

Longing for home

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[0 : 00] Let us pray together. Heavenly Father, as we come to this psalm, we pray now, Lord, that this psalm would not just remain at the head level, but indeed would penetrate to the depths of our hearts.

We pray, Lord, that the cry of the psalmist would indeed be our cry. And so, Lord, would you be remolding us today, shaping us by your powerful word, causing us to lift our eyes to you, to seek you, and to live for you, even in this unique time.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. As we sit at home, what is it that you're longing for? Perhaps you're currently unable to access your favorite Sarawak Laksa, or your store that sells your favorite roast pork, and your taste buds are just crying out for that yummy Santan, that crispy texture.

Perhaps you're longing for that time when you could just go outside and sit at a table with a friend, and then someone, called a waiter, would come and take your order for food and drink.

Perhaps you recall that time when you could just sit with your peers in the same room, and raise your hand, and ask someone, called a teacher, your questions.

[1 : 32] And they will answer it face to face, physically. Remember those times? The times when people actually had to travel to work every day?

It sure feels like a lifetime ago, doesn't it? Now that's a little bit of dry humor, but we're all longing for things just to get back to normal. But then there's the lingering question.

Will we ever get back to such a time? Will they be normal? In the same way. And that brings us to a deeper question.

One that might not have struck you. Why do we long at all? Why do we long for things to be normal or just right? What does our longings tell us about what we really need?

The Christian writer C.S. Lewis taught quite a lot about human longings and why we human beings have longings at all. He suggests if we have longings, it must be because of one of two things.

[2 : 32] Number one, it is because either we human beings like the state of longing, or number two, that longing points to the existence of something outside of us that we need.

Let me unpack that. Number one, we human beings like the state of longing. But Lewis thinks that that is simply not true at all. After all, if you're thinking about laksa, then you're longing for laksa. You don't think about laksa and then you long to long for laksa. You want the laksa, not the longing. We don't like the state of longing just for the sake of it.

And so that brings us to number two. That longing points to the existence of something outside of us that we need. Now, I'm sure I've quoted this in a sermon before somewhere, but let me just quote it again.

It's also on your outline. Here is what C.S. Lewis says in Mere Christianity. Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists.

[3 : 44] A baby feels hunger. Well, there's such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim. Well, there's such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire.

Well, there's such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

And of course, if we call ourselves Christians, that is what we believe. We believe in Eden, that the world was originally created good and perfect and just right.

We believe in the New Jerusalem, that one day the world will be good and perfect and just right. We believe that's what we were made for, that this is our destination.

And we believe that because we believe in God. And we believe that the story He has planned for humanity is one in which He is committed to the redemption and renewal of this world.

[4 : 53] this other world that Lewis talks about. But when this present world is feeling good and comfortable and peaceful, it's easy to forget that, isn't it?

It's easy to forget that our future is easy not to long for our heavenly home because our current home feels like heaven now. And of course, it's just one step from forgetting our future to forgetting God.

But COVID-19 has now become a bit of a wake-up call, drawing our attention back to the messiness and disarray of our world, helping us to see that this world is certainly not heaven right now.

And perhaps, it's reawakening some deeper longings in us, that longing for a world which is just right.

And that's where today's psalm comes in. The psalm we're looking at today isn't really about information. It doesn't present us with a list of facts and proofs and logical deductions.

[6 : 03] Rather, it's there to help set our longings in the right direction. It's there to give our relationship with God a fresh expression. It's there ultimately to provide our hearts with a reorientation.

For that might be just what we need. Many of us might have been Christians for a long time. But our relationship with God has gone a bit stale. It's static.

It's inactive. Because we've let the world crowd Him up. And so we need refreshing. We need recalibration. We need Psalm 84.

And so let's set the scene a little bit. There's a little bit of debate about when this psalm was actually written. Now it might be that it was written at a happier time in Israel's history before they were conquered and banished from their homeland.

If you look at the heading of this psalm, it says that it's written by the sons of Korah who were the temple musicians. And so perhaps they wrote it as they served joyfully in the temple.

[7 : 17] Or it might have been composed a little later when the people of God would have been in exile, ruled by their enemies, away from their homes, without the temple, without a king.

After all, Psalm 84 appears in the section of Psalms known as Book 3, where Psalms 73 all the way to 89 are collected together.

And if you were to look through this section, you would notice that it is probably the most depressing sequence of psalms in the entire book, with at least three psalms explicitly referencing the exile, and with almost no psalm written by King David, unlike Books 1 and 2.

