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## The Pilgrim Ache: Desire, Devotion, and the Economy of the Heart

### Introduction

“My soul longs, indeed it faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God” (Ps. 84:2).

The Psalms often begin where philosophy ends, in the ache of desire. Before the psalmist moves his feet, he confesses a holy restlessness. His heart strains toward the presence of God as if drawn by a magnetic center. This longing is not weakness but vocation. To desire rightly is to live truthfully before the One for whom humanity was made. The Christian journey begins not with motion but with orientation, with the recognition that what we love determines where we go.

In an age that mistakes speed for significance, Psalm 84 slows the soul to remember that direction without devotion becomes drift. Desire is the starting point of pilgrimage, and only when desire is anchored in God does the journey become trustworthy.

### Theological Exploration

#### The Reordering of Love

Human history begins with desire. In Eden, the fruit was “pleasant to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6). Desire, however, was not the problem; its disorder was. Augustine of Hippo described sin as the *ordo amoris*, the misordering of loves. “It is not that we love wrong things,” he wrote, “but that we love right things wrongly.” When love turns inward, it ceases to illuminate and begins to consume.

Psalm 84 dramatizes the reordering of love. The psalmist’s yearning is not for possession but for presence: “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts.” Desire is not abolished by faith; it is sanctified. Thomas Aquinas later called this sanctified desire *beatitudo*, or blessedness, the



soul's friendship with God. All created longing finds its rest not in what can be owned but in whom we are known.

The modern world cultivates restlessness. William Cavanaugh, in *The Economy of Desire*, argues that consumer capitalism thrives not on satisfaction but on perpetual hunger. "Consumerism," he writes, "is not about having things; it is about wanting things."<sup>1</sup> The market manufactures yearning while denying rest. In such an economy, the human heart becomes a resource to be mined rather than a mystery to be formed.

Psalm 84 offers a counter-economy. Its repeated word *'āshrê* ("blessed" or "happy") derives from a root meaning "to go straight, to advance rightly." Blessedness is not a feeling but a formation, the steady alignment of desire with divine direction. Those "whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion" are not escaping the world; they are being rightly aimed within it. Their longing no longer devours; it dwells.

### **Desire as Direction, Not Drivenness**

To long for God is to discover that holy desire is not a demand for immediacy but a training in patience. The pilgrim of Psalm 84 travels "from strength to strength" (*mēḥayil 'el-ḥayil*). The Hebrew phrase implies progressive intensification, a journey in which vigor deepens rather than depletes. Each step becomes a school of endurance, each valley a classroom of transformation.

James K. A. Smith's liturgical anthropology illuminates this movement. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith contends that human beings are not primarily thinkers but lovers, shaped by the rituals that capture their hearts. Malls, stadiums, and digital spaces function as rival liturgies, forming what and how people desire. Christian worship is a counter-liturgy, training the body to long toward the Kingdom. Desire, then, is not a spontaneous emotion but a cultivated posture.

When the psalmist confesses, "My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God," his language is bodily. The entire person—mind, muscle, and breath—joins in worship. Here, theology becomes anthropology: to be human is to desire, and to desire rightly is to become whole.

Paul expresses this same dynamic at the end of his life: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). The verb *tēreō* ("to guard, preserve") describes faith as something entrusted, not possessed. Desire has matured into guardianship. What began as yearning ends as faithfulness. In Paul, the restless heart finds its rhythm in watchful devotion.

### **The Economy of Desire and the Practice of Communion**

Cavanaugh contrasts two economies: the market of acquisition and the Eucharistic economy of gift. In the first, desire fuels production; in the second, it culminates in participation. "In consuming the body of Christ," he writes, "we become the body of Christ."<sup>2</sup> The Eucharist does not abolish hunger; it fulfills it by redirecting appetite toward communion.



This vision reframes Christian ethics. To live Eucharistically is to resist the world's manipulation of desire. Gratitude becomes the currency of the Kingdom. Possession gives way to participation, and scarcity gives way to sufficiency. Within this economy, even longing becomes liturgy, the soul's way of leaning toward the table of God.

Psalm 84's pilgrims embody this truth. They do not rush; they endure. They transform valleys of weeping into places of springs. Their progress is not measured by speed but by sanctification. Desire that once drained them now strengthens them. What the market names delay, the pilgrim names devotion.

### **From Longing to Love**

Thomas Traherne once wrote that "love is the true economy of heaven." Desire finds its final purification when it turns from acquisition to adoration. The psalmist's destination, Zion, is not simply geography but the dwelling of divine presence. "Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere." To dwell is to delight, to rest is to rejoice.

Aquinas taught that love seeks likeness. Humanity becomes what it contemplates. Thus, the one who desires God is gradually transformed into the image of the Desired. This is not the erasure of self but its completion. Augustine called it the "conversion of desire," the bending of the heart away from self-curvature (*incurvatus in se*) toward the openness of divine charity.

Paul's "crown of righteousness" (2 Tim. 4:8) is the fruit of this conversion. The righteous Judge rewards not achievement but alignment, the heart that has kept faith because it has kept desire in God. The finish line of faith is not exhaustion but expansion, the flowering of love that has endured the long obedience of longing.

### **Practical Reflection**

The theology of desire carries direct implications for discipleship in a restless age. Three practices help re-educate the heart.

#### **1. Sabbath as Resistance**

Walter Brueggemann calls Sabbath "the most radical social statement in Scripture." It refuses Pharaoh's demand for endless production. Sabbath teaches the body that value is not earned but received. In resting, desire is recalibrated from striving to satisfaction in God's provision.

#### **2. Eucharist as Reorientation**



In the table of the Lord, the logic of the market is undone. What cannot be bought is given. The Eucharist transforms consumption into communion, teaching believers that to receive is not to grasp but to belong. Cavanaugh calls this “the liturgy that heals desire.”<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Pilgrimage as Formation

The journey itself becomes sacramental. To walk toward God is already to be changed. The psalmist’s valley of Baca, the place of tears, turns into springs. Faith matures not by avoiding tension but by transfiguring it. Holy desire learns endurance through movement.

These practices resist the tyranny of immediacy. They train the heart to wait, the mind to wonder, and the body to worship. In them, desire ceases to be a restless craving and becomes a rhythm of grace.

### Closing Exhortation

Desire is not the enemy of holiness; it is its beginning. The restless heart, once ordered by grace, becomes the steady compass of the pilgrim life.

To live faithfully is to let longing become worship, to want deeply and wait patiently until love finds its rest in God. The psalmist’s cry, Augustine’s confession, Aquinas’s beatitude, and Paul’s farewell all converge here. The finish is not the end but the fulfillment of desire.

Blessed are those whose strength is in Him, whose hearts hold highways to Zion. For they go from strength to strength until desire itself becomes devotion.

### References

1. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 13–15.
2. Ibid., 121.
3. Ibid., 145.
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.
5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 3, a. 2.
6. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).
7. Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

