The Place Where Longings are Met
Psalm 84

So, we are spending our summer in Psalms, and this morning we are going to look at Psalm 84. And at the top, your Bible will say something like: 'To the Choirmaster: According to the Gittith. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.' Now, the Sons of Korah were one of the families of worship leaders in Temple. But no one really knows what the Gittith was: maybe it was the tune it was to be sung to, or maybe it was something like Mark's guitar, only much better.

But whatever the Gittith was, the theologians reckon this was a psalm written for your average Israelite to sing as he or she made the journey, along with everyone else, from the backwoods somewhere, up to Jerusalem for one of the great festivals. And it's written from the perspective of the pilgrim just setting out, and they know where they want to get to, to Zion, to Jerusalem, and why.

But if that was all there was to this Psalm, you could dismiss it as a historical relic, a nice piece of poetry, sure, but of no real relevance to us, because we don't do pilgrimages to the temple. And yet, that is far from the case. You see, the psalmist is really clever, and he uses the outward, physical journey of pilgrimage to describe the inner journey of the heart. And he tells us how the deepest longings of the human heart are only ever going to be met in one place.

So let's look at it together.

Psalm 84

Well it's divided into three parts, three stanzas by that little word 'selah' in v4 and v8. Now, nobody really knows what 'Selah' means. One worship leader told me that he reckoned it was the word the worship leader in the temple used when one of his guitar strings broke… 'selah… ce la vie!' But it's probably a musical term for a break, for a pause in the music.

But in each of these three stanza the psalmist wants us to see how the deep longings of our hearts can be met. So three points: blessing comes from dwelling where God dwells; blessing comes through the Valley of Tears; and blessing comes through trusting God.

Blessing comes from dwelling where God dwells

Now atheists have a hard time explaining transcendence, don't they? Now, I'm going to have a hard time explaining it, but not as hard as them! Transcendence is that innate inner sense that there is something greater, something above and beyond you, something above and beyond the physical universe; it's that innate sense of mystery, of worship, of something calling out to something deeper and greater. And you might experience that in a piece of music, and as it soars it does something to you beyond what musical notes can do; or you might have felt it as you've looked at creation around you, and you feel as if you're lifted up, that what you're looking at is just an echo of something infinitely greater. And, of course, if you think there is no god, that there is nothing *transcendent*, then you have a hard time explaining *transcendence*, and what it is we all experience in moments like that!

But the first time I think I became aware of experiencing transcendence was at school. I went to school in a town called Chichester, and it has this stunningly beautiful cathedral at its centre, and at times I would go in there just to sit and be and soak it all in, and the soaring vaulted ceiling, and the arches, and the light coming through the stained glass windows, falling on the cobbled floors that had been laid a thousand years before, just did something on the inside, this sense of awe, this sense of 'other and above', this sense of transcendence.

And you might think 'yeh, that's what the Psalmist is talking about!'. Verse 1-2, 'How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints, for the courts of the Lord.' You might think it's the sanctuary, and the beauty of the temple with all its incredible artistry, and that sense of transcendence, that he's longing for.

But if that's all you think you, you're really only halfway there. Because why is he longing for the courts of God in the first place? Why is he like a man thirsty for water, who would do anything to get to the temple? Well, he loves the house because of whose house it is. He longs for the dwelling place because of who dwells there. He knows that this is where his deepest longings are going to be met, because it's there that he can meet with God. And so it's God who he's longing for, not the building. It's God who his soul is thirsty for. And he's longing for the place where God is the centre and focus of attention. He's experienced it before and he wants to experience it again. He wants to be where God is.

And this man can't stay silent about it. Verse 2: 'My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.' He can't stay quiet and refined, he just can't keep it in; as hard as he tries, he can't keep his hands in his pockets, his joy is in God and it's just got to find expression, and his whole body sings for joy.

Now, why? How do you explain that kind of irrepressible joy that might seems so alien to us? Well, did you notice what part of the temple he finally fixes on? Verse 3: 'Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of Hosts, my King and my God.' And it might seem bizarre at first that the place of sacrifice, the altars in the temple, where animals were slaughtered, should become the focal point of his vision; and yet it's there, at the altar that his sin get's dealt with. It's there, through the sacrifices, offered in his place, that the very thing that could stop him coming, his unworthiness, gets dealt with. That there, rather than being rejected and sent away, he is welcomed to come, where he can find forgiveness and cleansing from the stain of sin and can approach.

Now, of course, you and I don't have a temple building where God dwells and we don't have an altar. But in the beginning of his gospel, John tells us that in Jesus 'the Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). That rather than God dwelling in a temple, he dwelt in a man, Jesus; and his cross became the altar, where all our sin was dealt with, so that we might approach God's throne with boldness and with confidence. And the psalmist's focus is on the altars

because it's not just that God lives, but that he loves, and sacrifices himself, to welcome men and women like us to come.

