

Teaching Plan  
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: July 2, 2017  
Lesson Title: "His Presence"  
Lesson Passage: Psalm 84:1-12

ABOUT THIS LESSON

This psalm is a song of praise sung by pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem to participate in one of the great religious festivals. The psalm opens with praise for the Temple and those who live there. This is followed by a comment on the happiness of the pilgrims as they travel through dry, desolate regions toward Mt. Zion. Then there is a prayer for the king, and, finally, God is praised as the source of all happiness and security.

TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

(1) Explain why Psalm 84 is often associated with the "Feast of Tabernacles." (2) Explain the probable meaning of "those who dwell in thy house."

BEGINNING THE LESSON

To introduce the lesson, explain why many interpreters believe Psalm 84 was inspired by the "Feast of Tabernacles," one of the great annual Jewish festivals: The "early rain" (v. 6) always occurred in October, the season in which the Feast of Tabernacles (Yiddish, *sukkot*) was held. Explanation: That name comes from the custom of constructing a *sukkah*, a small temporary hut constructed in the yards of families who ate meals there during the festival. (The *sukkahs* were reminders of the shelters Israel lived in during their 40 year sojourn in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt.) Emphasize this point: *Sukkot* is a joyful festival, commonly referred to as "the Season of our Rejoicing." And Psalm 84 captures this joyful mood ("With my whole being I sing for joy to the living God," "How happy are those who live in your Temple, always singing praise to you" [TEV translation]). So, as we consider the message of this psalm, let's imagine that it is being voiced by pilgrims as they approach the Holy City, eager to join the celebration.

TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. Note that the psalmist begins by expressing his eagerness to be in the Temple, "the courts of the Lord" (v. 2): (1) "How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts" (v. 1) could be either a comment on the beauty of the Temple or an expression of the psalmist's love for the Temple, the "dwelling place" of the Lord. (2) "My soul" and "my heart and flesh" in v. 2 express the deep feelings of the psalmist as he contemplates his arrival at the Temple. (3) "The living God" (v. 2) means not only that God lives, but, also, "the God who gives life to everything."

2. Comment on the observation in v. 3 that "the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest" near the Temple altars: Not only was this a

comment on the attractiveness of the Temple, but it also was literally true. There were two altars in Solomon's Temple: the altar for burnt offerings at the Temple entrance and the golden altar for burning incense, in front of the Most Holy Place. Sparrows and swallows could build nests in both places. ("Lay her young at thy altars" refers to the laying of eggs in nests near the altars.)

3. Call attention to the phrase, "Blessed are those who dwell in thy house" (v. 4) and suggest that this probably refers to the permanent staff of priests and Levites on duty in the Temple; but, possibly, it means all the people who regularly worshiped in the Temple. Comment on the word, Selah, that concludes v. 4: The meaning of this Hebrew term, which occurs 71 times in Psalms, is unknown, although there are a number of theories concerning this word. (The Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, identifies this as a "musical pause," but this is speculative.)

4. Observe that verses 5-7 refer to the happiness of the pilgrims who are traveling toward Jerusalem, as they make their way through dry desolate terrain toward Mount Zion, where they will see God in the Temple: (1) "in whose heart are the highways to Zion" (v. 5b) means "their hearts are set on the pilgrimage to Mount Zion." (2) The "valley of Baca" is an unknown place name, but it probably was arid terrain, since "they make it a place of springs" and "the early rain covers it with pools" evidently is intended to portray a contrast. (3) The TEV translation expresses the meaning of v. 7 well: "They grow stronger as they go; they will see the God of gods on Zion."

5. Suggest that verses 8-9 seem to change the subject abruptly, from the pilgrimage toward Mt. Zion to a prayer for the king, if the numerous translators who take "shield" and "thine anointed" (in v. 9) as a reference to the king are correct. However, some believe "shield" refers to God himself, since shield is used as a metaphor for God in 84:11 and elsewhere in the Psalms (Ps. 3:3; 7:10; 18:2).

6. Point out that in verse 10 the psalmist is saying that to live in the Temple was the greatest blessing a devout Israelite could imagine: (1) Literally, in v. 10a, the Hebrew text reads simply, "For better is a day in your courts than a thousand..." (RSV, "a thousand elsewhere.") (2) "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God" (v. 10b, KJV, RSV) is a familiar saying; but "Doorkeeper" could be misleading, since that was the title of a high official among the priests or Levites (see 2 Kings 12:9, 23:4; 1 Chronicles 26:12-13); and the term was sometimes applied to beggars at the Temple gate, like the lame man referred to in Acts 3:2. (3) "Than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (v. 10b) probably means "than live in the homes of the wicked," as in the TEV translation.

7. Note that the two metaphors in 84:11 (sun, shield) express faith in the Lord as a guide (a sun) and protector (a shield).

CLOSING THE LESSON

Suggest that Psalm 122:1 neatly summarizes the message of Psalm 84.

