

Alliance Theological Seminary
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Psalms DML970.NA
Assignment 1: Pre-Reading Sermon
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Message Introduction

Grab your Bible and go with me to the Book of Psalms, the biggest book of the Bible, to Psalm 84. If you aren't familiar, the Psalms aren't exactly a book but more a collection, of prayers, songs, and poetry of various writers compiled together in God's Word for us to grab a hold of for our own journey, and for our journey *together*, that we would draw upon them for our walk with God and prosper in our soul.

For thousands of years God's people have turned to the book of Psalms for wisdom, for comfort, and to express worship. The psalms are where we find some of the most emotionally expressive writing in the Bible, covering the spectrum of human emotion. Together, the psalms affirm what most of us intuitively already know, that we are broken people living in a broken world, as the psalms give voice to the good, the bad, and sometimes the ugly. But most importantly, the psalms give voice to the longing and need in our heart for God. The psalms point us to the one we look to with eyes of faith who the scriptures say will one day make all things new, who has now come for us in Jesus Christ, the scriptures tell us.

But before we jump into the psalm we want to look at today, Psalm 84, and what it tells us about what we find when we pursue God's presence, I first want to ask the question, what is it you are really longing for, searching for...in life? What is it that you are most passionate about, that you are most looking for, or hoping for, or going after? Because whatever it is, that desire will determine what kind of life you will have and what kind of destination you will arrive at, as you pursue it.

The 'Big' Idea

And what we are going to see today in Psalm 84, as we look into its 12 verses, is that when God's presence becomes your most cherished pursuit in the journey of your life, your life becomes marked by three things: God's peace, God's strength, and God's promised blessing. That is what we are going to see today, and that is what I want you to leave here knowing, according to what we read in God's own Word in this song of scripture we are inspired to not only read but sing.

This morning, I want to invite you to go on a journey with me in this message, because this psalm was a hymn likely written for those who were journeying on pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was written to encourage them and to remind them of why they were going on this journey.

The Text: Psalm 84 (ESV)

On your app, or in the bible you brought with you, or in one of the bibles in the seat in front of you, let's go there now, to Psalm 84. I'll be reading from the English Standard Version...

The first thing we read is an instruction. It says...*To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.* The first thing we are told is that this is a psalm that was intended for a choir...it's a psalm that was meant to be sung. It says, *To the choirmaster, according to the Gittith*, which was an ancient instrument, something like a lyre or a harp, although historians aren't sure exactly what this instrument was or what it looked like.

The *sons of Korah* were the descendants of those king David in the Old Testament commissioned to create and orchestrate music for worship at the Tabernacle, the place of worship that preceded the Temple – they were basically the first worship team. And it was a song to encourage those making the journey to the Temple in Jerusalem¹, that was built after the Tabernacle....and in those days, depending where you were coming from, the journey would have taken significant time and logistical planning, as it would have been largely on foot with no Starbucks along the way.

Several times a year, God commanded his people in the covenant of the Old Testament to make this journey, for festivals and special times of worship to keep their lives centered around him. In Deuteronomy 16, God said, *Three times a year [you] shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose...*And so, this was a song to motivate and remind those on this journey to the Temple of why they were taking this journey. Why they were giving themselves to this. Why they were going up to Jerusalem... the same way you and I need encouragement and reminding of why we on this journey...of daily giving our lives to Jesus and giving ourselves to follow him, and to keep going and not give up, or turn around.

And so, the first two verses of this song talk about the destination of this journey, which for them was the place of the Temple, which the psalmist calls God's 'dwelling place':

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,

¹ Pankhurst, Jennifer (2018). ["The Conventions of Biblical Poetry"](https://myjewishlearning.com/article/the-conventions-of-biblical-poetry/). myjewishlearning.com. Retrieved 3 April 2018.

O Lord of hosts!

2 My soul longs, yes, faints

for the courts of the Lord;

my heart and flesh sing for joy

to the living God.

To grasp what the psalmist is writing about, we need to know something about the Temple.

When it comes to the Old Testament, it's hard to over-state the Temple's importance.

The Tabernacle & Temple

To give some background, as God brings the Israelites out of Egypt to make them into a people for himself back in the book of Exodus, God first tells Moses to have the people construct a tabernacle, a tent of meeting. The Tabernacle was kind of a portable temple, that would move with the people – a place of worship, sacrifice, celebration, and devotion.

Eventually, as the Israelites move into Canaan, and through David, establish Jerusalem on its hill called Zion...where Jerusalem is still to this day...Solomon, David's son, to replace the Tabernacle, builds the Temple, where Jerusalem becomes the permanent home, not only for God's people, but more importantly, for the place of God's presence, represented by the Temple...that was the destination that those going on this pilgrimage would have been making their way to and as they listened to the words of this psalm...in anticipation of arriving at the Temple...the place of God's presence.

