

The song of the Pilgrim

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Well, as we start this new series in this new year of Songs for a Troubled World, I want to start this morning by asking you, what do you want most in 2021? What is your longing for?

I think for all of us, we want to see the end of the coronavirus, right? That's one of our deepest wants right now that we all share. You might want to reconnect with family and friends that you haven't been able to see for a long time. You might want to go on a holiday. Maybe you haven't had a chance to go on a holiday and you want to get away and you want to recharge from all that's happened in the year past. Maybe you have even greater ambitions to get further in your job or to get a new job. Maybe to travel. Maybe once borders open up and we don't have to deal with the coronavirus like we did. Maybe you want to travel and see new places. What are your desires for 2021? What do you want? What is your heart set on right now as you look forward to the next 12 months? Well, as we turn to Psalm 84 that we're looking at this morning, we find someone happy are the people whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. And this Psalm then exposes the heart and the desires of someone whose heart is set on pilgrimage. It's talking about those who, before anything else, want to be close to God. And this writer of the Psalm is one of these people who, above all other things, he wants God and he wants to know God and he wants to be close to God.

That's his deepest desire. And with all the other things that you want in 2021, and there's probably a long list of things that you long for and want in 2021, I want to ask you this morning, where is God on that list? Where is wanting to know God more and be closer to God? Because this Psalm challenges us, especially at the beginning of a new year where we can have so many other thoughts and priorities and desires for the year ahead. It challenges us to realize that this is the thing that you need the most. Look at verse one. How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty. I long and yearn for the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh cry out for the living God. Okay, so you can see this guy is focused on drawing close to God. He actually wants to be in

God's dwelling place. That was his deepest desire. And for him at that time, that was the temple of God in Jerusalem. We saw earlier the significance of the temple, that that temple in Jerusalem, in the nation of Israel, that we read about in the Old Testament, was literally, for that time, the dwelling place of God on earth. It was the point where heaven and earth intersected.

And it was a tiny little bit of the world where people and God could be in the same place and dwell together. And people could connect with God like they did before the fall. Or not quite like they did before the fall, but in a way reminiscent of that. That's why the interior of the temple was Eden artwork all around. It was a going back to Eden, going back to the time where people knew God and could commune with him and could enjoy him. And it's also the temple was a place from where God ruled and people could access God. They could hear from him. God would reveal himself and they could praise him and they could enjoy him. And this guy who writes Psalm 84, he wanted to be there in the temple in Jerusalem more than anywhere else in the world. Verse 10, he writes, better a day in your courts than a thousand anywhere else. Back in verse 1 or verse 2, when he says, I long, I have a longing for the

[4 : 27] Lord. I yearn for the courts of the Lord. That word longing, it's an interesting one in the original language. It only appears twice in the book of Psalms. Here is the one time. And the other time, it describes a lion longing for prey, a lion hunting its prey. I don't know if you've ever watched a lion hunting prey. Sometimes you can see on YouTube videos, or maybe you've been to the Kruger or something, and you've seen how a lion hunts its prey. But one of the things that stands out for me is how focused it is on that prey and getting that prey. That's the kind of, that's what this word longing implies.

A focus, almost a tunnel vision on a particular thing. And here, this guy is focused at the exclusion of everything else in the world. He's focused on being where God is. Because he was a person who had obviously come to realize the important truth that many people don't know, that nothing good comes to us apart from God. And therefore, much better than having any of God's gifts in this world is having God himself and being near to him. And for this guy, and for all the Jews of that time, the temple in Jerusalem was the only place that you had any chance of drawing near to God in any real way. The reason is because of the sacrificial system that happened at the temple. God set up a particular sacrificial system for this temple, which could atone for sin, by which people who were sinners, fallen people could still come close to God and have some kind of communion with him.

But that could only happen where the sacrificial system of atonement was happening. And that was the temple in Jerusalem. And that's why at least once a year, Jews from all over Israel, from the furthest corners of the country would leave their homes, they would pack up, they would pack their tents and their food and everything. And they would make a very long and expensive pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. And that's what this guy in Psalm 84 is talking about. It's a pilgrimage psalm. It's talking about going to the temple. And you can see in verse 3, he's even jealous of the birds who go and nest in the roof of the temple because they can go to the temple so easily. Look what he says.

