

Looking for the Presence of God

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Preacher: Chris Lamont

[0:00] I'm going to invite one of our deacons, Kevin Clennan, to come and to read to us our scripture reading this morning. It's from Psalm 84, Kevin.

Let's read together from Psalm 84. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts. My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord.

My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself, for she may lay her young. At your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise. Blessed are those whose strength is in you and whose hearts are the highways to Zion. As they go through the vale of Baca, they make it a place of springs.

The early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength. Each one appears before God in Zion. O Lord of hosts, hear my prayer. Give ear, O God of Jacob.

[1:04] Behold our shield, O God. Look in the face of your anointed. 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.

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. O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Well, it's so nice to see you all here this morning. When I was reading through Psalm 84 just this week, I kept coming back to this feeling that I've had at certain points in my life.

And I wonder if you've had this feeling too. This feeling like a homesickness, but it's not homesickness. It's a longing, but not for home.

It's for a place that you've never been before. I didn't want you all to think that I was really weird when I said that. So I googled it to make sure that it was a thing. And it turns out it is a thing. And the Germans have a word for it.

[2:03] They call it Fernweh. I did French in school, so you have to apologize for my pronunciation. It's a yearning for a far-off place that you've not yet visited. It's not Wanderlust.

Wanderlust is fancy for adventure. That's something different. It's not an excitement, but an ache. It's something like far sickness.

A longing for a place that you know deep down inside that's real, but you can't locate it on a map. And at no point in your life have you ever fully actually arrived at it.

Have you felt that ache? Maybe the day after everyone goes back home after you've all met up with family for Christmas, you felt that ache. Or maybe as you turn over the last page, the final page of your favorite book, you get that longing.

Or maybe, like just last week, the musicians who've written the soundtracks to a lot of our lives pass away, they die, and they move on. And you feel this feeling like there's something beyond.

[3:08] That thirst, that longing. That all your life you haven't been able to satisfy. And maybe you've tried. Maybe you've tried to satisfy it with the respect and the authority that comes from building a successful career.

Or maybe you've tried to extinguish that longing through deep friendship, where you can be truly open and honest with people. You can bare your soul and know that you're still safe. Or maybe you've amended yourself in beauty.

The beauty of nature or of music. You've sought out emotive experiences. Or you've sacrificed yourself for your own art. C.S. Lewis, he wrote the Chronicles of Narnia.

He was a Christian writer too. And he wrote a book called Mere Christianity. And in it he wrote this famous line. If I find myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.

Have you felt it? I think we all have. And as we read this 3,000 year old song, it takes this universal human truth.

[4 : 23] This place, this thing that the world's never seen. And it gives it a name. It gives it a face. And in Jesus, it gives us an answer. We're going to look through the psalm together in three movements.

This, longing for God, walking with God, and finally dwelling with God. So first of all, longing for God. This song, it doesn't start with theology, but it starts with longing.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts. My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.

The psalmist is wrapped up in this all-encompassing ache for God. Notice he speaks about his soul, the place of his deepest desires, and his heart, his inner self, and his flesh.

Even his body is aching, longing for God. And it tells us exactly what he's longing for. At first, it looks as though he's longing for a place, a building.

[5 : 25] God's dwelling place is lovely, he says. But he doesn't talk about the beauty of the temple. He doesn't mention the architecture, or the design, or the ornamentation.

He doesn't talk about the beauty of the activities that take place there. He doesn't say how moving is the liturgy, or how impressive is the choir. This place is not beautiful.

It's not lovely because of what it is. It's beautiful because of who is there. The place where God dwells is lovely, because this is the home of God.

And this is the key to this psalm. And the entire Bible. In the entire Bible, we read about what a human being is made for, what that longing is that exists in all of us.

We're not merely made to admire beautiful buildings, although we're thankful for them. We're made to live in the presence of God. Centuries before Lewis, St. Augustine, he wrote the line, you've made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.

[6 : 35] But in irresolvable longing that you feel for beauty, for belonging, for home, it's not a design flaw in human beings that we need to medicate away.

It's the hole in every human heart that only God can fill. And he's singing. He's singing for joy. That can be accurately translated in the original as crying out, crying out to be with God.

And look how he addresses God. He calls him the Lord of hosts twice in the first four verses. And that title, Lord of hosts, it's prominent throughout all of the Psalms, all of the songbook in the Bible. And it carries this idea that God is at the same time the terror of his enemies and the foundation, the security, the delight of his people.

And then in verse 2, the Psalmist calls God the living God. You see, the Psalmist is not longing for a concept, the idea of what a God might be like if only somebody was in control of all this chaos in the world.

