

God's Dwelling Place

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] I want you to keep your Bibles open to Psalm 84. And hopefully it's not too warm. I'll try and keep it short so you don't fall asleep.

I do understand if you do. Not the front door though. Now I wonder if there's a place on earth where you long to keep returning to again and again.

For me, I actually have a few places in mind. One would be Hawaii, where Alyssa and I had our honeymoon.

A second is London, where again Alyssa and I spent two years living and working and travelling. And then given our recent holiday, perhaps Korea and Japan could also get on that list.

But time will tell. Now if you know these places, you can easily see why they would make my list. But for me, they're extra special as well because I have shared them with people I love.

[1 : 02] Making happy memories. So it's not just the place itself, is it? But the people there with me. That make them desired destinations. And it's the same with our psalmist today.

Because he longs for the city of Jerusalem. Because that's where the temple is. But that is also where God's dwelling place is. Right? And so we want to spend a bit of time digging deeper today. To understand why God and Jerusalem are objects of such intense longing for him. And hopefully from that we can then apply this psalm to ourselves.

But first, remember that for most Israelites, Jerusalem was not their normal dwelling place. That is, unless your tribe is Judah, the land that was allotted to you by God would be somewhere else in the promised land.

And so as we'll soon see, the psalmist is writing as or for pilgrims who are making the journey. Perhaps with his family.

[2 : 07] And most likely to one of three annual festivals that they were stipulated to attend by the law. It may also be that because of the memory of past trips, what's been cultivated in him is a deep and wholly devoted desire for Jerusalem.

And so we begin to read in verse 1. The dwelling place here could be the city or more specifically the temple of God.

Because it's coupled with that reference to the courts of the Lord. This desire has so captured his entire being that his soul, his heart and his flesh yearn for it.

Every part of him cries out to be in God's house. To be with the living God. And so strong are his emotions, he says he's nearly fainting from it.

So, I can imagine it's probably a bit like you being a fangirl, a fanboy of your K-pop star. And you've been waiting at the airport for hours, you know, the heartbeat fluttering, you know, fidgeting.

[3 : 28] You can't keep your body still. Where is he coming? She, whatever. And then when they do, you're so overcome by excitement that you collapse.

But this sentiment of his then turns to envy, if you like. Because he then says he wishes, like the birds, that he was dwelling there himself. Making a home right where God's house is.

And so, verse 3, he says, Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself. Where she may have her young, a place near your altar. Lord Almighty, my King and my God.

Maybe he has seen in previous trips, these little creatures making their home right there at the temple. And as we know, the sparrow is not an eagle, is it?

Nor is the swallow a hawk. But somehow, God has allowed them, these little creatures, to shelter in his house. He's given them a home to raise their young, protected from predators.

[4 : 32] And the psalmist wishes that he had this same privilege. After all, if the Lord Almighty, the creator of the heavens and the earth, cares enough to give these little birds a home with him, then why not him?

But notice as well that there is a specific reference to God's altar. Near where the birds rest. And that is significant because a faithful Israelite would know that this is the place where God's people find forgiveness and atonement for sin.

Where animals are sacrificed at the altar, and their blood sprinkled on the altar, but also in the tent of meeting, so as to allow for the people then to draw near to God.

Otherwise, no one can dwell in God's holy presence. Only because God provides for this, can the psalmist then fulfill his longings to be in God's presence.

He and others to be blessed by being in that situation. And so he goes on to say now, verse 4, Blessed are those who dwell in your house.

[5 : 49] They are ever praising you. They are praising and thanking God. Why? Because they realize that despite their failings, their sin, God has actually allowed for them, a means for them, to come and dwell in his presence.

And so when they dwell, they know they dwell there by grace. And therefore, are praising God for that grace. So friends, let me pause here to ask, what is the source of your longings in life?

You know, some people are spurred by the past. You know, they long to search out their roots and their identity. Because where they come from tells them who they are.

Others are spurred on by the future. Perhaps they are weary and they're looking for a place that they can find rest. Or they're lonely and they desire a community to belong to.

Or they're anxious and are seeking a place of lasting security. What are the source of your longings in life? What is it that drives you in your search for meaning?

[7 : 03] Now, all these longings, I think, are really a search for what I would say, or what I would say is a place to call home. Isn't it? Because it doesn't matter what race you're from, what circumstances you're in, what age you are.

