

A Prayer of Longing

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Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[0 : 00] Homesickness. Have any of you ever been homesick before? Maybe some of you are experiencing that right now. Or maybe it was the first time you ever slept over at a friend's house when you were six.

Or the first time you ever went on a youth retreat. Or maybe it was, let's see, the first time that you had to move across the country for work.

Or maybe it was the first time that you had to move to a different continent for something. To visit family or even for school itself. And you know that feeling of homesickness, don't you?

It's one of those feelings that's really hard to explain. It kind of eludes us. But yet we feel it intensely and it's really deep. And if any of you have ever been homesick for long enough, you know that the longing for home doesn't just end there.

Eventually that longing for home gets so intense that you're ready to take the journey back home.

Right? I mean, eventually it gets to the point where you're willing to do anything you can to get back home.

[1 : 08] Because that's where you want to be. I remember feeling this for the first time when I moved to Vancouver about five years ago. First time I experienced homesickness. It was probably because I was sleeping on a used mattress and I was missing the bed at home.

And after a few nights of having steamed broccoli and rice, you start to miss mom's spaghetti and meatballs. And, you know, you start to miss home basically. But even more than all those things is you miss the ones that you love so deeply.

You miss the presence of your friends and your family. And I remember this longing getting so intense that eventually I was like, I'm going to buy the plane ticket and do what it takes to get home. And if you've ever taken a journey towards home after being homesick, you know that the journey is marked with a sense of joy and excitement. Right? You're anticipating every moment arriving at home finally and once for all.

And you're anticipating being in the presence of the ones that you love. And then that moment comes. Finally the journey ends. And you get to delight in the presence of home.

[2 : 24] I'll never forget the experience the first time I flew back to San Francisco. I got off that plane. I walked down this long hallway and I made a sharp right turn. And it opened up into this large waiting area.

And you could see parents waiting for their kids. You could see friends waiting for visitors. And you could see lovers waiting for their spouse. And there in the crowd was my mom and dad and my brother and sister.

With smiles on their face waiting to receive me. And we embraced. And delight was overflowing. Because we were at home in each other's presence.

You see. Homesickness is intense. But when it gets intense enough. Homesickness leads to a journey toward home.

And when that journey toward home reaches its final culmination and destination. It's the delight of being home. And that's what Psalm 84 is all about.

[3 : 20] It's about that progression right there. It's about a spiritual longing for home. And home is the presence of the living God himself. The psalmist is homesick, friends.

In verses 1 to 4. His longing for God's presence is very intense. And then in verses 5 to 8. He goes on a journey towards God's presence.

And then in verses 9 to 12. He finally arrives and delights in God's presence. Longing, journeying, delighting. Longing, journeying, delighting.

That's where we're going tonight. Start in verse 1 with me. The psalmist begins with a longing for God. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts. My soul longs, yes it faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh cry out for the living God. The psalmist is homesick.

[4 : 20] Have any of you heard of that proverb, home is where the heart is? Any of you heard of that? Yeah. It's kind of a funny proverb. Home is where the heart is.

It kind of means your home is in the place or with the people that you love most. Home is where the heart is. And the psalmist is homesick because his home is with God.

His heart is with God. He longs to be in the courts of his king. And he longs to be in the house of his Lord. And this longing is all consuming. Did you notice in verse 2 how he mentions his soul, his heart, and his flesh?

It's kind of like a Hebrew poetic way of saying all of me. Like all of me longs for all of you, God. And then he starts talking about birds.

Don't you find that kind of funny? When I read this psalm, I find that funny. He goes from a longing for God to then talking about birds. And you kind of wonder, what in the world is that about? Well, he's longing for home.

[5 : 27] So he's envious of anybody that gets to be where he wants to be. And the birds are in the presence of God. Look at verse 3.

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.

You sense the envy? He's like, I want to be there. He wants to be with the birds. Oh, that we would long for God like that, friends.

Oh, that God would give us a deep hunger and thirst for him like that. But for those of you who have experienced homesickness, you know that the longing is not inactive.

The longing eventually turns into a journey if it gets intense enough. Look at verses 5 to 7 with me. Blessed are those whose strength is in you.

[6 : 29] In whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Bacchah, they make it a place of springs. The early rain also covers it with pools.

