

August 13, 2017

Yearning for God

Psalm 84

"My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh call out for the living God" pines the writer of Psalm 84 (v.2).

1. Loving God Long Distance (Psalm 84:1-4)

Sometimes we don't **feel** very close to God. We look at other people and they seem to have something we don't have. They seem to have found some deeper spiritual secret that we haven't discovered. We long for that! The Psalmist expresses similar feelings of yearning: "*Even the sparrow finds a home close to you! The swallow builds her nest and raises her young in a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God! How happy are those who live in your presence, always singing your praises*" (Psalm 84:3-4).

It's not fair is it? Others seem to have such a close, intimate relationship with God ... the kind of close, intimate relationship with God we want. Why not us?

In our relationships with God, some of us begin with a dramatic mountaintop experience. Like Paul we have a once-in-a-lifetime totally life-changing experience. We can look back and say, "That was when I met Jesus." We yearn for that moment again. But the problem is, we don't live our lives on a mountaintop. Eventually we have to come down and live in the everyday world of mortgages, work, family, health problems, relationships ... how do we find God in our present lives?

Some of us cannot look back and find that specific moment when we encountered Jesus. Perhaps we have always known Jesus ... or the process of meeting Him just sort of happened ... there was no lightning bolt from Heaven. But we look at other people who seem so excited about Jesus and wonder, "What's wrong with me?" We ask, "What is a relationship with Jesus supposed to look like?" Are we missing something?

We want the quick fix! We want to snap our fingers and have this wonderful, intimate relationship with God! But we snap ... and nothing!

2. Drawing Closer to His Light (Psalm 84:5-9)

How do we draw closer to God? The answer comes as we read on: "*Blessed are those who strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage ...*" (Psalm 84:5 NIV). The image in this psalm is that the Lord is present in the temple in Jerusalem. So, in order to draw closer to the Lord, you have to go on a pilgrimage to the temple. The pilgrimage is a difficult one – you go over some hills and through some valleys ... among them the "*Valley of Baca*" (literally either "*The Valley of Drought*" or "*The Valley of*

Weeping). In Psalm 23, David talks about going through a similar bleak place, "*The Valley of the Shadow of Death*." The pilgrimage is not always pleasant! Notice what happens, however, in the grim Valley of Baca (whether that be a valley of drought or of weeping): as the pilgrim passes through, it becomes "... *a place of refreshing springs, where the pools of blessing collect after the rain*." (Psalm 84:6 NLT). And what of the pilgrims? "*They will continue to grow stronger, and each of them will appear before the God in Jerusalem*" (Psalm 84:7 NLT).

Do you want to know the secret of drawing closer to God? Here it is ... "*Blessed are those who have set their hearts on pilgrimage ...*"

Our lives with God are well described as a pilgrimage. We begin our journeys in different places – for some us the starting point is a mountaintop, for some of us the beginning is our parents' knee – but for all of us, our relationship with God is a journey. It has ups. It has downs. We go up hills where feel tremendous exhilaration. And we find ourselves in the Valley of Drought. Or the Valley of Weeping. Or the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Philip Yancey (one of my favourite authors) has a new book entitled, *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church*. It's a story of pilgrimage ... how he has drawn closer and closer to God over his 52 years, on a journey during which, he admits, "I had to overcome the church to come to God." In it he describes how various writers and thinkers, from G.K. Chesterton to C.S Lewis to Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa have helped him draw closer and closer to God. One of the things Yancey emphasizes is the idea of pilgrimage. That drawing closer to God *is* a journey. Yancey grew up in an oppressive, fundamentalist church which condoned racism, discouraged critical thinking, and preached a "smothering legalism." Of that environment and his journey out of it (with the help of the writings of G.K. Chesterton), he writes,

"I see now what I could not see then, that I was erecting a strong stone fortress against love, for I thought myself unlovable. In the most unlikely place, the Bible college I viewed as a kind of asylum, that inner fortress began to crumble. I found solace not in religion, where everyone around me claimed to find it, but in music. Late at night I would steal out of the dormitory and make my way to the chapel and its nine-foot Steinway grand. I never performed in public, but I could passably sight-read Mozart, Chopin, Beethoven, and Schubert, and that is how I spent many evenings, pressing some order into my disordered world. I was creating something, and in spite of myself it seemed beautiful as it echoed through the dark and empty chapel.

"Then I fell in love. Janet and I drew together for all the wrong reasons—mainly we sat around and complained about the oppressive atmosphere of the school—but eventually the most powerful force in the universe, love, won out. I had found someone who pointed out everything right with me, not everything wrong. Hope aroused. I wanted to conquer worlds and lay them at her feet. For her birthday I learned Beethoven's Sonata Pathetique and asked, trembling, if she would be the very first audience to hear me play. It was an offering to new life, and to her who had called it forth.

"The worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has no one to thank," wrote Chesterton. And also, "Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian." I know well that worst moment and know too the first stirrings of joy that flapped fresh air into crevices long sealed off. Great joy carries within it the intimations of immortality. Suddenly I wanted to live, even to live forever.

