

# Psalm 84:1-4

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Date: 08 March 2015

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I'm sure you've experienced meeting somebody, maybe spending a little time together, and sensing, detecting a connection. You just seem to click, and you're able to establish a level of mutual trust in a relatively short space of time. Somehow, you seem to know and understand each other at a level beyond what you experience, perhaps with other people that you may have known for a lot longer. One of the things that I find remarkable and very real about the Bible is the way that we can meet fellow believers who lived thousands of years ago, and yet sometimes, not always, but sometimes, we seem to know them, to really know them as people, real people that we can warm to and identify with at a deep level. There's a connection. Now, what is that connection?

Well, no doubt, it depends on the character in question that we meet or come across in the Bible. It depends on who we are and where we are in our own lives. It may be that what draws us in, what establishes that connection is how we're struck by their disarming honesty.

Maybe we're drawn in by their very vulnerability, perhaps the struggles that they face and honestly share with us across the millennia, or it might be the passion that they reveal or the joy that they express. Any of these things, perhaps, can be used to draw us in and for that connection to be established, and we feel that we really know these people, even though they lived so long ago and in such very different circumstances. I guess the fundamental connection is spiritual and has to do with our affections, the one we love and the one we trust in. Though millennia separate us, we share a love for our eternal and unchanging God. And that does, in a very real way, connect us, as I say, across the huge distance that there would seem to be between us. As I read Psalm 84,

I detect this same kind of connection with the one who composed the psalm. We don't know who wrote the psalm, and yet as we read what he wrote, there is a connection.

We read, and as we read, we feel and sense and identify with his affections, affections that are laid bare in the words that reveal his own heart. So there's a connection, or perhaps there isn't for you, I don't know, but certainly as I read, I sense or detect this connection. But what I would also say is that alongside the connection, there's also a disconnect, a disconnect that can be disconcerting for us, and that can keep us at least in some measure at a distance. The very language that is employed by the psalmist, the circumstances that he describes, the images that are painted, the very manner in which love and loyalty is expressed can seem so different, maybe even a little alien. What are we to make when we think of this psalm? What are we to make of dwelling places and courts and altars? How do we connect with talk of the valley of Bacchan and autumn rains? And no doubt we could go on. This is often a difficulty we have when we read the Bible. We have these images and this vocabulary and circumstances just seem so remote from where we are. And so while there's a connection at one level, there's also almost in parallel this disconnect. What I intend to do is to preach three sermons on this psalm, on Psalm 84. And the psalm, though it is very much an integrated whole, does divide into three clear stanzas or sections that facilitate preaching it or dealing with it in this way. And this morning we're going to think about the first four verses of the psalm. And I want to focus on the psalmist's affections. What does he most love? What is he most passionate about? What does he most long for? But I also want to think about our affections? What do we most love? What are we most passionate about? What do we most long for? But we'll start with the psalmist. What is the focus of the psalmist's affections and passion and longing? It's not really a what question, but a where question.

[ 5 : 54 ] The psalm in its entirety revolves around the temple in Jerusalem. The one who writes the psalm, the psalmist loves God's house, God's dwelling place. His passion is for God's house. His longing is for God's house. And he is nothing if not eloquent. And at the beginning of the psalm, he sets out his stall with striking clarity. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty.

This word that he employs, how lovely is your dwelling place. It can be translated as it is here in our Bibles as lovely. But from the root of the word, it's also possible and legitimate to translate it as love. How loved is your dwelling place. And of course, the two are so intimately connected. And I'm sure both sentiments are true of the psalmist. The dwelling place of God was delightful to him. It was lovely to him as it was loved by him. It was a beloved place for the psalmist.

How lovely, how loved is your dwelling place. And we might respond, well, why was that? Maybe here there's a, there could be an element of disconnect. How can a physical structure that the psalmist has in his mind's eye as he writes this psalm, how can it awake such passions? We might even be tempted to foolishly chide the psalmist and say to him, well, listen, it's only a building. Why do you get so excited about a building? Why does the psalmist so love God's house, the temple in Jerusalem?

Well, let me suggest two reasons why he so loves God's dwelling place, why it is for him such a delightful place. Two reasons. And following on or flowing from the two reasons, one consequence. So let me just identify what the two reasons are and the consequence of those two reasons or the consequence that flows from those two reasons. And then we'll think about each of these things in turn.