[7 : 49] That's not what he's saying at all. He's truly aching for the presence of God who made himself known to his own people. who made them, who's so far above them, so different from them, but yet at the same time entered into a binding relationship with his people, a covenant.

In verse 3, the writer says, 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 God and my King.

The writer's saying even the lowest, the least powerful creatures in all the world find a home here. In God's temple. Probably he's literally seen birds flying around, making nests in the eaves or on the roof.

But I think it's also like the writer's identifying himself with the least powerful, the least impressive of all God's creatures. And he's saying something like, these tiny little birds have a home here.

Even the least impressive characters like me can find a home with God too. Verse 4 says, blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise.

[8 : 59] This word blessed is a happiness, happiness. But it's not that fleeting happiness that comes and goes. It's not waking up to a sunny morning, if you can imagine what that might be like.

Or an unexpected visit from an old friend. It's not that kind of happiness he's talking about. There's elements of those things, glimpses of this happiness in those things. But this is a deep joy that lives really low inside of us.

And it outlasts our circumstances. No matter what we're going through, we have this happiness, this joy that carries us through. And we look then at the end of this little section.

No wonder the writer wants to dwell in God's house. Everyone who does experiences the fullness of God's favor. So in these first four verses, the psalmist is unashamedly crying out with joy because he's enraptured by the loveliness of God and longs to be where God is. And that makes us ask ourselves, doesn't it, this morning, is this us today? Do we spring out of bed on Sunday morning, hearts alive at the thrill of getting to come and worship God with God's people? [10:16] Do we really long for the presence of God? Or do we find ourselves more often than not thinking about the things that God can get us rather than God himself?

C.S. Lewis says that the problem is that it's not that we expect too much from God or that we ask too much from God. It's that we're too easily pleased.

We're too easy to settle for less. We set our desires too low. C.S. Lewis said, we want to go on making mud pies in a slum because we can't imagine what it means, what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

God's not merely somebody who brings us good things. He's the very source of all blessing, all happiness, all joy. So Christianity is not fundamentally about getting things from God.

The greatest gift that God could ever give us is himself. So if we're longing for the presence of God, how do we actually get there? Well, the psalmist taps into this in verses five to seven when he introduces us to the idea of pilgrimage.

[11:26] So point number two is walking with God. Verse five says, blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. So suddenly the writers transported us from this place of longing to enter the temple, the place where God is, to the image of pilgrims being on their way to that place.

Taking the Israelites would have, in this generation, they would have walked towards Jerusalem to keep the annual feasts. Zion, it says Zion in the passage, but Zion's another name for Jerusalem where the temple was, where God is.

So these people, they've got their hearts set on God as they journey through these difficult terrains. And their strength is in him, not in themselves.

The psalmist tells us something remarkable about the route. It says that as they go through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs. The early rain also covers it with pools.

So these people are heading for the temple, but they're passing through the valley of Baca. This is probably a real valley. There's a few potential places people, commentators think it might be.

[12:43] But Baca, the word Baca, sounds like the Hebrew word for weeping. So we could think about this maybe as the valley of weeping. It's a dry, thorny, waterless ravine.

And yet, it's made into a place of springs. The autumn rains cover it with pools. It brings refreshing and life, despite the arduous journey and the difficult circumstances.

This word pools that we've got translated in English as pools could be translated, it's translated in other places as blessing. So rain in dry land is a blessing from God to his people.

And this verse, this section of the psalm, it does something really important theologically, something that we have to grasp. Because as the people are journeying to the temple to God's presence, God doesn't lift them on a detour around the valley of weeping.

He leads them right through it. The psalm shows us that God doesn't promise an easy path towards the road of the presence of God.

[13:56] He promises us a road that goes right through sorrow, right through pain, right through disappointments and loss. And yet here, in the valley of sorrow, or pain or disappointment or hurt, through the driest valleys and the hardest terrain, God supplies blessing.

That's vital for us to hear this morning. Because which one of us, honestly, we put our hands on our hearts, can say that we're, spiritually, that we're standing in the courts of God with unbridled joy?

Aren't most of us somewhere along the path in the valley of Baca? Aren't most of us journeying somewhere through bereavement or sickness or broken relationships or a difficult diagnosis?

Well, the first thing to know is that if you're trusting in the Lord, this is real hardship. It's not making less of these things.

But it's not because you've taken a wrong turn. God's not taken his eye off you and allowed you to wander in the wrong direction. Psalm 84 doesn't tell us that the valley's a detour from the pilgrim's path.

