**PSALMS**

**LOVING AND LONGING FOR GOD’S DWELLING PLACE**

**Psalm 84:1-12**

**INTRODUCTION**

As we return to in-person worship, our church’s leadership team thought that it would be best to postpone the conclusion of our series on 1 Timothy and focus for a Sunday on what the Bible teaches about the joys and the significance of gathering together physically for worship.

This is an important topic as churches adapt to a world that has been changed by the pandemic. Innovation within the church can be wonderful as we find fresh ways to bring the truths of the gospel to bear in our lives. But it can also be dangerous as we begin to adopt pragmatic strategies to see the church grow and end up abandoning what the Bible says about how that growth is to be accomplished.

One of those strategies would be to multiply and expand our online content. After all, everyone is at home anyways, so let’s find a way to duplicate what we would be doing in person and put it into people’s homes. We could put together online devotionals, training workshops, teaching seminars, podcasts, and even small group discussions and make it all accessible from home.

I have nothing against online content *per se*. I frequently benefit from online content put on by other churches and ministries every week. But the message that online content can send is that going to church no longer matters. Being physically present in a physical church is just a matter of preference, because everything you could receive at church can now be consumed and enjoyed in the comfort of your own home.

There’s only one problem. That’s not a church. There is no such thing as an online church. There may be times when churches gather online like we have, but that’s not a real gathering. It’s a virtual gathering. Virtual means “almost but not completely”. “Virtual reality” isn’t reality. It appears like it, resembles it, but it’s not reality. In the same way, virtual gatherings are not real gatherings.

According to the Bible, we’re not gathering as God’s people for worship unless we’re gathering in person. We all know this by experience. Many of you have told me that it’s been nice to see each other on Zoom or watch the livestream, but it’s not the same. It’s not meant to be the same. Nothing can replace the many blessings of physical, in-person gatherings.

Our text today is going to help us understand this. Psalm 84 was written by the “Sons of Korah”, descendants of Levi who devoted their lives to serving in the Temple in Jerusalem. Some of them functioned as Temple guardians and caretakers. Others participated in the Temple choir and wrote music for congregational singing. Twelve of those songs made it into Scripture as Psalms inspired by the Holy Spirit. Psalm 84 is one of them.

As we read these Psalms, it becomes evident that these men loved corporate worship. They loved when God’s people gathered in God’s presence at God’s Temple, because that’s when God chose to manifest his presence in a special way.

For New Testament believers like us, however, God’s Temple is no longer found in Jerusalem. Nor is it found in any other fixed geographic location. Instead, it is found in God’s people. We are the Temple of God. There is a sense in which each of us is the Temple of God, since the Holy Spirit dwells in each of us. But it is also true that when we are gathered together, God is especially pleased to pour out his love into our hearts by his Spirit, because we aren’t just the Temple of God. We are the Body of Christ, not individually but together, and God has chosen to love us with the same love that he has had for his Son from all eternity.

And so, as we read Psalm 84, let us imagine not a place, but a people. We are to imagine a people, gathered together in one place in the presence of God as we worship him.

The title of this sermon is **Loving and Longing for God’s Dwelling Place.**

You may have noticed that there are three descriptions of the “Blessed” person in this Psalm (verses 4, 5, and 12). Those blessings will form our outline today:

1. The Blessing of Dwelling (verses 1-4)
2. The Blessing of Seeking (verses 5-8)
3. The Blessing of Trusting (verses 9-12)

(1) **THE BLESSING OF DWELLING**

The Psalm begins with the language of a love poem:

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
    O Lord of hosts!
2My soul longs, yes, faints
    for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and flesh sing for joy
    to the living God.

Verse 1 says, “How *lovely* is your dwelling place.” Things are lovely because they are loved. The Psalmist loves the dwelling place of God, not in the way that one loves cats or cookies, but in the way that one loves a person. He describes that in verse 2 when he references how his “soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD, and how his “heart and flesh sing for joy”. This is a yearning that he feels in his heart and in his body. It’s a physical and spiritual longing for God’s dwelling place.