The first reason why the psalmist so loves God's dwelling place is because of the one who lives there, the one who lives there. But the second reason is the activity that takes place there, the one who lives there and the activity that takes place there. And then flowing from these two reasons, we also have very dramatically and very vividly the psalmist longing to be there. That is why he longs to be there, because of the one who lives there and the activity that takes place there. So let's think about these four verses along these lines. First of all, the one who lives there. This is not just any dwelling place that the psalmist is writing about. He speaks of it as your dwelling place. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty. He goes on to speak of courts and altars, and they're not just any courts. They are, in the words of the psalmist, the courts of the Lord. He speaks of the altar, but it's not just any altar.

[ 9 : 45 ] It is your altar. It is your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God. What makes the temple lovely, what makes the temple delightful, what makes the temple a precious and loved place, is not the building, but the one who occupies the building. It is because God is there. It is because God makes Himself present there. Remove God from the temple, and it's no more than an empty shell, devoid of life and purpose. But even as we speak of the temple as the place where God dwells, there's perhaps an element of difficulty that arises, maybe that disconnect that I was referring to earlier.

What are we to make of this talk of God living in a temple? Is this not childish superstition that fails to appreciate that God is not bound by time or space? Well, it would be very wrong to imagine that the psalmist was under any such misapprehension that he could keep God inside a physical structure.

I've no doubt that the psalmist shared the conviction of Solomon, who in his prayer of dedication for the newly constructed temple could declare, but will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you, how much less this temple I have built. We don't know the time when this psalm was written. It's possible that it was written at a time when the psalmist would have been making reference to the very temple that Solomon had built. Or it may be that the psalm predates that temple. It's not of great consequence. But what I would contend is that the psalmist shared the conviction of Solomon.

Solomon, he recognizes that God is not bound by a temple built by human hands. But even while he recognizes that, Solomon also in the very same prayer, the prayer of dedication for the temple, goes on to say, and we quote what he says as it's recorded for us in 1 Kings in chapter 8.

He's addressing God, he's praying to God, and Solomon says, may your eyes be opened towards this temple night and day, this place of which you said, my name shall be there, so that you will hear the prayer of your servant, or you will hear the prayer your servant prays towards this place. God had determined that he would meet with his people in a special, though not exclusive way, at the temple. This was God's choice. This was God's declared will. And the psalmist, as he has a passion for God, as his longing is for God, so he longs to be where God is. His passion is for this God, the God he names and describes in the psalm as the Lord Almighty, the covenant God, the covenant God, ruling and sovereign over all, the God he knows as the living God, the God he relates to as my God and my King. This is the God that he longs for, and he knows that the temple is where he can meet with this God in a special way. So why does the psalmist long for God's dwelling place? Why does his heart and flesh cry out in the manner that it does? Because of the one who lives there. But we can also notice that the reason for the psalmist's longing, the reason for his passion, is also the activity that goes on there. This is the second reason why the psalmist so loves God's house. It's not just that God is there. That would be, we might imagine, reason enough.

[ 14 : 11 ] But it's also about what God and God's people do there. The temple is a hive or was a hive of activity. The pilgrim who arrives within its gates is active, and the God he comes to worship is active.

What is going on that so draws the psalmist? What is going on there that the psalmist so longs to be part of and to be involved in? Well, we could say a lot about that, but let me just summarize what is going on, particularly as we draw out that which the psalmist makes reference to. Let me summarize it in this way, that the temple is a place of prayer, a place of praise, and a place of pardon. This is what's going on there, and why the psalmist so longs to be there, because it's a place of prayer, praise, and pardon. Let's think of these three activities, if you wish. First of all, prayer.

Well, we've read what Solomon said, even as he prayed at the dedication of the temple, you will hear the prayer your servant prays towards this place. This isn't our text, but notice that the prayer was not restricted to the confines of the temple. Even Solomon uses the language of the prayer that your servant prays towards this place, and that opens the door and the possibility for God's people to pray to God towards Jerusalem, even though they may have been very distant from Jerusalem. But of course, it was singularly fitting that within its walls, God's people would gather to pray to God. And the psalmist loves the temple because there he prays, and there God hears, and there God answers. There he meets, and communes, and fellowships with God as he prays together with

God's people. And so he delights in God's house because of what's going on there. It is a place of prayer, but it's also a place of praise. Notice what is said there in verse 4 of this first section of the Psalm. Blessed are those who dwell in your house. They are ever praising you. In verses 3 and 4, we can detect a holy envy. If we can speak of envy as ever being holy, I think we can. A holy envy in the words of the psalmist. He's envious even of the sparrows and swallows that, oblivious to the privilege, make their home in the temple. 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. O Lord Almighty, my King and my God. And I think the sense of what the psalmist is saying here is that of how he would long to be that sparrow. He would long to be that swallow so close to the altar. There's maybe also a sense in which he's arguing or making the case, well, if they can be there, if they are welcome there, how much more would I be welcome there? But more than that, I think there is this holy envy. How blessed are they to be so close to the altar. But not only is he envious of the sparrow and of the swallow, but also of men and women who he describes as dwelling in your house. Blessed are those who dwell in your house. They are ever praising you. He is not among their number, but how he would wish to be among their number. But notice what it is they're doing.

