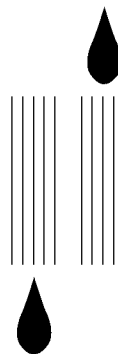


**SUMMARY:** “How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place” is the most well-known piece in the entire *Requiem*. It picks up where the previous piece left off, that is, with thoughts of heaven. What is it like to live in God’s presence? The words of Psalm 84 celebrate the joy of the believer’s ultimate destination. In contrast with the near despair of Psalm 39, this psalm presents a picture of God’s house which reminds us that we have everything to look forward to. In the meantime, we are reassured that there is blessing, strength, and mercy for the journey.

### ***REQUIEM IV. Chorus***

Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen, Herr Zebaoth!	How lovely are your dwellings, Lord of Sabaoth!
Meine Seele verlangt und sehnet sich nach den Vorhöfen des Herrn.	My soul desires and longs after the courts of the Lord.
Mein Leib und Seele freuen sich in dem lebendigen Gott.	My body and soul rejoice in the living God.
Wohl denen, die in deinem Hause wohnen;	Well-being to those who in your house dwell;
die loben dich, immerdar!	they praise you evermore!

*(Psalm 84:1, 2, 4)*



### **BASIC BIBLE REFERENCE**

Psalm 84

### **SUPPLEMENTARY BIBLE REFERENCES**

Isaiah 6:1-8

John 14:1-4

### ***REQUIEM* REFERENCE**

Movement 4: Chorus

### **WORD LIST**

Temple  
*nephesh*  
*Sabaoth*  
angels  
cherubim  
seraphim

## SESSION FOUR

# *A Glimpse of Glory*

### *Raising Our Sights*

Up until this point, our gaze has been fixed pretty firmly on the grave. Now, however, we lift our eyes toward heaven. With the help of **Psalm 84**, Brahms invites us to celebrate the joy of the believer's ultimate destination: God's house. Read the Psalm now.

Brahms' setting of this psalm is easily the most popular piece in the *Requiem*. Generations of listeners have affirmed it as a faithful interpretation of the psalm, perhaps because it communicates the psalmist's own longing and ecstasy in ways that no commentary ever could.

So why comment? Certainly not as a substitute for Brahms' interpretation. Yet, there are things that may help to supplement his work and deepen our appreciation of it. Why, for instance, do we associate God's "house" with heaven? What is it like to live in God's presence? Do the Bible's images of heaven have anything in common with our own notions of what heaven will be like?

These are just some of the questions that come to mind as we begin our consideration of Psalm 84. Once again, we will be looking at the entire psalm with a view toward understanding the verses Brahms quotes in their fuller context. If we do our work well, we should come away with a heightened appreciation of both Brahms and the Bible.

## *House Beautiful*

“How lovely is your dwelling place,” the psalm begins. Already our minds begin to supply images of heaven. We see angels perched on cumulus clouds, serenely strumming their harps. Cherubs flit here and there, stopping just long enough to smile and pose for our Christmas cards. But wait. Is this what the psalmist longs, yea faints, for? Harps are nice, but when was the last time you fainted for one?

I am being facetious, of course, poking gentle fun at some of our stereotypes of heaven. Yet, there is a point to the “poke.” These same stereotypes are the very things that stand in the way of our hearing this psalm in all of its power and glory. We need to find out what made God’s house so appealing to the psalmist. We need to find out why he was so envious of those “who live in your house, ever singing your praise” (verse 4).

Before we do that, however, we should pause to ask whether it is even appropriate to talk about heaven in connection with Psalm 84. The psalm, after all, is a poem in praise of the Jerusalem Temple. This is what the psalmist is referring to when he speaks of God’s “house.” He probably composed it on a pilgrimage to the Temple where he hoped to offer sacrifice and prayer. Is the goal of this ancient poet’s pilgrimage really the goal of the modern Christian? Or have we, and Brahm, wrenched this unsuspecting psalm completely out of its Old Testament context?

Let us recall, first of all, what was said in Session Three about Old Testament expectations of life after death. For the most part, there weren’t any. The shadowy underworld of Sheol was thought to be the destination of both the righteous and the wicked. It was neither heaven nor hell as we tend to think of them. It was only non-life. Most importantly for the present context, it was not a place where one could praise God (see Psalms 6:5 and 30:9).

