

Julie Merritt Lee
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Providence Baptist Church
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“Where Does God Dwell”

1 Kings 8, Psalm 84

Remember a time when you were homesick. Maybe it was that first time you went off to camp or college. Remember that gut-wrenching feeling of missing the ones you love, the familiar smells, the comforts of your own home, or at least one room where you felt safe.

Longing is what we feel for home when we are away. And we’ve all felt that longing for a true home for our soul. We crave ultimate meaning: to be known, to be loved, and to love the One who created us.

C.S. Lewis speaks of this longing in his book *Surprised by Joy*, naming this feeling of desire for what hasn’t been fulfilled yet—joy (or as I’m terming it here “home”). Lewis tells of his first encounter as a child with this “bittersweet stabbing,” this knowing of something more, something greater and more beautiful than himself. He states, “As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother’s toy garden. And every day, there were what we called “the Green Hills’ that is, the low line of the Castlereagh Hills which we saw from the nursery windows. They were not very far off but they were, to children, quite unattainable. They taught me longing.” Prior to Lewis’ conversion as a young student, this sense of longing seemed more of a distant shadow, so far off, otherworldly, and maybe something only dreams were made of. And then as he was wrestling with his own theological questions one day, he realized this sense of longing, that had been there since his childhood was no longer somewhere afar, but rather in the same room with him, in his own body even. In fact, he says the new sense of Joy was almost hard to recognize because it was so near.

Like the prodigal son who longed to go home and see his father, or Jacob who longed to go back to his father’s house, the Bible is filled with similar stories of longing.

Psalm 84 speaks of a man or men yearning for the dwelling place of God. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty. My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD. My heart and flesh cry out for the Living God.” This psalm was spoken or possibly sung by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem, waiting to see the temple. In a sense, they had a powerful experience and visual connection with the temple. This was their home, or at least a place where they finally knew they would experience the divine presence. And can you imagine when they walked up to this majestic structure—the whole house overlaid with gold—that they had longed to see, knowing that they would finally get a taste of the grandeur of God. A bond was formed between pilgrim and place. A little bit of that longing had been satisfied.

For many of us this is hard to understand. If we think of God’s dwelling at all, something of heaven is conjured up, and besides stories of the streets of gold, I don’t think we form a visual picture, much less do we form a bond between this dwelling place.

In the Old Testament reading, the First Kings passage, we also hear a prayer of longing. Solomon who has completed the building of this great Temple is dedicating it to the Lord and praying that God would answer the supplications of his people in this place. This is actually Solomon's prayer of dedication for the great temple. So in a way, it's somewhat of a fulfillment of the great longing he has had—I can imagine all of his hopes and dreams for providing a place where people could worship and experience the greatness and sovereignty of God were tied up to this place, and now it has been built. And yet he knows that this longing can't ultimately be fulfilled in one physical location. Though an early Israelite understanding was that God dwelled in specific locations—the ark of the covenant, a cloud, the tabernacle—in Zion. Solomon in this passage is breaking those barriers. For he says in verse 27, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” So if God doesn't dwell solely in the Temple or even in heaven, where does God dwell?

Now a days we hear language like “inviting Jesus into our hearts.” This would suggest that God dwells inside *us*. Thus, the question of God's dwelling moves us one step further—God doesn't just dwell in one location, God dwells in us. But is this all?

Ultimately, we know that God is beyond space and time. In the beginning was God, hovering before there was creation. God dwelled before there was a dwelling place to dwell in.

The question that is deeper and more relevant is not *where* does God dwell, but how do we find this dweller? The one who seems elusive at times. This is where we really struggle. Wouldn't I be rich if I could answer the question—where was God when...I contracted cancer, when my spouse contracted cancer, when my loved one died, when I lost my job, when my marriage was falling apart, when children are dying of hunger and curable diseases.

