

## Sermon for October 16 2005

### **Text: Psalm 84**

#### *The Discipline of Solitude*

This morning we are continuing with our sermon series for 2005 - 2006. We are using this time to think about what it means to be followers of Jesus. Our motto for the year is: "We are growing passionate disciples who are building a passionate church." Ruthy and I will be using a series of eight geometric figures, known as life shapes, to help you better understand what it means to be disciples of Jesus.

Last week I introduced the first of these shapes, the triangle. It helps us to better understand the three essential relationships and disciplines the bible teaches we are to cultivate as we grow as followers of Jesus Christ.

- Our relationship with God (Up/Solitude).
- Our relationship with each other in Christ (In/Community).
- And our relationship to the world (Out/Ministry).

Last week I spoke of each discipline in a more general way. Between now and the end of October we are going to consider each of the disciplines of Solitude, Community and Ministry separately by studying three psalms. The psalm we are using to consider the theme of solitude, our relationship with God is number 84.

#### **Introducing the Psalm:**

The theme of this wonderful psalm is the advantages that accompany one who is in touch with the living God. The psalm divides very simply into three parts which are marked off by the little word *Selah* which in Hebrew means "think of that" -- pause and think of what has just been said. In the first four verses, the psalmist is setting before us the advantages of life with God -- God at home within his people.

#### **1. God at Home within his People**

How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O Lord of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the Lord;  
my heart and flesh sing for joy  
to the living God. {Psa 84:1-2 NRSV}

What a wonderful expression that is of the excitement produced by the presence of God. Now of course when these psalmists talked about the dwelling place of God they meant the Temple, the building in Jerusalem where God's glory was manifest. In the holy of holies within the Temple was a strange and mysterious light which marked the presence of God. Into that holy place, no Israelite was permitted to enter, except the high priest, and he only once a year, and only then under the most rigorous of rituals. When the Israelites came into the Temple, though they could not physically enter the holy of holies to be in the presence of God there, there is no question but that, in their hearts and minds, as they appreciated and understood the truth pictured by their sacrifices and other things, they entered in spirit into the holy of holies. This is what the psalmist is now singing about: "O the joy of having God living in me!"

When we, as Christians, talk about the dwelling place of God, we learn from the New Testament that we are talking about our bodies. Paul says in First Corinthians 6 that our bodies are the "temples" of the Holy Spirit who lives within us. Therefore, we can read the words of this psalm and take them as an expression of the excitement that comes because of the presence of God in our bodies.

There are three things that the Psalmist sees here that mark his experience along this line.

*The first thing the Psalmist sees is an inner beauty that God creates by his presence: "How lovely is your dwelling place". He's excited about being in the presence of God. The place where God lives, the heart where God dwells, becomes a lovely place, a beautiful spot.*

The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians, prays that Christ "may make his home in your hearts by faith" {cf, Eph 3:17}, because that heart will then always be a lovely place. The character of that heart is changed. In practice that means that you will be a lot easier to get along with. You will be less prickly and difficult when God is living in you. You will become a beautiful person in the truest sense of that phrase.

The second thing is, he creates a compelling hunger. "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord." Have you ever felt this way? Have you known a deep-seated longing to have more of the glory of God, more of the sense of his presence in your life? Have you fed upon his Word and been satisfied, and yet as you went away, felt a hunger for more?

It is a strange paradox, this wonderful ability God has to satisfy us and at the same time make us hungry for more.

Then the third thing is the joyful vitality that the presence of God gives. "My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God." This is a life that is filled with vitality and purpose. Or in keeping with our motto for the year it reflects a church where "we are growing passionate disciples who are building a passionate church". You may have been a Christian for many years, but if you have not yet found this kind of vitality you haven't yet touched the possibilities and resources of a Christian life. This is not an artificial vitality. It is not something put on -- it is not a mask -- but it is the real thing. This Psalmist is struggling to set before us the reality of the excitement of God's presence.

As we grow in being attentive to God verses three and four describe the contentment that the presence of God brings:

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.

Happy are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise! Selah {Psa 84:3-4 NRSV}

He mentioned here two birds frequently found in Scripture.

