

Psalm 84 Part One - Longing for home

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[0:00] Psalm 84, which you can find on page 595 on the Bible in front of you. Psalm 84. How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!

! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 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, blessed are those who dwell in your house. They are ever praising you. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the valley of Baca, 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. Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty. Listen to me, God of Jacob. Look on our shield, O God. Look with favour on your anointed one. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.

[1:19] I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the Lord God is a sun and a shield. The Lord bestows favour and honour.

No good thing does he withhold from those whose way of life is blameless. Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you. Thanks, Katrina, for reading that.

If you could keep your Bibles open at Psalm 8, I thought that would be a great help. And you can find an outline on the back of the notice sheet. And it's got a little prayer as well that we'll close with. So you'd find that helpful as we look at this. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to this psalm. We're going to look at it in two parts. So today we'll look at the first half.

And then next week we'll look at the second half and pick it up again. So let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to your word now, eager to hear your voice.

[2:25] We long to have an encounter with you by your spirit as we open your word. And to be changed by what we hear from you. So we ask, may the words of my mouth and the reflections of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight.

Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Well, for lots of us, this time of year is a time of setting ourselves for a new season of life.

Whether it's that you've been away on a wonderful holiday and now it's kind of coming back to work and back to reality. Or maybe you're someone who is in a season of change as you come here today.

You're about to embark on something new. Well, as we look at a term ahead, Psalm 84 invites us to ask, what are we really aiming for? What is it that we really want?

On the 11th of April 1970, Jim Lovell, Fred Hayes and Jack Swigert were launched into space with one thrilling thought.

[3:29] The prospect of landing on the moon. It was Jim Lovell's second journey to the moon. He'd been on Apollo 8. But this mission, Apollo 13, was finally his chance to land on the moon.

But 56 hours into the journey, 200,000 miles from home, oxygen tank 2 exploded. Within minutes, the command module would run out of all power and all oxygen.

So the crew did the only thing they had left to do. They scribbled down some calculations and scrambled into the lunar module, which is basically like a tent. It's a small pod.

And they were aiming to use that as a lifeboat with its very limited power and oxygen. And from that moment on, all that mattered to the three men was how to get home.

They used the lunar module's engine and they aimed to travel around the moon and use its gravity like a slingshot to bring them back to Earth without an engine.

[4:33] In doing that, they traveled further from Earth than anyone has ever gone before. And as they went around the far side of the moon, they saw, as the moon obscured their view of Earth and

Sun, they saw the rest of the universe like they'd never seen it before.

Billions of stars. More brilliant than you could ever see them from here. But as they saw the Earth reappear again, Earth rise, as they came back around, Jim Lovell said this.

He said, I recall looking back on the Earth and knowing that the Earth is really the only place we had to go to. It was the only place we could see in the universe that was home to us.

And for two days, they watched it gradually getting larger, like a blue marble, longing to reach it. Jim said, It was like a blue and white Christmas tree ball hanging in a black sky, a grand oasis in the vastness of space.

For them, it was their only safe place. Familiarity, loved ones, it was home. And all that mattered was getting back. As we join with Psalm 84, the writer gives us that same singular focus about being with God.

[5:52] In verses 1 to 4, we find him longing for the presence of God. Look with me again at verse 1. He says, Maybe you could think of a time you've been parched for thirst, desperate for refreshment from cold water.

Well, that experience, that sense of needing water, is the picture the psalmist uses of a spiritual reality, that he is far from God, and he's desperate to be with God again, where he'll be satisfied in God's presence.

And three times in Psalm 84, he tells us how to be happy, how to be a blessed person, a happy person. And the first one comes in verse 4. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, they are ever praising you.

How do you find happiness? You find God. You experience the presence of God. Now, there's something very interesting about this psalm. The psalms are collected for us in five books in the book of Psalms.

And this psalm is in book 3, which is the section of psalms that smell of exile. They're the songs that were collected for the people of God to pray and sing.

[7:23] When they'd broken the covenant with God, and they'd come under the judgment of God, and the Babylonian empire had come in and taken them far from home into exile, and destroyed the temple.

So, the themes in the psalms around this one are pretty harrowing. Psalm 79, Or in Psalm 80, How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?

You have fed them with the bread of tears. There's this agonizing collection of songs. And then suddenly, a bit like when you get a break in the clouds, and the sun shines through, you get this optimistic Psalm 84.

The preacher Charles Spurgeon called it the pearl of the psalms. And he said this, No music could be too sweet for its theme, or too exquisite in sound to match the beauty of its language.

