

New Year's Eve service - Psalm 84

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Date: 31 December 2017

Preacher: John Rees

[0 : 00] So our first reading this morning is Psalm 84, page 591. To the choir master, according to the Gittith, a psalm of the sons of Korah.

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, where 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, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

As they go through the valley 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.

[1 : 04] O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer. Give ear, O God of Jacob. Behold our shield, O God. Look on 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 favour and honour. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you. Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision, by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

[2 : 06] But now, in Christ, Jesus, you who were once far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Great. Well, thank you for reading. Let me just pray for us as we start.

Father, we thank you for your word. We pray that you will speak into our hearts today and change us through that word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[3 : 34] Well, let me add my welcome to you today, especially if you're visiting us. I'm going to be talking about the first of our readings, Psalm 84.

So it would be great if you kept that open. It's back on page 591. And as we come to the end of 2017 and look forward to 2018, I wonder what occupies your mind as the old year ends and the new year begins.

It's often a time to look back on the year, the good times, the disappointments, and to look forward. And this week, I'm told, is the peak time for people to plan their holidays for the coming year.

Perhaps that's you. Perhaps you've spent the last few days looking through the brochures or going through the websites, sorting out your holiday, the one you've always looked forward to. I'm told that the most popular destination for the British is still Mallorca.

TripAdvisor Traveler's Choice Award is Bali for the more adventurous or those who like volcanoes. And a lot of other things to consider, aren't there?

[4 : 51] When you've chosen your destination, what about your travel plans? Is it going to be hours in a traffic jam on the M5? Or will you be relaxing in long-haul business class?

Who will be your companions? Eagles here today. Will you want to be with your mates or does the attraction of a free trip with your parents encourage you to go with them for another year?

And when you reach your destination, will it be a half-built hotel that looked fine in the artist's impression in the brochure? Well, in Psalm 84, read to us just now, we find the psalmist is looking forward to the best destination he can possibly imagine.

And we find him thinking about the journey, telling us his travel plans, and describing what it will be like when he gets there.

On the back of the sheets, you'll see there are three headings, longing to dwell with God, the journey, and the destination. And that's where we're going through this psalm.

[6 : 03] So first, longing to dwell with God. We're concentrating here on the first four verses. And let me read those first two verses again. And as you hear the psalmist's poetry, you'll see the depth of longing that the psalmist has for this destination.

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.

So he's seeking a destination that's so desirable that his soul faints. His heart and body sing for joy. He's seen the pictures in the brochure, read the reviews, and he knows this is the best place you could ever imagine.

Now for the Old Testament listeners to this psalm, this destination is the temple in Jerusalem. It's the dwelling place of the Lord, where the Lord lived with his people in the temple, in the courts and the altars of his God.

That's where the psalmist wants to be. For us as New Testament readers, as we heard in the second reading from Ephesians, the temple is no longer a physical building where God dwells.

[7 : 24] If we want to see the temple today, then you just need to look at those sitting around you. The temple is made up of the people of God, Christians like you, and it's built on the foundation stone of Jesus Christ, God's promised son.

And his dwelling now is in each of those who put their trust in him through his Holy Spirit. Each of us is a brick in the wall. The strength of the temple comes as you're locked in with the other bricks, making a place where God dwells today.

And as we look at this passage, one destination for us is the place where we meet and worship together. Do you long to be with other Christians as the psalmist did?

As you've got ready to come to Grace Church this morning, were your heart and flesh singing for joy? Perhaps not. And as we read about the psalmist's destination, we'll see he also points us forward to our final eternal destination, to the eternal life in the presence of God.

So Old Testament listeners would be thinking their physical journey to the temple in Jerusalem. For us, this journey is our lives in this fallen world.

[8 : 42] The final destination is the new Jerusalem. And there's a reference there, you'll see, to Revelation chapter 21 to read afterwards. But we have a foretaste of the temple.

Foretaste is the temple being built of God's people around you. And in verse 3, you'll see, as he looks forward to being with God, he envies those who are already there.

And since this is the best destination you could possibly imagine, you might expect it would be full of the rich and the famous who can afford the fare. But no, in verse 3, he's envious of the sparrow, the most insignificant of birds.

And the swallow is there, symbol of the traveler. And if God's house has room for the sparrow and the swallow, it has room for you too, if you choose this destination.

Because as Jesus said in Matthew 10, fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows. And look now, as we go on in verse 4, blessed are those who dwell in your house ever singing your praise.