That's our concern. The activity. What is it that they're doing, those who dwell in your house? Well, we're told they are ever praising you. The temple is a place of praise, a place of prayer, a place of praise, but also a place of pardon. This third element, at least in the order in which we are describing things, serves, we might say, as a pivot for the first two elements. There's a connection, and the central element is a pardon. You see, the prayer that was brought to God in the temple was prayer for pardon. That wasn't the only prayer that could be brought to God, but this was a central element, prayer for pardon. Prayer for pardon needed. And what are the praise that was lifted up to God?

[19:00] Well, it was praise for pardon granted. No doubt for other blessings received, but certainly at the heart is praise for pardon granted. But where in the psalm, in the words that we've read in this first section, do we find any reference to God's pardoning activity that takes place in the temple?

Well, let's go back to the sparrows and the swallows. Where is it that they make their home? Where is it that they've placed their nest? Where is it that they feed their young? Well, there in verse 3, we're told where it is within the temple, within the grand complex. If indeed, when this psalm was written, it was a grand complex. But where within it does the psalmist speak of the swallow and the spaddle?

What we're told there, a place near your altar. A place near your altar. And this reference to the altar is key. It was at the altar that the sacrifice was offered. The sacrifice required by God to atone for the sins of the people. It was at the altar that blood was shed, without which there could be no forgiveness of sins. It was at the altar that pardon was both sought and secured, and where God's people were put right with God by God at the altar. The psalmist loves the temple.

He loves God's dwelling place because of the one who lives there and because of the activity that goes on there. It is a place of prayer. It is a place of praise. It is a place of pardon, where pardon is sought and where pardon is secured. And these two reasons lead in turn to a consequence, and the consequence is the longing to be there. In verse 2, it's expressed so deeply and so vividly, my soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

The psalmist, it would appear, it would seem, from what he writes is far from the temple. We don't know if that's simply because he lived far from the temple but was able to participate in the festivals and gather with others without impediment, or whether there was something that actually prevented him from being where he longed to be. We don't know, but he's certainly not there. He longs to be there, but he's not there. We know of how he longs, because he says so, how he longs to join with the pilgrims in the joyful ascent to Jerusalem. He longs, his soul longs, and yearns and faints to be where God is, to be where prayer and praise is offered, to be where pardon is sought and secured, his heart and his flesh. In other words, his whole being longs for God.

[ 22 : 24 ] This longing to be there is a consequence. It flows from the reasons why he has such a longing, the one who lives there and what goes on there.

But then that brings the matter to ourselves. We've described in some measure what it is the psalmist is speaking about. We've sought to understand in some measure the reason why he expresses the longing that he expresses. But what about us? What has any of this got to do with us?

How can we make a connection between the psalmist and between ourselves? We don't do pilgrimages to Jerusalem or anywhere else for that matter. There is no longer a temple. It has gone never to return.

There is no longer a physical altar where sacrifices are to be offered. We are called to worship God in spirit and in spirit and in truth, no longer bound or limited by sacred places or sacred buildings.

How then can we translate the worthy affections and passion and longing for the temple expressed by the psalmist into language and, more importantly, into real-life experiences that are relevant to you and to me as believers living today? Well, we no longer have a temple, but we do have all that the temple or God's house symbolized and represented. And let me suggest four ways in which we can and in which we must share the psalmist's affections and passion and longing. Four ways. The first way in which we can share the psalmist's affections and passion and longing is in ourselves having a desire for God's presence. We've seen that this is at the heart of what explains the language the psalmist uses, his desire for God's presence. He longed to be with God. And we can ask ourselves the question, we can just for a moment pause and examine our own hearts. Is that our great desire? We don't need to travel to Jerusalem to enjoy God's presence. We can meet with God anywhere and anytime as we come to him in prayer and worship.

