

Come Before Him
Psalm 100, etc.

Turn to Psalm 100. Last month we had a church care supper and meeting at Dave and Sharon's place. I opened the meeting in prayer. That is not new to me, but what I prayed was new to me. The first words out of my mouth were, "God, what we really want is you."

I was surprised to hear myself say that. The words did not enter my mind until they came out my mouth. I also knew, while I was saying it, that this was deeply true. "God, what we really want is you." It has been true a long time I think, but I could not have put it into words like that.

I think the Holy Spirit was tired of my not saying that, so he took over for a few seconds. It was a light going on inside of me, about myself and also you all. "God, what we all really want is you."

That was 3 or 4 weeks ago. Since then I've said to myself, "It's fine to want him, but how do we find him, how do we get him, how do we meet him? That's not so easy."

But that's not true. I have noticed something in the Psalms. When God's people want to worship him, they go worship him and they know he's there. They know where to find him.

When God's people are in trouble, they ask God to come to them and help them. They say things like "why have you forgotten me?" or "why are you so far from saving me?" Even then, they know he's listening, they know they have his ear, the problem is that he's not acting to rescue.

But they never ask God to show up when they gather to worship. They know he is there.

Psalm 100, just vv 1-2.

¹ *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.*

² *Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.*

Let's look at verse 2. The basic unit of Hebrew poetry is a couplet, that is, two short lines that are parallel, two short lines that say more or less the same thing.

Worship the LORD with gladness,
come before him with joyful songs.

"with Gladness" and "with joyful songs" are parallel here. What we're more interested in is that "worship the LORD" and "Come before him" are also parallel. Worship the LORD with gladness, come before him with joyful songs.

Worshipping the LORD, and coming before him, are assumed here to be meaning more or less the same thing. If you are worshipping him, the psalm assumes, you have come before him.

Now that is just one couplet, which does not prove very much. Poetry can be a slippery thing. But the Psalms repeatedly sound like that. It is many places. It was a basic assumption of Israelite worship.

Look at Psalm 100:4

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise; give thanks to him, and praise his name.

There is such a clear sense that when people come to thank God, and praise him, they are coming to God himself. We are not just gathering anywhere to praise and thank God. We are coming into God's presence to praise and thank.

He does not come to us, that's not the picture. No, we go to him, we enter his place, his gates, his courtyard, we come before his throne. And he is there.

In the Old Testament, God's presence was tied to a particular place. As soon as God led Israel out of Egypt and across the Red Sea and to Mt Sinai, a trip that took about three months, God told Moses and the Israelites how to build the tabernacle.

It was a small elaborate tent, the kind of tent a king would have on a trip, it had a courtyard around it, and as soon as it was made, at the very end of Exodus, God moved in! That is the first time God had lived with his people since Adam and Eve were put out of the Garden.

Four or five hundred years later, King David's son Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem. It was like the tabernacle, only much bigger and more impressive, and when he finished it, God moved in to the temple! That story is in 1 Kings 8, and 2 Chronicles 7.

When Psalm 100 says "come before him with joyful songs, enter his gates with thanksgiving, and enter his courts with praise," it probably has in mind that temple.

Turn to Psalm 84, another psalm that has a strong sense of God's presence. This is a psalm of the sons of Korah, who we met in Psalm 42-43. They were Levites and they were part of Israel's worship music. And did those people ever want God!

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty!

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

³ Even 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.

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

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

¹² Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

“God, all we really want is you.” That line is the glue that holds Psalm 84 together.

This song comes from Levites who very probably were doorkeepers at the temple. But Psalm 84 is in the book of Psalms, and most of the people who used Psalms were not Levites, and most of them did not live in Jerusalem. But they sang and prayed Psalm 84 just like the sons of Korah. They had a strong confidence that God was there.

They knew, as we know, that God was not limited to his temple. Different psalms speak of praying to God in the morning, every morning, and that does not seem to be at the temple.

Psalm 139 says, “*If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*”

Psalm 11:4 says, “*The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD is on his heavenly throne.*” Psalm 123:1 says “*I lift my eyes to you, who sit enthroned in heaven.*”

So they knew God was not limited to the temple, that his real throne was in heaven, and he was with them wherever they went. That’s not new to the New Testament, it’s already in Psalms.

