



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Our Father's House

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ SEPTEMBER 5, 2021

Introduction to Scripture

We will spend a few minutes in the Psalms of the Old Testament today. These songs were central to the worship life of the people of God for hundreds of years, and have been invaluable aids to personal thoughts and devotions for thousands of years. This morning we will be looking at Psalm 84, one of the songs written about the experience of gathering for corporate worship.

How lovely is your dwelling place,
LORD Almighty!

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

³Even 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.

⁴Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.

⁵Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

⁶As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

⁷They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.

⁸Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.

⁹Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.

¹⁰Better 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.

¹¹For 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.

¹²LORD Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Psalm 84 (NIV)

In the classic Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*, Professor Henry Higgins takes on a big challenge in order to win a bet with a friend. He agrees to try to transform a common, uneducated girl from the slums of London into a high-society lady. And the magic he works on her is incredible. To show off his new creation, he takes Eliza to the fashionable horse race at Ascot, and there she is introduced to a rich young guy named Freddy. And Freddy falls for Eliza, big-time. He starts to hang around her, to try to court her. And one evening he sings this song:

*I have often walked down this street before,
But the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before.
All at once am I several stories high,
Knowing I'm on the street where you live.*

I suspect that most of us have certain places that have a magical appeal or magnetic draw to us, as Eliza's house had to Freddy. Even if that house looked like all the others on the block, he loved it because

she lived there. Is there a home you grew up in, a school you attended, a camp where you spent summer days, or a church where you have fond personal or family memories? We all have our special places we're drawn back to—and even if they no longer exist, they are real in our memories.

Psalm 84 describes the deep attraction of the ancient Jews to their great Temple of gathering and worship in the center of Jerusalem. But it has also been understood for centuries as having a deeper spiritual significance. We are not only drawn to a physical place to worship God, we are drawn to Him in a deep, inner way. As St. Augustine said, "O God, you have made us for yourself; and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." We are created in such a way that we need to know God and feel connected to Him and sense His unending and unconditional love for us.

Let's walk together through this psalm, and see what it meant to people so long ago and what it also tells us about our own lives and times. Beginning with verse 1 ...

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

The initial and obvious meaning of these words is that, like Freddy in *My Fair Lady*, the writer of this psalm is expressing his fondest feelings for the Great Temple of Solomon. Though the building was destroyed by the rampaging Babylonians around 600 BC, it was a spectacular place—from all accounts, one of the great architectural wonders of the ancient world. But its greatest attraction to him was because of its spiritual, emotional and personal meaning—not its architectural beauty. It was there that this man had experienced and grown in his relationship with the living God.

When he calls the house of worship God's "dwelling place," does he actually mean that God lives in a building like this one? Absolutely not. God is everywhere. He is immense, immeasurable and infinite. The entire known universe cannot contain Him. Solomon himself, the architect and builder of the Jerusalem Temple, said in 1 Kings 8,

“Can God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You. How much less this temple I have built.” But we humans are so limited, so confined and so spatially oriented. We need to have special places set aside to meet together and to worship God, even though He is equally everywhere in every corner and crevice of earth. And wherever we are when we experience God personally, that becomes for us the “dwelling place” of God.

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

Psalm 84:2

Apparently this man is removed for a time from the opportunity to worship God. We don't know why, and we don't know where he is. But he knows he's missing something important. There's a void in his life. I believe this is true for every person, if for any reason a regular time with God is being neglected or prevented. We were definitely made to function best on the fuel of knowing God, as our car engines were made to function best on a certain octane of gasoline. If you put something else in the tank, or let the tank go completely dry, it won't work right.

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.

Psalm 84:3

Apparently this writer recalls seeing a bird's nest up in the corner or under the eaves of the temple roof, and the sight has stuck with him. It reminds him of the tremendous truth that God welcomes all. No matter how insignificant or unworthy we think ourselves, He cares for us. There is a place for you and me and everyone else in God's house—not just a church or temple building, but a personal relationship. The fellowship of the Lord is not designed for “saints” but “sinners”—all of us.

Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.
Psalm 84:4

As our author is away from the place of worship, he realizes intensely how much he misses it, and how precious it is. What a common trait of human nature. We appreciate things more when we lose them or are separated from them. It can be true of the people in our lives: we may take someone for granted until they move away, and then we really miss them. It can be true of our country: many of you have had opportunities to travel extensively in other nations, and it's quite exciting and enriching to do. But inevitably we discover lots of things that are different—languages, cultures, customs, down to the smallest details. And it feels good to return to our own homeland, and our own home. It can be true of our bodies: we don't appreciate our abilities until we find ourselves without them. It can be true of our church life: we get used to the blessings we experience to the point that we take them for granted, and then when we are away from them we realize—as this author did—how much they are missed.

⁵Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

⁶As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

⁷They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.

⁸Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.

⁹Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.

