

Psalms For All Seasons: A Thin Place

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[0 : 0 0] So welcome here for this Sunday, August 13th. My name is Kent Dixon and it is my joy to be the pastor here. So welcome to each of you this morning. If you're here in person or if people are listening in the days ahead, sorry, in advance for whatever sound quality I wind up with at the end of the day, it is what it is.

So this morning we're picking up again in our series called Psalms for All Seasons. And we've been learning that the book of Psalms is that. It is a book for all seasons of our lives.

A thin place. There are certain places where you might find that God speaks especially clearly. Do you have places like that in your life?

So I've talked before about as an extroverted introvert, people say, oh, you're not an introvert. You're so good with people. You like to talk. You like all those things.

Yes, but I am an extroverted introvert. So I'm not filled necessarily by connection with people where extroverts are. Where I'm truly recharged and refilled and where I experience some of the greatest joy is to be with God in natural spaces.

[1 : 2 1] So I find that when I'm in the mountains, which I try to get to when I can, the sounds of nature, so sitting by a waterfall going for a hike, I feel the presence of God the most deeply personally in those places.

My spirit recharges and I can actually feel if you are a smartphone person or you have something in your life that you charge and you can see the little meter. Come on, 75%, 78.

I can actually feel my spiritual, my emotional, my mental health meter recharging in those spaces. So maybe your place is a favorite coffee shop that you like or a vacation spot or a special bench.

There's bench, beautiful benches and spots all over our city that have a special view. And those are just some examples that come to mind. So the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is another place where people find they hear from God in a deep and meaningful way.

And tens of thousands of people travel there every year. They make a specific pilgrimage to that place. And this sanctuary, this place in which we find ourselves this morning, is a place where we worship and many of us hear from God in this place.

[2 : 4 1] We return week after week with an expectation that God will speak to us. God will connect with us. God will move in our lives, will move in the life of our church.

And we recognize, as we have in singing this morning, that God is at work in this place. So with all this in mind, I want to introduce you to something this morning that may be a new concept to you.

And it's the concept of, the title of our sermon this morning, a thin place. A thin place. Maybe appropriately, it's a Celtic term.

So I'm Scottish and Irish, as you know. So ancient Celtic Christians believed that there were places in our world where the distance between heaven and earth collapsed, became thin.

Where the eternal grew almost tangibly near to the temporal. Places where it somehow seemed easier to encounter God and to experience his presence, perhaps more than other places.

[3 : 50] And thin places often become this way because people gather and sing and pray there. There are places where the connection with God has become a focus and a priority to the point where the temporal is ground away and distilled to where the holy can be felt.

And I'm sure that lots of prayers and praise have been delivered, lifted up to God in the mountains. Or thin places that you cherish. And perhaps many, hopefully, many of your own prayers and praise and words of praise have been lifted up to God in those places.

Your own personal prayers. And certainly they have been in this place, in this sanctuary. So in the fourth sermon of this Psalms for All Season series, I want to talk to you today about the idea of a thin place.

Because that's what the psalmist was expressing in Psalm 122, when he said, I rejoice with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

So over the past few weeks, we've been walking through the Psalms that meet us in every season of life. And we've learned from Psalm 1 about making every season a season of happiness and fruit.

[5 : 10] We learned from Psalm 23 about God's provision in every season. God is a good shepherd. And last week, we learned from Psalm 78 about our generational obligation and the importance of passing on our faith and beliefs.

So throughout this series, we've learned all kinds of things about the psalms themselves. There are psalms of thanksgiving and psalms of lament. There are wisdom psalms and there are enthronement psalms, which recognize the glory and the power and the majesty of God.

And towards the end of the book of Psalms, there are psalms that God's people sang as they were traveling up to Jerusalem. Remember, we said Jerusalem was a sacred site for people.

And perhaps you know this, but this collection of psalms that I'm talking about are called the psalms of ascents. And it's quite likely in your Bible, at the beginning of this section of psalms, it will say, and at the beginning of each one, that little introductory piece will say, will identify that it is a psalm of ascent.

So it's here in the ascents that we learn more about thin places. So in the book of Exodus, you don't have to turn here, but Exodus 23, verses 14 to 17.

[6 : 35] And I'll summarize this passage a bit. God taught the Israelites, and it says, and I'm just kind of condensing this passage, to celebrate a festival in my honor three times a year.

This is God directing the people. Observe the festival of unleavened bread. That's one. Observe the festival of harvest. That's two. And observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year.

Three times a year, all your males are to appear before the Lord. And that's the summary of that passage in Exodus. So for a thousand years, three times a year, the Jews did as God commanded them to do.

They gathered from all over the nation in Jerusalem, all over Israel, to pray and to worship God. They didn't have radios. Or smartphones.

