

A Day in God's House Is Better Than a Thousand Elsewhere

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I recall the time spent visiting my grandparents in Minnesota. The drive was long and cramped, but it was always worth it. We got to visit with family. We got to play in acres of forest and hills. We were blessed with delicious food. We played fun games and had all kinds of good things. I'm guessing you have some sort of happy memory of visiting someone's home. This year the conditions world-wide have made it hard for many people to visit their family and loved ones. Some might make it to visit a friend or family member's home, but many will feel left out and longing to be somewhere they can't go. What about longing to be in God's house? Do you ever find yourself longing for that? Today we continue our series on the Psalms and the end times by looking at Psalm 84. We will see how the Sons of Korah viewed God's house, namely, the place of worship in Jerusalem. As we do, we'll see why God's house is a place where all his people long to be.

If you've ever longed to be somewhere maybe you can begin to identify with how one of the Sons of Korah felt as he wrote Psalm 84. The Sons of Korah served in the tabernacle and later in the temple in the Old Testament. They were commissioned in David's time to write music for worship in the temple which David planned to build. The writer of Psalm 84 is apparently not able to be there for a time. So, he writes about how he longs to be in God's house.

The writer could have longed for the outward beauty seen in God's temple. David's son, Solomon, completed the building of the temple in Jerusalem. It took years of design and had been made with tens of thousands of workers out of stone, cedar, and gold. That temple would have been a magnificent sight.

But that was not the real attraction at all. The most incredible aspect of the temple in Jerusalem was God's gracious presence with his people. He made the designation of that temple to bear his name. It was where he wanted worship in ancient Israel to be centered. The Lord indicated his presence at the dedication of the temple by filling it with his glory. God directed his people to offer up sacrifice in his temple. It was the place where he chose to provide mediation for sin. It was where his people could meet with him. The temple in Jerusalem was the center of their worship life. Daily prayers and sacrifices took place. The high priest was to offer up blood before the presence of God on the great day of atonement. Though God does not need any house to dwell in, they knew they were stepping into his presence as they approached his altar and the inner temple sanctuary. God's temple in Jerusalem was aptly called "the dwelling place of the Lord" and "God's house."

Today our worship life does not center on the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus foretold that a time would come when the location of worship would greatly spread beyond Jerusalem. In fact, he foretold that people would no longer worship the Lord in Jerusalem. Today worshippers of the Lord gather in spirit and truth all over the world in many places.

But God does instruct us to gather together in his name. So, since Jesus' time believers have designated many different centers of worship. Places like Rock of Ages have been established by believers as centers of worship. Some people like Chuck and Donna Tyrell and many others began to gather regularly for worship at various places in Payson designated as "Rock of Ages" over forty years ago. Chuck, Donna, and many others who have come and gone have fallen asleep in Christ and are no longer here. A few others remain and many others have joined. But through the passing of the years one thing has remained: God's gifts and presence. Eighteen years ago, this particular building was dedicated to the glory of God and as a place of worship of the Lord. And this place of worship has rightly been called the house of the Lord.

There may not be a display of fire here and the majestic glory of the Lord like there had been at the dedication of Solomon's temple. But Jesus has promised that wherever two or three gather in his name he is with us. God is present here. It is far more than just his omnipresence. He comes to us in a special way through his Word and Sacraments. I've heard people say, "I don't hear God speak." But he does speak here. Every week in the liturgy, the signing of hymns and Psalms, and in the reading and preaching of Scripture God speaks in his house. Each time someone is baptized here in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit God is present. He comes to us and gives us his own body and blood to eat and drink together with the bread and wine as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. This is God's house, and here we are washed, fed, and welcomed by our loving Lord.

How did the Sons of Korah feel about God's house? They longed for it and their heart and flesh cried to God to be near. *"I love your dwelling place, O LORD of Armies. My soul grows weak and even wastes away, I long for the courtyards of the LORD. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God."* It is clear that the Sons of Korah who wrote this wanted to be in the temple area and greatly missed it. They even poetically speak of how they notice the sparrow and swallow have made a nest in the temple courtyards and near the altar. They notice with envy I'm sure!

Is this how we always feel about God's dwelling place today? We do have some birds occasionally making a nest over the doors at Rock of Ages. And some little fence lizards find their way around too. They even come inside here to make a home and spend a lot of time here. Are you ever jealous of the lizards? No doubt, you love gathering in this house of worship. This house of worship is where many have been baptized, married, grown in faith, encouraged,

prayed, grieved at a loss and held to their comforting hope of the resurrection, and were buried. It is certainly an important place for many. But is it always so highly regarded that you're even jealous of the tiny lizards who live near the baptismal font and the table?