You see, when you get self-insight, and know what you are really like, not the mask we all put on, but the real us in all its gory detail; and when you know what God is really like, in all his holiness and transcendence, and how incompatible those two are, and when the penny drops that in Jesus God has done everything you need to make it possible for you to come into his presence, then how can your heart not be filled with joy?

And in his time, the psalmist knew that. He knew that ultimately, those longings of the human heart, to know that we are accepted, that we are loved even as we are known, to find significance, and to know a deep inner security, are only ever satisfied by God. And knowing that, and experiencing that, his heart was filled with joy, even as he was thirsty for more.

We have some close family friends, and Jon and Carolyn have 5 kids, more or less the same age as our 4, and we kind of have a Slack/Camfield combined family song, and Jon and I have been singing it together for the last 25 years since we first sang it around his honky tonk piano in his rooms at college. And when all 13 of us get together it's not long before someone says 'can we sing 'Happy is the man' again!' and last time we sang it was in February when they were over skiing and we took over their hotel lounge with it's piano and let rip, and I won't sing it to you because that would be an excellent strategy for church shrinking, but it's really simple, and each time round you go up one key: Happy is the man who finds Jesus, happy all his days, happy is the man who finds Jesus, happy all his days, he feels a fire burning when he find Jesus, burning in his heart, he feels a fire burning when he finds Jesus, burning in his heart.

And this psalmist knew the happiness and the joy of the burning heart: the heart that burns with love and longing for God. You see, you can be like a bird, flitting around trying to find somewhere to settle, trying to find somewhere to rest, to alight, trying to find somewhere where you can find real deep inner satisfaction. Or you can be like the sparrow and the swallow, nesting at the altar of God. Because it's only God, in Jesus, who can satisfy the hunger and thirst of our hearts, and at the same time leave us gloriously longing for more. As St. Augustine said, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in thee.'

And the psalmist closes out the first stanza by saying, v4, 'Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise.' You see, real blessing, that answer to the heart's longing for love and acceptance and meaning, is found by dwelling where God dwells. The really blessed are those who stay, who linger where God is, who find in him their joy and delight. And as the psalmist says, it's enough to make the heart sing!

But what is that going to look like in our crazy 'I want it now' world? Well, if you and I are to know what this man knew, then there are no short-cuts, instead we're need to take time to dwell, to be quiet, to think, to read, to meditate, to

worship, to come into God's presence and savour what God is like. To be more like Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, dwelling where God dwells, than Martha in all her business. And maybe that's what that Selah is there for: press pause; take time out to let the truth of what God has done for you in Jesus sink in, and let that truth make your heart sing.

You see, we can live with distant longing, wishing things were different, or like the psalmist we can set our hearts on pilgrimage.

But if we do, there's no promise of an easy journey.

Blessing comes through the Valley of Tears

Verse 5: 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.' You see, the real highways of pilgrimage aren't physical roads, are they? They aren't the roads to Jerusalem, or Rome, or Canterbury. They're in the heart. And to enjoy the kind of communion with God the psalmist is talking about is a journey of the heart.

And yet, the hard truth of life is that along the way we go through stuff that results in real heart-wrenching sorrow and pain, and if we handle that stuff wrongly, it can scar and embitter our hearts, and rather than our hearts longing for God, we can grow to resent him and become angry towards him.

But listen to what the Psalmist says: Verse 6: 'As they [that's the pilgrims] go through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs.' And he's painting a picture of a dry, arid, valley, where nothing much grows. And that word Baca means 'weeping'. And it's a picture of those times in our lives when there is more weeping than joy, more sorrow than happiness. It's the place of pain, the valley of tears, when life seems barren and empty, when days are dark and hard, when relationships are strained, when work seems fruitless, when temptation is strong, when your prayers go unanswered, when you feel like you are in a wilderness, and when that joy of meeting with God seems like a million miles away.

But look what he says: those who have their hearts set upon God, 'make it a place of springs.' Their tears become the very things that enable new life to flourish. And as Mark showed us from Psalm 73, it is precisely in these hard times of life that God is fashioning something good. It's in the furnace that the silver is refined. It's in the valley of weeping that new life springs up.

But you've got to walk through the valley. You see, when you're experiencing a valley of tears time, it is so easy to lose heart. To despair of hope, to turn back on the journey and to turn away from God, and look to somewhere else to numb the pain. But the psalmist says that blessing comes by keeping on going through the valley.

But how can you do that? How can you press on when life seems so hard and fruitless, and when tears seem so plentiful? Well, the only way you can do that, the Psalmist says, is to keep looking to God for your strength. Verse 5 again,

'Blessed are those whose strength is in you' and verse 7, 'They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion.'

