

## On a journey as a Pilgrim People

Psalm 84

Journeying / Pilgrimage: now doesn't that sounds all a bit iffy? Or does it? Such descriptions have become common in the Christian Church over the past decade and I for one am glad they have. Why? Because the reality is that not everyone has a Damascus Road experience nor do we all grow and mature in the same ways and indeed: is it helpful to see things in black and white terms that leave no room for searching and earnest seeking of Jesus. Of course to journey you need first to take a step and begin the adventure of following Jesus, and to be a Pilgrim you need to have a attitude of heart that seeks to follow where He leads. So this is the Pilgrims Psalm and one that ought to resonate in the heart of every believer: My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God (v2) If we are to be a 'Soul Survivor' in a hostile world then we need each day to be intimately connected with the lover of our souls: Jesus. Not only is He the lover of our souls but Psalm 23 tells us that He is the Restorer of our Souls. Yearning, fainting, after his person and presence ("courts of the Lord" is I think shorthand for the throne of grace!) is about desire but it is also about discipline. Hearts need to cry out but also our flesh, which is more difficult: we make daily choices in trying to follow Jesus and that's the disciplined bit. Daily I must choose to follow and to trust and obey: whether I feel like it or not, for in seeking to follow Jesus I have as baptism shows so clearly died to my old life, buried it, and have chosen to live a new life under His Lordship. As the psalmist reminds us and as Jesus echo's in the Sermon on the Mount, if swallows and sparrows are cared for in such intimate detail, how much more will He care for us. The result the psalmist says of such a pursuit after God is an attitude of gratitude, a spirit of and power in praise. Blessing is promised to those who seek daily to live in and out of the good of His presence.

The challenge of the psalm comes in the middle three verses (v5-7): **"Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage"**: is the first part. Strength comes from Him alone as we sang in our first song: once we seek to do things in our own strength (in the flesh) He says okay get on with it (and we end up with spiritual egg on our face). As Nehemiah affirms: "the joy of the Lord is our Strength" (8:10) so why do we spend so little time cultivating that dynamic relationship with Him. How does the strength flow: by setting our hearts on pilgrimage. "His first avowed intent: to be a pilgrim!" So will pilgrimage be easy: absolutely, it never is! **"As they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools."** But wait a moment, it would be tough if we were doing this alone but we are not: "as they" suggests a group however large or small who have set their hearts in unity on a goal and will not fall at the first hurdle. In fact difficulty will be the food of their pilgrimage: it will energise them!! Their very presence, like that of God himself, will transform the desert places and experiences and they will be living proof that "all things work for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28). Desert places will suddenly be sprinkled with oases, and if that happens through God's people, then God himself will confirm their presence by His "autumn rains". It's a beautiful confirmation again of the Hosea 2:14-15 prophecy I shared on my first Sunday. Again we see that God's people thrive when in unity they go out into the desert places, into Satan's territory, and bring the light, love and mercy of Christ to bear. **"They will go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion"** That's the goal of pilgrims and pilgrimage: not aimless wandering but focused journeying who takes us from strength to strength (Glory-to-Glory: 2 Corinthians 3:18)) till we see Him face to face. And again it's they (plural) not he or her (singular): we journey together and are all a work in progress!!

The Psalm concludes with the immortal oft misquoted words: Better 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. The ministry of welcome (door-keeping and protection, like the shepherd sleeping over the entrance to the sheepfold) is probably one of most significant of all ministries and potentially the most fruitful. To downgrade it or consider it to be at best unimportant is foolish indeed. Congregations need Shepherds not just those who carry the Minister or Pastor title and call, but also men and women whose prime task is to welcome and embrace those whom the Lord is adding to our number whilst at the same time being wise in protecting the sheep from wolves in sheep's clothing. Such a ministry is crucial for it also connects new people, closes the back door, and has relationship building at its core. If you feel called to such a ministry at St Andrews then please make that known to the Elders.

But lets get back to this core call to be a Pilgrim People and Pilgrims who are making progress. So what is Pilgrimage: is it just to Holy Island/ Iona/ Canterbury or Jerusalem? The answer is no, for whilst making a pilgrimage to such places can be hugely helpful and maturing in ones walk with Jesus, it more the attitude and spiritual discipline of pilgrimage that matters over ones whole spiritual life and journey in trying to follow Jesus. Pilgrimage is a description of the Christian Life: a journey with Jesus and to Jesus, a journey with a goal in mind/ a heavenly vision in sight/ a journey which whilst never easy will prove to be the most exciting life-changing part of your whole life. And the principal pre-requisite of such a journey is mentioned at the conclusion of the Psalm: O Lord Almighty, Blessed is the person who trusts in you!!

John Bunyan, one of the great Puritan divines, was a Baptist Minister in Bedford who was consistently jailed for His non-conformist faith in Christ. The Puritans more than anyone else paid the price for and laid the foundation of the Evangelical

Revival in the next century. "Pilgrims Progress" remains a spiritual classic and was enormously influential in shaping a new generation of Radical Christians Believers so lets look at some of the characters Bunyan shows us:

Yes we are called to be **Valiant-for-truth**, a sword-wielding pilgrim who drives off attackers but lets not loose sight of the need to reflect the balance in Jesus of Truth and Grace! Yes we are called to be **Faithful** a fellow pilgrim who comes from Christian's home town and loyally accompanies him until he is executed in the town of Vanity for the crime of disrespecting the local Satan-worshipping religion, but lets be wise in the battles only God wants us to fight. But we are not to be snared by **Madam Bubble**, a tall dark and attractive temptress who seeks to tempt Standfast to stay with her. **Standfast** is later found kneeling on the ground giving thanks for having been delivered from her. Temptation will always be present for the pilgrim. Nor are we to be imprisoned by the **Giant Despair** in Doubting Castle but lets be **Hopeful** who replaces Faithful as Christians travelling companion. Finally lets not be **Temporary** - a would-be pilgrim who backslides but whom Christian helps. Do read Pilgrims Progress or a modern equivalent (like " A Distant Shore" by John Houghton): it could change your life!!

So Pilgrims whether you are 0 or 100 you are on a journey, whether you have walked with the Lord just a few days or over 70 years, whether at present you are bouncing in your relationship with God or struggling big time, you are a precious and unique part of what God is doing in his church and in a far greater way, in His Kingdom. You have been uniquely called and chosen and wedded to His People to enhance the beauty of the Bride of Christ and ready it for His return. God doesn't make mistakes and you are at St Andrews for a time and a purpose. So believe me when I say that as every one of us responds in trusting faith, sets our heart on pilgrimage, and gets into the flow of what God is doing and plays our part, the very

transformation of communities and cities once again becomes a possibility. Yes Canterbury changes in the spirit today when you set your heart truly on pilgrimage!

Pastor David

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