

Psalm 84/ Mark 13¹⁻⁸

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We come this morning to a Psalm of faith, a Psalm which both declares faith and which calls us to faith but does so in a particular way and with a particular force. The word 'Faith' like so many words stands for so much but because it is used so often in many ways it can end up conveying very little.

It's like poetry which uses the idea of the sea with its tide, its magnificence, its terrible moods and its immense power. If we aren't careful to define what we mean when we refer to the sea we can denude the image of all power simply by virtue of the assumption that everyone knows what we're talking about.

We bandy the word 'faith' about as if everyone knows what we're talking about and frankly, few in our society do. Our western world has become a culture of unbelief. For 600 years we've been fed the lie that belief in God is unreasonable and irrational except as a personal choice. The word faith carries, then, little meaning for those around us except, perhaps, when someone of faith does something we appreciate and even then so few really see much further than the service rendered.

Psalm 84 is an exegesis of the word faith using the notion of value. Faith then means, valuing certain things. Faith represents for the Psalmist those things of highest value and we may

understand something of the breadth of faith by examining the values attached to it in this Psalm. Before we do that, however, let's just ask a few questions about values. What so important about values?

What we value determines how we live. What we value highly captivates us. If we value money highly we will live in thrall to it and you will serve it. If we highly value fleshly delights we will live in thrall to them. If we highly value power we will live seeking power wherever you can find it. What we value determines our life. Faith calls us to value God but what does that mean?

For the Psalmist it means three things.

They are

1. Eternity – things that last.
2. Beauty – things that are lovely and
3. Power – things that give us leverage. Things that last, that are lovely and that give us leverage. These three things speak promise and life to us all and **anything** which can promise us them will attract us. Faith calls us to seek each of these in God.

The first three verses of Psalm 84 establish this well.

¹How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!

²My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

³Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young— a place near your altar, Lord Almighty, my King and my God. (Ps 84)

‘How lovely...’ Faith is that which sees the beauty of God; which understands God as beautiful and which highly values that beauty. They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder but in the case of faith it is not the eye which beholds God’s beauty but the heart. To see the beauty of God one must first commit oneself to that beauty, to be, as it were, open to God’s beauty.

You say, ‘But that’s not how beauty works Richard. Beauty is beauty. It’s either there or it’s not! No friends. We are wrong if we think that. The notion of beauty is as culturally conditioned as anything else. Consider these pictures of great beauty from different cultures as ask yourself – do I think that is beautiful? And how about the men?’

Faith is that which calls God beautiful; which chooses to understand God as beautiful and which refuses to see God any other way. And God’s beauty goes beyond God for it transforms the **place** where God is. **‘How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!’** God’s beauty is more than personal beauty – it is the beauty of **Presence. Where God is – all becomes beautiful.**

‘²My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.’

Most commentators sees in this a reflection of or a yearning for the Temple but it goes much much further than this. In the reflected or echoed phrase David says that his real desire is for the ‘living God.’ So it’s not the courts which are of ultimate value but it is the **Presence** of God who brings value to the court. But what is the nature of that value?

The Temple court was made indeed to reflect the nature of God; the majesty and permanence and power of God and particularly God’s eternal nature. It was made of stone; it was made to last; it was made to **remain!** David, understands that it is the living God who brings these things – not a building made of wood and stone. Faith, then, is that which understands that God is the **One in whom all things last and yet not for themselves.**

Eternity isn’t a quality in and of its own but rather an expression of the true nature of God... and what is that nature? **It is love! God, my friends, is love and not just love but resilient love – love which lasts for ever!**

Finally in verse 3 God is understood as power for God is... ‘Lord Almighty, my King and my God.’ These names are designed to express something of God’s power and to reflect that this is God’s nature but notice the context in which the Names are used – **³Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow**

a nest for herself, where she may have her young— a place near your altar,’

This is no ordinary power for what power is found in the company of the most common creature in all creation – a sparrow and a swallow. This is power that delights in the smallest things in our world, in the most common things, the most powerless things. This is the power of a loving God who delights in being found together with common and small things. Yes God is King and Almighty but He is so through His love and care of the smallest most powerless things in Creation. This is a power which understands powerlessness and which can be trusted with the smallest things.

So faith then thinks of God in these categories. God is lovely, God is lasting love and God is caring power and this will lead, according to the Psalm to two things.

1. Praise of God and
2. Trust in God.

In verses 4 and 5 the natural outcome of faith is praise...

⁴Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.

⁵Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

This is likely no surprise to us but what perhaps is surprising is **the result of that praise**. You see this praise isn't just an empty sentence or song. Rather, it has an incredible effect...

⁶As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

⁷They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.

The word Baka has traditionally been translated 'weeping' and though the word is not used elsewhere in the OT it is traditionally thought that the valley represents a barren place which stands for life at its worst. But praise transforms that place from a desert into a place of refreshment and growth. Praise then brings a change – allows, as it were, God to move in a place and, indeed, in our lives.

Secondly Faith also leads to trust in God...

¹⁰Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

¹¹For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favour and honour; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

¹²Lord Almighty, blessed are those who trust in you.

What is trust in God like? The picture we have here in this translation is somewhat confusing because in fact a doorkeeper was a pretty high official in the Temple. A slightly better translation of the Hebrew and the one I favour is of someone standing outside the door waiting to come in so that it reads thus...

'I would rather stand outside the Temple than sit in the homes of wicked people' In other words I'd rather be allowed to stand in the vicinity of God's Presence than be welcomed into the home of the wicked.

Such value do I place on God, on God's beauty, God's lasting love and God's loving power that I would be happy to have no place, no standing but be near God for a day than to have enough standing to last 1000 days in the homes of those who reject God.

This is the decision of faith friends. We value God. We praise God. We trust God.