The Place of God's Presence

More than just a place for worship, sacrifice, celebration, or devotion, the Temple was where God made his presence known. That's why in verse 4, the Temple is called a 'house' – God's house – the place where he dwells – with courts and courtyards that gave various levels of access to God's presence, depending on who you were under the various conditions of the old covenant.

But it was understood that God was not limited or contained to a building. In 1 Kings 8, Solomon says, *will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!* (v.27).

But before Jesus, it was at the Temple where God manifested his presence and made his presence known. And because of that, when the people saw the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, they saw God's presence. They saw that God was with them.

God's Presence is Everywhere

Sometimes people took the concept of God making himself known in a place too far, thinking they could run away from God, or get away from God. But while God made his known presence known at the Temple, he's also everywhere. In Psalm 139, David writes, *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol [or in the depths], you are there!*

How about you? Have you been trying to run from God? Trying to keep him at distance. Trying to run the other way? Out of his love, when we flee, he finds us. He comes for us.

The Temple Represents God's Presence

The Temple didn't contain God's presence. It represented God's presence. And so, when the psalmist says, *How lovely is your dwelling place*, don't think place, think presence...think, '*the person, the place of encountering God's presence*'...which for a time under the covenant of the Old Testament that 'place' was the Temple but is now a person, the pursuit or seeking after Jesus in the power of his Spirit. And so, now digging into these twelve verses of Psalm 84, going back to verses 1 and 2, the psalmist writes,

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,

O Lord of hosts!

He says...

2 My soul longs, yes, faints

for the courts of the Lord;

my heart and flesh sing for joy

to the living God.

This is a psalm about longing. Going back to my opening question, what do you long for? What are you craving? What is most 'lovely' to you? What do you 'faint' for that you desire so much? Because our answer to that question will shape our life. We chase what we love.

Here in Burlington, we love our homes don't we? We love our gardens and our yards, which is part of the reason why the housing crisis is hitting us so hard...because culturally speaking,

that's what we most chase after in our little part of the world and for so many, it's no longer attainable.

God's not down on desire. He's just down on us settling, putting our desire and greatest pursuit on something less than him, something that won't ultimately fulfill, something that may even turn toxic on us in making it the thing we live for – what the scripture calls an idol of the heart.

Here is the point. God wants to take us on a journey, on a pilgrimage, of making him our soul's greatest longing and desire, where nothing is more beautiful to us than being in his presence, where there is nothing more joyful to us than knowing and walking with him. You may not be there yet. But that is the journey the Holy Spirit wants to take you on...that's the pilgrimage he wants you to be on that he wants to use this psalm to encourage you by.

Why Go on This Journey?

Why go on this journey of being a follower of Jesus and seeking after God and making him your greatest longing and pursuit? Why keep going? Why is it worth it, to say no to other things? I want to give you three reasons from our text:

1) Peace vv.3-4

The first is to receive from God a life of peace. Look at verses 3 and 4. The psalmist writes,...

*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 Blessed are those who dwell in your house,
ever singing your praise! Selah*

In picturing the grandness of the Temple, the psalmist says that at the Temple even *the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself*...a place where she feels safe to lay her young.

On a lot of buildings downtown in the city, around their entrance ways, there are often spikes placed around the ledges and architectural décor to keep birds from landing or nesting there. But at the Temple, there were no such spikes. Birds would come and nest on the porticos and architectural features of the Temple. And the psalmist, in seeing these sparrows find safety and even a home on the temple and its altars – the very place where at times birds would be sacrificed – he saw a parallel, to the way God’s presence is a place of refuge and peace for us. There is no greater peace than when you know you are in the safety and care of God’s presence.

Jesus talked about this same picture. In Matthew 6, speaking to the disciples about their worries, Jesus said, *Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*

There is a peace that comes when you know and keep alive in your heart the truth of God's love, concern, and promise of provision for you. It's a truth and a benefit of close relationship with him that produces in you the gift of his peace.

But also take note of the title God is called by in verse 3...not only verse 3 but also repeated in verses 1, 8, and 12, where God is called the 'Lord of hosts,' a term from the Hebrew name for God that means 'the Lord of heaven's armies.' To the psalmist, seeing God as 'the Lord of hosts' is not a title that instills fear but the peace of knowing that in God's presence you are under the power of his protection. When you long for God and pursue his presence, your life becomes marked by his peace.

2) Strength vv.5-7

Let's look now at verses 5-7 to see what else marks our life when we pursue God's presence.

The psalmist writes...

*5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.[b]*

*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;
each one appears before God in Zion.*

Here, the psalmist talks about the hi-way to Zion, being on the path in your life of being steadfast in your pursuit of striving to live in God's presence – to live in close relationship with him. It's a hi-way, and the psalmist says that those who are on it find God's strength. The psalmist writes, *Blessed are those whose strength is in you...* in verse 7, it says, *They go from strength to strength...* as they keep making their way to Zion – to the place of God's presence.