But still: *worship the LORD with gladness, come before him joyful songs. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, enter his courts with praise.*

They have this unfailing sense that when they gather to worship, they have come into God’s presence. Psalms often connect God’s presence to a gathering of worshippers.

Psalm 116, the thankful psalm (vv18-19):

I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, ¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD—in your midst, Jerusalem. Being in the presence of God’s people, and being in the LORD’s house, go together.

Psalm 149:1 *Sing to the LORD a new song, [sing] his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.* Singing directly to the LORD himself, and praising him in the assembly of his people, regularly go together in Psalms.

Where am I going with this? A few things. One, do you think that we who follow Christ have less access to God’s presence when we worship, then they did? No.

We who trust in Christ also come through God’s gates and into his presence when we come to worship. And maybe someone will say, “well, nothing happens to me, I don’t feel anything.”

What do you think happened at the temple when the sons of Korah were there? Fire came down out of heaven and the earth shook? No. The point of Psalms is never that they felt God’s presence, or saw signs of his presence. The psalms don’t read like that.

The point of Psalms is that they knew he was there, they knew that when they gathered to worship, they had come before the LORD Almighty, they had come before his throne.

Every single thing they had came from him, and they knew their God was the one and only true living God, no other God like him, and they came into his presence to thank him and bring him gifts and worship him.

We worship blindfolded. Some days it is hard to imagine that we here are gathered before his throne. Some Sundays that comes more easily to me, and some not easily at all. Either way, he's here. If God's people have gathered to worship him and pray, we've come to him.

And on those days when God seems anywhere but here, that's a prompt for a different picture. We are all here standing before a great throne, singing and praying, and we are all wearing thick blindfolds.

We are right in front of the majestic throne of grace, and God is bending down close, his face and breath is close, but we're blindfolded, can't see anything. But we know that he's there, so we sing and pray.

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because those who come to him (get that? Those who come to him) must believe that he exists, and that he responds to those who seek him. When we come near to him, he comes near to us. Hebrews 11:6, James 4:8.

In the OT, the temple was the house of God, the one place where they knew God was present. Here is what the NT says about God's temple. The NT uses OT temple language, but it is not about a building, it is about God's people as a group:

1 Cor 3:16-17 - Don't you know that you yourselves [the struggling Corinthian congregation] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

2 Cor 6:16 - What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

"For we, the followers of Christ, are the temple of the living God."

Ephesians 2:21-22 - In Christ the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you [Gentiles] too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Everyone in Christ is joined together to become a single building, a holy temple. When new people come they also are joined to this dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

When we come together on the Lord's Day, the most important thing going on is that we have come to God, we are together before God.

I urge you to consider this ahead of time, and while you're here. Let's not only think about the parts of the service we like the most, or the people we will see and greet. What should we say to God himself? What can we bring to God himself, now that we've gathered before his throne?

I preached this kind of sermon once here ten or fifteen years ago. I preached it because I thought it needed to be said. The next week I spoke on something else, though, so I moved on.

But God did not let it go. God preached my sermon back to me. For four or five weeks, every Saturday what I had said to you came back to me. "Tomorrow I am going to stand before God. Tomorrow we will all enter into God's presence, before his throne."

And the most important thing about tomorrow is not that I will stand in front and teach again. The most important thing about tomorrow is that I will be part of a church body that enters into God's most Holy Place, and meets before his throne.

That's what God impressed on me Saturday after Saturday. In between I'd forget, next Saturday it was back. It has never left me.

I am grateful that our worship leaders in one way or another work on this assumption, and often they say it openly and directly.

In the material world, on a Sunday morning we come from all over, from north and south and east and west, and we gather in this room to sing to God and pray to God and hear from God. That's the material world. We're separated in our homes during Saturday night, and then we come together.

In the spiritual world it is different. I picture it this way: we leave our houses on Sunday morning to come here, and as soon as the door of our house closes behind each of us to come here, we are together. We are materially still apart, on our way here, but before God we are a single group on the move as soon as we leave our homes.

And as a group we proceed into the temple of God, we approach God boldly, we go together to the throne of grace. As it says in Hebrews 10, we enter with confidence into the Most Holy Place. That's what we do as a group.

And this is good. Because, what we really want is God. What we really need is God. The one we need to meet is God. *Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.* Amen.