### **First is a sparrow.**

Do you remember when the Lord Jesus speaking to his disciples referred to the sparrows? "Not one of them will fall to the ground without your father's will" {Matt 10:29 RSV}, he said, "you are of more value than many sparrows." {Matt 10:31 RSV}. In another place he said, "Are not five sparrows sold in the market-place for a farthing (the smallest value of money)?" {cf, Luke 12:6}. By these statements he recognized that the sparrow is a popular symbol for insignificance. Sparrows represent those who feel they are not worth anything. Now, says this psalmist, even the man or woman who feels insignificant finds in God a home, a place of warmth and security, a place where life is fulfilled. You may feel terribly useless, but when you come to God you will find through him a wonderful sense of purpose.

### **What about the swallow?**

These are swift birds and exemplify restless activity. They are used that way also in the Scriptures. The swallow represents those people who are restless, who are forever looking for something new. They settle down and try this and that but it doesn't work. They are rolling stones, restless, ever on the move. But even the swallow, says the psalmist, can find in God a home, a place to build a nest and to raise young, a place of purpose and fulfillment.

The Psalmist then goes on to address God as: "O Lord of hosts, my king and my God."

I love that phrasing. He puts together two concepts of God, which seem contradictory. It is done two times in this psalm. Here and at verse 8.

First he refers to God, "O Lord of hosts." What does that mean? Well, that means the Lord of the multitudes, Lord of the many, Lord of the great crowds, the One on whom all the creatures of earth depend for a living. One mighty in power who is able to meet the needs of thousands and thousands everywhere.

Then he adds to this, "my king and my God." That is a personal note, set in contrast to the Lord of Hosts. One of the glories of God is this wonderful fact, that he is able to do what none of us can do. He is able to give himself wholly to me as an individual. At the same time he is doing it also to you and to everyone else all over the world.

Then in the next section he sets before us a description of what happens when God is at work in our hearts.

Happy are those whose strength is in you,

in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

As they go through the valley of Baca

they make it a place of springs;

the early rain also covers it with pools.

They go from strength to strength;

the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;

give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah. {Psa 84:5-8 RSV}

Now I want to ask you something. Many of you have been Christians for a long time. When you get in difficulties or troubles or feel overwhelmed by the pressures of life, where is your strength? Have you found that your strength is in God, that he is the One who makes a difference?

It is in solitude that we discover this strength. This is where Jesus listened to God and found his strength. I would like to suggest that our lives are like a big wagon wheel with many spokes. In the middle is the hub. Often in our lives it looks like we are running around the rim trying to attend to all the responsibilities of our daily lives. But God says, "Start in the hub; live in the hub. Then you will be connected with all the spokes, and you won't have to run so fast."

May I suggest you take some time looking at the wagon wheel below and ask yourself. Where am I living my life? Am I running around the rim, frantically going from one activity to the next, feeling unconnected? Or am I learning to live life from the centre with every commitment and responsibility finding its purpose because everything is linked back to God, to the hub.

The psalmist then goes on to pray: "in whose heart are the highways..." Take out the words, "to Zion," because, they are not in the original Hebrew. What kind of people are these, with highways in their hearts? All through the Scripture you will find references to the highways, and they always refer to what people do in their lives to prepare the way for God, to give God access to all areas of their life.

We could say that the spokes are like the high ways. They connect the experience of our lives as represented by the rim, with God who is at the hub.

You remember when John the Baptist came preaching before Christ, it was said that he fulfilled the words of Isaiah 40,

The valley of Baca is the valley of weeping. This refers to the ministry that men and women who know how to make a highway for God will have in the lives of others. They will come into the place of sorrowing, of despair, of discouragement, and by their radiant faith and their cheerful outlook, turn it into a place of fountains, of refreshment, of satisfaction. They will do it by means of the Holy Spirit. The early rain is a picture of the Holy Spirit.

This beautiful, picturesque language of Scripture lends itself to exact interpretation if you understand how these symbols are used in other places. Here is a reference to the early rain and in the prophets there is also a reference to the latter rain. The early and the latter rain is a symbol of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as the prophet Joel makes clear. Pentecost was such an occasion -- pouring out of the Holy Spirit -- and that is what is referred to here. These men and women are able to turn sorrow into joy by means of the Holy Spirit who fills their lives with pools of blessing, and springs (permanent fountains) of joy.