We all have this basic universal need for belonging, security and rest. And that's why people, if they don't know, they desire to know their family history and heritage, where they've come from.

Particularly those who are adopted, let's say. They search, don't they? Longing to find their birth parents. That's why many of us long for a partner.

Because we want to settle down with them. Find a place to call home. We seek to be debt free or have a job to be comfortable so that we can have security in life.

Now, my family and I recently enjoyed a holiday overseas. But I have to say that within a few weeks into the holiday, although we were really having a great time, I was ready to come home.

[8 : 13] I don't know whether you feel like that. I mean, it's nothing like having your own bed to sleep in. Not needing to live out of a suitcase. Knowing where you can buy bread and milk every day.

There's a strong pull, isn't there? For home. To find somewhere where you can just relax and be and rest. Well, life more broadly is the same, isn't it?

These things we seek after in life, our search for a place to call home, I think are ultimately proxies for our search for God. Because if this world belongs to God, and it does, and we are His creatures, then we belong to Him.

Our search, you know, as a human race, we search for our origin. But actually it goes all the way back to our search for Him. Doesn't it? To find out the One who created us.

And He alone is able to provide us with a true identity. With a sense of belonging. With a place to call home. And many of us would have found some sense of this.

[9 : 26] It's true. Having family and friends, having a career and possessions, this gives us a semblance of that. But none of these are foolproof, are they? Because loved ones eventually pass away.

Careers come to an end. And possessions themselves, they don't buy happiness. And so the psalmist knew this, and knew therefore that the ultimate blessing is found in being with God.

At His house. Praising Him for the gift of relationship with Him. Now practically, of course, the psalmist is living far away from Jerusalem, right?

It's the land that, yes, no doubt, God has blessed His tribe with. But He still longs to be close to God physically, at God's house. Because intimacy in relationships require proximity.

That's why long-distance relationships are so hard, isn't it? You can use FaceTime, you know, thank God that you've got FaceTime nowadays. You can see photos of loved ones.

[10 : 31] But it's not the same, is it? As being there in person. And so, even though the psalmist's desire for God is strong, he's motivated to be there, to make this pilgrimage to be with God.

And so that's what he describes now in verse 5, where he reflects and says, Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the valley of Bekaa, they make it a place of springs.

The autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. So what's being described here is actually a long and arduous journey, isn't it? Probably out in the open desert, without shelter. It may be cold at night and hot by day, but either way, it's hard going. And we're not sure where this valley of Bekaa is, but it sounds like an arid landscape.

And yet, by magic almost, as they journey through it, we read that the places they pass through turn, by virtue of their presence, into oases watered by autumn rains, producing springs and pools.

[11 : 45] Now, is this literally so? Well, we can't be sure, but it's definitely symbolic, isn't it? Because it's a reflection, I think, of what's going on in the psalmist and his companions' hearts.

That they are being refreshed by God himself as they approach God in Zion. And Zion's just another name, a spiritual name for Jerusalem. So this is much more than a physical journey, isn't it? It's a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey to God. And the physical, what he sees around him, is simply a pointer to the spiritual. I don't know how many of you have run marathons before.

Anyone? No one. I thought there might be one or two. But anyway, I think the answer to this question I'm going to put to you is going to be pretty obvious, so you guys can answer it, okay? When you think about the marathon runner, when do you think he or she is at the strongest?

[12 : 48] Would it be at the start of the race or at the end of the race? Who thinks it's the start of the race? Put up your hands. Who thinks it's the end of the race?

Really? I thought it was obvious. You obviously haven't seen runners collapse at the finish, have you? When their every ounce of energy has been expended.

So, you can come and correct me afterwards if you think I'm wrong, but my answer is that the runner is strongest at the start. Alright? If you don't believe me, try running a marathon and then tell me afterwards.

And yet, notice what the psalmist says here. That as they approach God in Zion, they're going from strength to strength. And so, this surely is not physical strength that's being described, isn't it? Strength to strength means increasing in strength. What is being described here, rather, is spiritual strength and from God. That is, even as their physical strength is ebbing, the longer the journey goes, he discovers that they're sustained to continue by the willpower and faith that God gives them.