His longing is so strong not because of the *what*, but because of the *who*. He calls it lovely because it is the dwelling place *of the LORD*. He longs for the courts *of the LORD*. His heart and flesh sing for joy *to the living God*.

He loves the Temple because he loves God. He’s not like a tourist who stops by to admire the rich architecture of a building but has no personal history or connection to it. He’s like a lover who lingers at the home of his beloved, not for its own sake, but because that’s where his beloved lives. He loves the place because of the person within it. In the same way, the Psalmist loves the Temple, not for its own sake, but because that is where he meets with God.

That’s how much being together should matter. Most of us probably weren’t longing or fainting to be together again, but if you were, you weren’t out of place. This is a sacred assembly, a place where God himself is pleased to dwell. The more you love him, the more you will love being together as a church, because God dwells among us.

The extent to which we love the church reveals the extent to which we love God, because the church is the dwelling place of God. The church is the body and the bride of Christ, and it is the dearest place on earth.

So if you look at these verses about longing and fainting for God’s dwelling place and you think, “I don’t relate to that at all”, or “That’s just not me”, don’t just resign yourself to it. Instead, set your mind and your heart to knowing the love of God more. Know the height, and length, and breadth, and depth of the love of God that moved him to give his only beloved and begotten Son to die on the cross for sinners, because that’s how we grow in love for him. We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

It is in knowing his love that we learn to love him in return. His love is what generates our love for him. And the more we love him, the more we will love his dwelling place and experience what the Psalmist describes in these verses.

The Psalmist continues in verse 3:

3Even 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.

The imagery here is striking. The Psalmist’s favourite title for God in this Psalm is the “LORD of hosts”. We see that in verses 1, 3, 8, and 12. God is portrayed in this Psalm as the Warrior King, the Commander who leads the heavenly hosts. He is the God of angel armies, the Sovereign Lord who rules with all authority and might.

But here in verse 3, the LORD of hosts is also described as the Lord of the weak. He is gentle, tender, and welcoming, so that even the sparrow finds a home in his presence, and the swallows may nest and lay their young.

This is a beautiful picture of the tender mercies of our God. All are welcome to dwell in the presence of the LORD of hosts, God Almighty, whether rich or poor, strong or weak, old or young. All can experience the blessing of verse 4:

4Blessed are those who dwell in your house,
    ever singing your praise!

This is the promise for all who are in Christ. It doesn’t matter if you don’t have everything together, or you don’t measure up to the standards of success in the world, or it seems that you’re always falling short of other people’s standards. If the sparrow and the swallow can find a home with God, then you can as well.

Blessed are those who dwell in God’s house. We can be happy together when we’re together as a church. We can be perfectly content, because we know that he won’t cast us out of his presence because of our weaknesses. The Lord of hosts won’t condemn us because of our sins. Instead, we can rest assured that if we repent of our sins and turn to Christ, he will hold us close to himself, and we will dwell in his house forever.

(2) **THE BLESSING OF SEEKING**

But it isn’t always possible to be in God’s presence. Israel experienced that in the exile. We have experienced that in this pandemic. Some of you are still experiencing that now.

What does this Psalm have to say about that? Where do we find our hope when we’re still in exile and we’re not together in the dwelling place of God? This leads to our second point.

In verses 5-7, the Psalmist shifts the focus from those who are in Zion to those who are on their way. They’re on a pilgrimage back to the dwelling place of God. Surprisingly, verse 5 says that these people are also “blessed”:

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

These people aren’t blessed because they dwell in the house of the Lord. Instead, they’re blessed because their strength is in the Lord. If they can’t experience the blessing of fellowship within the Temple, they can still experience the blessing of finding their strength in the Lord.

What does that look like? The context shows us that those who find their strength in the Lord are those who are eager to get back to the Temple. Verse 5 says that these people have the “highways to Zion” in their hearts. It’s those who have the “highways to Zion” in their hearts who experience the blessing of finding their strength in the Lord, because God wants them to return to him. He wants them to travel on the highways to Zion and return to his people and presence, so he will give them the strength to do that.

I love the imagery of the highway, because it reminds us that we’re not the only ones who have spent time away from the dwelling place of the Lord. These highways are well-beaten paths that others have travelled on before us.

