

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – August 26, 2018

[Psalm 84](#) & [Ephesians 6:10-20](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Psalm 84

(by Bobby Morris for *workingpreacher.org* – October 24, 2010)

Throughout life, we humans sometimes identify certain places or times as special.

Often the result of interaction with one or more other persons, these places and times take on added meaning. The same is true of religion. Various times and places can come to be identified as *sacred* or *holy* for various reasons. Such designations are a way of saying these times and places are *different* or *out of the ordinary* in an important and meaningful way.

Psalm 84 is typically categorized as a "Song of Zion." The Temple Mount in Jerusalem was in ancient times, and is to this day, one of the most religiously hallowed places in the world. Many consider Psalm 84 to be a poetic account of the experience of a pilgrim approaching the temple in Jerusalem for a religious festival. The sense of excitement and awe must have been almost overwhelming as the city on a hill with its exalted temple first came into view.

But what makes going here so "special" or so "different" from anything else a person might do? The difference is that this is the dwelling place of the "Lord of hosts" (verse 1). Referring to God in this way is reminiscent of stories surrounding the ark of the covenant in which God is invisibly enthroned upon the cherubim but nonetheless present in a real way among the people. The realization that God desires to dwell among mortals is as powerful for the psalmist and pilgrim as it would later be for John of Patmos (Revelation 21:3).

This "Lord of hosts" is also the "living God" (verse 2). Not only does all life come from this God, but *living* further characterizes the holy one who dwells in Zion as one who is dynamic, at work, and active among that which he has created. This God is not static and trapped in endless cycles of death and rebirth as some of the Canaanite deities. Only in Zion does the pilgrim find the one who can truly be called the "God of gods" (verse 7).

So the palpable excitement found in the psalm is not so much about going to the particular place, but more so about who and what may be found there - the very presence of God. It is because of God's presence that the psalmist may say, "Happy are those who live in your house" (verse 4). Even the birds seek to be in the presence of God and thus find homes among God's altars (verse 3).

There is no validity in accusing ancient Israel of viewing God as present only in Zion. While the temple was viewed as the focal point of God's presence (where it was most "intense" so to speak), God was certainly present and could be experienced outside of Jerusalem. There are hints of this even here in this psalm whose focus is on Zion. Verse six mentions travel through the valley of Baca. The location of this place is unknown, and it may be more a symbolic designation than a concrete place. Yet it would seem that Baca is known or should be understood as a notoriously dry place. Then, it becomes striking to hear that pilgrims might find springs there. In fact, the text says that they actually "make it a place of springs."

What is special or different here? Again the answer is *the presence of God*. Those who experience God's real presence are brought into a new reality where a dry valley can yield springs and be covered with rain. The living God uplifts and empowers through this new reality in a way just as real as the Lord of hosts led and sustained his chosen people through the wilderness and into the promised land.

Psalms 84 invites readers to a similar experience. There are those special places and times in the life of faith where God's presence may be found particularly intense. Believers need these anchors amid the seas of life. Regular worship at one's home church and experiencing the Sacraments are both ways of profoundly entering God's presence and being uplifted and empowered by it.

God's presence may also be found, however, in the dry valleys and journeys of life where one may not expect to find God. Even here the Lord of hosts, who is also the living God, brings springs, rain, and strength to those who seek the ever-abiding presence of the one whose home is among mortals.

Commentary on Ephesians 6:10-20 (From *Homiletics*; "The Cane Fu Defense", August 26, 2018)

The Pauline authorship of Ephesians is by no means certain. The debate is well-known and documented. For our purposes in the discussion of this text, however, we will assume Pauline authorship and move into the issues of the text itself. Paul, then, has moved from opening texts of praise and blessing through a long section of urgent exhortations. The verses read today mark the conclusion of this exhortative material, but in typical style, Paul first crashes to a great crescendo of powerful images before closing. Interlocking pictures are stacked one upon another, increasing the drama of challenges confronting the believer.

The apostle opens this section with a revealing "finally" -- denoting the beginning of this ending. There is a slight, but significant linguistic subtlety at the beginning of this text that must be clarified in order to get the rest right. The exhortation to "be strong" carries with it in English a fairly active connotation, inferring a "shape up" or even "get strong" admonition. The Greek, however, is definitely the passive form, carrying the sense of "be strengthened." This understanding of "be strong" clearly connects this demand with how we may attain this strength, i.e., "in the Lord and in the strength of his power." *Strength, then, is not something we bring with us into the fray; it is a quality that comes as a gift from God.*

Paul emphasizes the combative nature of the Christian encounter with this world by invoking military images throughout this exhortation. These types of images were common throughout both OT/Jewish apocalyptic literature and in the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qumran community. But there is a frequent use of military images by Christian writers at this time also -- 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:8-10 are part of this Christian tradition.

