

Psalm 84 (3)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 October 2022

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Now, perhaps you could turn with me for a short while this evening to Psalm 84 and verse 3. Psalm 84 and verse 3, where we read these words.

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. Even the sparrow.

What is prayer? Is it a duty or is it a beauty? Prayer can be hard, but do we think more in terms of it as a duty or as a delight?

Prayer is a work of art, not so much in the words we use, but in the deeper sense of the emotions of our hearts. The way lovers lose each other in each other's eyes is a work of art.

[1 : 08] The way we pray, not with our mouths, but with our hearts, can only really be described as the beauty of prayer. It's what we in Scotland used to call, it's better felt than told.

I wonder whether I'm guilty, we're all guilty at times, of rationalising prayer and transforming it from heart work to the clinical analysis of words.

Now, Psalm 84 verse 3, without a doubt, is better felt than told. The psalmist uses sparrows and swallows to express his deep desire to be close to God.

If ever a verse from the psalm were to draw tears from your eyes, it's this one. In essence, the psalmist is saying, I just want to be close to God.

The 5th century Syrian bishop, Theoderate of Cyrus, wrote of this verse. Just as swallows wander about, but once they settle, they usually stay and nourish their young.

[2 : 24] Even we of old wandered, but now, having received the call from your grace, have found your home.

Having received the call of Christ's grace, like these birds, we've found a home in God, our King, the Lord of hosts. These birds nested in the nooks and crannies of the temple and olive trees which had been planted in the temple courtyard.

And for all the world, the psalmist wants to be just like these birds. Close to the God he worships, to the King he loves. This is the beauty of prayer.

This is prayer as a work of art. When it moves beyond the mere words of our mouths, to the unspoken desires of our hearts for a closer relationship with God.

For a few moments this evening, let me unpack this verse under three headings. First, prayer as safety. And then prayer as life. And then prayer as song.

[3 : 35] And I recognise that I'm trying to put words into something that's perhaps better felt than told. But imagine yourself in these courts, in the Jerusalem temple, watching these birds flying around, wishing that you could be as close to God as they are.

First of all then, prayer as safety. Safety. The primary reason the sparrows and the swallows made nests in the temple and courtyards is because of the safety it provided for them.

There they could raise their young without fear of predators like foxes. They could fly in and fly out, knowing that the nest they'd built would still be there when they'd turned.

Birds like this love cover. They don't nest in the open. They nest in hidden places or high up places where they can't be reached. And they'd found the perfect spot in the temple and its courtyards.

Olive trees in which to nest. Crevices in which to hide their young. Outside the temple, they would always be restless and insecure. But here near the altars of God's house, they knew they were safe.

[4 : 51] Safety and security is important to us as human beings. Perhaps we don't think much of them when we're children because we rely on others for our security and we don't give our safety a second thought.

And that's the way it should be. Our children shouldn't have to worry about such things. However, the more independent we become, the more safety and security becomes an issue for us. Sometimes we long, do we not, to enjoy that sense of freedom we had as children. Not to worry about tomorrow. About what we'll eat. About what we'll drink. About what we'll wear. The older we become, the more we encounter life red in tooth and claw. The more we long for these feelings of safety and security these birds have as they find a home and nested in the temple. The difference for us as Christians is that we've realized that safety isn't a place.

It's a person that is no safer place than prayer. Where we, in the words of Jesus, are seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

[6 : 06] Where we draw close to our heavenly Father and we hear his words of love. The storms may rage about us. The storms may rage within us.

But with him in prayer, we're secure. We feel rather like the hymn writer when he famously prayed, Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

There's no safer place than the assurance of the love our heavenly Father has for us. No greater safety than kneeling at the foot of his cross, at the Son's cross for example, and being filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

And this is a learning process for us all. It's one thing to know this theologically and intellectually, as I'm sure we all do. It's another thing to allow what we know to filter down into how we feel.

There's something for which we pray, is it not? That the settled truth of our minds would become our daily experience. That our safety and security, whatever form they might take, spiritual, economic, social, they're not in our own hands, but they're in the hands of a heavenly Father who loves us infinitely more than even our human fathers could.

[7 : 26] Where's your safe place? Who's your safe person? When you're anxious about life circumstances and your mind is filled with the thought of questions, you need a safe place and a safe person who understands you, perhaps without even a word being spoken.

You have it in God when you pray. This church may not be safe. Your nearest and dearest may not be safe.

You may not feel safe in yourself, but God is safe. And he says to you, I'm the good shepherd.

Prayer is your safe place.

And he's your safe person. And to be near him is security for you. Prayer as safety. Secondly, prayer as life.

Prayer as life. Prayer as life. This verse tells us that the reason that the swallow makes a nest in the temple precincts is because it's there in those conditions of safety and security she can give birth to her young.

[8 : 41] Her nest, hidden in the branches of the olive trees, planted in the courtyard of the temple, are filled with hatchlings. Temple is no longer the antiquarian equivalent of the concrete jungle.