Or video games. Or anything to occupy their time. I am with three smartphone lovers in my family. So when I'm driving somewhere, especially on our long trips, there will be three smartphones activated at any time in our car.

[7 : 41] So Michelle will be coloring. Others will be looking at YouTube stuff or whatever. So those are things occupying on long trips. But the people of Israel didn't have those things.

So over time, they developed songs to sing as they walked along the road. And that's what the Psalms of a sense are. So since Jerusalem at the top of Mount Zion was sitting at 2,700 feet, I was trying to think in my past, what's the highest I've climbed?

I don't know. But I've climbed some pretty high peaks. Certainly not some as perhaps as Larry or Vern or people who are actual climbers. But this trip to Mount Zion at 2,700 feet, it was quite a climb, obviously.

And it took time for people to reach their destination. So they called these songs that were composed for this specific journey the Psalms or Songs of Ascents.

Because they were literally sung as they were going up. So as we've recognized a bit in our series so far, there are Psalms of Praise and Psalms of Lament scattered somewhat randomly throughout the book of Psalms.

[8 : 54] So if you read the entire book of Psalms, you will see that there are some random placements. But the Psalms of Ascents, it's interesting to note, are all in one complete grouping.

They're not scattered throughout the book. And there are 15 individual Psalms of Ascents, from Psalm 120 to 134. And Psalm 122, our Psalm for this morning, is actually identified as the Song of Triumph.

So if you would open your Bible, most of you are there, I can hear lots of leafing. Open your Bible to Psalm 122. There are Bibles in the pew in front of you. Or you can smartphone your Bible too, that works.

So while you're getting there, here's the background and context. So it's getting towards the season of one of these feasts. The people are thinking about how hard life is.

And that's Psalm 120. So we're leading into the Psalms of Ascents. They also know they're headed to a place where they can meet with God. They're headed to a thin place.

[10 : 01] And that meeting is going to make a difference for them. And that's Psalm 121, which is one of my personal favorite passages, all-time favorite passages of Scripture.

We memorized it in seminary. I could not recite it from memory for you now, unfortunately. But they started walking. So they started walking, and they walked, 2,700 feet.

And they walked, and they walked, and they walked, and they walked. And they came from every direction of the compass to walk and to sing together.

And then finally, they reached their destination. And that is the story of Psalm 121, which reads, and I'm reading from the Christian Standard Translation.

And yes, it is a legitimate translation. Don't, anybody who's a King James or NIV or ESV person, don't panic. It is a legit translation. But I like the wording that's used in this translation, in this passage.

[11 : 02] So I'll read it for us. Psalm 122. A song of ascents of David. I rejoiced with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

Our feet were standing within your gates, Jerusalem. Jerusalem, built as a city, should be solidly united, where the tribes, the Lord's tribes, go up to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

This is an ordinance for Israel. There, thrones for judgment are placed, thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls, security within your fortresses. Because of my brothers and friends, I will say, may peace be in you.

Because of the house of the Lord, our God, I will pursue your prosperity. Let's walk through this together. So David writes, I rejoiced with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

[12 : 09] He knows about this place. He knows that God richly dwells there. He also knows that when he gets there, not only is he going to get to meet with God, he's going to meet with God's people as well.

He's going to be inspired and encouraged. And just the thought of all of this, he's anticipating, David is. He's getting excited. So David gets to Jerusalem and writes essentially, and now we're here.

Our feet are standing within the gates. He looks around the city and at its walls, and he's saying it is well built, he says in verse three. It is solidly united.

He looks from the walls and the buildings then to the people. And in verse four, he says, this is where my people, my tribes meet. It's where the thrones of judgment are placed, David says.

The place where authority is. He recognizes that God, God's seat of power and authority and influence exists in this place. If this place can thrive, he says, the whole world will thrive.

[13 : 24] So David says, pray for the peace of Jerusalem in verse six. Then this is so neat. He gives a blessing. He says, may those who love you be secure.

May there be peace within your walls, security within your fortresses. His prayer is for peace and security. The Hebrew word for peace, I bet you know it is.

Shalom. And the word for peace, calm or security is shalva. Those are interesting. I didn't know the word shalva before.

So shalom actually means complete well-being inside you. It's essentially a blessing. May complete well-being be inside you. And shalva means may security be around you.

So this is a prayer for protection inside and outside. It's a blessing. He's praying for peace inside the hearts of the people of Jerusalem.

[14 : 32] And he's also praying for peace and safety around the physical city of Jerusalem. This is a hugely encompassing blessing. David's declaring that when you go to the house of the Lord, you get peace inside you, but also around you when you go to this place.

And after experiencing the house of the Lord, David concludes the psalm with the attitude, you know what? I feel so good right now that I'm not going to worry about myself anymore. I'm going to do something for others.

