



This morning we're on one of those in-between Sundays. We just ended a series of messages on the life of King Solomon and we'll begin a new series next week called "Follow Jesus." I was thinking about what to preach today. Lynn and I talked about what we need to hear on a morning like this, with the end of one year and beginning of a new almost upon us. Her idea was simply, "Hope. We need hope for the New Year."

In the context of what's happened this year, that made sense to me. So this morning I'd like us to look at Psalm 84. Someone has called the book of Psalms "the soul's medicine chest" and I think that's a good description. When my soul is sick and needy I turn to the Psalms. This particular psalm describes a journey of hope. Last Sunday we learned about the Christmas journey and how the Son of God journeyed from heaven to earth, from eternity to time, from spirit to body and from light into darkness. That was **his** journey, but today we're going to talk about **our** journey.

It may be an overused metaphor to say the Christian life is a journey. This was the controlling metaphor in what's perhaps the most famous of all the books written on the Christian life—*Pilgrim's Progress*. John Bunyan's hero, aptly named Christian, was on his way to the Celestial City, and that's the classic understanding of the journey we're on. That's also the idea behind the song we all know so well, "Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come. 'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."

So the idea of life as a journey or even pilgrimage is solid as a metaphor for our life as Christ-followers in this world. But for the one who wrote this psalm it was more than a metaphor. This is a psalm about a real pilgrimage. It's set in the glory days of Israel; perhaps even when King Solomon ruled. Every year crowds would flock to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. They'd make the journey from all over Israel to the Holy City in order to worship at the Temple. Their own homes might be a long way from God's house, but they had every intention of getting there. Psalm 84 expresses the heartbeat of one unnamed pilgrim as he journeys to Jerusalem. Listen as I read his words from 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 Baka,
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 favor on your anointed one.

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.

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.

Lord Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.

This psalm can be broken down into three parts or stanzas. Each stanza has four verses and each expresses a different aspect of this journey. Verses 1–4 show this was a journey of desire. Verses 5–8 show it was a journey of surprise. Lastly, verses 9–12 show that this was a journey of contentment.

A Journey of Desire

First this was a journey of desire. The pilgrim begins by saying to God, "*How lovely is your dwelling place...*" God's dwelling place was the temple in Jerusalem. The psalmist's longing, his desire, is to be there. Look at the words he uses: "*My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out...*" Those are strong words! If you've ever been really homesick you

might begin to understand what he's feeling. He's consumed with this desire. He's even jealous of the little swallows who fly around the temple grounds, building their nests and hatching their young near the altar of sacrifice. He longs to be so close to God, in that place of both intimacy and safety. Finally, he gives the first of three blessed's in this psalm: *"Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are forever praising you."*

Certainly, the temple was a beautiful sight, but he's not longing to simply be there because it was such a fine piece of architecture; he's longing to be with God; to be in his presence, continuously praising him. He yearns *"for the living God...the Lord Almighty."* He knows him personally; he calls him *"my King and my God."* It's like two lovers who want to go out to dinner together. It doesn't matter where they go. What matters is they're together. The person you're with is far more important than the place you go. You know there's something wrong in the relationship when the place becomes more important than the person.

This psalm forces us to evaluate our own desires. Can you speak or pray these words as if they're your own? Do you long to be in his presence? Does your heart pant after him? We all know one of the sure signs we're getting sick is we lose our appetite. Things we'd normally crave don't interest us. The same thing is true in the spiritual realm. The loss of an appetite for fellowship with and worship of the living God is a sure sign of soul sickness. Why does that happen? Usually it's because we've allowed the desire for other things to satiate us.

C.S. Lewis expressed this well. He said if we stop to consider the unblushing promises that God makes to us, "It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We're halfhearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he can't imagine what's meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We're far too easily pleased."

This longing to be in the presence of God, praising and worshipping him, won't be ultimately fulfilled until we meet him face to face. There's a sense in which, try as we might, nothing this side of heaven will satisfy us fully. There's an old hymn that puts it well:

While we walk the pilgrim pathway,
clouds will overspread the sky;
but when traveling days are over,
not a shadow, not a sigh.

When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!
When we all see Jesus,
we'll sing and shout the victory!

But there's another sense in which this longing to be in God's presence is fulfilled, and that's when we gather to worship and praise him as we do this morning. The New Testament clearly tells us that we, the church, the body of Christ, are the temple of God. He's here among us. When we come together there should be something deep in our heart that resonates with the whole experience. It goes so much deeper than whether we like the music or if the sermon meets our immediate needs. Psalm 42:7 says, *"Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls..."* When we hear the people of God singing and praying that should touch us in a deep place and our heart should echo back in agreement.

