

Psalm 84^[a]

For the director of music. According to *gittith*.^[b] Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
LORD Almighty!
- ² My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
- ³ 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.
- ⁴ **Blessed are** those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.^[c]
- ⁵ **Blessed are** those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
- ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.^[d]
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.
- ⁸ Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.
- ⁹ Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.
- ¹⁰ 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.
- ¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.
- ¹² LORD Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Beloved of the Lord,

Last Sunday as we were driving to church, I said to Patsy, “I was glad they said to me, ‘let us go to the house of the Lord.’” That reflection led me to pick this passage for tonight. In our car ride, I was, of course, quoting Psalm 84. And as I said it to Patsy, I was both rejoicing that I could go to church but also lamenting the fact that church hasn’t been the same for the past 21 months. We’ve missed out on a lot of church life in the past two years. There are members of our church that I haven’t seen in person since things first shut down here in Edmonton. I’m glad you can join worship on line but I miss you. I miss being able to gather here with a full house, raising the roof in praise to God. I’m grateful for what we do have and the ways we’ve been able to navigate the pandemic but I still long for a return to every pew filled, no masks, no distancing, no obsessive hand sanitizing, and it’ll also be wonderful when we can serve refreshments to everyone after services again. That’s just the tip of the iceberg. I also long for the freedom to go to the hospital and visit the sick. I long for days when families grieving loved ones can have a funeral service surrounded by as many people as they want and sharing food and drink together. You all know it as well as I do. We’ve missed a lot.

In a slightly similar way, Psalm 84 tells us about an Israelite of old crying because he misses the worship of God. The writer is noted as being the sons of Korah, according to the superscript of the psalm. That means the writer is from the family of the Kohathites, who were part of the tribe of Levi which is the priestly tribe of Israel. These are the people who are responsible for worship in the Israelite community. For some reason, this writer and his clan are longing for the sweetness of corporate worship with the people of God. Something has kept these sons of Korah from the house of God.

Maybe it was sickness. Maybe it was a war of some kind. It seems possible that it is distance. For whatever reason, this person or group can’t make the trip to the place of worship. Normally enroute they would travel through the valley of Baca, which means sorrows. It might not even be a real place since there doesn’t appear to be any historical evidence of it. It could simply be a picture of their hardship—the valley of Baca/suffering. Kind of like Psalm 23 talks about the valley of the shadow of death. In any event, when the sons of Korah speak of the house of God, they are talking about the tabernacle or temple, the ark of the covenant and the holy of holies, the place of sacrifices and offerings and singing praise. What’s clear in this psalm is that this person or group simply misses gathering to worship God, regardless of the place and the furniture.

As the writer reflects on the past and as he looks to the future, his eyes and his heart rest on the Lord. By the end of the psalm, he comes to this conclusion:

Ps 84:12 O Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Think of that line in light of the longings, frustrations, disappointments and waiting of the past year again. It’s kind of like a journey through Baca in some way. Can we look back on 2021 and say, “Indeed, how blessed I am to trust in the Lord.”? Have we been able to leave our troubles in the Lord’s care? When it comes to trusting God, how do you think you’ve done? Have you trusted God in 2021 with all of it’s ups and downs and curveballs? And, likewise, are you ready to leave this year behind and enter the future trusting the Lord in 2022?

Notice that the conclusion of this writer is that any person who trusts in the Lord Almighty will experience the blessing of God on his or her life. And isn't that what we all want—to know that God's blessing rests upon us throughout our life?

The word "blessed" is the very first word in the book of Psalms. When we are happy, sad, confused, afraid or angry, when we need God's guidance in decisions or His care in our travels, we want to know that God's blessing rests on us. But basically this psalm is saying that when we are in the presence of God, we find his blessing and from there we can go on living for him in our Baca or elsewhere.

What we learn from reading Psalm 84 is that to have the blessing of God, you have to stay in touch with him. You **won't** have the blessing of trusting him if you **aren't** connecting to him and looking to him for grace and help of every kind. As I said at the outset, it's been hard for us to get together in person as a congregation so we've probably all had to work a little harder and more intentionally to stay in touch with the Lord. It's not that our Sunday worship services or other weeknight services like this one are the only way to connect with God but they are definitely important. So it's good that we've had the ability throughout the pandemic to connect with the Lord in worship, even online.

The past year has had its share of struggles once again. The various struggles of the pandemic have gone from heavy to light and back to heavy. It effects our health; even our mental health. It results in struggles in the workplace, hardships for businesses, constant juggling for our governments which have led to all kinds of restrictions, including travel that prevents us from being with loved ones. It's strained some friendships. The list goes on. Then there are other struggles including our beloved ones dying, accidents and injuries, cancer and other diseases, surgery that has been canceled, frustrations with healing, the frailties of old age and sometimes caring for the frail. We have struggles in our work, family, and community.

All of these experiences can make us feel like God is far away; they can test our faith, our ability to trust in the Lord. God never is far from us but it's hard for us to feel good about his nearness when things in our lives seem to be falling apart or we're longing for what is familiar and good.

So the psalmist delights in going to worship because when he gathers with God's people, he stays in touch with God. We would say he meets God in worship. That's why he praises God saying,

PS 84:1 How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!

*PS 84:2 My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.*

Tonight, you've chosen to come to worship either in person or online because in worship God's people come to meet with God. It feels good to keep God front and centre as we reflect on another year of his grace and anticipate the beginning of a new year in a few hours.