Why? Well, you see that in this psalm, the writer's yearning for God, but clearly he's writing at a time when the temple is still there, and he's on his way, and he knows that when he gets to Jerusalem, his longings will be satisfied.

[8:47] So what's the psalm doing here in this collection? I take it that it's placed here in book three to say to those who are in exile, when you've hit rock bottom in life, when your circumstances are awful, recalibrate your heart so that your longings are longings for God.

Aim for him. And that means Psalm 84 speaks to us because the apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter chapter 1 that the identity of Christians is that we're exiles.

We looked at this on our weekend away. 1 Peter chapter 1, that we are elect exiles, chosen by God but strangers in the world, far from our true home.

And our lives here are a journey to that home. Just as Jesus told his disciples in the upper room as he went to the cross, he said, I'm going there to prepare a place for you.

He said, in my father's house there are many rooms. I'm going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I'll come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

[10:04] God has given us plenty of things in this world to enjoy in his goodness, but this Psalm reminds us that we're not called to settle here. We're called to have a kind of godly homesickness about this world because what we really long for is to be home with God.

And if you're someone here today thinking, well, I just don't really feel like that because I'm pretty settled here, Psalm 84, as we say it, as we pray it, can work on us to recalibrate our hearts.

So have a look at verse three. As he remembers the temple, he says, even the sparrow finds 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.

So the writer remembers looking up at the shelters, the kind of roof rafters in the temple as he's in the outer courts and seeing the nesting birds flying in and out.

And it's as though that image gives us a picture of what God is like, that he's the defender of the weak. Even vulnerable creatures can find their home with God.

[11:18] And that's good news for us because we're vulnerable creatures and he invites us gently to come to him. And we're not just creatures, are we? We're sinners. We've messed it up.

And crucially, when we come to God admitting that, what we meet is compassion. So in verse three, what is it that the writer remembers from the temple courts?

It's the altar. It's the place where you brought your sin offering. That God knows what we're like and he has made a way that his just wrath against sin can be turned aside so that he can invite you and me.

Sinner, come to me. So then, look at the different ways that God is described in this psalm. It's remarkable because they show us how great God is and how gracious he is.

So in verse one, he's the Lord Almighty. Literally, he's the Lord of armies. The Lord of the armies of heaven. And that's the same in verse three at the end there as well.

[12:18] Lord Almighty. And he's the living God at the end of verse two. So he's the God who is there. The God who has life in himself. The fountainhead of life. But in verse three, he calls him my king and my God.

So whether you've come to church today soaring in life or struggling through life, Psalm 84 invites you, long for God. Make him the one place in the universe that you really call home.

The place of safety and familiarity and love. Now where this is helpful for me is that I tend to aim for things in life. And even when they're good things, I find, well, I drift into thinking, if only God will answer my prayers for those things, I'll finally be satisfied.

So if only God brings revival to Glasgow. One of the prayers, Jonathan and I sometimes pray is that we talk about the steady trickle of people we're seeing at St. Silas exploring faith and becoming Christians and asking God, would he burst the dam?

Would we see people flood in to find more about Jesus? That we would be engulfed with spiritual hunger. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Or I think if only we could raise up and train up 10 workers for the gospel from St. Silas in the next few years who could be deployed to be in ministry.

[13:54] Or if only the five guys that I was at university with, that I pray for, would all become Christians. Wouldn't that then mean I'd be truly fulfilled and satisfied?

And Psalm 84 just helps us remember that those are good things to ask for. But our deepest desires won't be fulfilled by the really good things that we strive for in life.

Because the world is not enough to satisfy our desires. God gave us desires that are too great for that. So that God is not just better than anything else the world can offer.

God is better than anything else God can offer. There's a modern hymn that has words that put it well. It's just on the screen, the words.

It goes, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer, greatest treasure of my longing soul, my God, like you there is no other. True delight is found in you alone.

[14:58] Your grace, a well too deep to fathom. Your love exceeds the heavens reach. Your truth, a fountain of perfect wisdom, my highest good and my unending need.

So that's our first point, longing for the presence of God. But what if we're thinking, I haven't got time to long for God. I'm just trying to get through life here and it's tough. Well, our second point from the psalm is this, strengthened on the journey to God.

In verse five, we get the second promise of blessing. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

So here we're getting a promise of blessing now, in this time, today. If we are a people willing to picture this life as a pilgrimage, as a journey, and we set our hearts fully on the future when we'll finally be with God.

God, in verse five, strengthens us for that journey. Now the original pilgrims, they're on a journey to Jerusalem, to the temple.