[15:11] The valley tells us the valley of, the psalm tells us the valley of weeping is the pilgrim way. As we walk through this valley, we're reminded that we're walking towards the God who's going to

turn every valley, every difficult challenge, into a spring, into a pool, into a blessing.

King David wrote very famously, we sang a paraphrase of it, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'll fear no evil, for you're with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The second thing to know about this journey is that this is not our final destination. I love the singer, the singer-songwriter Tom Waits, and he's got a song called Come On Up to the House.

And in it he says, this world is not my home, I'm just a passing through. He sings, does life seem nasty, brutish in short? The seas are stormy and you can't find no port.

You've got to come up to the house. Yes, the world is not my home. I'm just passing through. And then in verse 7, we see this upside-down logic of pilgrim theology.

[16 : 21] Despite walking through the valley of weeping, they're going from strength to strength. Now this is a stunning statement, because when we think about journeying through a difficult journey, we think we start off fresh and we become gradually weaker and weaker.

We go from strength and positivity to exhaustion and despondency as we become tired. But this is not about a physical journey, it's about a spiritual one.

And it defies worldly logic. When our spiritual walk is with God, it doesn't drain us, it actually fuels us.

This is a joyful paradox for Christians. Even while our bodies, our minds, all the things around us that we see and touch and feel seem to be falling apart, becoming weaker and weaker, our spirit is being renewed.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, the church in Corinth, and he says, though the outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day, not by our own strength, but by relying on God's.

[17 : 33] And then the second verse, the second half of verse seven, it gives us this incredible hope to grab onto that no matter what your circumstances are right now, no matter what you're going through, no matter how hard your valley of weeping is today, this psalm says, each one appears before God in Zion.

Every pilgrim who's on the way to God's presence will arrive in God's presence fully and completely. This is a hard course to walk, but it's a course you'll not fail to complete because that's God's promise to us in this psalm.

And then as we come towards the final point that we have this morning, we need to look at verses eight and nine because these two verses, they're a prayer that unlocks so much about the way that we understand this psalm.

Verses eight and nine reads, O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer, give ear, O God of Jacob, Selah. That's a musical note, it's a note to musicians, we think. Behold our shield, O God, look on the face of your anointed.

So he's just described pilgrims, those journeying through this difficult terrain, this difficult life, as going from strength to strength. And then immediately, he admits that he can't carry on the rest of the way through his own strength.

[18 : 55] The walk through the valley isn't designed to make you self-sufficient, self-reliant. It makes you someone who prays all the harder and brings you all the closer.

Where it says, look on the face, look on the face of your anointed. That phrase means to look favorably, to bless this person. And look at who he asks God to look favorably on because it's not himself.

The writer's not saying look favorably on me, but he's saying, look favorably on your anointed. This is the king, the one who's been appointed, anointed to lead and rule over the people.

The logic's something like this. Look favorably on the king because the destination, the destiny of pilgrims is inextricably tied up with the destiny of the king.

The king is like a mediator, an intermediary, the one through whom the people will be blessed. Look favorably on him and let us be accepted for his sake, is what the psalms saying.

[20 : 14] You see, access to God's presence was never going to rest on the pilgrim's own worthiness. No matter how much he longed to be in the temple, no matter how much he had to endure as he journeyed towards it, it had to rest on somebody else.

And that brings us to our final point, dwelling with God. This is maybe, we arrive now, the most quoted line from this psalm. If you've been in church for any length of time, you'll have heard this before.

It says, for a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. So again, the psalmist is defying the way that we think.

We calculate value differently. He teaches us about quality over quantity. One day near God outweighs a thousand anywhere else, the psalmist says.

He'd rather hold the most lowly position he can think of. A doorkeeper. Someone who doesn't even get to enter into the heart of the court. Who merely stands at the threshold as others pass by.

[21:25] He'd rather that than dwell in the camp of the wickedness. Even if he could go right to the center, prized place, and all the good things, the perceived goodness that comes from that.

This is personal for the person who's written this psalm. Because the sons of Korah, it tells us at the beginning, they wrote a bunch of psalms. They wrote this psalm.

But they are descendants of a man who wanted more for himself than he had already been blessed with.

He was chasing more. and in his sinfulness, he tried to step over others in order to get it. And what that led to, it led to destruction, it led to separation for him from God.

So the psalmist knows what it's like to be on the proximity of God's house. And he's telling us it's worth more than all the comfort, all the blessing that we think we can find anywhere else.

[22:30] The psalm closes with a description of his God. And he says, God is a son and shield. He's the giver of life and light.