And specifically, I will pursue your prosperity. David ends that psalm with. And that's what happens when you go to the house of the Lord.

That's what happens, should happen when we go to church. Our eyes and our attitude should focus, switch focus from ourselves to focusing on others.

Our eyes and attitudes should switch to other people from ourselves. You should feel freed from, unburdened from, your own worries in this place, in a thin place, and be free to focus on other people and their concerns and their needs and their worries.

[15 : 51] God calls us to be other focused. That's part of our calling as followers of Jesus. Not in the sense that we're criticizing or judging others or worrying about what they may do, what we may feel they're doing or not doing.

Not in that way, not other focused as in scrutinizing others, but that we're always seeking to encourage them. We're always seeking to lift other people up, to focus on their well-being ahead of our own.

I don't know what you feel like, but when I intentionally put someone before myself, I feel good. Psalm 122 is the story of David going to the house of the Lord that we've recognized.

And the most familiar thin place in the entire country was where they were going. So let's take a moment now to consider what David thought, David personally thought about thin places, because I think we can draw some conclusions.

So in Psalm 120, David starts out, as we talked about, in trouble. And he decides, when I'm in trouble, I need to go to the thin place.

[17 : 10] He recognizes a need to do that. When he feels like he's anxious or worried or in conflict, he needs to meet with God. David declares that he's going to the house of the Lord.

That's Psalm 120. And then in Psalm 121, he starts on his way, and he knows exactly where he's going, because once you've been to the thin place, you know where the thin place is.

Does that make sense? It sounds like, well, duh, Pastor Kent, that's pretty obvious. But it's so true for us as human beings. We forget so easily.

So once you've found God, once you've found a place that where you resonate with him, where you deeply connect with him, remember that place. Remember where you felt that.

And so David is essentially going to church. He's going to the place where he knows he can best meet God. And so once you've been, you want to strive to not forget.

[18 : 18] Once you've heard from God there and met with God there, hopefully you recognize in a thin place, it's a place where heaven comes close to earth.

I wasn't sure I was going to share this, but I will quickly. So my father was sitting by his mother's bedside as she was dying. And I've told this story once, probably a long time ago.

And he was sitting with her. So this is a woman who is deeply, deep faith, deep, deep faith. So she was passing away. She was lucid.

She was unmedicated. She was aware my dad was there. So my dad said, she paused at one moment and then said, I'm over here, Mel.

Mel was my grandfather's name. And Mel had passed away already. Thin place. In David's day, the place to meet with God was the tabernacle in Jerusalem.

[19 : 23] And so he lifted his eyes towards the mountains. Sound familiar, right? Psalm 121, because he lifted his eyes up because that's where the tabernacle was.

Then in Psalm 120, and that's one interpretation. You've probably heard other, well, he lifts his eyes up to the mountains because God is up. And you know, there, so there are different interpretations of that, but that one really resonated with me.

because David is going through a progression here in Psalm 120, Psalm 121. And then we come to Psalm 122. David arrives in Jerusalem and confirms what he already knows, which is that location matters.

Okay. God is everywhere, right? We all agree. Not a rhetorical question. Okay, good. Just checking, checking our theology. So you can meet with him anywhere.

Fair, right? Those two things connect. Those dots connect. You can meet with God in your bed. Hopefully you don't fall asleep. Begin to pray and drift off. But that's not necessarily a bad thing because you're in a peaceful place.

[20 : 33] You can meet with him in your living room or in your car. Don't be distracted in prayer. It's unsafe. But, or in your garden. Many people are gardeners.

Or in the mountains, as I said. God is everywhere. God is always available. I think we're quick to forget that. God is not asleep. God is not distracted.

You have his attention whenever you want it. Instantly. Connor and I are in the process of getting his student loan application approved. Lots of waiting on hold.

We're trying to get his residency booked for his schooling. Lots of waiting for responses on emails. From registrars and potential rental people. It's agonizing.

God is not like that. God is instant response. God is always available. But we are located in bodies.

[21 : 30] Hopefully that's common sense. So where our bodies are located makes a difference. Does that make sense? Can you recognize that?

That when you go to a pool, you probably feel, maybe if you're a swimmer, like swimming. When you go to the gym, you might feel like working out. Or you might avoid a gym entirely.

When you go to a coffee shop, you probably feel, sights, smells, context, like having a coffee. So location matters. And some locations are just better for encountering and connecting with God than others.

And hopefully you've experienced that and recognized it in your life. And that's part of why so many of us get, I think, depressed. We get depressed when we spend too much time away from God's people.

We were made for church. We were made for this community. We were made for connection in this way.

[22 : 36] And the discipleship journey, walking through your life with Christ, is not a solo gig. It's really not. So when you, as a follower of Jesus, feel anxious and afraid and concerned and lost and like you're all alone, you need to get to your thin place and you need to get with other believers.