Even a sparrow finds a home and a swallow a nest for herself where she places her young near your altars, Lord Almighty, my King and my God. And so we can see the Psalm is about this guy's desire to draw close to God, which for him is to go to the temple. But we also see in the Psalm there were a few things that were necessary for him to be able to go to the temple. The first was that he needed to take this pilgrimage. So verse 5 again, happy are the people whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

So that's the first thing that needed to happen for someone to draw near to God. They needed to set their heart on the road to go to him. Literally, the verse reads, whose heart is set on the highway, whose heart is set on the road, people who are focused on the road to get nearer to God.

[7 : 57] But we also read that it wasn't an easy road. Verse 6, as they passed through the valley of Bacar, or other translations, the valley of tears. This, we don't know exactly where it was, but it was most likely an arid desert valley that the pilgrims to Jerusalem needed to pass through. But we also discover that for pilgrims who had their hearts set on getting to Jerusalem and being near God and enjoying God and praising God, they didn't mind the journey to get there no matter how long it took, and no matter how treacherous it was, or no matter how arid it was. As we read on, as they pass through the valley of Bacar, they make it a source of spring water.

Even the autumn rain will cover it with blessings. They go from strength to strength, each appearing before God in Zion. You see, because of where they knew they were going, because of what they had their heart fixed on, their destination, they had a joy that turned even their arid valley into a place of blessing and made them ever stronger the closer they got to it.

You know, when you're hiking up in the mountain, especially when it's hot, you don't get stronger the more you walk towards your destination. You get weaker and more and more tired until you get there, but it was the opposite. It's the opposite for pilgrims going to God as they get closer to Him, they get stronger and they get more joyful. That's the picture we have painted here.

But to do that, even though they had to go through this arid valley, they needed first to step out of their comforts and their home to do that. That's the whole point of a pilgrimage. It's a stepping out.

They needed a willingness to step out on this journey and take the road that God had made available to get to Him. And so does anyone who wants to be close to God in any age. They need a willingness to identify the way that God has made to get to Him and a willingness then to step out of their comfort zone and walk that path that He's made, to embark on that journey to Him. And maybe you still need to do that. Maybe you've been watching online content in 2020. You've been learning about what the Bible says, but you still need to embark on the road that God has made to get to Him. That's not the only thing they needed to do. They didn't only need to embark on the road to get to the temple in order to enjoy the presence of God. There's another thing they needed, which we see in passing later on in the psalm. They needed a king sitting in Jerusalem. Look at verse 9. Consider our shield, God. Look on the face of your anointed one. This was a prayer seemingly out of place. Just one verse in the psalm, a prayer for the king, which the psalmist called the shield of Jerusalem. But even though it's out of place, it's essential that there's a king in Jerusalem if they're going to reach the temple. Because without a king, there would be no temple and there would be no access to the place of atonement. And that's why when God established the temple in the Old Testament in Jerusalem, He also established a kingship and appointed special kings called the anointed ones, whose job it was to establish and defend the place of atonement so that people could access God. Their job was to protect and establish the temple, as we see in the reigns of David and Solomon. And that's why we see there's this prayer for the king right in the middle of the psalm of our pilgrimage, because the king, the anointed king, is vital for people to be able to access the presence of God in Jerusalem. But it's also because of that verse that the psalm is not just a psalm about Old Testament Jews thousands of years ago.

[12 : 06] It's a psalm about Jesus and Christians today. Because in the same way that those kings in the Old Testament were appointed to make the place of atonement accessible to God's people, Jesus, by being the sacrificial system Himself, by fulfilling that whole sacrificial system, when He died on the cross for sins of others, He made a place of atonement accessible not just to Jews, but to anyone who comes to Him in faith. And that's why He said these words when He was confronted with the Jews in Jerusalem. Jesus answered, destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days. Therefore the Jews said, this temple took 46 years to build and you will raise it up in three days. But He was speaking about the temple of His body. You see, Jesus, through coming to it, and through fulfilling the whole sacrificial system, He was making a new temple. Because He now, not a place in Jerusalem, but He Himself is the place of atonement and access to God for anyone.

