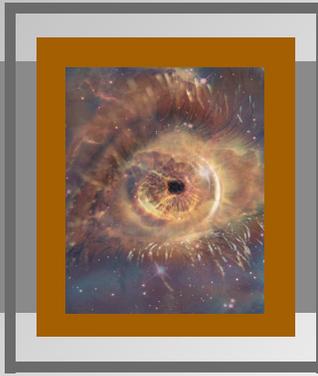


VISIO



DIVINA

The Wisdom of Contemplative Vision

THE MYSTERIS OF LONGING

Psalm 84 Part II

After imaging birds and swallows nesting in the nooks and crannies of the vast altar in the temple complex in Jerusalem, the psalmist picks up the second metaphor in his hymn to God. Describing the journey that the pilgrim makes through the strange topography of life, he chooses the difficult metaphors of the desert in his prayer. Humans are meant to dwell near God, that is, near the burning fire, in safety and in peace. That image, however, is juxtaposed with the root metaphor of the sacred journey each human being takes through the world of space and time. The biblical text is full of such journey stories through desert landscapes and across difficult terrain. The metaphor is apt, for it describes life's passageway as a descent into desert valleys and across towering mountains.

This is not unlike the Twenty-Third Psalm's description of a similar pathway through a valley which is called the "shadow of death." Much of the experience of life involves the play between life and death. We may manage to survive, but often our passage becomes a deepening descent into greater and greater darkness, through rugged terrain that leads to shadows and sometimes death. Evil seems to be present everywhere, and every human being encounters some aspect of this. We cannot avoid the experience, for the way through earth-time is indeed into a duality that is constituted of both highs and lows, light and darkness, goodness and evil.

We inevitably experience these oscillations, but the psalmist also knows and proclaims another truth, a deeper secret. Descents are strangely and paradoxically also ascends into the divine Presence; to go down is

also somehow to go up into that Reality. A descent into difficulty can also be a pathway into transcendence. This is counter-intuitive and difficult to logically explain, but it is a secret known by travelers on the sacred path. Looking backwards on the trails that lead downward offers the vision of a strange reversal. The downward path is also an ascent toward the face of God—toward nearness to the Divine.

If this seems logically impossible, that's true, it is. But transcendence defies the linear processes of logic and also the rules of physics governing the material world. It expresses itself in the language of mystery behind the veil of logic, and it explains the soul's own responses to spiritual dynamics existing beyond the phenomenal world. The human heart can know what the mind can never comprehend, and it is the dynamics of the human heart that are being described in this ancient text.

Not only does the the human heart nest near danger (the burning altar), it journeys through desert wastes in order to ascend to the divine Face. At that boundary marker between time and eternity, the heart arrives just outside the door to another world. In this psalm the liminal borderland between realms is crossed as the soul draws near to a land it had considered alien. The psalmist sees that just one moment of existence beyond that threshold is better than anything experienced in a thousand years on this side of that doorway. This presents us with another paradox. The human environment of what we call the creature-comforts cannot match the experience of the soul's own homeland in transcendent reality, Unknown to us, perhaps, the human heart longs for that passage into direct

experience of the divine Presence into what it considers to be its native ground. Ultimately nothing else will suffice for us than to reach and know this state.

The language of the final verses speaks of an ecstatic experience that takes one completely out of one's small self into an intimacy with the divine Self that has been described by the great mystics for millennia. Both seeking and finding, ecstasy and joy, are rooted in the goodness of divine Being. This is the perpetual homeland destined for all humanity. This is the divine ground which is the origin of our being and to which we shall all return.

Reflections on Image and Text:

1. *Would you agree that a desert landscape describes the terrain of your own life's experience while living in the realm of duality?*
2. *What descents in life have you experienced that have taken you into difficult valleys? Describe such an experience in your journal.*
3. *How have you experienced this psalm's description of a reversal—a descent that can, paradoxically, become an ascent?*
4. *If you have experienced this paradox, how did you come to know it was an ascent?*
5. *What have you found or discovered as you moved upward into unknown dimensions and presences?*
6. *As you view the images, which ones best describe your own experience? How has this surprised you?*
7. *Do you learn anything new from these images?*
8. *How would you define mystical experience?*
9. *The final verses of this psalm are not unlike descriptions of contemporary near death experiences? What do you know about these experiences? If you have the opportunity, view some of the testimonies about these experiences online.*

A Place for Journaling and Notes

This reflection, text and its illumination have been provided by Alison Hine and Lynn Bauman as a means for contemplative prayer.

LECTIO DIVINA

The Contemplative Reading of a Sapiential Text

PSALM 84

Journey to the Divine Face

1. O how I love you, God, your presence is my home, my high abode.
I go to be with you, my longing draws me there
Where flesh and bone, and heart and soul flame up
in joy that's yours, O Living One.
2. Sparrows have their nests and swallows build right next to you.
Your temple altar is their safest keep,
where they may lay their eggs and hatch their young.
3. You see, anyone who lives near you is filled with higher purpose,
and fuller joy.
What else is there to do but go on praising you?
4. And joy fills all who gain their strength from you,
who walk upon the pilgrim's path
with hearts secure in yours.
5. And though their journeys lead through desert wastes,
even there they find that secret springs await them.
The early rains you sent have filled the pools before they got there.
6. Their descending pathways through the valleys deep, in truth, are great ascents,
leading upwards and further into you,
until at last on mountain peaks they stand to see the shining visage of your face.
7. Lord God of everything that is, God of my heart,
listen to this humble prayer.
8. Defend me now by simply looking at my face,
and your look will be for me a healing oil that covers all.
9. To be with you for just one day is better far than
having spent a thousand secured in my own room.
Simply standing at the threshold of your door, is so much more
than dwelling in the vast and wealthy holdings of the wicked-wise.
10. O God, you are for us the shining sun, the shielding shade,
and both become the fullness of your grace and glory.
11. And as we seek you on this pathway, we are found by good.
and nothing lasting is withheld from all who walk with deep integrity of life,
for they shall come to trust and find in you eternal rest,
12. And there, O God,
all life is drenched with happiness and joy.

—translated by
Lynn C. Bauman
Ancient Songs Sung Anew

Contemplating
THE ILLUMINATIONS



