

## ***Building a Nest in God's Presence***

### Psalm 84

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When I was about 11, I attended a very large church in Dallas with several huge arches in the sanctuary, like great white ribs across the ceiling. On each one was carved a Bible verse. Like any kid in church, I spent a fair amount of time looking around during the sermon, and since this was a typical Baptist church with no pictures to look at, I suppose I looked at the ceiling. I say that because I remember distinctly the verse on the arch closest to the front of the sanctuary. It said: "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord. Psalm 122:1." I used to wonder *why*. Why was he glad? Was he glad to see his friends? Was he glad to hear music? Was he glad to dress up? I don't think it ever really occurred to me that the man in the Bible was glad because he wanted to be close to God. I don't think "enjoying God's presence" was a category I knew anything about. Psalm 122:1 had been trivialized into a verse about the importance of church attendance, when it was really a verse about the longing for God. I never thought about how much that verse was like saying "I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to grandmother's house." Why was I glad to go to my grandmother's house? It wasn't the fudge, really, or the fireplace, although those things were nice; it was really that I liked being with my grandmother, and knowing that I was in her house.

The greatest discovery of my adult life may be the discovery of delight in God himself. When we come to church, or when we worship on our own in a quiet time, it's really not about following rules or meeting requirements. It's not finally about learning more or figuring God out. It's not about what God will do for you or even about waiting for God to save somebody else. What worship is really about is enjoying God as we come into his presence. As we think of how great God is, how merciful, how faithful, as we think of all the Bible and Jesus Christ have revealed to us about God's nature, as we speak and sing of who he is, God becomes present to us. As we lift him up, our hearts are lifted up, and we enjoy the nearness of God.

Psalm 84 is sung by a pilgrim who is glad to be in God's presence. Of all the psalms about being in the temple or in Jerusalem, this has been the favorite over the centuries. We opened the service with it and sang one song based on it, but I want you to take a look at the psalm again. It is one of those psalms in which the themes of sin and forgiveness, enemies and rescue, fade to the background. The one theme is how good it is to be with God. I think we can still learn from that.

Verse 1 starts with a gasp. The pilgrim has come to the temple in Jerusalem, and he shouts, "How lovely is your dwelling place!" Actually, that makes it sound kind of archaic. The feeling is more like those old Burger King commercials: "I *love* this place!" And it isn't just the architecture that the psalmist loves. What I love is the place where you live, God. I want to be where you are.

Look at verse 2: "my soul longs to be in your courts, Lord; my soul faints from yearning. My heart and my soul—my whole being—cries out for the living God." These are the words of a lover. C. S. Lewis says about this psalm that he'd rather not talk about our love of God, though, because that makes it sound too spiritual. He'd rather call it our "appetite for God," because in this psalm it has "all the cheerfulness of a natural, even a physical desire." This longing for God is not some elevated quality that has to be learned through much study. Our longing for God is

an appetite we are created with, like the appetite for food or water or contact with human beings. We are created to be with God; that's why when we draw near to him it feels so right. His presence is our eternal destiny, so when we experience it now it resonates with something deep within us. Have you ever had the experience of trying something new—a new sport, a new hobby, a new job—and thinking *Wow, I love this, I was made for this*? That's the way you feel when you really experience God's presence: you finally know what you were made for. So when you are away from God, you yearn to get back.

Psalms 84 talks about wanting to be in a certain physical place, the temple in Jerusalem, but the point is not the geography but the joy of being in God's presence. The longing to be in the temple is a longing to go home, to the heart's true home. The psalmist is homesick. God's home is where he is most fully at home.

Verse 3 of the psalm has a word picture that has stuck with me. The psalmist comes into the temple courtyard and he sees small birds flying around. It's not a closed building but a courtyard open to the sky. The sparrow has a home there, and the swallow has built a nest—perhaps in a tree in the courtyard, perhaps in a crevice in a wall, or up next to a roof-beam. If you saw a bird's nest in the corner of *our* sanctuary, you'd be on the sexton's case. But as the psalmist watches the birds he thinks: I want to be like *them*. I want to be close to your altar all the time. I want to build me a nest in your presence. I want to raise my kids close to you. O Lord, my King, my God, I want to be as happy as those birds, living in your house all the time and always singing praises to you.

Is that what *you* want? The psalmist has given me a goal. I don't want to be someone who occasionally experiences the presence of God. I don't want to find God once a year on a pilgrimage to a retreat center. I don't want to be someone who meets God once a week for a fill-up. I want to build me a nest in the presence of God. I want to settle down here. I want to bask in his light and sunbathe in his glory. I don't want God to be a winter resort; I want God to be my home.

