

# “In His Presence”

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Psalm 84

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Have you heard the expression “*a bad day of golfing is better than a good day at work*”? You can make the expression fit your situation. Maybe for you it’s a bad day shopping or fishing, or a bad day binge-watching Netflix in bed is better than a good day at work.

Some things in life are so good that even when they’re bad they’re good. That’s how the person who wrote Psalm 84 felt about being in the presence of God. “How lovely is your dwelling place O Lord of Hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord.” Later on in the psalm he says that *one day in God’s house is better than a 1000 days anywhere else*. One day in God’s house is better than a 1000 days at the cottage, or on a fancy Cruise Ship or a beautiful Palace or Hilton Head or anywhere else in the world you can imagine that sounds wonderful. That’s how good it is to be in God’s presence. The guy who wrote this psalm would rather hang out just outside the door of God’s house than live inside palaces where God is not present.

So where is this place? Where is the house of the Lord? Is God’s house the temple or the church? Partly.

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts. My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord.* The person who wrote that psalm was probably sitting in the temple when he wrote it. But the Psalmists feelings were deeper than just thinking that it was a beautiful building with great archways. He wasn’t a tourist. In the Old Testament, the glory of God was seen and experienced in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple. When the People of God were away from that presence, as they were during the exile, they felt separated from God.

While the glory of God was experienced in that special place, even Solomon, who built the first and most magnificent temple, knew that no building could ever fully contain God. In 1 Kings 8:27 Solomon says “*but will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!*” This is the ultimate truth: no building, no temple, no church, no religion, no matter how grand, could ever fully contain God. God is bigger than any container, but sometimes these containers help us to experience that presence. It would be a bit like trying to find a container big enough to hold all the fresh

mountain springs in Canada -- it would be impossible. But you still need a cup to hold the water so you can drink it.

The Psalmist was talking about how incredible it is to feel so close to God that you feel like you are in the same house in the actual presence of God, experiencing something of the Glory of God.

Solomon didn't need to build the temple for God to live in, and he knew that he knew that no building would ever be perfect enough. God the master architect and builder had already built his perfect temple; his favourite place to live. *If God could choose any place to live in heaven or on earth, that place would be in your heart. And when human hearts, filled with God come together in community — they form the Church —the living church.* That's what happened on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit and the glory of God filled the people of God. That's an incredible thing to behold.

In that last few months, I've had something of a revival in my faith life. I've had a new and real sense of experiencing the transforming presence of God. I want tell you about it and help you experience God a little more closely.

Earlier this winter I was struggling. Having the church move from 2 ministers to 1 was an overwhelming change, one that I was having difficulty wrapping my head around and navigating. In the New Year I had a sense that it was time to get back to a dedicated devotional time. I have been faithful in my devotions for years and years, but somehow they had become more hit and miss in the fall and early winter as the hockey season got into full swing. (I have two kids in hockey!) And I seemed to come down with every cold that floated my way. I'm a morning person, but you wouldn't have known it last winter.

In AA they have an expression: "Sick and tired of being sick and tired." When you are sick and tired of being sick and tired, you are ready to make a change. I knew something had to give. Something had to change. Sometimes these times of desperation, these times of hitting bottom, can be a gift. Those in Recovery know that.

What change did I take? Strangely, I felt called to get up earlier. I felt called to start getting up at 5:45 a.m. to do a proper devotional before the house wakes up at 6:30 and the mad scramble to catch the 7:16 school bus begins.

I have no doubt that the idea of getting up at 5:45 was from the Holy Spirit because, well, that certainly wouldn't be my idea of a good time! (lol) Also it was so specific and so concrete and, all things considered, a small step. That's how the Holy Spirit tends to guide us. The Spirit doesn't say

‘Get your act together, you lazy slob!’ The Spirit gives small concrete steps. A little later I was encouraged to take another small step of joining a mentoring group with Pastors from across the country.

Who deserves to be in God’s presence? I love in Psalm 84 the verse that goes “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.” I’m no Ornithologist, but I can tell you what you already know, that sparrows and swallows are incredibly ordinary birds --they are a dime a dozen. But even they have a place in God’s presence. If a sparrow has a place to find shelter and security and peace in God’s presence, how much more do you who were made in the image of God?