You are not alone in your pilgrimage to return to the Lord. You are not alone in your experience of feeling distant from God. Others have been on the same paths before you and made it safely back to the Lord.

Derek Kidner writes,

“The way to God’s presence is not as lonely or trackless as it may seem, but well prepared and well frequented.” – Derek Kidner

There is blessing from the Lord, not just for those who are here, but for those who are out there, so long as you long to return. If the highways to Zion are in your heart, you can be blessed. If you love the church and long to return to the church, you can be happy in God, because you know that his strength will preserve you, and he will bring you back to himself.

That’s true even in the most difficult seasons.

6As they go through the Valley of Baca
    they make it a place of springs;
    the early rain also covers it with pools.

Verse 6 says that they go “through the Valley of Baca”. *Baca* likely refers to the “balsam tree”, which was a tree that grew in the desert. It also sounds like the Hebrew word for “weeping”. This was a spiritual desert, a place of sorrow, a place that seems like the farthest thing from the blessed life, where one goes not to grow but to die.

But these pilgrims don’t give up. These pilgrims who are blessed with the strength of the Lord get to work, and they make that dry and barren desert “a place of springs”, a place where fresh water floods the land and fills it once again with life.

If you find yourself in a spiritual desert, don’t give up. Don’t lie down in that barren land and languish. Get up in the strength of the Lord and start digging, because if you do, you’ll not only find water, but a spring of water, a fount of water that pours into your soul and quenches your thirst.

I can’t help but think of what Jesus said in John 7 when he stood up on the last day of the feast and cried out,

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38)

The living waters of course were a reference to the Holy Spirit. If you come to Jesus, if you believe in him, looking to his promises and his provision on the cross, then he will pour out his Spirit into your heart so that it overflows into rivers of living water.

Verse 6 reminds us that we don’t have to do this alone:

6As they go through the Valley of Baca
    they make it a place of springs;
    the early rain also covers it with pools.

It says that the “the early rain” comes as well and “covers it with pools”. Water from below as we dig, and water from above as God rains down his grace upon us. He doesn’t leave us on our own. He meets us in the desert and turns that place into a refreshing oasis where we can drink and be satisfied.

7They go from strength to strength;
    each one appears before God in Zion.

No wonder verse 7 says that these pilgrims “go from strength to strength”. They don’t get weaker. They get stronger in the strength of the Lord until that glorious day when they each appear before God in Zion.

If you’re in the desert, whether it’s because you can’t gather for worship, or you have felt far from God for a long time, verse 7 assures you that you’re going to make it. You will appear before God in Zion and experience not just the blessing of seeking, but the blessing of dwelling. The one who strengthens you will empower you to go from strength to strength until you’re with him once again.

That is the Psalmist’s prayer as he pauses in his reflections and offers up this simple request:

8O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
    give ear, O God of Jacob!

Keep praying, keep seeking, keep finding your way back to God in Zion, and the Lord will hear and answer your prayer.

(3) **THE BLESSING OF TRUSTING**

This leads to our final point.

Verse 9 is a prayer that the Lord would bless the King, whom he refers to as God’s anointed:

9Behold our shield, O God;
    look on the face of your anointed!

He calls the King “our shield”, because his role was to protect the nation from physical and spiritual enemies. He was to lead Israel away from the dangers of idols and protect it from the surrounding nations. The Psalmist prays that the Lord would look on his face, to shine the light of his countenance upon his chosen one, because the strength of the nation depended on the strength of its king.

We know that Jesus fulfilled this prayer. Jesus is *the* anointed one, the Son of David who will reign on David’s throne forever, so we don’t need to pray for his protection. He’s already conquered every enemy in his death and resurrection! That ought to give us tremendous hope, for God has indeed looked on the face of his anointed and declared that this is his beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased. Now nothing can threaten him or put his kingdom at risk.

The Psalmist explains why he prays for God’s anointed one in verse 10:

10For 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.