We were made to gather with others in sacred places like this. We were made to worship and experience God, not only on our own, but together in community.

At some point, I don't know if it was the pandemic, I think it was even before that, followers of Jesus, committed followers of Jesus, decided somehow, lots of people, I have lots of friends that are pastors, I have a friend who's a counselor, people are seeing it across the board, that committed followers of Jesus somehow, at some point, got the impression that gathering in a church, in a community of believers, in fellowship with others, was optional, was not an integral, critical, essential part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

And God inhabits the praise of his people. Have you ever thought of that? We give him praise here, as we've already done this morning. And you can worship the Lord anywhere, but places where people meet together to do that are usually thinner places.

Because God's spirit dwells deeply there. And I'm not saying the spirit of God doesn't dwell everywhere, doesn't dwell in you and in me, he does.

[24 : 28] But where people gather and worship and pray and are in community, I believe God's presence is more deeply connected there. And it probably won't surprise you, shouldn't surprise you, that sanctuaries and worship centers and places like that are truly thin places.

And David, while writing in Psalm 122, found that not only does our location matter, but being together matters. That's the reality.

So let's look at this again for a minute. Psalm 122, verses 1 to 4. Now listen for some words. Verse 1, I rejoice with those who said to me, let us go out to the house of the Lord.

I'm cheating by giving you emphasis. Not me, but us. We're meant to worship God together. Verse 2, Our feet were standing within your gates, Jerusalem.

Jerusalem built as a city should be solidly united. So not my feet, but our feet. And united. Where the tribes, the Lord's tribes, go to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

[25 : 44] Friends, when we meet together, we do it as a tribe. Or tribes, even. And as you likely remember, Israel was composed of 12 tribes.

And for most of the year, these folks lived in their own areas, their own territories, their own tribes, their own families. And it's interesting, I reflected on this as I was preparing for this Sunday.

God knows the power of diversity, of individuality, and uniqueness, and a one-to-one relationship between Him and us. But He also recognizes and values the power of togetherness, of community, of unity.

And He created us to revel in, to experience, to delight in both of those things. So Exodus 23 and Exodus 34 in Deuteronomy 16, He commanded all 12 tribes to gather to meet with Him.

Because there's power in meeting together. In ancient Israel, gathering together for worship was so powerful that it created a thin place on the Temple Mount.

[27 : 04] And that's part of the reason why the Wailing Wall, which is on the western side of the Temple Mount, is such a powerful, thin place, even to this day.

Friends, we need the church. We need the house of the Lord. We need, everyone desperately needs a thin place in their life.

And everyone needs a place to encounter God in the midst of God's people. Have you ever felt that, God really touched you when we're gathered together in a place like this?

As we've talked about, David said, I was so glad when somebody said to me, let's go to the house of the Lord. David was excited to gather with God and His people.

And everybody needs a place like that, a place to gather in the midst of God's people. And by God's grace, this place is an awesome place to do that.

[28 : 11] Do you agree? So I'm a fan of the old Mission Impossible TV series. So no disrespect to Tom Cruise, the movie franchise is fine.

But with this in mind, and maybe if you know the series, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is, number one, do not take this place for granted.

Come as often as you can. And that's not just the pastor saying, I want to fill up our church, I want everybody to come every Sunday, I want you to feel guilty. Not at all.

Come here to truly encounter God and to truly be in fellowship with His people. Number two, don't take these people for granted.

It's so easy to do that. We are each other's tribe and family. We are brothers and sisters. And it's not just a great Christianese expression, it's truth.

[29 : 19] And everybody needs a place where, it's almost like cheers, where everybody knows your name, where everybody genuinely cares about you. and that's this place. And it's truly deeply humbling to recognize that God's presence, God's power is here when we gather together.

Number three, here's the challenging one. Ask God to help you identify a few friends you can invite to join you here in this thin place.

and that's also not pastor self-serving stuff. That is, if you love Jesus, if you love this thin place and these people, share that with people that you know and who are important to you.

So there you go, pretty simple stuff and the tape will not self-destruct. So my friends, if you have a thin place in your life, spend some time there this coming week.

Pray and meditate and just listen and meet with God. And if you don't have one, or you can't maybe think of one right now, spend some time this coming week thinking about and maybe mapping out some spots that you think might work for you.

[30 : 46] Maybe there's a campsite that you like. Maybe there's a trail or a local park or maybe you're a Matard conservatory person. A drive, a bike ride, a walk, anything that you like to do where you naturally feel recharged, refreshed, you feel joy.

Bet you God would connect with you there. so try God out. This sounds weird, but try God out in some of these spaces. Marry your comfort zones and your places of joy with your father because I promise you he's already there.

And maybe that place, that special place where you already feel a connection to recharging and joy, your thin place that could be to meet with him.

Amen.