Psalm 84, on the other hand, talks about a place where the happy inhabitants are always singing God’s praises (verse 4). Obviously, the psalmist is not thinking about the dead here, but about the priests who actually live in the Temple precincts. It would appear, then, that we *are* taking Psalm 84 out of context when we associate it with heaven. Still, there are reasons for thinking that such a negative judgment is too simple.

In our study of Psalm 39 we discovered a point at which the author of that psalm cast himself blindly into God’s care (verse 7). There are other places in the Old Testament where this same impulse combines with an awareness that the God who creates has

the power to *re*-create (see especially Ezekiel 37:1-14, as well as Psalm 22:29). Although these passages do not offer evidence of any full-blown doctrine of the resurrection in the Old Testament, they do illustrate impulses *toward* that doctrine. They are like seeds which take a long time to grow. In the New Testament they finally begin to bear fruit, particularly in Jesus Christ, “the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Although Brahms does not specifically mention the name of Jesus anywhere in the *Requiem*,<sup>1</sup> his use of Psalm 84 is very much a “Christian” one. It is a way of reading which is not so much *out* of context as in a *new* context.<sup>2</sup> When Christians read it, we read from the perspective of those who know that those Old Testament impulses were right—that the God who creates does indeed re-create. When we hear references to God’s house, Jesus’ words from John 14:1-4\* echo from across the canon (“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places . . .”). When we read Psalm 84, it is with the assurance that we, too, will be among those who will spend eternity singing God’s praise.

### ***Are We Having Fun Yet?***

Humorist Garrison Keillor has made a career of telling stories about the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. In one of them, he imagines what it will be like for Lake Wobegon’s Lutherans in Paradise. He speculates that these practical, hard-working people (“my people,” he calls them) will not take to it well. When they get there they’ll huddle inside the gates for a while. Pretty soon some of them will start looking for the stairs to go down to the kitchen. Heaven, after all, is bound to be uncomfortable for people who were “brought up to endure this life . . . to work hard and not complain.” Keillor speculates that they’ll probably only end up staying a couple of weeks.<sup>3</sup>

Lake Wobegon’s Lutherans are suffering from what we identified earlier as a lackluster stereotype of heaven. Clearly, the author of Psalm 84 does not suffer from the same malady. There is nothing half-hearted about this psalmist’s attitude toward God’s house. “How lovely” can also mean “how beloved” (verse 1), and it is very possible

<sup>1</sup> It is said that Brahms wanted to keep the *Requiem* as universal as possible, and so avoided references which would seem to make it less so.

<sup>2</sup> Readers of Kerygma’s *Hallelujah! The Bible and Handel’s Messiah* will recognize this as what we there called “recontextualization.”

<sup>3</sup> From one of Garrison Keillor’s “News from Lake Wobegon” monologues on the radio broadcast, *A Prairie Home Companion*.

that the poetry intends to capture both meanings. This psalmist holds the vision of his beloved Jerusalem before him like a soldier at the front might hold a picture of his wife. It is an act of poignant pleasure.

Verse two makes us wonder if the psalmist is literally *dying* to reach his destination. The Hebrew is much more graphic than the English. The word that is usually translated as “soul” is, in fact, the Hebrew word *nephesh*, a word used to describe the totality of the human person. (It is what God created in the Garden of Eden; see Genesis 2:7.) As if to emphasize that the longing is physical as well as spiritual, the next line makes reference to both the “heart” and the “flesh.” The heart in Hebrew is the location of both thought *and* feeling; the flesh is what one might get a cut on. In other words, this psalmist longs and faints for his destination with every fiber of his being.<sup>4</sup> Things seem to be looking up at the end of verse 2 with its reference to singing for joy. But don’t be too sure. While this is usually translated, “my heart and my flesh *sing for joy* to the living God,” my own suspicion is that the author is again indulging his love for double meanings. While the Hebrew word at issue does usually mean “to cry or sing for joy,” it can also mean simply to “cry out.” The latter seems more probable in this context. The Hebrew audience’s positive associations with the word probably made its use here all the more poignant.

Is this psalmist having fun yet? It certainly doesn’t sound like it. Yet, bear in mind that he is only *on his way* to the “courts of the Lord”; he has not yet reached his destination. The thing to notice thus far is how badly he wants to get there. That in itself should make us suspicious of our stereotypes.

### ***God’s Eye Is on the Sparrow***

When you are on a journey, you want to be sure you’ll be welcome when you get there. You make reservations, you call ahead, you tell Aunt Edith to put the kettle on. So, too, our psalmist. In verse 3 he comforts himself with the thought that if the birds build their nests at God’s altars, how much more will he, the travel-weary pilgrim, find a welcome.