They go from strength to strength, and each one appears before God and Zion. I want to highlight two things for you. Number one, the journey is not easy.

The journey is not easy. Zion, for those of you that don't know, is the mountain on top of which the city of Jerusalem was built.

And then in the city of Jerusalem is the temple of God, his dwelling place. And so the picture we get here is this picture of the psalmist with a bunch of pilgrims traveling and ascending up Mount Zion so that they could go in Jerusalem and reach their destination at the dwelling place of God itself.

But, in order to get there, they first have to go through the valley of Bacchah. And for those of you who don't know what the valley of Bacchah is, it's a very dry and arid place.

[7 : 39] It's a place that has very few signs of life. Like, food is really hard to come by, and water is really in short supply. And some commentators even suggest that this word Bacchah has resonances with the Hebrew word for tears or weeping.

So you could literally call this valley the valley of tears or the valley of weeping. And so not only is this a lifeless place, this is a place of suffering and sorrow and brokenness.

The journey is not easy. You know that, right? I can see it on some of your faces. You know the journey is not easy. But second, though the journey be not easy, the journey is showered in God's grace.

As the pilgrims go through the valley of Bacchah, the wastelands become a place of springs, and the desert lands become a place of pools and rain. As you may know, water is often used as an image for God's grace and blessing in the Bible.

And in the midst of the journey, we get this picture that God showers grace on his people. And he doesn't just give them the grace that they need to survive.

[8 : 59] It's not like an image of just a few raindrops hitting the desert land. It's an image of springs of water welling up from underneath and pools of water from the showers of the heavens.

Because God does not give his people just grace so they can survive, but grace so that they can thrive. So they can thrive. And so we see in verse 7 that God's people actually gain strength as they go through the valley of Bacchah.

And they appear before their God in Zion. But that's not the end of the journey. Because as great as the valley of Bacchah is with God's grace, it's still not the destination.

Have any of you heard of that Aerosmith song, Amazing? Any of you know who Aerosmith is? Okay, good. Yeah, there we go.

So this song was written 20, 25 years ago. It's a song, Amazing. And Stephen Tyler, he describes a time in his life in this song when life felt so painful and so out of control and so tiring that he just wanted it to end.

[10:11] So he was despairing of life so much that he would rather die than continue going on. That's a deep place. And he says this in that song. Life is a journey, not a destination.

And I just can't tell just what tomorrow brings. Life is a journey, not a destination. And I just can't tell just what tomorrow brings. Now, it's understandable, right?

He's gotten some things right. Life is a journey. And we don't know what tomorrow brings. But I think he's missed something that's key. And I think this may be part of what contributes to the despair.

He says he doesn't realize that life is a journey with a destination. And that's the great hope, friends. That life is a journey with a destination.

And in Psalm 84, we see that God's sustaining grace leads the pilgrims through the Valley of Bacca and eventually brings them to God's holy place.

[11:14] The journey toward God culminates in the delight of being with God. And it doesn't take him long to realize when he's there that this is the greatest privilege of his life.

Look at verse 10. And his delight is not only in the presence of his God.

His delight is in who God is. Look at verse 11. The Lord God is a son, he says. He is the source of life. The Lord God is a shield.

He's the protector of life. The Lord bestows favor and honor. He gives grace and glory. And no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

He gives abundantly and lavishly. The psalmist has arrived at home and he is delighted in what he finds. His God is a glorious God.

[12:29] His God is the author and protector of life. But I left one thing out. We skipped over one very important thing in this psalm.

The psalmist actually doesn't enter into God's presence alone. The psalmist does not go into God's presence on his own. In fact, the psalmist can't go into God's presence on his own.

So the question becomes, how can the psalmist get there? How did he get there? And the key is verse 9. Verse 9 is where everything holds together.

It's how the psalmist goes from this journey to this destination. Look at verse 9 with me. Behold our shield, O God. And look on the face of your anointed.

Behold our shield, O God. And look on the face of your anointed. This is the picture. The psalmist with hundreds of pilgrims, maybe thousands, finally approaching the temple of God.

[13:39] And what do they do? They cry out a prayer for their king. Look at our God. Look at our king, O God. The king is their leader.

The king is the shield of verse 9. The king is God's anointed one of verse 9. And the psalmist realizes, along with all the rest of the pilgrims, that you do not enter into God's presence unless you have God's anointed representative with you.