[14 : 07] The hope of appearing before God in Zion, the prospect of being blessed, fuels their determination to complete the journey. And so, that's why even though the journey is hard, the psalmist can say, blessed are those who journey in it.

it's worth the hardship because God himself gives them strength to complete the journey. And you know, I think there are many similarities with the Christian life here.

For those of us who have been Christians for quite a number of years, we know that it's not actually our physical strength or our self-determination that actually keeps us going in our faith.

You know, there was a time when I was young. There was. Where, you know, you know, that's what happens with young men.

We have this naive and gung-ho attitude, a bit like how the Apostle Peter was, that, you know, we will have the strength to overcome whatever adversity we have in order to stay strong in our faith.

[15 : 06] Right? But let me tell you that as we get older and weaker physically, I look back on my own folly in those younger years because I realize, I have to realize humbly that even as my body is fading away, it's not me, it's not my strength that is keeping my faith going, but rather God is the one that's renewing me spiritually in order to help me stay the course.

And that's what the psalmist is describing here of his journey, but reflecting his spiritual experience. Now, in this second section as well, the psalmist at the end includes a prayer in verse 8.

So he says, Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty. Listen to me, God of Jacob. Look on our shield, O God. Look with favor on your anointed one. Now, this seems to be at first a little digression from what he's been talking about.

So what is this prayer doing here? Well, I can't be exactly sure, but I think it's because as he sees himself arriving at Zion and he looks on Jerusalem, he realizes how important it is that the peace and security of Jerusalem, how important it is to have peace and security in Jerusalem in order for the temple, the place of his longing to be.

Otherwise, the temple no longer is able to receive sacrifices for atonement and therefore allow him to come and dwell in God's presence. And so while this security rests on God himself, God enables this by installing his anointed king to rule over Jerusalem and indeed to rule over Israel.

[16:53] He's the shield that God raises to protect Jerusalem and therefore the temple that is in it. And so in verse 10, we finally get to the point where the psalmist, I think, arrives at the temple and he knows he can't stay forever or make a home there like the sparrow and yet the approach to the temple gives him cause to sing.

Now, is it a song of joy or is it a lament? I think it's a bit of both but you decide as we read it again. For he says, better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. So, obviously, there's joy, isn't it? Because he says, even one day at God's house, oh, that's great. Better than a thousand elsewhere. It's like, again, being on holiday. I know I've got a few holiday analogies at the moment. I don't know why but anyway, it's like being on holiday and you know, you can't afford to stay in the five-star hotel all the time, right?

You could settle for the mid-three-star hotel throughout but no, you decide that you will splurge one night at a luxurious penthouse suite and then make up for it by going to the backpackers for the rest.

[18:18] Is that what you did, Mark? Yeah. Because you think one night in that luxury hotel is worth putting up with all the other nights in the bed-bug-ridden hostel.

And that's, I think, how the psalmist is feeling, isn't it? But with it is a bit of lament as well, isn't it? Because then he feels like if he could only stay longer, how great would that be?

Instead of one night or one day, what if he could stay longer? But you know, more than the amount of time here, I think the psalmist is also seeing the great blessing that comes from being in God's house compared to dwelling in the tents of the wicked.

That is, even if he's just a lowly doorkeeper, which is possibly one of the roles of the sons of Korah that write this psalm, even if he can't dwell in God's house forever but gets to only work there one day a week or one day as a doorkeeper, that would be better than having pride of place forever in the tents of the wicked.

Where no doubt he will enjoy the comforts and pleasures of life but achieve through ill-gotten gains, through greed and deceit.

[19:39] And so what the psalmist is really saying is that if you choose to be or if you long to be at God's house, there is actually a choice to be made. And that choice is between God and wickedness.

if God has provided atonement and forgiveness of sin, then a condition for the psalmist to dwell in God's presence is to walk in God's way, to reject wickedness, to pursue righteousness and holiness instead.

And that may mean forgoing pleasures in life, the creaturely comforts, in order to do the same. And yet, the psalmist knows that even though he may be missing out in all these things in life, in the tents of the wicked, he's not really missing out because God is ultimately the ruler of this world and therefore, he's the one who will bless.

Only he can bless. Protection, provision, prosperity, all these are the Lord's to bestow. Blessings, especially the spiritual ones of peace and joy, even when things are physically difficult, are God's to give alone.

And so he says in verse 11 to end, for the Lord, God, is a son and shield. The Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

[21:07] God's reward is with those whose walk is blameless. He alone knows what we need to be secure and fulfilled. And he says, no good thing will he, God, withhold from those who trust in him.

