

God's Dwelling Place
Psalm 84

After just a few weeks of social distancing, I'm sure at least some of us share the sort of longing expressed in this Psalm, the desire the sons of Korah had to go to the Temple. After all, they were the Levites in charge of the music that was performed during worship. And as we've all discovered, even the best speakers on your computer just can't match hearing and singing along with a pipe organ or piano in person. No, the authors of this song wanted to sing it in the only place they could be sure God was present – in the Tabernacle or the Temple described in the Law of Moses.

Now, we know it is no longer necessary to travel to any one spot to worship God – after all, last week, we had folks joining in by Facebook livestream not only from all over Claiborne and Warren counties, but even from as far away as Georgia and North Carolina and Michigan. Yes, today we are proof positive that what Peter said in our responsive reading is true – that all those who love and trust the Lord Jesus, that people from every race and every place are living stones, joining together to make up the true Temple of God.

Moreover, we know it is no longer necessary to bring sacrifices to an altar in order to be forgiven of our sins. Because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, all those who trust in Him have become part of a royal priesthood, free to offer up our prayers and our praise from wherever we are.

But that doesn't mean we living stones don't long to assemble ourselves regularly, to gather in worship and service to demonstrate the reality of the Christ Who is so precious to us. No, just like those sons of Korah, especially in this time of social distancing, we long to be with other believers, to come together as one in the true Temple of God.

So, why do we have this longing? What is it that corporate worship does for us? And how can we enjoy our connections even during this time when we have to be physically separated?

Well, the fact is that even in the best of times, none of the sons of Korah were allowed to go into the Temple either. Only the priests could go in – so they, along with the rest of the Levites who made up the Temple's support staff, were only allowed to work in the courtyards surrounding the Temple while the great drama of sacrifice and atonement was played out before them.

But the Holy of Holies, the place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, the place where God was symbolically present among His people was even more exclusive. It was off limits to everyone except the High Priest. And he could only go in once a year, and only if he carried the blood of a sacrifice with him, and only after he first filled the whole room with so much smoke that he couldn't see anything inside anyway.

And so we see why verse 10 is written the way it is: just like most of the Old Testament worshippers, the sons of Korah could only go as far as the courts, the courtyards surrounding the Temple. They could go up to the door of God's house, they could stand by the threshold, but they couldn't go in. The birds mentioned in verse 3 could get a whole lot closer to God than they could.

And why not? Well, their problem wasn't a physical virus that made it dangerous for them to congregate. No, theirs was a spiritual problem. For they understood that it was only the animal sacrifices that were constantly being made in the Temple, only the blood and death that they saw and

heard and smelled all around them that enabled them to approach God in all His holiness and purity. And that's because of the sin that resides within all human hearts, past and present.

And that's one of the big things that coming together as the people of God should do for us – it should remind us of our great need for Christ. For let's face it – as we go through our normal week, it's easy for us to start thinking more of ourselves than we should. It's easy for us to imagine that because we get a lot of our tasks accomplished that we are somehow in charge of our lives. It's easy for us to compare ourselves favorably to the people we see around us, considering ourselves to be more hardworking or more self-disciplined than they are. Or perhaps we give ourselves over to envy, coveting others' possessions, or resenting those around us for the health and happiness they seem to have. In short, a worldly perspective all too often leaves us either proud or depressed.

But when we come together as the people of God, all those delusions vanish, don't they? For as we gather around the Word of God, as we allow it to become the true rule of our faith and practice, as we read its law of perfect love for God and for other people, it's hard to go on imagining that we deserve anything more than those animals received on that Old Testament altar. And as we are honest with our Christian brothers and sisters, we can hold one another accountable, puncturing each others' illusions and shining the light of God's truth and love into the darkest places of each of our hearts.

That's why Peter urged us in our responsive reading to long for the pure milk of the Word of God, which alone can help us grow into the likeness of Christ. And that's one reason why the sons of Korah were so eager to stand in the courtyards of the Temple – to be reminded of their need for a sacrifice to pay for their sins.

So, how can we preserve this perspective when we can't come to worship every week? One way is to do what many of us are doing this morning – to engage with the online resources that are available to us. Whether you are participating at this very hour or whether you have to tune in later, you can allow the Word of God to comfort you and challenge you even when you have to stay home. And you don't have to wait for Sundays to come along – both on Facebook and on the First Port Gibson website you can find daily readings that will carry you through the Bible in a year, along with a daily devotional based on those readings.

And as you read the Scriptures, either alone or with your family, allow them to sink in, to convict you, to point out any areas of your life that need to come into greater conformity with God's Word. And then go to the Lord in prayer, confessing those things and turning away from them. Allow God's Word to do for you what the altar in the Temple did for the Sons of Korah – to draw you closer to Your Savior.