If you would like to experience God’s presence more, I would suggest that you pray about it. Say something like; “God I want to be in your presence -- what specific step should I take?” Ask, and then listen for picture and thought or a word. Listen for one small step. A 5:45 a.m. devotion time works for me, but it might not work for you -- 5:00 a.m. might be better for you 😊! You might get a picture of sitting near the river, or going for a walk or journaling or joining the Tuesday morning Christian Meditation group. If you don’t get any pictures, words or thoughts when you pray about it, I would recommend that you simply take time every day to read a little bit of the Bible. The devotional *The Word for You Today* is a great way to start. So ask God; listen and then commit to it. Entering into the presence of God does take effort on our part. Don’t wait until you ‘feel’ like it, commit to practicing that ‘constant contact’.

It has made a huge difference in my life. I read from the Bible in a little ‘Alpha, Bible In One Year’ app on my phone. I sometimes read Richard Rohr’s Daily devotional and then I journal, I talk to God and I listen for what the Lord has to say to me. I have learned that entering into God’s presence makes all the difference in the world, and there is no place I’d rather be.

What will that do for you? Verse 5 of the Psalm says “*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 of it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength.*” Being in God’s presence gives you strength. The exact meaning of the line “As they go through the valley of Baca they make of it a place of springs” is uncertain in the original Hebrew, but it is clear that whatever or wherever that valley of Baca is, it is a rough and difficult place—likely dry and barren—a valley that is hard and tiring to get through.

I heard on the radio a story about the Marathon event of the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis. Of the 32 who ran in the race, only 14 managed to complete it! The conditions of the race were really beyond imagination. They started the race at 3 p.m. in the heat of the afternoon with the temperature well above 30 degrees Celsius. The course was a dry dirt road where vehicles were constantly driving by and kicking up clouds of dust. For the 40-mile race, only two water stations were set up, at the 6-mile mark and 12-mile mark -- and that's only a little over the quarter of the way! To top it off, they were deliberately running an experiment to see what effects prolonged dehydration had on the body.

In the race were all sorts of strange characters, including a number of Greek contestants who had never run a marathon before. There was a Cuban named Andarin Carvajal.

He hitchhiked to the games after losing all his money playing cards.



He came dressed in street clothes, heavy pants and big ordinary shoes to run in. Someone took pity on him and cut off his pants at the knees. But overall he was probably one of the smarter ones as he stopped along the way to talk to people and to eat apples from an orchard -- and he even took a nap! He finished 4<sup>th</sup>.

He was more fortunate than the guy who ran a mile off course because he was chased by a pack of wild dogs. The one who crossed the finish line first got a ride in a car for a good chunk of the race and was waving to people and runners from the car as he drove along. Just before they laid the gold medal on him someone protested that he didn't run the whole race.

The second across the finish line and the one who actually won gold was an American, Thomas Hicks. His trainers had to keep him going and keep him from lying down —they did so by refusing to give him water (remember the experiment) —but instead they gave him several doses of strychnine sulfate (a common rat poison, which stimulates the nervous system in small doses) mixed with brandy. He continued to battle onwards, hallucinating, barely able to walk for most of the course.



When he reached the stadium his support team carried him over the line, holding him in the air while he shuffled his feet as if still running. The

judges decided this was acceptable, and gave him the gold medal. He never ran professionally again.

That was truly one of the most difficult and bizarre Olympic events in history. It's truly amazing what people will put themselves through for a medal. The one grace note for the winner? -- this was one of the only Olympics where the medals were made of solid gold, silver and bronze!

Even more than a solid gold medal, being in the presence of God is worth any price. It's worth any price because that very presence helps us to endure and win the race of life. This life is not easy. I know so many people who are struggling with heartbreaking challenges. You have your own and you are connected to people who are carrying such heavy burdens.

It took some effort for me to connect to God, but in these past few months, instead of being tossed about by the wind and the waves and distracted by so many things, I've been able to sit still and experience God's presence. I have had more constant contact, and more peace. Instead of dragging my feet, I have felt the living presence of God. *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.* (Isaiah 40:31)

There's no place I'd rather be. I wish for you what I have experienced and what the Psalmist knew well: *Better is one day in Your house than thousands elsewhere.*

May the peace of God be with you. Amen