This verse is notoriously difficult for modern churchgoers to relate to, since most of our church buildings are completely enclosed. But bear in mind that the outer Temple

<sup>4</sup> Luther’s translation is actually somewhat misleading at this point (*Mein Leib und Seele freuen sich*/my body and soul rejoice). The Hebrew does not say anything about “body and soul.”

“courts” were just that—courtyards. Birds could, and evidently did, fly in and build their nests there. I think of this verse every time I walk by the entrance to the chapel at the seminary where I work. There, on a narrow ledge near the top of the doors, is a mourning dove sitting contentedly on her nest!

A colleague of mine tells a similar story of a pair of sparrows that routinely build their nest in a tree in his church’s courtyard. The best part is that one of the courtyard’s walls is made of glass and fronts on the sanctuary. No matter what the sermon is about on any given Sunday, the congregation can always count on a “silent sermon” from Psalm 84!

Such a sermon speaks volumes both for us and for this psalmist. Part of his picture of the heavenly courts includes the image of those birds and their very vulnerable young—safe, at home, and content. One gets the distinct impression that the psalmist is envious as well as reassured.

If he is envious of the birds, then he is even more envious of the humans who live in the Temple, also singing God’s praise (verse 4). “Happy,” he calls them—with the same word that is the standard beginning for all beatitudes. And as we saw in Session One, it is a word that carries much more meaning than any superficial, short-term pleasure. It points to a state of profound blessedness, a deep and lasting joy. No wonder the psalmist longs and faints for the courts of the Lord.

### ***Praise Is the Point***

When we come right down to it, however, the goal of our pilgrimage has nothing to do with our own gratification. The point of the journey—and the source of the joy—is the praise of God.

Once again, uninvited images of angels and their compatriots threaten to crowd in. This time, however, I’m going to suggest we let them. They are, after all, members of the heavenly “hosts” who surround God’s throne. Keep in mind, however, that the word “hosts” is the Hebrew *Sabaoth*, meaning “armies.”<sup>5</sup> That in itself should give us pause about our preconceptions. But let’s take a moment for a more thorough review of the troops.

Remember that angels, whose name literally means “messenger,” are almost always greeted in Scripture by reactions of abject terror. (Did you ever notice how angels

<sup>5</sup> Hence, the name “LORD of Hosts” actually means “LORD of armies.” This paints rather a different picture of the Christmas story when, as Luke puts it, “Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host . . .” (Luke 2:13)! Be careful not to confuse this word with another Hebrew word, “Sabbath,” which means “rest.”

seem to start every speech with, “Fear not . . .”?) The prophet Isaiah was certainly awed by his encounter with the seraphim (literally, “burning ones”) in his vision of God’s heavenly Temple. See Isaiah 6:1-8.\* And Cherubs/cherubim bear little resemblance to their chubby descendants in religious art. In the Bible, their wing span is wide enough to overshadow God’s very throne (see Exodus 25:17-22). I for one would not like to meet any of these characters in a dark alley!

If we find all of this frightening, that’s good. It means we are getting closer to what it means to stand in the presence of God. If our knees aren’t knocking, there is something wrong with us.

Maybe this is why author Annie Dillard pens such a stinging critique of the casual way we often approach worship. “Does anyone,” she asks, “have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?” If we had any sense of the Divine Presence at all we would come to worship wearing, not hats, but “crash helmets.” Ushers would “issue life preservers and signal flares.” They would “lash us to our pews.”<sup>6</sup>

If our psalmist has any inkling of this, why isn’t he running *away* from the Temple instead of *toward* it? Perhaps it is because he knows that this God—this Holy One of Israel—is also the God who welcomes the sparrow. It is the same God who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who crowns us with steadfast love and mercy (Exodus 20:2 and Psalm 103:4). To this knowledge, Christians add their awareness that it is the same God who “became flesh and lived (literally ‘tabernacled’) among us,” dying and rising again from the dead (John 1:14). When we think of God in these terms, we can better understand why we might want to spend eternity in the heavenly Temple—lost in wonder, love, and praise.

### ***Traveling Mercies***

Now that we are genuinely excited about the destination, we need to face the realities of the trip. It is, as the Beatles’ song says, “A Long and Winding Road.” Yet, God has not left us without a generous supply of traveling mercies. Verses 5-12 introduce us to some of them.