So, see, there's no king. And so since it appears that in this particular collection, it could have been written during this time of exile. And in a sense, it doesn't matter.

I believe that it's likelier that Psalm 84 was written during the exile, but even if the psalm was written before the exile, it would have been sung by later generations.

[8 : 31] This psalm would have been sung by people whose world had turned upside down, who no longer live in a golden age, who experience loss and uncertainty and distress.

And that's where we find ourselves now. This week, I read that the United Nations Secretary General said that COVID-19 is the world's biggest challenge since World War II.

In other words, all of a sudden, that means I'm living through the biggest global crisis of my lifetime. And I won't deny that fills my heart with unease.

And since, so more than ever, we need this psalm to redirect our hearts. Now, how does it do so? Here are three ways. Firstly, to long for God.

To long for God. You know, have you ever felt homesick? Perhaps you've been an international student abroad before, like me. Or you've just been away on a business trip for a very long time.

[9 : 38] And after a while, you're getting sick of all the fish and chips and the pasta and you're dreaming of chicken rice and nasi lemak. And you want to see the familiar landmarks.

And suddenly, even Wisma Sabakas and the cat statue look like architectural and artistic masterpieces. They become lovely to you.

Well, the psalmist begins verse 1. How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty. He is homesick. And home for him is especially the temple that's his landmark. He is far away, part of a scattered people in a foreign land. But he remembers and he says, I want to be in the courts of my Lord.

The temple, of course, is a building in Jerusalem, but it is far more than a building. God is everywhere, but he's established this temple as a symbol of his earthly dwelling.

[10:43] And so it's where the psalmist longs for. Perhaps he doesn't live in Jerusalem and he will recall the track that he makes three times a year to go up to the temple to celebrate the various festivals.

1 Kings 8 verse 29 tells us that God has placed his name there where he would listen to his people. It's where God said he would meet with his people. After all, the temple is where you encounter the sacrificial system where a bull or a sheep or a goat would be sacrificed on the altar and the smell of blood and incense is everywhere.

All so that an unholy people can step into the presence of a holy God. It's where you encounter the priests who give instruction, who teach the law of God.

All so that a holy God can speak to an unholy people. It's where God wants to meet with you.

That's why there's a sacrificial system. That's why they are priests and that's why there's a temple.

And so of course it's not really about the building.

[12:00] The psalmist isn't just expressing a nostalgia for his childhood hangout place. For just like last week, the where is determined by the who.

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

And so he wants to go to the temple because it's the living God that he most wants. He yearns, he faints, his soul and his heart and his flesh all cry out.

And notice that his entire being is involved. Notice the bodily emotions involved. You know, this isn't some super spiritual thing that he's engaging in.

This is the cry of someone wanting to be home with his loved ones in body and soul. I wonder if you've ever heard of third culture kids.

[13:01] These are children who've grown up in two different worlds. So say for example, a Malaysian who spent almost his entire childhood in Japan because let's say his parents are working for the embassy there.

And so as a result, it's difficult for them to know where is home. They might speak fluent Japanese. They might be familiar with Japanese culture. But when they return to Japan as an adult, they're still treated like an outsider.

They need a work permit to work there. People still ask them where are they from and so on. But when they go back to Malaysia, although outwardly they look like a Malaysian, they don't get all the lingo, the jokes, the communication styles.

And so they don't feel at home either. And they struggle to know where is home. And for many of them, they begin to understand much more than a non-third culture kid that home is no longer so much about a place but about a sense of belonging.

They want to feel like they belong. And the psalmist is saying about God here, you are who and where I long for because where I really belong is with you.

[14:26] You caught me. You loved me. You rescued me. You sing over me. You are where I belong. And that's why the psalmist envies the birds.

The birds, in a sense. Verse 3. 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.

How fantastic it is, he marvels, that even the sparrow and the swallow can find a home in the temple courts itself. How amazing it is that they can approach the altar, the very place of sacrifice, the very sign of God's mercy, and build their nests and find rest there.

And if not even one sparrow will fall to the ground outside of the Father's care, how much more valuable is the faithful worshipper in his eye?

He knows what we need. He knows what we will eat. He knows what clothes we will wear. And so, verse 4. Blessed are those who dwell in your house.

[15:42] They are ever praising you. What a picture of longing the psalmist paints for us. And Psalm 84, as God's word to us, is stirring within our hearts a desire, a yearning, an ache, a thirst.

