



A Passion for God's Presence

Psalm 34, (42)

Novelist David Lodge, in the introduction to one of his books, tells where he was - in a theatre watching the performance of a satirical revue he had helped write. In one sketch, a character demonstrated his nonchalance in an interview by holding a radio to his ear. The actor playing the part always tuned in to a real broadcast. Suddenly came the announcement that President Kennedy had been shot. The actor quickly switched it off, but it was too late. Reality had interrupted stage comedy.

We have come here to worship this evening. We've come bringing all the baggage of the day and maybe of the week. It's just another service – for us from MRBC it's our evening service in a different venue. But it's the same old minister giving the sermon! The issue is that we have come with the intent of worshipping God, and when that truly happens reality breaks in to the nonchalance of life and things happen. Let me read you a little bit of Exodus 34:29 *When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. 30 When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. 32 Afterwards all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the LORD had given him on Mount Sinai.*

The reality of God had interrupted Moses' life. Yes, he'd seen all the miracles in Egypt and as the people went through the Red Sea and into Sinai. But the experience on the top of Sinai was profound. Moses had spent time communing with God and it showed physically on his face: he was radiant and we read on how he had to veil his face because it shone so much. We cannot enter into the presence of God and not be affected by it, whether that's corporately or individually. But when we do, shouldn't it reflect in our lives; in our manner, in our words, in our lives and on our faces?

Look at Psalm 34 again and you'll see an interesting parallel to Moses on Sinai:

34:1 I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. 2 My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. 3 Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together. 4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. 5 Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

As far as the Psalmist is concerned, we go into God's presence and we come out different because we have been with Him. Why do we come out different? It should be because we worshipped God. So the psalmist starts by praising the Lord at all times. He had a passion for the presence of God. A passion - a burning desire to just praise God. And in spending time worshipping God, he came out with a radiant face. His life was changed so that his behaviour afterwards meant that his face was never covered with shame.

In fact he boasted in the Lord. Boasting? I was brought up to believe that boasting is a really bad thing. Most of the time it is, unless we are completely justified in what we are boasting in. So he made big claims *2 My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. 4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears*

The psalmist had found God to be everything He says He is. Why are we always so modest about God and what He can do? "So what do you do on Sunday?" "I ...er ... (mutters quickly) ..go to Church.." or is it "I go to Church on Sunday and quite frankly, I wouldn't be anywhere else because it's so fantastic to join other Christians and tell God how great He is?"

He's just so amazing. Did you know that He....." etc. Let's boast in the Lord. We've got something the world hasn't got. Let's make them know that they are missing out - so that they might have the same boast too!" So boasting isn't the issue when the object of our boasting is a God who brings forgiveness and eternal life. After all, we are not boasting about ourselves but about God and what He does. And we do that in worship because all worship as we now know is focused on Him.

Let's look at these words again: *2 My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. When we worship and boast in God, it affects other people.* Our testimony of the greatness of God affects our lives and the lives of others. Why? Worship brings us into the presence of God and it transforms the afflicted. The presence of God changes lives! It puts our lives in the context of God who is our Saviour. Look at what was read earlier.

42: 5 Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and 6 my God.

When we look at what we have been made in Christ - children of God - then we look at life in context and our God ministers to our souls. What Psalm 34 suggests that it is not only right that we go into the presence of God when we are low, when we are in difficulties, when we feel depressed, when we feel sick, when we are in despair: but that it is the best place to be. Because as we commune with God, He loves to minister to us. As we extol our God at all times and as His praise is on our lips, He deals with our deepest needs. Note that it starts with worship.

So often I think that Christians can come before God like grumpy teenagers, wanting everything without realising the grace and love that has been shown us. And that is our concept of worship as we come into the presence of God. Surely our worship should be all about Jesus. What we experience below is nothing to what's going to be happening up here! As we worship - God ministers anyway - and clearly loves to do so. What does Psalm 34 tell us?

Refuge

As we come before our God we find that in Him is a refuge.

8 Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. 22 The LORD redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him.

There is a wonderful truth when we feel a failure because as we find ourselves in the presence of God. We find acceptance. Let's have a passion for God's presence because in it we find that we are redeemed and accepted. So therefore we can truly extol the Lord at all times. Let me read you some familiar words.

Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death

We are God's people - loved and redeemed. So whatever our problem and situation, we are accepted into His presence. We're accepted - come!

Refreshed and Challenged

We have a God who refreshes and challenges us as we come in worship *9 Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. 10 The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing 11 Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. 12 Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, 13 keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. 14 Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*

We see how as we seek the Lord we lack no good thing. What is a good thing to use isn't necessarily a good thing to God - but God sees that we don't lack what we need to live and worship Him. Remember that passage in Luke where Martha criticises Mary for listening to Jesus rather than getting on with the practicalities of life: *Luke 10: 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" 41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*

When we take time to be in God's presence, it refreshes us and takes us into the good things that God wants

to give us - things about Himself and things to equip us for life and for eternity. Isn't it so true that like Martha we so often limit our desire to worship and seem to have so little passion to worship Him and desire His presence - and then we blame God if life doesn't go as it suits us. Let's have that desire afresh this evening to seek His presence because in it we don't lack good things.

But there's more here. As we seek God's presence we find challenge.

Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. 12 Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, 13 keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. 14 Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

As we are in God's presence we need to understand afresh the fear of the Lord. The fear in fear of the Lord is a word that reflects His fatherhood. We show due reverence and respect to the One who is our Father in heaven, not to have relationship but because we have relationship. He is a Father who wants to bless us and teach us the way we should be have as the people of God. And as we enter into worship and commune with Him, then we are challenged and encouraged to walk in His way. In this case we are encouraged to take care in what we speak and what we do. Perhaps these items are things for another time. Suffice to say, worship leads us into paths of right living. If we think we have been in the presence of God and He has not challenged us as to righteousness personally or as a church, then whose presence were we in - just ours or His? As we consider our worship this evening and in the future, let's be ready not just to listen to the still small voice that encourages us when we are down, but the voice of a Father who challenges us to be like Jesus!

Relief

15 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; 16 the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. 17 The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. 19 A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all; 20 he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken. 21 Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

We have a God who delivers us as we come in worship. Whether we are aware of our own problems or shortcomings before God when we entered for worship, or whether by God's Spirit we become aware of them as we worship, we have a Father who wants to deliver us from them. Are you burdened this evening? Perhaps its some big problem - a problem of relationships, a problem with family, a problem with sickness, a spiritual problem. Then come and find deliverance.

Has the Father been showing you where there is sin in your life. Then find forgiveness as you confess it before God - because there is full and free forgiveness as we repent.

Renewal

18 The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

But let's end with good news. We have a God who renews our spirits as we come in worship. He's close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. As we face the issues of life, the problems, the realisation that we have sinned and need to repent: then where's our heavenly Father. Like a earthly parent - He's right there next to us. Giving us that hug or that arm around us. We have a God who desires to be close to His people - to be there with them. The question isn't how close God is, but how close we want Him to be.

Worship is supposed to take us into the presence of a holy God. By the blood of Christ, we can come rightfully into the holiest place as God's sons and daughters. Let's do that this evening. we find, refuge, we find refreshing and challenge, we find relief and we find renewal. Is that how you have feel as we have gone through this evening.

Let's pray.