

Psalm 84
“Pursuing Happiness”
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
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Introduction:

Today’s Psalm is a Song of Zion. It describes the Temple in Jerusalem and invites everyone to worship God. It tells of the merits of worshipping God for a happy and faithful life.

The Reading:

¹ *How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!*

² *My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.*

³ *Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.*

⁴ *Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.*

⁵ *Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.*

⁶ *As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.*

⁷ *They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.*

⁸ *O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!*

⁹ *Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.*

¹⁰ *For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.*

*I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.*

¹¹ *For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
bestowing favor and honor.*

*No good thing does the Almighty withhold
from those who walk uprightly.*

¹² *O Lord of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.*

Academics have tried to figure out what Thomas Jefferson meant by “the pursuit of happiness” – the third of his three named “inalienable rights” in *The Declaration of Independence*. Some assume that he was copying John Locke who wrote of “life, liberty, and *property*,”¹ so actually meaning material prosperity. Oral tradition says that he heeded Benjamin Franklin’s advice to substitute “property” for something more substantial and inspirational. As far as my reading has taken me, Jefferson himself did not elaborate upon “the pursuit of happiness” in any of his other writings.² He thereby left the phrase open to interpretation. I guess that doing so appropriately allows future generations to read new and different ideas into this, and certainly reflects that there are a *variety* of ways that human beings seek happiness in real life.

Indeed, *you* probably have ideas about how happiness can be achieved, and you have likely tried various paths. Feel free to type into the Chat ways that you have pursued happiness while I continue to name some of them...

Many, if not most people in our society have at some point tried to become happy through the accumulation of material goods – buying the latest and newest tech device, or car, or cool item of clothing. Some of us are attracted to prosperity and power as means to the good life. Others focus in on their job or career to make them happy. Then there are folks who fill themselves with food or drink, romance or sex, trying to be happy. Other people think health and fitness is the key.

There are people who nurture relationships with family, friends, and their children as a means to a happy life. You’ve probably also heard people describe that spending time on creative projects, music, or in nature gives them joy. People of faith often underline how they are happiest in altruism and service to others.

(Return briefly to anything in the chat.)

It is for sure that some of these paths that we have named will usher us into at least a degree of happiness for a time. Others of them promise more than they deliver, and a few are actually dead ends.

I don’t think that Jefferson, himself, is a model of a happy life. Yes, he was curious and brilliant, but also self-centered, enigmatic, and contradictory. He enslaved others and, though he personally abhorred the slave trade, he didn’t use his power to free them.³ As one writer points out: “Jefferson’s own ‘property’ included about two hundred human beings whom he did not permit to pursue *their* own happiness.”⁴

By contrast, we have Psalm 84. The faith poet claims, “One day in God’s courts is better than a thousand elsewhere!” Using other words: “I would rather wait on the porch of the church than spend time at Macy’s or in a million dollar home!” The Psalmist is happiest in the Temple. It’s her home, along with the swallow and the sparrow. He finds strength and joy, honor and favor, trusting God.

¹Constitutional Rights Foundation article, <https://www.crf-usa.org/foundations-of-our-constitution/natural-rights.html>. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 1689.

²Carol V. Hamilton, “Why Did Jefferson Change ‘Property’ to the ‘Pursuit of Happiness?’” <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/46460>

³Annette Gordon-Reed and Peter S. Onuf, *Most Blessed of the Patriarchs: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), xv.

⁴Hamilton, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/46460>

Yes, you and I can pursue happiness in many varied ways, but have you considered this *one* way over the *thousand*? Let's look at it more closely.

In these verses, the Psalmist describes going up to the worship space and how enamored with it she is. But what stirs this author to joy is *more than* the stained glass and the rich wood, *more than* the sound of the organ and the beauty of the old building! What puts a smile on his face is *not* just that the space is large enough for birds to make nests high up in the rafters. He's talking about something more.

Is it the order of service that makes her happy? I mean, when people in a congregation all sing together, or voice their prayers, or sway in celebration, or humbly come forward for communion, it is inspiring for sure!

I remember when I graduated with my doctorate, and I was in another church. I shared the news with the kids during our worship service and invited them to dance with me to Pharrell William's *Happy*.⁵ Some of the adults joined in too. As fun as *that* momentary act of worship was, I think that the Psalmist is trying to express something still even *more* basic.

What makes him happy is worshipping God.

You see, worship is plugging into the *Source* of Happiness – giving our whole selves in trust to the High, Holy One! Not only the space. Not just the high moments of a worship service. The poet in Psalm 48 is longing and fainting for the mysterious connection between the Divine and the human. Like she references, worship is heart and flesh together – making a body, mind, and soul integration.

Jesus called it worshipping our Maker “in Spirit and in Truth.” True spiritual worship grants us peace *and* pushes us to change. Bowing before God in worship is what builds a just world and brings joy. Real worship is both feeling ‘at home’ and courageously sailing to the horizon!

When we worship God, it also naturally forges *community* – builds relationships with others that appreciate difference and create harmony. While written in the first person, *groups* experienced the Psalms together. You have shared in the communal energy that comes from singing God's praises.

Another dimension to worship comes across in verses 5-7, which is the central core of the psalm's message. I imagine that you too have walked the dry valley of Baca and then discovered the refreshing pools of God's presence. Have you prayed through tears instead of words and been transformed? Have you made the passage from suffering to strength? Then this morning, you know what the happy Psalmist is getting across!

Worshipping God is the way to true happiness.

Whether our beloved Roslindale Congregational Church worship is online or in-person, inside or outdoors, hither or yon, you and I can pursue the path Psalm 84 outlines and experience the blessed well-being that worshipping God brings. You and I *can* be happy!

⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7dPqrmDWxs>