Behold our shield, O God. Look on the face of your anointed. And brothers and sisters, I get the great privilege of telling you tonight that we have a much greater king.

We have the king of all kings and the Lord of all lords. And his name is Jesus of Nazareth. I have the privilege of telling you tonight that this Jesus of Nazareth has already ascended Mount Zion.

He's already entered into Jerusalem. I have the privilege of telling you tonight that when he entered Jerusalem, he hung on a cross and paid for your sins and mine.

[14:46] And I have the privilege of telling you tonight that when he hung on that cross, he tore the curtains of the temple in two so that we could enter into the presence of the living God.

Jesus is our king. And Jesus is our representative. And so when you pray, you can pray knowing that the Father sees the face of Jesus as your representative.

Your perfect, spotless, righteous representative. And when you pray, Jesus as your leader takes you right into the presence of God.

And that's why we can pray. Now I'm aware that many of you are having very different reactions to this song.

Very different reactions. And so I'm going to name three. And I have a word for each of you. Some of you, when you hear the words of the psalm, your heart leaps with joy.

[15:57] Because you sense a certain sort of affinity with the psalmist. You feel like you can take those words on your own lips and speak them to God. Because they give words to the desires of your heart and the longings of your own soul.

And if that's you tonight, praise the living God. That is a gift of his grace. Keep seeking God's face. Keep expressing your longing for him.

And keep delighting in his glorious presence. And may the words of this psalm, Psalm 84, be your words tonight. For others of you, when you hear the words of this psalm, it's not affinity that you feel.

You feel a sense of dissonance inside. You know that the longings of your own heart and the desires of your own heart are nowhere near the psalmist.

And if you're honest with yourself, you know it's true. Some of you here tonight, there's a relationship or there's a job. Or there's school or there's friends or there's money.

[17:01] Or there's status or there's popularity or there's music. There's something that has captured your heart more than God. You know that God has been dethroned on your heart and something else has replaced him.

And I want to say something to you tonight. God loves to reorient our sinful hearts. God loves to redirect our wayward affections.

And God loves to transform our misplaced desires. God created you with those longings and with those desires. And we've twisted them and destroyed them.

But God wants to restore our desires and set them on him alone. So that he alone would be our satisfaction. C.S. Lewis illustrates this point really beautifully in his book, *The Weight of Glory*.

Listen to what he says. He talks about our desires. It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.

[18:08] We are half-hearted creatures. Don't you feel that? We are half-hearted creatures. Fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us.

Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased.

Far too easily pleased. And God wants to give us a whole lot more tonight than what we've been settling for. We think that other things can satisfy us, but no, God wants to say to us that only he can satisfy us.

Because in his presence is fullness of joy, and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore. So if your heart needs redirecting tonight, I want to offer you the words of Psalm 84.

And may they be your words tonight. And finally, for others of you, when you hear the words of this psalm, you feel nothing.

[19:21] You feel like if somebody was to hook up a spiritual heart monitor to you, you would just be flatlining. There'd be no heartbeat. You feel like your heart is so cold that nothing could warm it.

You feel like your soul is so dry and weary that nothing could refresh it. And you feel so apathetic and dead inside that you just want to feel something or anything, let alone a longing for the living God.

And if that's you tonight, then I want you to hear this. God's words are creative. God's spirit is active. And God's ears are attentive.

And God's life is a lot more powerful than the death that you're feeling inside right now. And God's sympathy is a lot more powerful than the apathy that you are experiencing. I want you to hear this tonight.

That the living God has created out of nothing once before, and he can do it again tonight. He can speak into your life and create desires for him that you never knew that you could possibly have.

[20:25] And God wants to do that for you tonight. And God will never reject you crying out to him, God, give me a desire for you. He will never reject that prayer. Because he wants you to join the psalmist and say, How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts.

My soul longs, yes it faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh cry out for the living God. Because a day in his courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

May the words of Psalm 84 be your words tonight. Brothers and sisters, it starts with a deep homesickness. And that longing for God gets intense enough to where it turns into the journey towards God's presence.

And then that journey reaches its final destination and culmination in the delight of basking in God's glorious presence. That's the journey of Psalm 84.

That's the journey of our lives. And that's the journey of prayer. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.