[9 : 58] So unlike your summer holiday destination where you may be lucky to spend two weeks, those who reach this final destination never have to leave. They live with the Lord and can sing his praises forever.

Being with God is the ultimate desirable location. Those who live there are blessed. So we need to know more about how to get there. What's the journey like?

Will it be Ryanair or will it be a first class sleeper bed? So verses 5 to 8 are going to tell us more about the journey. And we're on to the second heading, traveling to God's house, looking at verses 5 to 8.

And the answer about the journey is that although the destination is wonderful, the journey may be difficult. The psalmist may be thinking back to the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years to reach the promised land.

He's thinking of a time of being separated from God's temple, of making a pilgrimage as the Israelites did regularly to get to the temple in Jerusalem. And remember, our equivalent journey is our journey on the life through this world.

[11 : 17] And because the journey may not be easy, we're going to need strength to make the journey. And verse 5 shows where that'll come from. It's God himself who will provide the strength to get there.

The traveler needs to know which way to go to have the direction in his heart, his own integral sort of sat-nav system, so the highways to Zion are in his heart.

And our journey, too, in our Christian life may not always be easy. There'll be trials, there may be suffering, there may be diversions, but the directions for our journey are for us, here, in God's word in the Bible.

And God promises to provide the strength we need to cope with any problems that we may encounter on the way. And the psalmist tells us about going through the valley of Bacca in verse 6. Now that's a valley near Jerusalem through which a pilgrim to Jerusalem would have passed. Apparently, the translation may refer to a Bacca tree, possibly a borsom tree.

[12 : 25] But it's often referred to as a valley of weeping. The analogy may be because cuts made in the trunk of a borsom tree weep to yield a resin which has healing properties.

So traveling on this difficult journey through the valley of weeping, the traveler seeking the house of the Lord is in a dry desert. But in verse 6, we see that these travelers to God's house bring a change in the environment around them.

The pilgrims on this journey make this dry valley a place of springs. They bring nourishment to their surroundings. Do you know Christians like this?

Those who give so much more than they receive when you're feeling low? Do you have humble, holy Christian friends who are a blessing, who can lift your spirits, change your dryness, into springs?

There are Christian brothers and friends here at Grace Church whose presence brings refreshment for me. Wouldn't it be great to be one of those who bring that refreshment to those around you?

[13 : 41] And how do they do this? They get their strength from the Lord. And as they travel with God, they grow in holiness. Verse 7 says they go from strength to strength until they appear before God in his dwelling.

And as they refresh others, God works in harmony with them. In verse 6, they make it a place of springs and the early rain also covers it with pools.

As they refresh others traveling with them, God works with them, bringing the rain and the pools. So it won't always be easy traveling through this life to the Lord's dwelling.

But be reassured if you're finding the Christian life hard, God will give you strength and other Christians can help you on the way. This is not a journey to be made alone.

You can't just trust in your own strength. We need to make it with Christian brothers and sisters, those fellow bricks in the wall of the temple of God. So on to our third heading.

[14 : 49] Let's see more about the destination that the psalmist desires so much. And we're looking now mainly at verses 9 to 12. I think verse 9 is a key verse here.

Behold our shield, O God, look on the face of your anointed. It's another verse which would have been interpreted one way by the original listeners to the psalm but which we can approach with New Testament ears.

The psalmist is presumably calling on God to look favorably on the king, his anointed king. It's not certain when this psalm was written. It may be David or Solomon, the anointed king who's the protector, a shield for the people.

But we're looking at these words after the coming of Jesus. We're all sinful people and our sin makes us unacceptable to God.

We cannot come into God's house, into his presence in our sinful state. But Jesus, who was free of sin, went to his death on the cross for our sake.

[16:04] He takes our sin. He washes us clean. And we're able to enter God's presence because when God looks at us, he doesn't see our sinful state.

Verse 9 again, Behold our shield, O God, look on the face of your anointed. If we turn to Jesus, God's perfect anointed king, he takes our sin and when God looks at us, sinful as we are, he doesn't see that ugly sin.

He sees Jesus whose sinless presence shields us. And when the Old Testament pilgrims reached the temple in Jerusalem, they offered sacrifices for their sin.

They had to purify themselves to make themselves clean. And still, they couldn't enter the most holy place in the temple beyond the curtain.