The birds, they give it movement and they give it life. Hundreds of generations of sparrows and swallows have been born, lived and died in the precincts of the temple.

San Juan Capistrano is an old Catholic church in California. It stood since 1776. For the majority of its existence, San Juan Capistrano had been home to a colony of blue-feathered swallows.

We don't get them here in Britain. Migrating north from Argentina, these swallows are to San Juan what the sparrows were to the Jerusalem temple. They gave that monastery life and colour and vibrancy.

Unfortunately, these swallows haven't returned to San Juan for these last 20 years and worshippers in that monastery pray annually for the return.

[9 : 54] The safety and security of the temple meant new life for generations of these birds.

The altars of the temple were places where bulls and goats and sheep died for the sins of the people. But close by in the crevices of the temple and in the olive trees just outside, there wasn't death, but life.

The temple wasn't all about death. There was life, there was colour, there was vibrancy, thanks to these sparrows and these swallows who lived there. And in the same way, prayer is life for us.

This is where we find our spiritual life. Not in performance, not in religion, but in relationship with God. And that is what we call prayer. Prayer is not merely a way of life for the Christian.

Prayer is life for the Christian. Without prayer, there's only spiritual death. It's prayer which gives vibrancy, movement, colour, joie de vivre to the Christian life.

[11 : 02] And that life isn't expressed just in words. It's expressed in loving endurance, gracious forgiveness. The connection between a mother and her child goes beyond words.

She gave that child life. Perhaps I'm being a little sentimental, but you cannot possibly put into words the debt you owe to your mother. And that relationship is in of itself a beautiful thing. And that is what we engage in when we pray, something beyond words. We draw closer than at any other time to the Father who gave us spiritual life.

By his grace he called us to live in him. And when we pray to the Father through Christ and the power of the Spirit, we experience life abundant and full.

Prayer is life. And then third and last, prayer as safety. Prayer as life. And then third, prayer as song.

[12 : 06] Prayer as song. One of the commentators that I read on this verse writes these beautifully evocative words. He was a German commentator.

A marvelous commentator on the book of Psalms. Arthur Weiser. From their privileged position in the nooks and canopies of the temple precincts, the birds fill the air with joyous song.

The birds are like the temple singers whose praises to the Lord of hosts are never ending. The birds fill the air of the temple with joyous song.

You'll remember when the first COVID lockdown began in spring 2020, the city went quiet. The background noise, the traffic stopped.

And all you can hear was the sound of the birds singing in the first light of the morning. It brought cheer to our hearts at a difficult time to hear the sparrows and the blackbirds and the thrushes and the blue tits.

[13 : 13] Hustling their morning chorus. Now, usually the temple was not a silent place. There was the painful sound of animals being sacrificed every day.

There was the speech of priests and Levites. But for many hours of the day, during the evening hours normally, it went a bit quieter. During these hours, the birds sang.

And for anyone who had ears to hear, they made as sweet a song as any temple choir, the job it was to fill the temple with the sound of God's praise as ever could.

The priest who entered into that temple first thing in the morning did not encounter silence. Merely a different kind of praise from that song during the day by the choir to the temple.

He heard the sound of the joyous songs of the birds of the air. Now, my commentator friend may be making a bit of a fanciful extrapolation, but it's beautiful nonetheless, this thought.

[14 : 24] Prayer is our place of song. It's our place of joyous song. Prayer can bring joy inexpressible. Prayer is our place of joy.

It's the place of praise. But only because the one we approach pardons our sin, draws us close to himself and loves us with no strings attached.

Our songs at these times can go beyond words. Not that we're singing with our mouths, we're singing with our hearts. And sometimes our praises sound like laments.

And other times they sound like an orchestra of joy. But all the time, the very act of dependence and trust which prayer represents is what it means to praise God.

Like the nesting sparrows and the hatchling swallows, we're singing because we're close to the altars of God. We're safe and we have life. To the presence of the Father, we're exulting in the experience of God's closeness.

[15 : 29] Sometimes there's more in a look than in a word. More in a feeling than in a phrase. And the songs to which I'm referring here are not necessarily vocal.

When we pray to God, there are times that the expressions of our love for him and our trust in him go beyond words.

Even though we're maybe living a nightmare on the outside, we trust him to wake us up. To guide us through. That's what's really better felt than told about this verse.

And you know, this pilgrim in Psalm 84, he longs to be like one of these birds. Because with the exception of the Jewish festivals, for most of the year, he lived far away from the temple.

And from the earthly presence of God. The differences in Christ and filled with the Spirit were always here in our Father's presence.

[16 : 35] And yet when we pray, we draw closer to the still. So the sparrows and the swallows of the Bible have something to teach us, did they not? By grace, when we pray, we experience safety, life and song with our Father.

That's what turns our prayers from a thing of duty into a thing of beauty. Grace's work of art.