

**Songs of the Heart:
YOUR HAPPY PLACE**

Psalm 84

Worship strengthens and blesses our spirit.

A sermon preached by
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Where is your happy place? You know, that place where you can go and escape all the cares of the world. I have photographs of some of my happy places on my office wall—one from the Grand Tetons, one from Yellowstone, and one from Yosemite National Park. When I get stressed, I can simply look at those pictures, and it always brings a smile. There are others that I carry in my mind. When life gets out of control, do you ever take a deep breath and go to your happy place?

Going to worship should be like going to your happy place. Not a duty, not a drudgery, but a place you want to go and can't wait until you get there. Commenting on Psalm 84, Richard Allen Farmer writes, "Until you stop coming to worship as if you have to [go] see God, you'll never know what the Psalmist is talking about. He says it ought to be your delight to come up into Papa's face and enjoy his presence. It presupposes a relationship that makes you want to be there."¹

We feel that attitude of joy and expectancy in the opening words of our Psalm today: "*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 my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*"² Does this describe your thoughts and feelings as you came to church today?

I believe worship should be one of our happy places. The Book of Psalms, in addition to being the hymnbook of ancient Israel, can be seen as a guidebook for living a happy life. If you noticed in this Psalm, there are three statements about happiness. There are three beatitudes—verses that begin "happy are" or blessed are." I want to make three affirmations related to these three beatitudes. These affirmations talk about what true worship is.

The first beatitude is in verse 4: "*Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.*" The affirmation I get from that is "**God's house can be a happy place.**" One way to get happy is to dwell in the house of God and worship him. Last week I said it is more about the Person than the place; it's more about knowing Jesus than being in the proper location. That's true, but sometimes the place helps

us meet the Person. God's house is where we encounter the living God. It's good to be here.

The image that the Psalmist uses is so simple. Maybe he looked up in the rafters of the Temple and saw some birds flying around. So he wrote, "*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.*"³ Even the birds like it in God's house! Their songs are songs of praise, too, blending in with the songs of worship.

How much does a faithful person want to be in that kind of place? The Psalmist says, "*My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*"⁴ What would it be worth to you to dwell in the presence of the living God?

Warren Buffett is one of the richest men in the world—estimated worth in the billions of dollars—and a brilliant investor. Every year he auctions off a lunch to support a ministry for the poor and homeless in San Francisco. The highest bidder gets to invite seven friends to have a personal lunch with Warren Buffett at a steakhouse in New York City. This year, the winning bid was \$3.3 million! I don't know if that included the price of lunch or not.⁵ People will pay dearly for access to greatness.

The good news is, you already have access to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords—and it's free! All you have to do is want it, and show up, and experience the presence of the Holy One.

Even better news: This experience of worship is not limited to a Temple in Jerusalem or a church building in Fort Smith. God can be worshipped wherever God is, and God is everywhere. Our God is an awesome God, and our God is a portable God. Anywhere we are, we can be aware of his presence and worship him.

This is not an excuse to miss church. But it does explain why we have a variety of happy places—because God is there. You look at the mountains or a sunset or a waterfall or a beach or a grandchild, and you sense the presence of God. And you worship. You feel the joy. We are happy when we are in God's house, wherever that might be.

The second beatitude in this Psalm is in verse 5: *“Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.”* Psalm 84 is a pilgrimage song, sung by the faithful as they journeyed to Jerusalem and entered the city and made a procession up to the Temple mount. For many it was a grueling journey, but the closer they got to God’s house, the stronger they felt. The Psalmist said it was like walking through the desert, and everywhere your foot touched it became a spring-fed pool. The pilgrims grew *“from strength to strength”*⁶ at the prospect of being in the presence of the God of gods.

That’s a wonderful affirmation, isn’t it? **Worship strengthens our spirit.** As people of faith, we already have the strength of a relationship with God. But the more we worship, the stronger we get. We find strength for living even through the wasteland, and strength builds upon strength until our blessings are lush and abundant.

One of the saints that I had the privilege of pastoring years ago was a lady named Zelia Thames. She was a church leader, a former organist, a Sunday School teacher, a tither—just a great person of faith in every way. In her 80’s, she broke a hip and was hospitalized. One day in the hospital she told me her story.

Zelia was raised Baptist, and she was baptized at the age of 15. But she told me she was pressured into it and didn’t really feel God was real to her. By the time she was 23, she had married, had a son, served as Sunday School secretary and played the organ. Still somehow her life felt empty.

At a revival meeting, Zelia heard a testimony from a young woman who talked about completely surrendering her life to God. The woman described herself as standing on the edge of a huge pit, crying to the Lord to save her, and he did.

Zelia had never felt on the edge of the pit until that moment. Instantly she understood that she needed grace. She needed the salvation God had to offer her. But she made no move that evening. It just wouldn’t do for the organist to respond to the altar call. Who would play “Just As I Am?”