Psalm 84:5-9

In this extended section the writer is describing himself on a trip. And this is a frequent theme in scripture: all of life is really a journey, a pilgrimage. We start out for a distant country—the future—and the road we travel can be filled with lots of dangers and uncer-

tainties. In verse 6 “the Valley of Baka” is described. Literally this meant “the Valley of Tears.” It was a desolate and dangerous part of the wilderness in the Middle East—not unlike the dangerous desert road through Death Valley in California. Some of us are in a “valley of tears” right now. We have lost someone we love, or have lost a job, or have lost our health, and it is very hard going. We sometimes wonder if we will even make it across to the other side of this valley.

But the reassurance this writer offers is that we are not alone in that lonely valley. It may be a desert, but God will provide occasional springs for us—ways to refresh and renew us and give us the strength to go on. The renewing “springs” of God can come from scripture, from music, from the encouraging word of a friend, from unexpected help, and from the inner peace that prayer brings. And that is how this section concludes: with a prayer to the God who really is, and who offers to travel life’s pilgrimage alongside us.

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.

Psalm 84:10

This is the author’s testimony to his own faith and his personal choice. He has looked at the options, and has made his decision of the best one for him. He is going to pursue a life of relationship to God and dedication to Him, rather than any of the other possibilities. He contrasts the glories of a sultan’s tent, with all of its wealth and grandeur, to the humble task of being a “doorkeeper in the house of God.” And he has chosen for himself the one that really matters. Nothing we do is insignificant if we do it for the Lord.

In a mansion in suburban Cleveland a number of years ago there was a little statuette. It had been used for years by the maids and cleaning staff as a doorstop. When the wealthy elderly homeowner died, the heirs hired an appraiser to come in and determine the value of the big house’s contents, before the items were auctioned and the house put on the market. As he was going through the house, the appraiser actually stumbled over the figurine. He stopped, picked it

up, and studied it carefully. Then, without a word, he rushed out of the house and drove to the Cleveland Museum of Art. He showed it to a friend on the curator's staff, and further evaluation by experts ultimately confirmed that it was a genuine Rodin, a miniature version of his famous sculpture "The Thinker," with a value of hundreds of thousands of dollars. And all those years it had been overlooked and used as a humble doorstop. No one knew its true worth. Yet it was intrinsically very precious.

When we serve our Lord and others, we sometimes are overlooked. We may feel unappreciated and insignificant. Thankfully, God never fails to see and understand what we do for Him. Our service is always rewarded and precious.

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.

¹²LORD Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.
Psalm 84:11-12

Psalm 84 ends on a note of confidence. After serving and doing our tasks—even humble ones like "doorkeeper"—God's presence and protection is reaffirmed. We receive his "favor"—a feeling that we are loved and valued. We are "blessed" when we trust in Him. To be "blessed" is the highest value and goal in scripture, the ultimate experience. Jesus taught extensively: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the pure in heart..." etc. Our Savior laid out these priorities for life in the Sermon on the Mount.

It's good for us to hear the personal witness and experience of other people—even those who lived a long time ago and in a very different part of the world. Psalm 84 is such a witness: a man from millennia ago whose words even yet remind us of what really matters in life.

This psalm was actually the favorite text of scripture of a man who reached to nearly the pinnacle of power and influence a half century

ago. His name was Alben Barkley. Students of twentieth century American history will know him. He was elected as Harry Truman's vice president in 1948. Prior to that he'd been a senator from Kentucky for 22 years, including ten years as majority leader—the Chuck Schumer or Mitch McConnell of his day. He was, by all accounts, a diplomat and a statesman, a power-broker and a king-maker, one of the most influential men in his party, his state, the nation and the world. He'd been right there, at the highest levels of decision-making of our government, during World War II and the Korean War. He routinely interacted with kings and heads of state; routinely spoke to huge cheering crowds at political conventions and strolled the halls of power in Washington. For four years he was the proverbial heart-beat away from becoming the most powerful man in the most powerful country on earth. Pretty heady stuff. Alben Barkley knew more of the glories of this world than any of us will ever experience.

But, literally, the final words he spoke, while giving a speech at Washington and Lee University on April 30, 1956, were a slight variation on Psalm 84:10—words he had memorized and repeated to himself throughout his political career: “I would rather be a servant in the House of the Lord than to sit in the seats of the mighty.” And then he dropped over of a massive heart attack and could not be revived. These final words, it was stated at his funeral, beautifully captured the man's inner humility. Barkley knew that the great power and prestige he had experienced were nothing compared to the privilege of entering the presence of Almighty God.

And that privilege is available to you and me as well—not just to the rich and the royal, the powerful and the famous. One day we'll each be able to enter into and experience the full presence of God in glory. It will be a joyful experience of worship unlike any we have experienced here on earth. Until then, we can catch a small glimpse and savor a foretaste of the full blessing of dwelling forever in “Our Father's House.” ■