A few weeks ago I visited a dear woman in our church who is 99 years old. She'd just come home from a week in the hospital due to pneumonia. We sat in her living room and talked and in the course of about 45 minutes she must have said to me at least five times, "I'm going to make it to church on Sunday. I'll be there, Mark. I'll see you there." She didn't make it that Sunday, but there was in her a deep longing to be at worship with God's people in God's house.

More often than not we're more like the guy who slept in one Sunday morning. His mom came in and woke him up. "It's time to get up. You'll be late for church." He told her he didn't want to go to church today. She asked him why not and he said, "Because I don't like that place and I'm tired of those people. Why do I have to go?" She came a little closer, saying, "Because you're 35 years old and you're the pastor!"

So let me just ask you, how is your spiritual appetite? Does your heart cry out for the living God? Does your soul yearn and even faint to be in his courts? When you daydream, is that where your mind goes? Do you envy those who can be there when you can't?

If you find yourself lacking in this, as I do myself, it might help to remember that this altar in which the birds make their nest is an altar of sacrifice. That sacrifice is the means by which we're forgiven and renewed. Guilt won't make us long for God, but love will. And we know something the psalmist didn't know. He loved us enough to place his Son on that altar!

A Journey of Surprise

So this was first a journey of desire. The second thing the psalmist describes is a journey of surprise. In verses 5–8 the word "strength" is used several times. Verse 5, *"Blessed are those whose strength is in you..."* Verse 7, *"They go from strength to strength..."* It makes sense that those on a long journey would get tired and need strength. But it's more than that. In verse 6 he talks about passing *"through the Valley of Baca."* On the way to the temple, the pilgrim would pass through this valley. Baca was a Hebrew word that meant weeping or tears. It was also used for Balsam trees that grew in the most arid places. The Valley of Baca may refer to an actual place called the Valley of Rephaim, leading up to Jerusalem from the west. It was an arid, dry place.

It wasn't a fun place. But if you wanted to make it to the temple in Jerusalem, you had to pass through it.

For us, the implication is that we'll pass through difficult and dry times on our way to meeting God; times of weeping. After this service, I'll hop in a car with my wife and son and we'll drive down to Los Angeles. We'll take Highway 5 and drive through that wonderful smelling stretch of road passing through Harris Ranch. We don't look forward to that, but we know to get to our destination we must pass through there.

But the surprise is that this of all places can become a place of blessing. Look what he says: the Valley of Baka becomes a place of springs. Not only that, the autumn rains cover it with pools. That word "pools" is a play on the Hebrew word for "blessing." So the dry and arid place, the place of weeping, becomes a place of refreshment and blessing.

Haven't you experienced this? Just look back on this past year and think about the times you've had to pass through the Valley of Baka. Dry times. Times where your faith was tried. Times you had no idea what God was up to. Times of weeping. I look back on this year in my own family and we've had both a funeral and a wedding; times of joy, but also times of weeping. Yet when I look at my own life and when I speak to other people what I realize is that we wouldn't trade those times of weeping for anything. As hard as they were, somehow God showed up and gave us strength, refreshment and blessing. We'd never have known God's faithfulness had we not walked through the Valley of Baka.

But how does that happen? How can we experience God's strengthening in these times? How can we make the Valley of Baka a place of springs? He says those who receive strength from God are those *"whose hearts are set on pilgrimage."* That's what it says. There's a direction to their life. They're moving towards God. Their heart is set. That's what allows them to *"...make it a place of springs."* This isn't easy. We're constantly battling with temptations to go this way or that. We all have a kind of disease of our own affections. Far too often, our hearts aren't set on this pilgrimage but on something else.

I think of marathon runners. I ran a marathon once but it was a long time ago. I'm not talking about marathons run by people like me that take four hours. I'm talking about the guys that run them in just over two hours. They drink a great deal of water on the way. Yet have you ever seen one of those guys really stop and drink a cup of water and maybe have a little chat? No way! They grab a cup, chug it down, throw the cup away and hardly break stride. Their purpose and direction is set. Their heart is set on pilgrimage.

When we face difficulties, when we walk through the Valley of Baka and it seems to never end, what will keep us going in the right direction? Certainly the Holy Spirit must do a work in our lives. He's the One who gives us a kind of homing instinct

for God. Yet there's something we can do. It's found in verse 5, *"Blessed are those whose strength is in you."* It's dependence. It's a walk of faith. It's God-reliance rather than self-reliance. It's out of that spirit of weakness and helplessness that the psalmist cries out in verse 8, *"Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty; listen to me, God of Jacob."*

It's the same thing the apostle Paul had to learn. Remember his thorn in the flesh? We don't know what it was, but some nagging problem of mind or body that kept Paul weak and frail and needy. Paul asked God three times to take it away but each time God said to him, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* So finally Paul said, *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Cor 12:9-11). You see, it's only those difficulties that keep us dependent, and it's only when we're dependent, looking to God in faith for those resources we don't have, that we'll really know the strength of God.