It is God's word to us, inviting us to make these words our words to God. You see, yes, the Christian life is based on truth.

The Christian life is based on sound doctrine. That is absolutely foundational. That is non-negotiable. The Christian life that is built on lies and false doctrine will eventually collapse because there is nothing substantially holding it up.

But the Christian life is also experiential. It's not anti-emotion. We don't just state a bare fact God is sovereign.

We allow that truth to lift us up, to reach out to God, to cry out to Him when everything around us is out of control. We want to lean on this truth when we look at the future and we feel real fear.

[16:58] And we don't just state God is merciful. No, we let that truth take root in our hearts to reassure us that He would not let us be consumed.

But that just as He preserved His people in the wilderness, in the exile, He can preserve us. The Christian life is experiential.

That's what the psalmist shows us. And to use some big words for a moment, theology leads to doxology. Now, what does that mean? Theology is made up of two words.

Theos, meaning God, and logos, meaning word. And so, theology is the word about God. It's the study of God. But the study of God can never be dispassionate because we're studying a person whom we discover is love himself, grace himself, mercy himself, power himself.

And so, it leads to doxology. that's from the word doxa, meaning glory. And so, doxology is about giving glory. It's about worship.

[18:13] The study of God leads to worship of God. Knowing God leads to glorifying him. That's what's happening to the psalmist. As he's thinking about God, it leads to him praising God.

blessed are those who dwell in your house, who can say of him, you are my king and my God. They are ever praising you.

And so, in this time of COVID-19, let's be stirred to know God more, to long for him. We might not be Jews under the old covenant like the psalmist, but we're on the same path.

In the book of Hebrews, we're told that the temple is really a copy of the heavens. It's like a blueprint telling us what our future dwelling place will look like.

And indeed, when we turn to the end of the Bible, to Revelation chapter 21 and 22, we get a description of that dwelling place, and we discover it's the world to come.

[19:26] And what does it look like? It looks like a garden city in the shape of a temple. And there's so many amazing things about it. There's nothing impure there, just like the temple.

Certainly no death causing coronaviruses. There's no suffering there. No decaying, breathless bodies. No isolation wards where people are left alone to weep.

And so we are able to cry out as we think about that future. How lovely is your dwelling place? We too want to travel to the courtyards of the new creation.

We no longer long to be in a literal temple, but we long for a world that is just right, that is normal according to God's design.

And like the psalmist, we don't just long for the place, because who stands at the center of the new creation? Revelation 21 verse 22 tells us, I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

[20:43] The living God, the risen Jesus is there, and it is Him we long for. Is this our longing? Or is our religion merely intellectual?

Is this where our gaze is fixed on? Or have our eyes only become fixed on the temporal? Does your soul yearn for the courts of the Lord? Or does it merely yearn for a cure to COVID-19 so that we can resume our lives like nothing has changed?

Where is your heart set on? For where your heart is set on, is where your feet will take you. This brings us to the second way Psalm 84 redirects our hearts, to journey with God, to journey with God.

In verses 5 to 7, the psalmist is probably recalling some of the previous pilgrimages to the temple as he makes his way down to one of the festivals. travels. But travel then isn't like travel in our days. Before COVID-19, people would complain maybe about the Aasia booking website or the crowded planes. But all that is merely inconvenient. You can still get to London from Kuching within a day.

[22:06] But back then, it would take days if not weeks to travel. And the road might not merely be inconvenient, it could be downright dangerous. And just imagine if you had young kids to bring along.

But why can they undertake this journey time after time? Because their hearts are set upon their destination. They are consciously heading towards their beloved.

Because they know where they truly belong, they want every step they take to be part of their journey home. It will not be an easy journey.

Verse 6 makes reference to a place they would pass through called the Valley of Baka. Now, no one knows where exactly this is, but it's very clearly a dry place, a desert place, a barren place with no water, filled with thirsting.

But as they go through this place, the Psalmist paints an incredible picture of transformation. Look at verses 6 and 7 with me again. As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs.

[23 : 24] The autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion. Somehow or other, as they make this journey, they are able to find blessing and create good even out of the adversity they face.

They bring sustenance, they bring refreshment, they bring provision to those around them in the valley. Indeed, notice that their own character is progressing as they make this pilgrimage. For in verse 7, they are going from strength to strength. And the psalmist, I believe, intends for this picture to be a figurative image for our own journey.

It's not hard to imagine, is it, that we are passing through our Valley of Baka right now? The healthcare system in many places are withering.