When we moved into the parsonage here, we inherited a washer and dryer to use. I noticed right off that the dryer took a long time to get clothes dry. But I'd never had a dryer that ran on propane, and I didn't know what was normal for this machine, so I just lived with it. After about a year and a half, I happened to mention that dryer to the trustees, and they said, "What?! It shouldn't take an hour to get your clothes dry. Something's wrong." Bob Marelli and John Sargent climbed out on the roof of the run room and began looking at the exhaust pipe from the dryer. They could tell there was all kinds of stuff blocking the flow of hot air. But as they reached down in there with a coat hanger, they pulled out a bird's nest. Some mother bird had found a safe and warm spot and gotten past the flaps on the outside of the exhaust and built a nest in that exhaust pipe of grass and sticks and eventually lint.

I learned from Google that this is not an unusual occurrence. If you go on YouTube you can find videos of people removing bird nests from dryer and bathroom vents. One guy even tells about finding a bird nest in the tail pipe of his 1956 Corvette. I can't help but contrast all of that with the swallow in Psalm 84. How many of us build our nests in the exhaust pipes of the world rather than building our nests in the presence of God? This week as I've thought about the Block Island rumor mill and all the hot air that comes out, my advice to you is: Don't build your nest in the pipe where the hot air is; build your nest in God's house.

Did you notice that there is a recipe for being happy in this psalm? It's a kind of Old Testament beatitudes. There are three verses that begin with "blessed," or in other translations "happy"—verses 4, 5, and 12. First, "Happy are those who *live* in your house, always praising you."

There is a direct connection between living in God's presence and praising God, and I believe the connection is effect-and-cause. If we always praise God, we will be in his presence. If we are in his presence, we will be happy. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how to be happy: learn to praise God. The second beatitude says "Happy are those whose strength comes from you." The strength to praise, and even the strength to make the journey to God, comes from God himself. Happy are those who know they are weak and cannot make the trip to God's presence on their own. Listen: if you think happiness is about control and power and demonstrating how strong you are, you are on a trip in the wrong direction. You will not reach God. That leads to the third beatitude: "Happy are those who trust in you." That pretty much sums it up. The way to be happy is to trust in God. Don't place your ultimate confidence in yourself, or your family, or your nation. The happy ones are the ones who trust God.

Let me ask you a question: are you happy? The psalmist forces that question on us, the guy is so happy. If the answer is no, we have to ask the further questions: are we praising God and spending time in his presence? Are we relying on God's strength? Are we trusting him?

Skip down to verse 10, where there is an outlandish claim: "A single day in your courts is better than a thousand anywhere else"(NLT). Here is the biblical answer to the age-old question: Which is more fun, going to church or going to parties? Maybe that's not fair, because the word is "better," not more fun. But would you rather be in God's house, in God's presence, or be living the good life in the homes of the wicked? The long line is outside the tents of the wicked. If you go where the long line is, you are headed to destruction. But the psalmist says it's really no contest which is better, by a thousand-to-one margin. He says "I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God than live the good life in the homes of the wicked." I'd rather be a menial worker on the outskirts of the place where God is than be in the center of the action where God is not. I'd rather be an usher at Harbor Church than live like Harry in Vegas.

What is it that makes a day in God's courts a thousand times better than a day anywhere else? His presence. Because, after all, that is what we really desire. C. S. Lewis (again) said, "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us....We are far too easily pleased." Why settle for the so-called good life in the homes of the wicked when we can have infinite joy in the presence of God?

Don't settle for less than the presence of God. Friends, I have a secret to tell you. Sometimes, when I look at your faces as we begin a worship service, I am not sure that you really believe that this is going to be a thousand times better than anywhere else. I'm not sure you believe that this is going to be better than a day at Disney World or a day at Fenway Park or a day in bed. I'm glad you're here, but are you having a good time? If you're not, in the light of this psalm, I can only think of two explanations: (1) You do not believe that God is really here, or (2) You have not learned to enjoy God's presence.

The thing is: if you don't find God's presence out there during the week, you probably won't find it here on Sunday morning. God is not just in his house. Our bodies are now the temple of the Holy Spirit. The whole created world is full of God's glory, but we find evidence of God in ourselves and in our lives. The corporate worship we share on Sunday morning is built on the foundation of individual worship during the week—what we taught the kids in VBS to call "God sightings." You may see God in a time of quiet at the beach, during meditative reading of the Bible, when you are giving thanks or praying for a friend in need. When you come here from a week of walking with God, bringing all your joys and concerns to share with this community

and with God, worship is an easy task. When you come expecting God to meet you through the scriptures and hymns and yes, even the preaching, you will probably find him.

The main thing, this psalm is telling us, is to *want* him, to desire God and take delight in his presence. As the Lord says through Jeremiah, and through Mendelssohn's Elijah, "If with all your heart ye truly seek me, you will ever surely find me." Jesus said, "Seek and you shall find." Make God's presence your heart's desire.

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;  
Nought be all else to me, save that Thou art...  
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,  
High King of heaven, my Treasure Thou art.