[16:14] And what's really striking here is that the strength and blessing they get from God flows out from them to bless the people around them.

If you look at verse six, as they pass through the valley of Baca, 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. And the same can be true for us today. It's like, a bit like, Chris Rea driving home for Christmas.

Now, this is a bit sensitive if you like Chris Rea because last year Chris Rea drove home for Christmas for the last time. But if we think back to when Chris Rea wrote his Christmas classic, it is a cheerful song.

It's Christmas vibes. Some of you might be thinking, is it not too early in the year for this, but work with me. So, driving home for Christmas, he sings, with a thousand memories.

[17:22] Take a look at the driver next to me. He's just the same. It's very jolly. But, actually, Chris Rea is having a bit of a nightmare on the journey. So, he says, in one of the verses, I'm top to toe in tailbacks.

I've got red lights all around. So, he's having a nightmare journey, Chris Rea, driving home for Christmas. But why is he on such outstanding form to have written such a cheerful song?

It's because of where he's going. His heart is down the road and he's thinking of, he says, with a thousand memories of where he'll be. He says, soon there'll be a freeway here.

I'll get my feet on holy ground. Holy ground. And, it's not heaven, he means there. Do you know where he's going, Chris Rea? Middlesbrough.

Honestly, honestly, that, that is where Chris Rea is from. And he's driving home. So, this is the T's flyover. That's the A19 there. And, we can picture Chris Rea, whenever we hear that song, that's what he's yearning for.

[18:30] That road. This is what he'll eventually reach. Just the next slide. That's, that's it. Middlesbrough. The holy ground. That's the transporter bridge. And, who can blame him?

Now, we as a family have this with Gretna Green service station. I don't know whether you have this with Gretna Green. I know, I know many do. That, you know, for us, everyday life is in Glasgow.

But, you know, every summer we go to the Keswick Convention. Love that. And, the last couple of years we've driven to Portsmouth and got on the ferry to France for our summer holiday. So, when we get on the M74 with a packed car driving south and a hundred miles down the road you stop at Gretna, there's this sense of feeling we're winning here.

You know, we're nearer where we're going than when we started. Meet us in Gretna, we're on cracking form. Does anyone else feel like that at Gretna Services? I know you do because you see it on people's faces.

You know, they're in WH Smith or in the very long queue at Starbucks. Well, people are, people are on good form at Gretna. But, but imagine if you're at Gretna service station and, and someone said, actually, sorry, plans have changed.

[19:44] You've got to stay here. You have to live at Gretna Green Services. How would we feel then? Well, pretty gutted actually because Gretna Green Services is a bit grotty.

You know, it's not T-Bay, right? T-Bay, T-Bay, I'd live there. Yeah? But Gretna, I wouldn't want to live there. But we feel really happy there because we're on the journey and we're closer to our destination than when we'd started.

And our hearts are full as we think of where we're going. For us as Christians, sometimes it's going to feel like we're in the valley in life. The place the psalmist calls in verse 6, he refers to this place the valley of Baca and it's a play on words here the valley of Baca because you could literally translate Baca tears.

It's the valley of tears. It's clearly a desert place in the wilderness where the only water that you can find are the tears of grief. And at times that will be our experience of the world that we live in today, of our lives.

But in the seasons when your life here feels like you are going through the valley of tears, as you fix your eyes on your future and long to be with God, you will be strengthened by that hope.

[21:06] The valley becomes a place not of tears but of springs in verse 6, of refreshment, pools of morning rain. In other words, as God strengthens you because you're a person of hope, that strength will flow out to refresh others.

And I don't know about you but when I think about that, I think, I see that in the world around us that for all the prosperity and comfort that the world can sometimes promise people and however well they feel they're doing, when they meet a Christian who is really full of future hope, it really impacts people because there's something distinctive and attractive about a Christian who is confident about the future with God because we know when we think like that that our security and joy don't depend on anything in this world which means we could never lose them.

But there's something else very important to notice this morning about the writer of this psalm is that even while they're on the journey yearning for God and longing for God and describing it as a wilderness, they also have God with them.

So that's our third point, knowing the nearness of God. In verse 8, if you just look at that, he calls out to the same God that he longs to be with. He says, hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty.

Listen to me, God of Jacob. In fact, the whole psalm is like that. Look back at verse 1. He's calling to God, isn't he? How lovely is your dwelling place? And we've seen in verse 3, he calls him my king and my God.

[22 : 56] So that's this paradox in the psalm. He's on pilgrimage and it's not just his future hope that's strengthening him. it's also that the Lord is with him on the journey.