He's the one who guards and protects. He bestows favor and honor and withholds nothing good from those who walk uprightly. So the psalm began with longing and it ends with blessing to those whose faith leads them into God's presence.

So for the psalmist 3,000 years ago, this is all bound up in a building, in a place. His longing, his pilgrimage, his doorkeeping, it's all pointing towards the physical temple that existed that was built in Jerusalem.

A temple that was made of stone where people would come to gather to worship God, where God's presence was. See, but here's the problem for us if we read this today.

God later allowed that temple to be destroyed. So if Psalm 84 is only about a material building, only about stone building, then the story of this song ends in tragedy.

[23:43] The temple collapses, the sparrows and the swallows, they fly away, they make their nests somewhere else. And our far sickness, the ache in our hearts, that longing for that place we've not yet been remains unfulfilled forever.

But the whole Bible tells us, that the temple was never the destination. It was merely a signpost.

And it wasn't the only one. So when God made Adam and Eve, he placed them in a garden.

And the garden was perfect, and so God could be present with them there. But because they fell, they sinned against God. They were put out of the garden. And there was separation between God and mankind.

Then later, God dwelt with his people in the tabernacle, a tent that lived in the midst of the people who wandered aimlessly in the wilderness.

And then came the temple that we're talking about here where God dwelt. But even in the temple, there was a curtain put up that separated human beings from the most holy place where God was.

[24:53] and now this psalm longs for unbroken nearness to the living God, a place where God's presence and human beings are no longer separated, a home so secure that even the birds can make their nests in it, a valley of weeping turned into springs of waters, a doorway into the very presence of God that doesn't depend on our own worthiness.

And every single one of those longings is answered not in a renewed temple but in a person. A thousand years ish after this psalm was written, Jesus stood at the temple and he said, destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up again.

So the people thought that he was talking about the physical temple, the stone temple that he was standing beside. But John, one of Jesus' disciples, tells us that he wasn't talking about that temple at all.

He was talking about the temple of his body. You see, Jesus didn't really come to be a pilgrim walking the way to Zion. He is the way. He is the destination.

Jesus is the true temple. And John tells us that he tabernacles among us. He lives among us. Jesus walked through the valley of weeping not as one who needed springs but as the one who supplies

them.

[26:28] Jesus turned humanity's driest, most thorn-choked sorrow, death itself, into a place where living water rises.

He's the sun. He's the shield in a way that the psalmist could only hint at from his vantage point. He's the light of the world. And when he went to the cross, his own body became a shield, protecting us from the suffering that was rightfully ours.

And maybe most staggering of all, Jesus doesn't stand in. He doesn't let us, doesn't just let us stand at the door. He says to us this morning, I am the door.

And having entered once by his own blood, once for all, he tears that temple curtain apart from top to bottom so that you and me who deserve to be outside forever are welcomed all the way in.

He's the one through whom we have the confidence to enter the most holy places and not just to be doorkeepers but because of the anointed one, the Mashiach it is in Hebrew, the Messiah, the Christ, we're named sons and daughters of the King.

[27:50] That's why your Fernway, that unnamed longing for a world that you've never seen is not a cruel joke played by nature on your human heart.

It's a homing signal. C.S. Lewis was right. If you feel that you don't belong in this world, if there's something that just doesn't feel like you belong here, that's because your true home is not fully here.

Not yet. At the end of the Bible, John sees a vision. A vision of what's going to happen at the end times and he records it for us and this is from that book, Revelation, it's called.

He says, When we read Psalm 84, this side of the cross, in the light of Jesus, it tells us that our home is not just in the future.

The living God, who once dwelt behind a veil in a tent or in a temple, is now dwelling in his people by his spirit.

[29:16] And one day, he'll do that so completely that the dwelling place of God will be with man. Because Jesus Christ, God himself, left the loveliness of heaven to come to earth.

And at the cross, the Son experienced the agony of the Father turning his presence away from him. Our far sickness is transformed into homesickness.

How? Because he's opened up the way for us to enter into God's presence where we will find complete fulfillment. Our longing for something we can't name has become a longing for the home that we can't lose.

Let's pray. Lord God, we're so thankful to you for your holy word that teaches us that the circumstances of our lives are not an indicator of our spiritual health.

Rather, these are the things that humans endure as they journey towards the cross. We thank you that Jesus Christ came and he lived this life suffering before glory for us.

[30:33] And now as we walk through suffering in so many different ways, we look forward with hope to when you will make all things new, when Lord, you will dwell with us forever, wiping every tear from every eye.

Lord, we ask that you bless us and keep us. Forgive our sins in Jesus' name. Amen.