The Old Testament saints missed the house of God, longing and yearning for it. They missed it because sacrifices were offered at the tabernacle. God's people came to

worship to bring their sin offerings and thank offerings and prayers to God. The blood of animals was shed in the courts to atone for sins. And all of those sacrifices pointed to Jesus, the final sacrifice, given once for all for the forgiveness of sins. He's the reason we don't have to bring animal sacrifices. He is now the reason we can connect directly with God. He came at Christmas and he came to connect us with God as Immanuel, God with us.

So as we end this year, we recognize that putting our faith in Jesus, the one complete sin-sacrifice, stands us in good stead with God. We jump safely into the Father's arms and are held in his almighty and loving embrace. The sins of the year are paid in full... our anger, confusion, and doubts sanctified. Our failures in the home, church, school, work and among friends completely forgiven. We are washed clean in Jesus. No further sacrifice is needed. God's grace in Jesus allows us to finish 2021 with a clean slate and confident of the Father's love for us! Our hearts can be glad for this solid connection to God. That is a huge blessing.

Then looking back on 2021 we also find a different comfort in Psalm 84. You see, the priests took the offerings of the people and presented them to God. They prayed for the people since Christ had not yet come. The book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is our new priest—the one and only High Priest we need—who is both the sacrifice and the one who intercedes for God's people today. And this Jesus has been praying for you and me all year long. He's been interceding for us when we couldn't pray because we hurt too much or felt too defiled by sin to pray or even just too weary from all of life's pressures and trials.

No matter what you've been through, Jesus has always been going to bat for us, you might say. When we trust him—put our faith in Jesus—we can be assured that he is for us. Even when our faith is so weak because we're worn out or doubting, he is on our side. Romans 8 reminds us that if Christ is for us, no one can stand up against us. All the struggles, questions, frustrations and trials of the past year serve a holy purpose in our lives.

These things—believe it or not—have served to draw us closer to the Lord we are longing for with the writer of Psalm 84. We've heard these words from Romans 8 before, I suspect:

Rom 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

In other words, nothing in the past was senseless because of Jesus and his love for us. He's been at work in us throughout 2021. He's never missed an opportunity to draw us closer to himself. As Psalm 84:11 puts it, "no good thing does he withhold from the one whose walk is blameless" which means someone who is striving to do his will. Friends, we can move confidently into the future being comforted by our connection to Christ. When we're connected to Christ who reconciles us to God, then we are assured of God's blessing on our lives, whether life goes the way we expected or not. Psalm 84 reminds us that Jesus Christ is always close to us and that's why we can always trust him.

The other day I was looking up some info on YouTube, and I came across a 1985 interview of Johnny Cash talking to David Letterman (Feb 7, 1985). To understand the

quote I'm about to share, you need to know that Johnny Cash had gone through some serious bouts of alcohol and drug addiction. In this interview, he's reflecting on his last time in treatment at the Betty Ford Rehab Center. So when Letterman asks about how he was doing a year ago, Cash replies with this great line:

"The only person who would talk to me was the Lord.

And the only woman that would have me was Betty Ford."

This was his way of saying that no matter how bad life is—whether of our own making or not—the Lord will never forsake us. The one we long for in our heart of hearts will never fail to care for us and be with us.

So it is that the psalm writer finds comfort in trusting God's voice above all the other voices and gods in the world. That's why he longs to be back in the house of God as he stresses that in v.10:

Ps 84:10 Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere...

So, imagine! Given the choice of a one-day opportunity to be with God or a chance to take a three-year vacation to some exotic place, the psalmist says, "I'll take a day with God!" If he had to choose one or the other, he would choose God. That tells you something about the value this psalmist places on the presence of God. He has obviously learned through the ups and downs of life that nothing is worth more than being with God, hearing His voice, and trusting him. That's a true blessing.

As we reflect on some of the joys and the struggles of 2021, the good news in a world of change is that we can face the future knowing that our God is always faithful. As we leave 2021 and face the unknowns of 2022, we need to be in the same place as every other generation of Christians: close to God. We need to find our eternal security in Jesus, we need to know that he hears our every prayer and that his word is trustworthy in every way. We have to hear God's voice amid the noises and gods in our world all around us. We need to stay close to Jesus and hunger for him as the psalmist longed to be in God's house. His voice alone can speak to us of peace and lead us on a good path. We can trust him every day. That is the way of blessing.

Prayer:

Lord God Almighty, we praise you for drawing us close to yourself, for making it possible for us to come to you through gift of Jesus. We thank you, Lord Jesus, for making us right with God, ensuring we have access to the heavenly throne room, that our sins are covered in full and we have your promise that nothing can separate us from your love. In fact all things must work together for good for us. Praise be your holy and loving name.

You have guided us through another year. You have helped us through the Baca—suffering—of the year. Your grace has been sufficient once again. Your presence with us has given us strength and confidence. You have surprised us over and over with grace to endure and sometimes even shine in our struggles. Yes, shine with your power and light.

As you have been our strength in 2021 and every day before, so we look to you even more as we move forward. May our hearts yearn daily for you and be confident of your presence so that we find ourselves in that place of sweet blessing where we trust you fully.

O Lord, your love is strong and true, eternal, incomprehensible and free to us through Jesus. Be our guardian, guide and strength once again in 2022. We do not know what the future holds but we confess and confidently declare that our trust is in you, O Lord Almighty, God our Provider, God our Saviour, God our helper, God our Friend.

In Jesus we pray. Amen.