The first is the fact that even if we have not fully “arrived” at the heavenly courts, there is still a beatitude left over for us. In Psalm 84, it is not just the permanent heavenly residents who are declared “happy.” Verse 5 holds out hope for the rest of us as well.

<sup>6</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching A Stone To Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 40.

“Happy are those whose strength is in you,” it declares, “in whose heart are the highways to Zion.” The journey is internal as well as external.

Not that the journey is going to be easy. No matter how one understands the cryptic reference to “the valley of Baca” in verse 6, it is clearly not a cake walk. It could be the name of an actual valley, though if this is the case, no one knows for sure where it is. Interestingly, the name sounds precisely like the Hebrew word for “weep” (*bakah*). Could it be that our author is indulging in another double meaning?

In any case, the psalmist is realistic about the fact that we will often be “pilgrims in a barren land.” Whether our wilderness is physical or emotional, the point is that there will be strength for the journey (verse 7). This, too, is a mercy.

Finally, God understands that we humans do not travel well if we do not have plenty to do. In order to stave off the inevitable “are we there yet?” questions, God has packed the car with some very important, and absorbing, activities.

The first is prayer. Verses 8-9 are the prayer that our psalmist offers for his king. (“Shield” and “anointed” are both names for the king.) The fact of the prayer is important, but its content is significant as well. The fact that it is directed toward the welfare of others means that our pilgrim is not becoming too self-absorbed.

The second activity is service. The “doorkeeper” reference in verse 10 continues the psalm’s focus on others, while at the same time reminding us of the utter desirability of the destination.

Finally, there is the matter of righteousness (verse 11). This alone should be enough to keep us occupied for the entire trip. We ought to be clear, however, on why it is so important. My own sense is that it is not so much a way of earning our way into the heavenly courts, as a way of showing our gratitude for being invited. When we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8), we are saying thank you for “this grace in which we stand” (Romans 5:2). And we are letting some of God’s holiness spill over on us. I can think of no better preparation for standing on holy ground.

### ***A Glimpse of Glory***

Finally, however, Psalm 84 makes its most important contribution to the pilgrim’s progress not with advice, but by giving us a little glimpse of glory. Surely, that is why Brahms chose it for this particular point in the *Requiem*.



Once in a while, by the grace of God, we can catch a glimpse of God “high and lifted up” during our earthly worship services. And then it is as if time and place and even self have fallen away like unwanted weights. Suddenly, as the “hallelujahs” rise around us, we find ourselves—and lose ourselves—among that great cloud of witnesses which surrounds God’s throne.

My own most recent experience of this was—believe it or not—at a denominational meeting. The text for our morning worship was from Isaiah 6, Isaiah’s vision of God’s heavenly Temple. The chancel was set with seven smudge pots on gold lampstands, smoking just enough to give the room a kind of heavenly haze. At the climax of the service five hundred people stood, bare feet on a cold chapel floor, and sang “Holy, Holy, Holy,” pipe organ rumbling all around. When it was over, nobody moved. It was as if we were frozen—or better—electrified by the presence of God. If the world had ended at that moment, I don’t think any of us would have minded.

We would like to have stayed. Yet, it was only a glimpse . . . a glimpse not unlike the one the psalmist gives us in Psalm 84. How lovely, how beloved is your dwelling place, O LORD of Hosts. How lovely, indeed. Sometimes all we need is a glimpse to keep us going.

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## ***For Further Study and Reflection***

### **MEMORY BANK**

Psalm 84:1-4

### **RESEARCH**

1. Compare the entries for “angel,” “cherub,” and “seraphim” in a Bible dictionary such as *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*.
2. Read Paul Minear’s reflections on Movement Four in *Death Set To Music*, pp. 72-74.
3. Review the words to the following hymns for echoes of Psalm 84 and the themes of this session: “Lord of the Worlds Above,” “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven,” “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go,” and “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.”

## REFLECTION

1. Does your “nephesh” long and faint for the courts of the Lord? What do you think would help it to do so?
2. Have you ever had a worship experience that made you feel like you had had a glimpse of glory? How would you describe it?
3. Reflect on this quote from Henri Nouwen:

I am unable to say that I have arrived; I never will in this life, because the way to God reaches far beyond the boundary of death. While it is a long and very demanding journey, it is also one full of wonderful surprises, often offering us a taste of the ultimate goal.

(From *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, p. 15)