We have every reason to be envious of the birds and the lizards around God's house! The Psalm goes on to describe a three-fold blessing experienced by those who are in and near the house of God.

The first blessing noted in God's house is that it is where you find those who are praising him. The chief function of the temple in Jerusalem might have been thought to be sacrifice. But there was more than sacrifice. Praise was offered up continually. We come to praise God for all he has done. We begin by praising God for his gracious dealing with sinners. The very idea that we might be able to gather anywhere near God is reason to praise him. As sinners we can approach his throne with songs of praise on our lips. That is because he invites us to receive his gifts and his forgiveness. We too have every reason to gather for praise in his house!

The Psalm further describes how we are blessed by the Lord in his house. Why do we come to worship over and over again? We are strengthened by the Lord. With the gifts of his Word and Sacrament God strengthens us. These gifts give us strength day by day as we face guilt, temptation, hardship, and trials. The middle of this Psalm has a play on words. It speaks of believers who pass through the valley of tears and find springs of blessing through the Lord. Verse seven reminds us that as we gather in his house, we grow stronger in faith throughout our lives. This continues as we gather in his house until we see God.

That is the end goal of our gathering here. God strengthens us in faith until he calls us to our eternal home with him. This past year four people who had confessed their faith at Rock of Ages were called home. Bill McClymonds, Jim Strong, Chuck Tyrell, and Hank Brumley. They loved God's house because they were able to praise him and be strengthened by him. And they were looking forward to the promise to appear before him forever. They are now in triumphant glory and will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The same is true for each one of us. We gather here because we love to praise him and receive what the Lord graciously gives us. We don't deserve to be near him any more than the sparrow or the lizard. But he has in grace invited us into his house. *"The Lord does not withhold any good thing..."* In gracious love for us he did not withhold his only Son. He gave him up for us all. And if he would not withhold his Son, will he not also give us all good things? Will we not live with him forever in his eternal kingdom? Our bodies will be raised to be like Jesus' glorious body, and we will be in God's house forever! All of those who trust in the Lord long to be in that place! Like the Sons of Korah we always long to be in his house!

While we wait to enter that perfect place, we long for time in his house. *"Yes, one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather wait at the doorway of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked."* A wise Christian teacher once remarked, "If those who gather for worship would truly understand and believe what God is giving them, they would spend more than a hour or two each week in his house. They would desire to spend every spare moment in prayer and praise." Do we? Is there anything else we'd rather be doing? Is our time in his house sometimes less appreciated than it ought to be? If God's people knew and believed what a privilege it was to join with the sparrow and lizard, they would never skip out on any opportunity to gather in house. If God's people understood and believed that God himself was present to strengthen them each week by Word and Sacrament in worship would they ever begrudge the effort it took to get there? Would they not travel across the world in order to find such gifts and such food? If God's people saw and believed that the house of worship they met in deserved such high honor that it equals the blood of the Son of God, would they ever hold back in honor and praise to make that place filled with their very best music, offerings, and all they had to offer God in praise? *"I long for the house of God..."* Do we?

Thank God that his Anointed One, Jesus, did. He eagerly spent many long days in the temple. As the eternal Son of God he didn't need to be there to be close to God. But he needed to be there to draw us in and open the gate. He came to his temple to be our rescuer, our shield, our strength. This Psalm brings us to pray, *"Look upon our Shield, O God. Look with favor on the face of your Anointed One."* Jesus is the Anointed One. He is the one who opens the way.

We may not always be able to go to every home we want. But thanks to God we will not always long for a place where we cannot be. We are invited into God's house. We don't deserve it. We can only come before him and say "Lord, forgive me for the times I desired to dwell in the tents of the wicked rather than in repentance seeking to just be near your gate." At his table we humbly bow. We don't deserve to be here anymore than the fence lizards. But he has invited us into his presence. He does all this for us in grace. He does it all for us because we are now his family. We are invited into his home. We get to visit with the family of God. We are fed by him. We find his grace and glory as we walk with him. And we are blessed as we trust in him. *"How blessed is everyone who trusts in you."* And when we die, we will forever be with him and all his family in his house. *"How I long for your house... my King and my God!"*