In a few verses before what we read today in 1 Kings, before Solomon's dedication prayer of the temple he addresses the people saying in verse 12, “The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud.” So the Lord dwells in a dark cloud or as one translation says, “God tabernacles in a thick darkness.” I see this as a symbol of the mystery of God's presence. We know God is present like this cloud, but we have had too many experiences where we couldn't make him out—truly the darkness was too thick.

Many days we don't feel God, much less do we yearn for God.

Or do we? How many times on the other hand do I hear people talk about how they yearn to find what they're meant to do or who they're meant to be. Or they want that spiritual experience that will set them free. How many pens have spilled the ink about finding God. Even that phrasing about finding God is interesting. It implies that God is elusive or possibly playing peek-a-boo. People are dying to sense God in an ultimate way, a way that puts their soul at ease—at rest. In a word—to come home.

You've had those times, haven't you? When you've had some encounter and you've said, "I have come home."

I know I've experienced this. In case you want to know your pastor a little more, let me tell you a little bit about my story—I was always a wandering and wondering soul. I never could "figure out" Christianity, I always felt different from others in church because all I could do is ask questions, and why this Scripture didn't seem to fit with this other one, and what was going to happen to my best friend who was Hindu. I ached inside for years and years—a longing for definitive answers. In college I studied different religions and was on a quest for ultimate truth. I was never satisfied though. And this went on and on until...I finally found him. It was Christ of course, but it happened because of one church—DaySpring Baptist Church. I finally found a place where I experienced the Divine. Something in my soul connected to God in a real way every time I entered that sacred place—it was a place where there was space in worship to be silent and still and know "that I am God." And I would cry. Boy, did I cry. I think I cried the first two months I was there. And there were others like me. So many people would find this place—where they could be open and honest about their faith struggles. But what kept us all alive spiritually is that we finally encountered and experienced God in an authentic way. And I finally said, "I have come home."

The psalmist speaks of home in an interesting way. Perhaps he was jealous or just delighted that even the small birds have direct access to God's home—the temple. For he says, "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, O LORD Almighty, my King, and my God." What a beautiful picture—even the birds of the field find their home. And then he says, "Blessed are those who dwell in your house."

When have you dwelled in the house of the Lord? When have you delighted in God's presence? Maybe it was as simple as listening to the perfect musical composition or song and the chords resolved in just that perfect way—it was spiritual. Or being in the mountains where you're reminded of something bigger than yourself, something, someone so creative, so artistic and you loved this great Creator for it. You were brought to a different place.

Early Celtic people believed that there were "thin places" where someone could go to be closer to God. It was said that in these places "the veil between this world and the next was so sheer you could almost step through." I think we also experience these thin places. Places where you felt like God was right there, the veil had been removed, and you were experiencing the divine. My prayer is that Providence Baptist Church would be a thin place. A place where the sovereignty and intimacy of God is experienced and proclaimed. Those pilgrims going to the Temple knew that at least they could experience that—to know God's presence there and feel God's sovereignty. That is my prayer for Providence pilgrims.

And if you don't feel God's presence? Embody it. Embody the behavior and love of God as seen in the beatitudes: love the unloveable, mourn with those who mourn, be

peacemakers. And it's strange how in the midst of embodying *Christ* to someone else, you begin to feel *Christ's* presence creeping in.

For don't we ultimately experience the dwelling place of God through *Jesus Christ*. In the first chapter of John, we read literally that Jesus was made flesh and tabernacled among us—made his home with us. For Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the longing we feel—our desire for true home.

Lee Strobel, a Christian journalist was interviewing an atheist who was once a Christian. And after the interview as they were talking, the man with tears running down his face said, "I miss Jesus." Somehow our soul just knows. Our soul longs for the Living Christ. But as Lewis said, what we think is far off, we realize is closer than we ever thought—maybe so close, we didn't even notice. Christ communes with us, Christ dwells with us. May you search no longer and finally say encountering the Living Christ, "I have come home."