The jobs and incomes are drying up. Even our everyday rituals that we take for granted. The opportunity to gather together as family, as friends, as church.

[24 : 41] The ability to just go out on a weekend to get a haircut or hang out at the cinema. The habit of looking up how our sports team did last night. Well, they've all been taken away.

All these, whether big or small, are losses. You know, we laugh or we get angry whenever we read in the newspapers of people flouting the MCO rules to go get their newspaper or their coffee. But while we shouldn't excuse them, we can have sympathy for them. Their daily rituals, the predictability of their routines, the need orderliness of their lives, have been completely turned upside down.

and that is disorienting. That is a loss. And so our losses need to be named and grieved over. And so it's important during this time for us to sit down and name our losses no matter how small they might seem. That graduation ceremony will never have.

[25 : 49] That long hopeful reunion that will never happen. that project that will never be completed. It's important for us to acknowledge that at this step of our journey, we are passing through the valley of Bakka.

And God says, you know, we can't make our way around it. Our paths as pilgrims require us to travel through this valley. And it's also important to acknowledge that we don't know how long this will last.

It's true, isn't it, that we have no real insight what's going to happen next. We don't know how long we'll be in this valley. But here's what the psalmist now encourages us to do.

While we are in the valley, look to the future, but stay grounded in the present. Recognize the moment. Yes, name the loss, grieve over them, but also see this as an opportunity from God to bring renewal.

See it as an opportunity that God can somehow use us to bring water to dry land. See it as an opportunity that God can use us to help people realize that only he satisfies their thirst.

[27 : 10] See it as an opportunity to make clear that Jesus is the true spring of living water. We can be vessels of self introspection or we can be agents of transformation and Psalm 84 makes clear who we should be.

As they pass through the valley of Baka they make it a place of springs. How so? Perhaps through simple acts of love and self sacrifice.

Perhaps through being an oasis of peace in the midst of fear. I don't really know yet. But maybe we need to ask God to show us.

But you might be thinking I'm too weak. I can't do it. Well yes exactly. You're in the place where God wants you to be.

To even think about being an agent of transformation when we're dealing with so much anxiety so much mess even so much fear. Well it sounds impossible.

[28 : 18] To go from strength to strength seems impossible. And you are right. But notice verse 5 where we are to draw our strength from.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you. As we journey towards God, to the new creation represented by Zion here, we also journey with God.

That is the amazing truth. We are not here on our own. As our hearts are set on making this journey, this pilgrimage, God comes alongside us to give us his strength. That has always been his way. As Paul reminds us, the Lord says, And that is why Paul goes on to say, For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. For I am giving space for God to work. And that strength given is not for ourselves, but for the sake of others and for the glory of God.

[29 : 40] As Peter says in 1 Peter 4 verse 11, If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

So let Psalm 84 set our hearts on pilgrimage, especially through the valley of Baca. Let Psalm 84 redirect our hearts to that day when we will appear before God in Zion.

Let Psalm 84 bring joy as we realize that God is journeying with us, giving us his strength. And thirdly, let Psalm 84 reorient our hearts to trust in God.

To trust in God. Verse 12, Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

As this Psalm is sung in exile, as this Psalm is sung in the valley of Baca, as this Psalm is sung with longing, here is the invitation, respond with trust.

[30 : 50] Back in verse 10, the Psalmist recalls the moments when he dwelt in the presence of God, and how delightful it was. 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. He esteems the position of a lowly doorkeeper, finding there a more exalted position than the secure dwellings of the wicked.

As Spurgeon, the Baptist preacher, once noted, God's worst is better than the devil's best. For it is with God he truly belongs.

And so even the penises of the wicked bring him no joy. And then in verse 11, the psalmist makes clear why belonging to God is such a good thing.

For the Lord God is a sun and shield. The Lord bestows favour and honour. No good thing does he withhold from those whose way of life is blameless.

[32 : 02] Our God, you see, is a source of life and illumination, even in the darkness, whom the prophet Malachi says will bring healing in his wings.

He lights our paths. And he is also a source of protection, a shield. And in the Bible, the shield is not just a picture of protection, but it is sometimes a metaphor for the king.

And this king bestows favour and honour. Now what does that mean? The last line of verse 11 helps us make sense of this. It means he withholds no good thing from us.

He doesn't hold back in granting us his best. But how do we know that? Where's the proof? after all, isn't COVID-19 evidence that God doesn't give his best?

Well, did you notice that hidden away in this psalm is a little prayer in verses 8 and 9? Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty.