Friends, when we walk in God's ways, when we pursue godliness, that is actually an exercise of faith. And that's why the psalmist put those two things together.

Those whose walk is blameless is the same as the one who trusts in God. It takes faith to flee temptation, to reject evil, because we're holding on to God's promises instead. Even though we may not have received or experienced all these promises in full, we decide to choose God and his promises instead of accepting the rewards or the pleasures of evil now. And chief among these promises is God's promise to save us. That he has sent his son so that all who trust in his death on the cross will be saved on the last day and enjoy God's presence and blessing.

[22 : 28] And so for the psalmist, he comes to the conclusion at the end of the psalm that even though he may not be able to spend all his life at the temple physically dwelling in God's place, he knows he will be blessed provided he trusts in God.

He doesn't need to be at God's house. He may be somewhere else but provided he is trusting in God then he will be blessed. And for us as Christians that's even more true, isn't it? Because we no longer need to make any physical programmages. The temple is no longer required. We don't need to go to Jerusalem. Why? Because Jesus is our sacrifice. Jesus is the temple. And so in Christ God has actually come near to us instead. By his spirit which has been poured out to us after Jesus went up to heaven, God's dwelling place is actually among his people.

Here, right here. Corporately as the body of Christ, but also individually in our own lives because the Holy Spirit indwells us if we believe in him.

[23 : 38] And when we come by faith to Jesus, then all our deepest longings in life are met in Christ. We don't need to go and find God in a physical place.

God is already here and God has already given us Jesus and his spirit to give us his presence. And so if there's anyone here today seeking for your deepest longings to be satisfied, then know this, that the allure and temptations of this world, whether it's wealth or status or human relationships, they're not going to give you lasting satisfaction.

Instead, come to God. Spend time knowing him. And dare I say, better is one day in his word, because that's where we meet God and his promises, than a thousand elsewhere.

So if you'd like to talk with me or King or any one of the pastors here to find out more, then please do. But the story doesn't end here, does it, for us as Christians, because blessed though we are by being in Christ and having God's spirit by his presence, we also know that we're not ultimately home yet, are we?

Because God has promised that one day we will be with him physically forever in the new Jerusalem where Jesus dwells and after Jesus comes again.

[25 : 07] On that day we will appear before God in the heavenly Zion. And we were reminded of that when Asaph read from Revelation chapter 21. Let me read it to you again on the slide.

I did not see a temple in the city, that is the city of New Jerusalem, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are his temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. And so friends, when we believe in Jesus, when our names are written in the Lamb's book of life, then that is where we will be one day. But in the meantime, even though we long to be there, in this life, we are a bit like the psalmist, isn't it? Finding ourselves traveling through the valley of Baca, that is life, or else being tempted or distracted with the tents of the wicked.

[26 : 30] And you can imagine how tempting it is, isn't it? For the psalmist, as he's journeying through this desert, and here it is, there's a tent there, flap opening, the wolf of beautiful food, music, inviting him in.

It's very tempting, isn't it? To want to just stop and go in there and dwell, rather than to keep going on this journey. And that's the same with us as well. We are still on a journey, not a physical journey, but one of faith.

And during such times in life, we may sometimes not see God dwelling, or being with us physically. We may not be there at his dwelling place in heaven, and yet we are being encouraged to long for

and keep making that journey until we get to the new heavens and the new earth.

So this being the start of the year, let me encourage you to think how you might continue doing this this year. How you will choose God instead of wickedness, how you might stir up your longings for God and his presence, how you will remember that God alone bestows favor and honor.

What habits will you form? What choices will you make? What lifestyle will you adopt that will make sure that you keep going on this journey instead of ending up in the tent of the wicked?

[27 : 59] Well, look with me at the psalm again, verse 4. Blessed are those who dwell in God's house, ever praising you. Verse 5. Blessed are those whose strength is in God, whose heart is set on pilgrimage.

And verse 12. Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you. Well, let's pray and ask God to bless us.

Father, give us a heart that longs for you, the living God who blesses all who trust in you through your son, Jesus. Teach us as we journey through life to find our strength not in ourselves or others or false idols of this world, but in you.

And then bring us with great joy and anticipation into your everlasting kingdom as we fix our hope unwavering in it on you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.