The world tells us that we find strength in ourselves by digging deep when faced with a challenge. But God says the way we find strength by putting our trust in him...by counting on him *to be* our strength. And the thing God wants to give us strength for the most, is pursuing him.

The pilgrims in making their way to Jerusalem who would have heard this song weren't there yet. Like us, they hadn't yet 'arrived.' But they were trusting God to give them the strength to get there. We need to do the same. None of us have the strength, in and of ourselves, to faithfully walk with God or to not succumb to temptation or anxiety. The only way we will make it to the destination God is calling us will be by his strength, by calling upon him.

The psalmist talks about their journey. He says, *they go through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs.* Baca was a dry place. Little or no water. Not hospitable. And likely a place they couldn't go under, couldn't go over, and couldn't go around...it was a place they had to go *through*...like a lot of the situations in our lives.

But the psalmist says, that in this journey of pilgrimage, of seeking and pursuing God, they made that desert place in their journey a *place of springs*. How? By drawing from the living water of God's presence in the midst of being in a dry place.

In John 7, in coming to the Temple for the feast of tabernacles, it says, *Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them"* (vv.37-38).

How do we access the living water of Jesus' presence? The answer is by coming to him, by drawing close to him. How do we do that? When people draw water from a well, they need a few things to be able to draw up the water. They need rope, a bucket, and maybe a pulley. That is what spiritual disciplines are – they are the means by which we access the living water of Jesus' Spirit – regularly reading God's Word. Regularly spending time with other believers to focus on God. Regularly and intentionally praying and confessing sin.

How is your walk with God? Is it dry? With the means by which God has given you, he wants you to begin drawing upon his living water by drawing close to him.

In life, we all encounter dry, difficult places. But when we draw close to God, God draws close to us and those places can actually become the places we find the deepest springs of Jesus' living water for our soul.

The journey God wants to take you on in pursuing him is a journey where he wants you to go from strength to strength, as you learn to draw upon his presence through spiritual discipline like we read about in his Word that helps us access his strength in the places we need it.

3) Blessing vv.10-12

Pursuing God's presence will mark our lives with God's peace. Pursuing God's presence will bring us God's strength. There is a also third reason to stay on this journey of following Jesus, and that is that it will lead you to experiencing God's favour and blessing. That's what we see in verses 10-12:

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 dwell in the tents of wickedness.

11 For the Lord God is a sun and shield;

the Lord bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does he withhold

from those who walk uprightly.

12 O Lord of hosts,

blessed is the one who trusts in you!

Of all the places you could be or things you could long for or pursue, none will be better, says the psalmist, than being in the courts of God's presence. Even a day is better than a thousand elsewhere, he says. He would even rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell

anywhere else, including the often enticing places of the world, who the psalmist describes as wicked.

The question is why? Why give up what the world offers...even if just to be a doorkeeper? The reason is because it's only in God's presence – even if you only peer in from the doorway – where you will find a truly blessed life out of the favour and honour God will bestow on you by trusting in him through his Son.

While we don't see God's blessings all up front, the psalmist reminds us that in following God and pursuing him with our life, *No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly*. In his presence, we will experience God as a sun who fills our life with light and goodness. His presence and following his ways will also be like a shield, keeping us from many self-inflicted wounds we receive when we resist him or go our own way and do not seek him in our decisions or in the way we live. But instead, the psalmist ends by saying, *blessed is the one who trusts in you!* How about you? Will choose to trust him? Keep trusting him?

While you may not see the fullness of his blessing today, God wants us to hold on to his promise as we persevere in pursuing him. To make Jesus your greatest longing and pursuit, you have to give up looking elsewhere for satisfaction, honour, or status. You have to see that giving up or going after what the world chases after pales in comparison with what God has for you...if you will trust him.

Jesus said, *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?* (Mark 8:36). In pursuing God's presence, your life will be marked by the promise of blessing – the greatest blessing being God's promised presence living inside you in the person of the Holy Spirit, through whom we receive all of the other promises of God, as we continue to trust him to bring us home as we faithfully journeying with him at each step.

Close

What about the Temple now, today? In speaking about himself in going to the cross, Jesus said in John, *"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days"* (2:19). It was Jesus' way of saying that he is now the Temple. He is now where we find God's presence – *in him*, as we come to him, the living God. It's now in Jesus, and Jesus alone, that we find God's peace, God's strength, and God's blessing for our lives. He's the pursuit and destination God sets before us. The Temple ultimately point us to a person, to Jesus.

Where are you on that journey of pursuing Jesus?

Our vision as a church, if you don't know it, is *'Pursuing Deeper Life'* – pursuing Jesus and his presence. Together, he wants you to seek his presence every day, and he wants you to know it will always be worth it, because he is a God of faithfulness and promise where everyone is welcomed to the journey of knowing his presence.

Pray

"Better is One Day" by Matt Redman