[33 : 10] Listen to me, God of Jacob. Look on our shield, O God. Look with favour on your anointed one. Now, it feels a little abrupt.

But you see, the psalmist knows very well that the future of his nation depends on the human king. That's who the shield and the anointed one of verse 9 refers to.

This human king needs the favour of God. And in this time of exile, where the people of God do not even have a king, how much more fervently they would have prayed.

God, bring forth your anointed one, whoever he is, and pour out your favour and blessing upon him. And so the psalmist prays and God's people pray and pray this prayer of the psalmist after him.

And even when they return after the exile to their homeland, they continue to pray. They pray and pray. And then one day, Jesus appears and he goes to be baptised by John the Baptist.

[34 : 26] And what happens there? the heavens break open and the voice says, This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.

In other words, God is declaring, This is the anointed one whom I look upon with favour. I delight in him.

And as Jesus continues his ministry, we discover another astonishing claim. He says he is the one whom God sent. He is the gift God has given us.

He is the son, S-U-N, who is the very source of life and illumination. Remember those famous words of his? I am the way, the truth, and the life.

He is the source of life and illumination. And then he dies. what a strange turn of events. But we discover why.

[35 : 32] He dies to become our shield. As the king, he enters the battle we cannot fight for ourselves, against sin, against death, and against the devil.

And to win the battle, he accepts the crown of thorns, makes the cross his throne, and allows the Lord to bestow on us favor and honor by taking our disfavor and our dishonor upon himself.

How do we know that God withholds no good thing? Well, God did not withhold his only son.

And when we trust in him, Jesus himself says, we become united to him like a branch is united to a vine. And so if the Lord favored and honored him, the Lord favors and honors you.

Through the valley of Baca, the Lord favors and honors you. Through the valley of Baca, God withholds no good thing from you.

[36 : 49] Now, that doesn't mean that he will give you instant riches or an instant change of circumstances. Jesus, the one most favored by God, wasn't rich.

His own family thought he was crazy at times. One of his closest companions ended up betraying him. And he dies like a criminal. The one man in history completely favored by God did not have it easy.

And so that tells us that the favor God grants us cannot be thought of in purely material terms. But he gives you the very best.

Because you see, God has actually given us himself. And God himself, by definition, is the best thing in the universe. Above riches, above our family, above even health.

perhaps right now, as we contemplate what is happening with COVID-19, it's hard to see where the favor of God lies.

[37 : 57] It's hard to see that he is giving us his very best as we struggle with so many things. But if he did not withhold his only son, we know that whatever he's giving now, even though we can't understand it, is for our good.

We know that he is still our son and shield, because he's already made Jesus our son and shield. And so we respond with trust. We set our hearts on him.

We seek to walk blamelessly with him, which doesn't mean that we never sin, but means that we walk faithfully with him, regularly turning back to the one who didn't sin, whose walk was completely blameless whenever we go astray.

For as we sit at home, or go out into the front lines, what are we longing for? I pray that Psalm 84 has redirected the longing of our hearts.

We long for home. We long for the new creation. We long for the world where everything will be just right. And we long, ultimately, to behold God and to worship him.

[39 : 20] To say, better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. Let theology lead to doxology. Let longing for God become worship of God.

will you pray then that Psalm 84 will become the cry of your hearts during this coronavirus age.

Let us pray. Father, as we come to you, help us to see again just how amazing you are, that you are indeed our son and shield.

You are the one who withholds no good thing from us, for you have given us the Lord Jesus to die on the cross for us. And so, Father, will you fill our hearts with longing, with yearning for you and you alone, even as we travel through the valley of Baka right now.

Help us to be steadfast pilgrims, taking each step along the way in your strength, by your grace, with the help of your Holy Spirit, so that we can navigate what lies ahead of us.

[40 : 51] Lord, we have no idea how long this will last. And we already know, Lord, that there are so many problems that we face.

For some of us, we are struggling now with financial hardship, with loss of jobs. For others of us, we're worried about our loved ones. All of us are struggling in one way or another.

And so, Lord, we pray, Lord, that even during this time, we would still be people who long for you, who fix our eyes on you, and help us to see this as an opportunity to be an agent of transformation, to make this desert place a living spring.

May your gospel continue to go out during this time so that more people will turn to you. And so, Lord, how lovely is your dwelling place.

How beautiful are your cords. We eagerly await the day where one day there will be no more suffering, no more tears, but we will be with you, enjoying you, loving you, praising you in the new

creation.

[42 : 04] All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.