Christians are made strong, then, by putting on the "whole armor" of God to protect and prepare them for their encounter with "the wiles of the devil" that will assault them. The whole armor refers to the entire stock of protective apparatuses available to soldiers going into combat -- a wholeness that is necessary so that no unprotected surfaces are open to harm. That Christians "stand" against these forces reasserts the simple foot-soldier image of the Christian -- those who may expect to combat the enemy at close quarters, hand to hand and face to face.

This battle requires God's strength because the opponents facing believers are not other human beings ("flesh and blood") but "cosmic powers of this present darkness." Note that amid all this apocalyptic imagery, the battle that confronts Christians is in the here and now, the "present darkness," and not some distant future. Yet this encounter is not with human beings, for even the world rulers mentioned here should be understood in slightly gnostic terms as dark spirits who have made both this world and the "heavenly places" potential regions for their dominion. Having revealed the frighteningly powerful forces that oppose the faithful, the writer once again urges his reader to take full advantage of the protection God offers, the "armor" that is our only hope to withstand that "evil day."

The next section of exhortations begins with more military language, encouraging the Christian "soldier" to "stand." We are able to stand only by wearing this promised armor that God provides. The items the author describes are all part of a standard armored soldier's wardrobe, and each piece protects and prepares the soldier for combat in a particular way. The "belt" or "girdle" of truth plays a dual function. First, its complete encircling of the faithful supports the Christian wholly, leaving no part unprotected. Second, the soldier's belt was also a place to store other weapons, showing that the truth of God's love through Christ also provides Christians with a grounding for other convictions -- salvation, deliverance, adoption, inheritance.

The "breastplate" of the soldier protects the most vital and vulnerable places, i.e., the throat, heart and lungs. God's righteousness functions similarly for Christians confronting evil. Without the unyielding righteousness of God, we, too, would never be free from the threat of some mortal blow. God's protective righteousness is also described in Isaiah 11:4-5 and 59:17 with the same type of military image and offering the same symbolic shielding.

The "shoes" with which believers must be shod are surprisingly less clearly defined than the other armored accoutrements. Traditionally, soldiers wore sturdy sandals or even boots that had nails driven through the soles. These could then act as cleats, helping the battling soldier to "dig in" effectively against an opponent. But this author doesn't stipulate a particular style of shoes; instead, he leaves open the question of what "will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." Mentioning "peace" in the midst of these images of war and conflict is startling. It highlights the radical difference between the gospel Jesus offers and the violent discord the "spiritual forces of evil" pour out upon the world. For those "in Christ," however, no matter how much chaos swirls about them, they can stand firm within a calming peace -- for Christ is our peace (Ephesians 2:14).

While vague about the foot covering, the description of the "shield of faith" is quite detailed. The image described here refers to the ancient tradition of taking the heavy wood, cloth and hide-covered shields of the front-line soldiers and dipping them into water just before the battle. The shield soaked up this water and retained its wetness for quite some time. In this way when the enemy rained down flaming, pitch-covered arrows on the advancing troops, the arrows that embedded themselves in the wet shields harmlessly fizzled out, instead of engulfing the shield and its soldier in flames.

The "helmet of salvation" is another military image borrowed from Isaiah 59:17. But what is part of God's own armament against injustice and evil is now given over to protect those standing faithfully in the fight. By being given God's own "helmet," this author demonstrates just how directly and personally our salvation comes from God.

The final piece of equipment itemized here is the only potentially offensive one -- the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Note that though the Spirit is mentioned, the Spirit itself is not a sword, but the Spirit works through the word of God. It is the Spirit's vitality and strength which lend the sharp, cutting edge to the sword which every believer can wield: God's holy word.

But Christians have yet another piece of armament on which they may rely, another positive, indeed aggressive power that gives added protection -- prayer. The "war" Ephesians envisions is fought with both the power of prayer and the sword-like word of God. The final exhortation to pray may initially seem like an unusual demand in the midst of all this military imagery, but for this author it is yet another weapon in the Christian's arsenal. Verses 18b-20 outline how this state of constant prayer is to be attained -- we must "keep alert" and "persevere."

Constant prayer was greatly emphasized in the early church community -- for it was only by remaining in a state of constant contact with God that Christians felt assured that God's protective presence remained near at hand, ready for the imminent *eschaton*. By their persevering in prayer "for all the saints" -- that is, for all those who are members

of the body of Christ -- the bond between individual Christians is strengthened and tightened, and the armor of God protects all.

The final exhortation to pray is prayer for this author -- who is identified as the apostle Paul. The plea here is for the right words, a faithful message, so that his gospel message might "speak" (or perhaps better, "make known") coherently about "the mystery of his will" (see Ephesians 1:9).

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?