And so He has made a new road, a new highway to get to God that people in any nation can take no matter who they are or no matter where they are. But just as we read in the Psalm that people needed to step out and take that road that God had made to Himself and set their hearts on that pilgrimage, so do we today. Even God's people whose sins were atoned for needed still to leave their homes and to take that journey and to take advantage of what God's atonement had unlocked for them, which was the ability to know God and the ability to enjoy God and draw close to God and have a relationship with God. And we can do that now because of Jesus far easier than they could back then. But it doesn't mean we do. You see, I think many Christians, especially when life is chaotic and confused, I think there are many Christians who neglect the huge benefits that Jesus came to give us and to make possible for us, which is the ability to draw close to God and to know Him and to have real communion with Him. And so we must learn to share this Psalmist's desire for the presence of God and each day afresh to set our hearts on pilgrimage, to be in God's presence, to seek God, to know Him, to long for Him. And we do that, of course, partly through the disciplines of each day, setting aside time to pray, to read God's Word, to have that two-way communication with our

Creator that Jesus has made possible, that God desires. He wants us to long for that as well. God wants communion with His people. He wants us to want that. And when we do, we see that He's done everything. He's made the road available for us to do that. We've just got to step on that road and set our hearts on that pilgrimage and make that a priority to seek God each and every day. But that's one way we do it. The main way we do it, which might come as a surprise to you, the main way we seek to be with God and to be in His presence is actually, the Bible teaches us, to be with God's people. Because God's people is the temple today that Jesus came to make. We see this, for example, in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul writes, He says,

He says later in Ephesians, He says, He says, He says, He says, And He's talking here about, He was talking to the Ephesians, the local church of believers, wherever God's people are gathered around His Word, the local church is the place that we find the presence of God in His people. Because that's where we hear from God as His Word is explained and preached. That's where we praise God together. And that's where we practically experience God's grace as we serve each other. God looks after His people through His people. And so when His people are gathered, that is the primary place that we experience God and His presence. And so as the Psalm challenges us as God's people to long for the presence of God, I need to ask you, how much do you long to be a church amongst God's people?

How much do you realize that in those relationships, not just after church on a Sunday, but in those relationships that we develop with other believers, other followers of Christ, in those relationships, you will find the presence of God as you interact with those in whom God dwells. Even though those relationships look ordinary and those people are flawed, and they are relatively ordinary people, as God's Spirit dwells in them, He ministers His grace to you through them, and to them through you. It's as God's people gather that the presence and the grace of God can be experienced more than anywhere else. And so however long this new lockdown lasts, at the end of it, I wonder if you will be longing to be with God's people again. I wonder if you will be singing with the Psalmist, I long and yearn for the courts of the Lord. And so we seek God's presence in daily communion with Him, but primarily amongst His people as they're gathered around His Word. But finally, we must realize that while God is available in a very real way to His people through Jesus Christ, our ultimate pilgrimage is still not over. We are still on the road to the ultimate temple.

[19 : 22] We still long for the day that Revelation talks about when God will be here on earth with us in all His glory and all His fullness, and the whole earth will be His temple. That's when, verse 11, He will not withhold anything good from His people. Are you setting your heart on that day, on that new creation?

Is that your deepest longing to know God and to see Him face to face and enjoy Him without the hindrance of sin? Is that the thing you look forward to the most? Because if it is, look again with me at verse 6-7 of Psalm 84.

As they pass through the valley of Bacow, the valley of tears, they make it a source of spring water. Even the autumn rain will cover it with blessing. They go from strength to strength.

And it's talking about the people whose heart is set on God and who long for God. And in the same way as when they passed through the desert valley, they actually, it became a place of blessing for them because it was on the road to God.

In the same way, whatever this year holds for you, if you have your desires right in 2021, and you long for God above all else, and you focus on Him more than the things that are making you happy or sad here, if you have your heart set on the road, you have your heart set on pilgrimage, then even the desert and arid times that you will face this year will turn out to be times of blessing because they will be the very things that strengthen you for the journey ahead and draw you closer to God Himself.

[21 : 19] Well, let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this psalm that challenges us to get our priorities right at the beginning of this year. And as we are in a troubled world, we thank you for helping us to see that even as we pass through the valley of tears, as we have our hearts set on you, you will satisfy our ultimate desires.

You will satisfy our desires with your presence even now, but ultimately in the world to come. And so, Lord, we thank you for setting our eyes again on this, on the true temple, and the way, the road that you have made available through Jesus Christ.

Help us, Lord, to set our hearts from this day forward for the rest of this year. Help us to set our hearts on pilgrimage, to set our hearts on drawing closer to you. May that be our number one priority.

And will you satisfy us with yourself this year, no matter what we go through, in Jesus' name. Amen.