But the Sons of Korah didn't just dwell on their sin – they also looked forward to the ultimate solution God has provided for it, not the animal sacrifices made on the altar, but the perfect sacrifice of the Messiah. Notice that in verse 9, they appeal to God to look on their shield, the face of God's anointed. And we still offer the same prayer today. We plead that the blood of Christ, God's anointed, would shield us from the consequences our sins deserve. We rely on God's anointed Messiah to forgive us and to cleanse us and to make us worthy to come, not only up to the threshold of God's house, but all the way inside. We depend on the Spirit of Christ to fill us and thus to make us truly part of the Temple of God, the place where God now dwells on the Earth.

And that brings us to the next great thing that we do in corporate worship – for if worship convicts us of our sin, it also allows us to praise God for providing us a Savior. For when we stand shoulder to shoulder with fellow Christians, when we confess our common faith that we can only be saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, it’s hard to go on believing that we are no more than a rabble of unworthy sinners. No, when we gather, we remind one another of how blessed we are – that God has chosen us to be His own people, that God has called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light, that God has formed us into one Body, that God has built all of us into one great Temple in which He lives among and within us.

But can we praise God even when we can’t come together for corporate worship? Sure we can. I mean, what do you do when you find a new restaurant you like or when you buy a new product that you really enjoy? Or what do you do when you’re watching a game on TV and your team makes a spectacular play? You tell other people, but it doesn’t have to be in person. You can pick up the phone or send a text or email or use social media. “Did you see that? You gotta see this! You gotta try this!”

In the same way, however we get in touch with one another these days, instead of sharing our fear and dread and anxiety, why don’t we talk about the great things God has done for us? Why not share the blessings God has brought our way? Why not express our confidence in Him? As the Sons of Korah put it in verse 4, those who are dwelling in God’s house are always praising Him. Just so, since Peter reminds us that we are in fact living stones making up the Temple in which God dwells, since God lives within us in the Person of His Holy Spirit, and since He has made us a royal priesthood and a holy nation, shouldn’t our lips be constantly filled with God’s praise? And shouldn’t we expect both the convicting power of God’s Word and the uplifting power of God’s praise to transform our lives all week long?

But there was one more thing that corporate worship did for the Sons of Korah, indeed for all who travelled to and from the Temple. For Verse 6 recognizes that Sunday mornings are not always full of sunshine and roses – sometimes we have to travel through the Valley of Baca to get to God. Baca may refer to a place where balsam trees grow – a dry place. We all know what it’s like to go through times of spiritual dryness, when God seems far away from us. The word Baca may also mean the valley of weeping, and we all know what it’s like to go through times of grief and mourning. We know what it’s like to worship even when our heart’s not in it, even when we are stressed out, weighed down by fear or dread or grief. Maybe that’s where some of you are this morning.

But what happens when God’s people go through the Valley of Baca, the times of dryness or grief? Verse 7 says that those whose hearts are set on God will go from strength to strength. Verse 5 reminds us that when we are at the end of our rope, we can always find our strength in God, the One Who not only forgives us of our sins but Who holds us close to Him even when we don’t feel His presence, the One Who loves us even in our times of greatest grief. The good news is that no matter what is happening in our lives, we can always draw strength from the Almighty God Who loved us enough to die for us.

And don’t we receive all these blessings in a special way in corporate worship? How many times has the faith of others encouraged us when God seems to be so distant? How many times has just being with fellow believers helped us, even in our times of deepest grief and sorrow? No, it’s no wonder that we miss being around other believers, especially in times like these.

But did you notice what the Sons of Korah said in verse 6? They said that when God's people gather and head on their way to the Temple, they not only overcome the circumstances of their lives – they somehow transform the world around them. As we worshippers pass through the places of dryness and grief we make it a well, a spring of water. Somehow our prayers bring the rains from God that fill the dry places, that refresh the souls of those who grieve.

And that's the good news for all of us today. Even if we can't all gather for corporate worship, those of us who have experienced God's love and who have access to God's strength, those who by faith in Christ have the Holy Spirit living within us still have the opportunity to share His light, His love and His truth with whoever is near to us. Those who are having to spend a lot more time with family than usual can show kindness and consideration to one another, especially when we're all getting a little stir-crazy. Those whose connections are purely electronic can still send messages of encouragement and express concern. We can help each other out however we can. And we can all pray for one another no matter where we are.

So, who knows? Even though we can't gather as the Temple of God right now, as we spend more time in God's Word and prayer, confessing and repenting of our sin, as we spend more time in praise and less time stressing out over our problems, and as we not only talk of God's love but live it out in our lives, carrying the blessings of the Temple to those around us, don't be surprised if some of those dry places start to get a few showers. Don't be surprised if God starts to wash away some of those tears.

Yes, as the ending of this psalm makes clear, our God is a sun and shield for us wherever we are, giving us grace and glory as we stay close to Him and walk in His ways. So if we want to be sure of God's blessings for ourselves and our loved ones, let's put our trust in Him, even today.