And blessing comes through the valley of tears by knowing and confessing to God that you just don't have the strength to do it in yourself, but that you are looking to him, in Jesus, for the daily strength you need to keep walking. Blessing comes by daily dependency on him. And as we do that, though we may not know it at first, our strength increases. You see there are ways of living, of coping with valley of tears times, that leave you feeling wasted; anxiety, worry, frustration, bitterness, resentment, over the long haul, they just deplete you of strength, they eat away at your strength. But the pilgrim's strength, the strength of the one who looks through his tears to God for strength, his strength grows.

And look how he ends this second stanza: v8, 'O Lord God of Hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, *O God of Jacob*.' Interesting isn't it, that he calls God the God of Jacob. Because Jacob knew all about the Valley of Tears. He knew all about dark nights of the soul and wrestling with God and not letting go of God until he blessed him. It's as if the psalmist is praying, God, like Jacob, I won't let go of you, not even in the valley of weeping, not even in the dry and barren place, because I know that it's from you that blessing comes even in the pain.

And then there's that little word again, 'Selah'. Pause, and reflect that even in the valley of tears, as we look to God for strength, blessing comes.

And then the psalmist is into his last stanza, and he tells us that ultimately…

Blessing comes with trusting God

Verse 10: 'For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.'

Now, if you had some money to invest, and one fund was offering you a 1000-fold better return than another, you'd rightly think, 'that can't be right, either they're crooks, or I've missed something in the small print!' But what if that return was 100% guaranteed by the highest financial authority in the land, who promised to take all the risk upon themselves, and this will pay out. You'd be a fool to put your money elsewhere, wouldn't you?

And what if instead of your money you were investing your life? Well, that's exactly what the psalmist is talking about here: I would rather spend one day in the courts of God, in the presence of Jesus, than a thousand anywhere else! Because nothing else comes close, the world can offer me nothing, no reward, that comes close to the joy of knowing God and being known by him.

In fact, he says, I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, I'd rather take the lowest position, I'd rather have to stand at the back somewhere, than take the seat of honour in the tents of wickedness. I'd rather be the janitor, the concierge, the guy who takes everyone's coats, and be in God's presence, than

dwell in the tents of wickedness, than enjoy all the lavishness of some rich, travelling merchant, which ultimately is going to count for nothing.

You see, fundamentally, for the psalmist it all comes down to a choice of where you dwell? Do you choose to dwell where God dwells, or will you dwell in the tents of the world? When your thoughts are free to run, where do they run to? Where do you turn your mind, and your heart? Where do you go for your sense of worth or significance? Is it to God, and his love to you in Jesus, or is it to any number of other things, that offer a temporary high, or, in the valley of tears, a temporary numbing of pain?

And the psalmist is clear as to his choice isn't he? He'd rather be at the back where God is, than at the front anywhere else. But how? How can he be so sure, how can he be so certain as to turn his back on all that glitters, and set his heart in pilgrimage?

Well, he tells us. Verse 11: 'For [because] the Lord God is a sun and shield.' Now it may seem odd to you to think of God as the sun. But just imagine those winter months, when the cloud is down over the lake, and its cold and grey, and you haven't seen the sun for days, and one day you've had enough, and you take a drive up into the mountains, and there comes that moment, when you break out of the cloud; and down there in the valley it's grey, but now you are in the sunlight. And you stop the car, and get out, and closing your eyes you turn your face to the sun and its as if light and life and warmth flood into you, and for a moment, everything seems right with the world. And the Psalmist says: Why do I choose God over everything else? Because he's like a sun, I've felt, I've experienced the warmth of his embrace, I've felt his light flood my soul, I've known what it is for everything to come right in his presence, and in comparison anything the world has to offer is grey.

But he's also a shield. You see, whether it's in money, or relationships, or academic output, or career advancement, we all try and find security somewhere. But true security, true protection, that ultimate sense of wellbeing is found only in God. And did you notice how the psalmist repeatedly describes God as the Lord of Hosts? The God of the Armies of Heaven. That's where true security and well being lies. Everything else the world offers is just a pale imitation of God who is a shield.

The Psalmists goes on in v11: 'The Lord bestows favour and honour. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.' All those longings of the human heart: to be known and yet still accepted, to find significance, to be loved and to love, to feel complete and whole: it's God who bestows them all. It's in him that we find both grace and glory. And he withholds nothing good. Now, that doesn't mean that he gives us everything that we think is good, because that would be a disaster! It's the promise that he won't keep from us anything that is for our eternal good. And in sending Jesus he has truly withheld nothing good from us. He has given us everything we need, to know him, to be able to come to him, to dwell where he dwells, and to find strength in the valley of tears.

Which is why the psalmist ends, v12, ‘O Lord of Hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!’ Blessed is the one who comes into your presence, blessed is the one who walks through the valley looking to you, blessed is the one who sees that you are of infinitely greater value than anything else, blessed is the one who finds in you all the longings of their heart fulfilled. Blessed is the one who knows that Jesus has done it all. Blessed is the one who trusts you.