"Chesterton viewed this world as a sort of cosmic shipwreck. A person in search of meaning resembles a sailor who awakens from a deep sleep and discovers treasure strewn about, relics from a civilization he can barely remember. One by one he picks up the relics—gold coins, a compass, fine clothing—and tries to discern their meaning. Fallen humanity is in such a state. Good things on earth—the natural world, beauty, love, joy—still bear traces of their original purpose, but amnesia mars the image of God in us ... For Chesterton, and also for me, the riddles of God proved more satisfying than the answers proposed without God. I too came to believe in the good things of this world—first revealed to me in music, romantic love, and nature—as relics of a wreck, and as bright clues into the nature of a reality shrouded in darkness. ¹

This sense of journey – drawing closer to God through a lifetime of getting to know Him through experiences, relationships, reading, praying ... just plain living – is what makes all the difference in the world. In an interview, Yancey observes, *"In America it's 'God's going to do something good for you,' 'God's going to solve your problems' Jesus never promised that. People who are attracted to this invitation end up disillusioned because it doesn't work that way."*² Jesus never does promise us a rose garden – here on this Earth! He never does promise us blessings in the terms we normally define them – happiness, health, and wealth. He promises a cross. What does that mean? It means He promises that life will have its challenges ... there will be those valleys of drought and of weeping ... That's not an attractive thing to preach is it?

But talk to those who are on a journey of faith; hear what they have to say! It's tough! But they wouldn't trade it for the world. Because in that pilgrimage, Jesus promises His presence. Like refreshing springs in an arid valley, He is there in those bleakest, blackest valleys of life. When the valley is well-watered – when life is good – you don't notice the spring of living water. You don't need it. But when the valley is a desert, a spring of living water is what you desperately need. And the presence of God – the living water of His Holy Spirit, transforms the desert places of our lives into the spiritual gardens of our lives. We grow the most – as people who know God – in the desert!

It's interesting to note that throughout the Bible, people have the most meaningful, life-changing encounters with God in the wildest places ... Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah, Paul. Jesus began his ministry, tempted in the wilderness. Those wild times are the times we need God most. They are the times we make choices about our spiritual journeys ... to go on or turn back. And when we choose to go on, we find the springs. And those desert experiences become the times that draw us closer and closer ... closest ... to God.

¹ For an enjoyable excerpt, visit, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/011/6.66.html>

² "Philip Yancey: Disappointment with church," *Servant* Fall 2001, p. 11.

But note:

- a. It is a journey – a pilgrimage – getting to know God. It is not a “snap-your-finger-and-it’s-done” type of thing. It’s a lifelong trek, along which we draw closer and closer to God as we live life – the ups and the downs – with God.
- b. The pilgrimage will not be easy. There will be the valleys.
- c. Even when you cannot see beyond the canyon walls, keep walking! It is tempting to stop walking and despair! Or even to return to where you were (the Israelites wanted to return to slavery in Egypt!). You got to keep walking. There is always a way out of the valley ... but you’ll have to trust God to find it!
- d. The valleys will make you stronger. Because you have to trust God, you will grow in your faith as you keep on walking!

3. Living in His Presence (Psalm 84:10-12)

At the end of the day, the pilgrim arrives in Jerusalem and exclaims, *“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere!”* (Psalm 84:10). He goes on to say (literally), *“I would rather stand at the gate of the house of God (doorkeeper) than live the good life in the homes of the wicked. For the Lord God is our light and protector. He gives us grace and glory. No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who do what is right. O Lord Almighty, happy are those who trust in you!”* (Psalm 84:10-12).

On the one hand, this is a vision of Heaven. When – one day, some day – we who put our faith in Jesus as our Saviour enter into the perfect presence of God, we shall enjoy an eternity of “grace and glory” (see Revelation 21-22). We don’t talk enough about Heaven these days! Many of think we have it so good on Earth we cannot imagine anything better! But our lives are not as wonderful as we often portray them to be. The golden years are not so golden. Relationships aren’t always blissful. We need to recapture a vision of Heaven.

On the other hand, we live here and now! What we need are some spiritual realists ... who acknowledge that life is not always a stroll down some fictitious English country lane. It can be an exhausting, parching scramble through the Milk River Coulee! And we need to know that it is here – in real life – that we can meet the real Saviour, Jesus Christ. Here we can discover the living water we so desperately need. We will still be in the Milk River Coulee, but we will find refreshing springs of life-giving water. We will find pools of blessing that collect after the rain. We will continue to grow stronger.

Our Saviour meets us where we are ... not where we think He wants us to be. Let’s pray, and ask Him to come alongside us and give us a drink of life ... real life, eternal life ... by His Holy Spirit. Let’s ask Him to fill us with His Spirit – to fill us with His life. Let’s ask the God of grace, the God of Glory to draws us close ...