He prays for God’s anointed because he’s the one who will protect the Temple, and if the Temple is protected, then God’s presence can be enjoyed. And what a blessing it is to be in God’s presence. Just one day in the courts of the Lord is better than a thousand elsewhere. A day in God’s presence is so sweet, and so satisfying, that he says he could just be a doorkeeper in the house of his God and be content. He could just open and close a door in that most blessed place and be completely happy.

He would rather do that than “dwell in the tents of wickedness”. It doesn’t matter how much freedom he could enjoy, or how much pleasure he could pursue, just one day as God’s doorkeeper would be far better than a thousand elsewhere.

The Psalmist ends by explaining why the presence of God is so sweet and satisfying in verses 11-12:

11For 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.

Every good thing comes from the Lord. He is our sun, and he is our shield. He gives us the light of his truth, the heat of his love, and the protective shield of his absolute authority. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly, not even favour and honour. He lavishes his blessings on us freely and generously so that we never want to leave his side.

This is why a day in his courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. This is why we would rather be doorkeepers in his house than dwell anywhere else. And every time we gather as a church, we get to experience this blessing. Our church gatherings may not be the fulfillment of this vision – we won’t experience that until we enter through gates of splendour and stand in the presence of God – but it is a foretaste. The church is an earthly foretaste of the heavenly pleasures to come.

And so, the Psalmist ends in verse 12 with one final blessing:

12O Lord of hosts,
    blessed is the one who trusts in you!

If you trust in the Lord you are blessed, because you won’t just spend one day in the courts of the Lord, but thousands upon thousands upon thousands of days stretching on for an eternity. This is the blessing secured for us by our Saviour Jesus Christ: an eternity of days in the presence of the God who is our sun, our shield, and our salvation.

**CONCLUSION**

As we close, let me briefly suggest three points of application.

First, Psalm 84 should inform the way that we talk about the church. There’s no question that churches fail, disappoint, and hurt people. If you’ve never experienced any of this, it’s only a matter of time before you will. What should be the safest place on earth can become the very place where you suffer your deepest wounds. The temptation for those who are hurt by the church is to fight fire with fire. It’s to complain, criticize, and even condemn the church as a flawed and failed institution.

The church may be flawed, but it has not failed, because it belongs to God, and what belongs to God will never fail. Christ himself is the One who promised that he would build his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. For better or for worse, the church is the body of Christ, and the church is the bride of Christ, and it is not for us to throw stones at something that is so infinitely precious and beloved by our Saviour.

That doesn’t mean that we can’t talk about how the church has gone astray, or how it needs to return to its biblical foundations. But when we do, it should come out of love for the church and not hatred for it. We want to reach the place when we can soberly and wisely point out what needs to change in churches while still saying, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts.”

Second, Psalm 84 should inform the way that we value Sunday mornings. We live in a time when there are more excuses than ever to skip public worship. You work hard all week so you’re tired and you want to sleep in. Your kids love competitive sports and they routinely have tournaments all weekend. You regularly go out of town to visit family. None of these are wrong in themselves. They could all be good excuses. But if missing church becomes regular and routine, if you stop feeling the absence of Sunday worship, then something has gone terribly wrong.

Psalm 84 challenges us to become the kinds of people who love the church so much that we miss it when we’re not here, the kinds of people who long and faint for the courts of the Lord when we’re not present within them. If you love the church like that, it’s going to change your priorities. Church won’t just fit around your other priorities. Your other priorities will fit around church.

Lastly, Psalm 84 calls those who are with us to remember and care for those who are not. Even today, there are people tuning in on the livestream because they can’t be with us for legitimate reasons. We have a role to play in God’s sovereign care for them. We can help them journey through the Valley of Baca. We can help them go from strength to strength until they’re finally able to join us again.

And so, if you know someone who has been joining us online, I encourage you to reach out to them. Pray for them. Give them a call. Help them know that they’re not alone.

And if you’re watching the livestream but you’ve never introduced yourself to us, I encourage you to make yourself known. We can’t help you if we don’t know who you are. Let us walk with you on the highways to Zion, because one day there is better than a thousand elsewhere.

May God give us the same love that he has for his church, and may he carry each of us to his eternal dwelling where we will worship him forever.