The Psalmist points out the effect that building these "highways" has on the persons who do it, too: "They go from strength to strength." They get

better and better as they experience God's grace until, ultimately, the God of gods is seen in Zion. The manifestation of the invisible God becomes visible through the lives of people like that. When I read this psalm I feel like praying exactly what this Psalmist prays in Verse 8.

O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;

give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah. {Psa 84:8 RSV}

He asks, in effect, make me this kind of a man, just as, over a life time filled with valleys of Baca, you made Jacob that kind of man. (See his story in Genesis) Help me to learn where my strength lies and to build in my heart highways for God so that I can go through the valley of weeping and make it a place of springs and so go from strength to strength until the God of gods is seen. Is that not what you want?

Then let us give ear to this prayer as it is set forth in the closing section,

"Behold our shield, O God," or more literally, "O shield, behold!" It is God who is the shield. The writer is now addressing God and he says:

Behold our shield, O God;

look upon the face of your anointed! {Psa 84:9 NRSV}

It is a cry for a personal application of these great truths. The Palmist says, "Lord, I see your blessing and power in the lives of others and I want this. Give it to me as well!" It is perfectly right to pray that way. It is never wrong to ask God to do for you what he wants to do for you. It is right to pray, "Lord, I want to find the way into this!"

Then the Psalmist gives two reasons why he wants this kind of life, set forth by the "for's" of Verses 10-11.

For a day in thy 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. {Psa 84:10 RSV}

The first reason he wants this is because life with God is incomparably better than anything else. There is no other place to go. One day lived in fellowship with God is the equivalent of almost three years (1000 days) without him. That is worth something, is it not? This man has evidently discovered how rich God can be and remembering it he says, "If every day could be like that, what a difference there would be in my life! Lord, this is what I want. A day with you is worth a thousand elsewhere. I'd rather be a humble door keeper in your house than to have everything else without you, to live in the tents of wickedness. Life with you is incomparably better."

Second, it is inexhaustibly complete:

For the Lord God is a sun and shield;

he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the Lord withhold

from those who walk uprightly. {Psa 84:11 RSV}

If I need a sun, if I am in darkness, if I do not know where I am going and I do not know what lies ahead of me, then God can be to me a sun. He is wonderfully adaptable to my need. If I need protection, then he is a shield around me, guarding me, guiding me. Whatever I need he is. That is the good news of the gospel. I love the acrostic that is built around the name of Jesus,

J - Just

E - Exactly

S - Suits

U - Us

S - Sinners.

Is that not right? Jesus exactly suits us sinners! He is designed for us. He is a sun and a shield, and gives grace and glory. Grace is for pressures. It is his power to keep the heart at peace within. That is the inner gift. Glory is the outward expression. God gives grace in order to bring us to glory, not only finally, in heaven, but now.

God is constantly giving grace (favour) and glory (honour). He does not take us out of the pressures, but he gives us grace in the midst of them in order that he might bring us to glory (thanksgiving, joy and gladness). This is to be the repeated pattern of the Christian life.

If you are going through a time of pressure, thank God for it and ask for grace. He will give it, and you know that it will lead you on to glory. Our problem is that we are always wanting it to happen now. We want glory all the time. But God knows that is not good for us. So he gives us grace first, and then glory.

This writer sums it all up in Verse 12,

O Lord of hosts,

blessed is everyone who trusts in you! {Psa 84:12 RSV}

Happy is the man and woman who trusts God, who has learned that life lived with God has tremendous advantages. Again, this is not designed to make you excited on Sunday morning; this is for all the week. This is for the problems you are now facing. You young people, this is for you at school, to help you with the longings and yearnings of your heart. This is for you in business. You older people, retired, facing loneliness; this is for you. Blessed is the man who trusts in God. That is the secret of life the is centred in God, built on practicing His presence through the discipline of solitude.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, keep us from taking these words artificially or mechanically. Help us to know they are a testimony given to us to make us see that our lives can be rich and full. Teach us patience in this, Lord. We want richness overnight. Help us to realize that your process is to drop a seed and let it grow, to come at last to fruition. Teach us then to wait, Lord, upon you, but to know that you will bring us to a glory and a richness that is

beyond our wildest dreams, more than we can ever express. We ask in your name, Amen.