A Journey of Contentment

This brings us to the final section of this great psalm. In verses 9-12 we see this was finally a journey of contentment. It's almost as if he's reached his destination and he finds there in the presence of God every imaginable good. Have you ever had that experience where you look forward to something and it turns out to be even better than you thought? That's his experience as he cries out, *"Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere."* In essence he's saying that he wouldn't trade one day in God's presence for anything on earth. Where do you dream of going? What do you dream of doing? What's on your bucket list? An all expenses paid trip to a beautiful mountain lodge? A month in Maui? How about a whole year in Tuscany? Sounds good, doesn't it? Yet he says, "I'll just take one day in your courts above any of that.

Then he adds, *"I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked."* It's like, "I'll take the most humble position in God's house above anything the world has to offer. For some reason, when I read this my mind went to AT&T Park where the Giants play. Did you know if you can't get tickets there's a place in right field where you can watch at least part of the game for free? There are four openings in the right field wall where you can watch the game. The spots are standing room only and you can only stay there for 20 minutes at a time. It's like the psalmist is saying, "Listen, I'd rather stand and watch the Giants from that remote spot in right field than have season tickets to the Dodgers!" He'd rather be a humble doorkeeper in the house of God than a king somewhere else.

And the reason for that is what he knows about God. Why would I rather have just one day as a doorkeeper in God's house? Because ***“the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor.”*** It's like he's tasted what the Lord gives and after a meal like that nothing else satisfies. Why would I choose ground beef when I can have filet mignon? The Lord is a sun—he gives light and guides us. He's a shield—he protects us and guards us. He bestows favor and honor, or as another translation says, grace and glory. This is what we all long for. Grace is that sense of acceptance and belonging that God grants to us out of his great love; glory or honor is the outward manifestation of that grace in our lives. What more could you want?

Then there's this beautiful promise, ***“No good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.”*** Notice that he doesn't say, “Nothing does he withhold” because there are things he'll withhold from us. Instead, he says, “No good thing does he withhold.” There's a difference. Notice also this promise isn't for everyone. It's only for those whose walk is blameless. Well, count me out! Yet this isn't talking about moral perfection; none of us could qualify if that were the case. It's talking about what he says in the next line, ***“Blessed is the one who trusts in you.”*** That's what God wants. He wants his people to trust him. Throughout the Scriptures it's simple faith that pleases God and makes us blameless in his sight.

You might have noticed I skipped over verse 9. I did that on purpose. It's a verse that at first glance seems out of place. He prays, ***“Look on our shield, Oh God; look with favor on your anointed one.”*** This is really a prayer for the king. The Hebrew word for “shield” was a royal title for the king of Israel. The word for “anointed one” is the Hebrew word for Messiah. The New Testament translates this word as *Christos*. These titles, of course, not only speak of Israel's king when this was written, but they also look forward to another king—the Messiah King, Jesus. But why does he pray for the king? Why does he pray, ***“Look with favor on your anointed one”***? What does that have to do with this journey to the temple? The answer is that it's only when the king is firmly established on his throne that the pilgrims will be safe and the temple will be secure. The good news is that we as Christ-followers know without a shadow of doubt that God does indeed look with favor on our King and because of that our access to God's presence is guaranteed.

I don't think there's anything that could be more hopeful than that, do you? Because of Jesus, because of God's anointed King, because of all he's done for us, our journey is one of hope. Not a wishful thinking kind of hope, but a sure hope, a certain hope. God has planted within us a longing and desire to be with him. In this life he will take us through the Valley of Weeping and as we trust in him in those difficult times he will strengthen and refresh us. And when we get there (and we **will** get there), it will be better than we even imagined it would be.

Think for a moment about the most difficult thing you've ever had to go through, or the most painful thing that you have to live with in your life. Perhaps it is a thing that daily threatens to undo you with loneliness, confusion, and fear. Now imagine yourself standing in the presence of God, looking down from heaven on the earthly life you're about to be born into, and God says to you, “I'm going to send you into the world for 60 or 70 or 80 years. It will be hard. In fact, it will be more painful and confusing and distressing than you can now imagine. You'll have a thorn in your flesh, something that is the result of your entering a world that sin and death have broken, and you may wrestle with it all your life. But I'll be with you, watching every step you take, guiding you by my Spirit, supplying you with grace sufficient for each day. At the end of your journey, you'll see my face again, and the joy we share then will be born out of the agonies you faithfully endured by the power I gave you. No one will take that joy away from you.”

Now answer me this: Would you say yes to the journey if you had had that conversation with God? In a way, we **have** had it. God **is** the author of your story. He's watching your journey, supplying you with his strength each day. And he will bring you home to live with him and all the great company of the redeemed forever. You can keep walking the lonely road if you remember he's looking on and delights to help you persevere. You see, the joy of our destination makes our struggle now worth it.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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