He is a present reality on the way. And that was true for Old Testament believers, but it's much more true for us as Christians today.

Because verse 4, blessed are those who dwell in your house, has already been fulfilled for us today. The psalmist has to travel to a temple to meet God in God's house, but we live in times where God has come to meet with us.

In John 14, when Jesus was teaching about the Holy Spirit, he said, anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them.

That is true for us today. Today, every Christian, you're on a journey home, but today, God has already moved in and made his home in you.

[24 : 07] So we wait for more and when Jesus prayed in Gethsemane in John 17, he said, Father, I want those you've given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you've given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

So we yearn for that future and when we pray Psalm 84, it directs our hearts towards our future, longing for that day when we'll finally be lost in wonder with Jesus, but our longing for God also gives us something to take hold of today in our lives.

Could you be spurred on by Psalm 84 to make time in your life for God, for what writers call communion with God? One of the first verses I was taught to memorize as a Christian was 1 Peter 3, verse 18, Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God.

And I have said it again and again to people as a verse that explains the cross. Jesus died for sinners. He died for me. He died for anyone who puts their trust in him.

In our place, the righteous for the unrighteous. But it's extraordinary, isn't it, the end of that verse. Why did he die? To bring you to God. If we say Jesus died to get you to heaven, we miss the priceless treasure that he died to give you God.

[25 : 37] Forgiveness is wonderful because it's brought you to God. Eternal life is wonderful because it's life with Jesus, a different quality of life that starts now.

Heaven will be wonderful because God will be there. So, how foolish it would be to spend all of our time urging others to put their trust in Jesus and come to God without making the time ourselves, day by day, to come to him.

The writer John Piper talks about our need to take hold of that gift in his book, God is the Gospel. He says this, Behold your God is the most gracious command and the best gift of the Gospel.

The ultimate good of the Gospel is that we would see and savour the beauty of God in the face of Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is to make much of the magnificence of Jesus.

And folks, that's hard, isn't it? Lots is set against us doing that. We live in an age where instant entertainment and gratification is on offer and one of the biggest industries is the industry of distraction.

[26 : 49] So, while we might make time to rise early in the day and spend time in prayer and with our Bibles open, our smartphone apps are competing for our attention, making us think, well, I could do a Wordle or I could tinker with my fantasy league team or I could find something to laugh at on TikTok.

but we are going to be happier and stronger and more content and more optimistic and more energised the more we make time to be with God.

Jesus has done everything that we needed so that we can have that communion with God. It's on a plate for us thanks to Jesus but we still have to take hold of it.

Don't make your experience of God in your life like the Glasgow solar eclipse the other day. You know, I've seen the pictures in the news.

There was definitely a solar eclipse, wasn't there? In Spain, it looked amazing. In the south of England, it looked amazing. The cosmic reality was there but I was in the garden looking for it.

[27:54] It just went a bit gloomy for ages, yeah? The clouds were in the way. Well, the glory of God is freely available to us in the face of Jesus Christ.

What's clouding out your view of him? What's getting in the way of you enjoying God? Could you move it out the way? Is it good things that you're enjoying too much that are a distraction?

Or is it difficulties in life? Things you're worried about that distract you? Psalm 84 urges us, behold God.

Behold your God. gasp at his wonderful glory every morning. Sigh in relief at his grace every evening. It's just a foretaste of what we're going to spend eternity doing.

And as we finish that future, we know, more even than the writer of this psalm, that future is going to be all the sweeter because when we get there, we'll know what it costs the Lord Jesus to bring us home.

[28:59] Those astronauts on Apollo 13 were helped to get home by the NASA crew at Cape Canaveral and when they came back to Earth safely, with the whole world watching them, Jim Lovell spoke and he said this of the team at NASA.

He said, of all the welcomes home that we've had, this one means the most because it was these people here who made it possible for me to be home. Well, in Revelation 7, when the Apostle John sees our future, he says, after this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

And he says, they sing praise joyfully to the Lamb because the Lamb saved them. And an angel tells him this, never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst.

The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. He will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Let's pray together. We'll have a moment of quiet to reflect on how God's been speaking to you through the psalm and then I'll lead us in the prayer that's on the sheets. Almighty God, Almighty God, you alone can mend our broken hearts and bring into good order our wayward wills and affections.

[31:00] Grant us the grace to love what you command and desire what you promise. That among the swift and varied changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are to be found in knowing you in your glory and your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you in the Holy Spirit one God now and forever.

Amen. Amen. Amen.