[ 25 : 05 ] We can hear God's voice speaking to us as we read and meditate on God's word together, as we gather on occasions such as this, but in our own homes as we open up God's word and read it and meditate upon it. We can meet with God. We can know and enjoy God's presence. But then I think it's important for us to, if you wish, get real with ourselves and pose the question or wrestle the question, what happens if I don't have that desire? What if that isn't what I most want? I don't deeply desire.

God's presence. What can I do? Well, you can ask for it. You can come to God and recognize that that is not where you are, but that is where you would wish to be and ask that God would grant you that growing and deepening desire for himself, that hunger and thirst for himself. But you can also accompany that request by cultivating a greater desire for God's presence. And God's presence or a desire for God's presence is cultivated by seeking his presence and increasingly knowing and enjoying all that flows from it. So that's the first thing that we can do that would be a way in which we would reflect the sentiments and the affections and the priorities of the psalmist as he expresses them in his own context and language. A desire for God's presence, but also secondly, an experience of and gratitude for God's presence. As we were noticing just a moment ago, the temple was the place where God's people could seek and secure forgiveness and cleansing. Now, we also need to be forgiven and cleansed, but we don't go to a physical temple. We go to the one who replaced the temple. We go to the one who, using the language of John chapter 1, tabernacled amongst us, or if you wish, templed amongst us, embodying the very presence of God. We go to Jesus. Not to the temple, not to

Jerusalem. We go to Jesus. We go to the one who offered himself as the perfect and final sacrifice for sin, for our sins. We go to the one who shed his own blood at the altar outside Jerusalem, where he was crucified and died in our place. There's no longer any need for us to offer blood sacrifices, but we do remember and give thanks for the blood sacrifice offered on our behalf.

We'll do so in a special way as we gather at the Lord's table this evening to remember the death of Jesus in our place. And so we can identify with, we can share the affections, the passion, the longings of the psalmist as we desire for God's presence, as we experience and are grateful for God's salvation.

But thirdly also, as we would know, an ever greater longing for the fellowship of God's people. Now while the psalmist's principal focus in the psalm is on his desire for the living God, we need to remember, we need to picture the scene that the temple was a place of gathering. It was a place where God's people gathered together to worship God. It was not a place where men and women in some solitary pilgrimage would go and do their own thing. That is not the kind of place it was.

[ 28 : 56 ] The very pilgrimage that the psalm speaks of, we'll come and think more of that subsequently when we look at the second part of the psalm. But that pilgrimage that the psalm makes reference to, it was a time of carnival. It was a time of festivity when people joyfully and cheerfully together made their way to Jerusalem, made their way to the temple. Part of the delight of going to the temple was that you did it with others. That it was this corporate, this family, this community pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Can you even imagine, even today when we read over, see of carnivals and festivities, can you imagine a carnival of one? It's just a ridiculous picture to even try and imagine.

And so, if we are to reflect the passions and the love and the longings of the psalmist, there must be in us a longing for the fellowship of God's people.

But in this same vein or along this same track, we can add to what we've just said, the New Testament insight that as believers, each and every one of us as believers, we are God's temple. What does Paul say as he writes to the believers in Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 16, he says, don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

And so, there's this contrast between the temple in Jerusalem where God dwelt, and now in the New Testament, Paul says to believers, you are God's temple and God lives in you. God's Spirit lives in you. Given that that is so, then we can surely say that as the psalmist longed for the temple, so we must long to be with those who are God's temple, those in whom God's Spirit lives.

[ 31 : 11 ] So, a longing for the fellowship of God's people. But then a fourth and final way in which we can join with the psalmist and share his affections, his passion, his longings in a manner that is appropriate for us in the day that we live, we can do so as we delight in the offering of praise to God. The temple, as we've seen, was a place of praise. Those who dwelt there were ever praising God. We share in the psalmist's affections and passion as we delight in offering praise and worship to God. We do so together as we gather for public worship, and we do so day by day as we seek with God's help to live our lives as a sacrifice of praise to our God. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts to me, the tabernacles of thy grace, how pleasant, Lord, they be. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the one who penned the words of this psalm, and we pray that we would know and increasingly know a sense of identification with the one who so writes, that we would know and increasingly know something of the affection, something of the love, something of the longing of the psalmist for God's presence, for your presence, that we would know more of a longing to be with and to celebrate with God's people, that we would know an ever greater desire to lift up our voices and indeed offer our lives as praise and worship to you. We pray that your spirit, the one who dwells in us, will be the one working in us, so making us evermore to reflect and to be like the one who wrote this psalm that you've given to us for our profit and for our challenge. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.