But Jesus sacrificed himself for us and he died on the cross and as he did so, the temple curtain was torn in two, allowing us to enter God's presence so that we can be a people where the Holy Spirit, God's presence, can dwell.

[17:21] So what's it going to be like there in God's house? In the introduction to the psalm, you see it's a psalm of the sons of Korah. Now the sons of Korah started as doorkeepers doorkeepers at the temple.

Hence perhaps the comment on the doorkeepers in verse 10. And they then went on to be the main musicians in the temple. Imagine, it's as if the welcome team, instead of standing at the door, took over the leadership of the music group.

Now that actually requires some musical talent and you may say some of us in the welcome team have not shown much evidence of musical talent, but remember anything is possible with God.

So verse 10, what's it going to be like? Here's the destination that the psalmist has been desiring.

When we get to heaven to be in the presence of God, it will be so wonderful that a day there will be a thousand times better than the best thing you can dream of in this life.

Psalmist is saying, you can't imagine how wonderful it will be. The best holiday destination, the best exam results, the best house, the perfect family, heaven will be a thousand times better.

[18:38] Not only that, but there's no return journey to worry about. This is forever, as verse 4 tells us. Is this the most desirable thing for us?

If you're anything like me, you'll often look for your satisfaction in the things around you. Do we hold lightly to worldly things?

Or are we obsessed with getting more, better possessions, the latest iPhone, the best job, the best group of friends in school? The psalmist says these are nothing. They fade into insignificance compared to the glory we will see when we're in heaven.

And we get a glimpse of this now when we meet with fellow Christians here to worship him, when we look around at his temple. So then let's look on to verse 11 and we see how we get entry to this destination.

So when you look in the holiday brochure, the glamorous destinations, the best places come with a big price tag, don't they? How will we ever afford this place the psalmist longs for?

[19:51] Well, the great news is that this amazing destination, the dwelling place of the Lord, is free. It's a gift of grace that the Lord bestows. He bestows favor and honor.

All we need to do is to want to be there, to put our trust in Jesus. We need to take that first step on the journey. But then, even if the way is tough, God will give us the strength we need.

No good thing does he withhold from us. He's given us the best gift ever. He's given us Jesus. And we should walk uprightly because we are the dwelling place of Jesus.

We are the house where he is worshipped. What we have to do is to trust him, to receive this blessing, to want to walk uprightly with him.

And the psalm shows how we'll be blessed in this. In verse 5, blessed are those whose strength is in God. Verse 4, blessed are those who dwell in your house.

[20:57] And in verse 12, blessed is the one who trusts in you. So if you're here today looking into Christian things, that's wonderful.

I hope you can appreciate something of the glorious future destination that we look forward to, that we glimpse now. And the entry criterion is to trust in God, to turn to Jesus.

And if you're here today and you want to find out more about what that means, speak to somebody around you or ask about the Christianity Explored course that we run here. That'll allow you to ask any questions you like in comfort and safety.

Why don't you make that a plan for 2018 to investigate these claims further? And if you're here today having put your trust in Jesus, if you're on the journey through the valley of Baca, do you think of heaven as the psalmist does?

Do you long for it? Does your soul faint at the idea? When you meet with other Christians here as part of God's temple, when you're getting ready to come to Grace Church at 9.30 on a Sunday morning or when you're rushing to get to growth group on a Tuesday evening, is it a chore?

[22 : 15] Or do you walk in with your heart and your flesh singing for joy? I hope that you're as encouraged as I am by this psalm, this reminder of our eternal home, our future, a thousand times better than anything here.

If you're finding it hard at the moment, be confident that God will give you strength. Jesus, his birth we've just celebrated at Christmas, sacrificed himself for you at the cross.

He's made you acceptable to God. He's paid the price. And remember, this is not a journey to be made alone, trusting in your own strength.

You need to be refreshed by friendship with other Christians. Wouldn't it be great if your friends felt refreshed by your presence too? Perhaps we need to think how we can be a refreshing spring to those around us in 2018 to look out for them, to help them on the journey.

So as you make your holiday plans for 2018, as you fight for your seat on EasyJet, remember that you're already on a journey to this glorious destination.

[23 : 33] And there are no luggage charges to pay because you don't need any worldly baggage. And the entry is a free gift through the grace of God. So let me finish by reading again the last two verses of the psalm.

For the Lord God is a sun and a shield. The Lord bestows favour and honour. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

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