The next day, however, Zelia was working in her garden and looked up to see the young woman who had given the testimony standing at her garden gate. They talked outside, then they went inside and prayed. For the first time, Zelia admitted that she was lost. She was stranded in the “*valley of Baca*,”⁷ in the wasteland of sin. But the instant she admitted that to God, a peace flooded her soul. She said it was like a great weight had been lifted. A burden was removed, and her heart was filled with joy.

Sixty-three years later, laid up in the hospital with a broken hip, having been widowed twice and losing her son as well, this wonderful Christian lady told me, “Whenever I get depressed, I think about that day, and it still gives me strength.”

How happy we are to dwell in God’s house! How happy we are to grow in strength! And how happy we are to make the connection with God. The third beatitude concludes this wonderful Psalm: “*O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.*”⁸ So this is our final affirmation: **Worship is where we make our connection with God.** We are happy because we trust in God, and when we trust in God, that relationship is a connection to God’s almighty power, to a community of faith, and to a world in need. It is better to be a doorkeeper in that community than to live in the penthouse of evil. It is better to spend an hour in the worship of God than a thousand hours doing anything else—even golf, even shopping, even video games.

It’s not about the place; it’s the Person we meet here. It’s not about the religion; it’s about the relationship. Happiness comes from trusting in God, and worship is where we make that spiritual connection.

Norman Neaves, now a retired United Methodist pastor, once had a conversation with a woman who had been a recovering alcoholic for years. She told him one of the best things about being in A. A. was learning to be a spiritual person. She said, “I’ve been a religious person all my life. I’ve gone to church and gone to confession and done all the things that good Catholic girls do. ...But something was missing, and I didn’t know what it was until I got involved with A. A. You know,

you can be a religious person and not be a spiritual person. I've been a religious person for a long time, but just now I am beginning to discover what it means to be a spiritual person."

So what's the difference between a religious person and a spiritual person? Norman's friend said this: "A religious person is someone who goes through all the motions of faith, but never connects. A spiritual person is one who connects."⁹

When you make that spiritual connection, you don't stop being religious. But the practices of faith then mean something. They become a means of grace, an avenue of blessing. The Psalmist sang, "*For the Lord God is a sun and shield (our Light and our Protector); he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. (There's the blessings!) O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you!*"¹⁰

Mary Poplin is a professor of education at Claremont Graduate University in California. Mary attended a Methodist church as a child, but as an adult she began searching other spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, even telepathic attempts to bend spoons. When she began teaching at Claremont, a friend encouraged her spiritual journey. He would often say to her, "If you ever want to do anything with your spiritual life, I'd like to help you." But she was too busy trying to bend spoons to take him up on his offer.

Then one night Mary had a dream. She was in a long line of people, and at the end of the line, Jesus was greeting people. When he got to Mary, she fell down at his feet and wept for shame. Jesus picked her up, stood her on her feet, and Mary felt the most amazing peace she had ever felt. Then she woke herself up crying.

Immediately she called up this friend who had offered to help with her spiritual life. They met, and Mary shared what had happened. For the first time, she found out this man was a Christian. He got her a Bible, and she began to read. They met every week from November until January.

In January, Mary took her mother back home to North Carolina for a visit. They attended the little Methodist church mainly so her mother could see her friends. But because it was God's house, something totally unexpected happened. Mary said:

When we got there, I was really moved to just go up to the altar and give my life to the Lord. It wasn't even an altar call. It was a communion call. The guy said, you don't have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe that Jesus Christ lived, that he died for your sins, and you have to want him in your life. And when he said that, I was so powerfully moved that I actually thought, even if a tornado rips through this building, I'm going to get that communion.

I took the communion, and I didn't even listen to the guy. I knelt down and said, "Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get me." And when I took the communion, and I said that, I felt free. I felt like tons of things had been lifted off of me.¹¹

Are you feeling empty today? Despite the fact that you're doing to right thing religiously by being here in church, is there still something missing spiritually? Are you laboring under some kind of burden, and you need to be set free?

Here we are in God's house, and we are about to take communion. What will happen when you encounter the living God today? Trust in him. Grow from strength to strength. Dwell in God's house, and you will find your happy place!

¹ Richard Allen Farmer, "The 'What's' and the 'Why' of Worship," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 150.

² Psalm 84:1-2.

³ Psalm 84:3.

⁴ Psalm 84:2.

⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/winning-bid-to-have-lunch-with-warren-buffett-3-3-million-1527946585>

⁶ Psalm 84:7.

⁷ Psalm 84:6.

⁸ Psalm 84:12.

⁹ From a sermon by Dr. Norman Neaves, Church of the Servant, Oklahoma City, OK.

¹⁰ Psalm 84:11-12.

¹¹ ["The Dick Staub Interview: Mary Poplin Calls Claremont Her 'Calcutta,'"](#)

ChristianityToday.com, December 10, 2003.