

***In the House – Psalm 84***

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My girlfriend, Laura, and her daughters, Bree and Lily, are moving to a new home this week. The landlord of the house they've been renting is taking it back to live in it herself, so it's forced them to look for a new place. And this week, they'll move into a lovely apartment with a little more space and some amenities that will make their lives a little more comfortable.

I spent a little time with Laura looking at some options for this move. And we were reminded that housing in America is expensive, especially safe and decent housing. And it really does price many in our economy out of the market. Safe, decent, and affordable housing is critically important to the welfare of families.

Sometimes, the intrigue of looking to move is not completely rooted in the best of intentions. Getting the itch to move up in housing when we really don't need to somewhat stems from the ancient tradition of keeping up with the Jones'. "If our friends are moving up," we say, "maybe we should too."

But, at the same time, we all have a genuine and well-intentioned desire to have a place where we and our families can realize the greatest comfort and harmony – the place that can best serve as our refuge from the stresses and demands of our hectic schedules away from home. After all, it is in our homes where we rest and relax. It is in our homes where we connect with family and friends. It is in our

homes where we gather the energy for the challenges of a new day.

Homes are important. Whether they are apartments or houses, our homes are certainly where our hearts are.

Psalm 84 captures the sentiments of others who were caught up in the intrigue of a new house. Except, these Hebrew pilgrims were not caught up in the excitement of a home for themselves; they were expressing their excitement over God's dwelling place (in this case, the Temple in Jerusalem).

"How lovely is your dwelling place," writes the psalmist. "My soul longs, indeed, it faints for the courts of the Lord." Upon seeing the city and the temple, the writer is bonded to this place in a way that suggests a true love and a deep yearning to always be apart of the house of the Lord.

Just as all of us have affinity for our homes in ways that supersede their outward beauty, so do these pilgrims have a connection with the temple and Jerusalem that supersedes any physical appeal. They are concerned with what is inside the house of the Lord and what the house of the Lord stands for.

The psalmist is homesick for a true home: God's house. The sight of birds (even sparrows!) nesting within the temple complex leads the psalmist to reflect upon the appropriateness of literally finding a "home" in the temple.

Do we yearn to be in God's house? Are we eager to make the house of the Lord our home?

With all of the improvements to our building and property here over the last several years, and with ideas that are being bounced around for improving our indoor

worship space in the years to come, it is obvious that we have a beautiful house and want to have a beautiful house where God dwells. It indeed is lovely. But, do we yearn to be in it only because of its exterior beauty or do we long to be in it for what it says to us about who God is and who those who dwell in God's house are and should be to us?

Inside any home, of course, are its occupants. And who they are and how they behave dictate whether strangers will be welcome there.

To indeed have a lovely or beloved dwelling place, such as this (the house of the Lord), there must be a combination of accountability and mercy.

Growing up in my parents' house, I always knew where I stood. Like so many other households, there was no doubt as to who I was accountable to. My mother and my father were the ones I answered to. My actions were a reflection on them, in addition to myself. And because of that accountability, there was also a certain set of expectations I was counted on to fulfill.

But, in addition to being accountable to my parents, I was also accountable to my brother. We were members of the same family, and my actions—good or bad—would reflect upon him and his well-being too.

As members of the family of God, the same accountability comes into play. Because we are connected as God's children, we have responsibility—to God and to one another. We have the responsibility to act in ways that God has instructed us to act—lovingly, honestly, truthfully, and respectfully. Our inability to do so saddens God—a God who has given us so much.

And as members of the household of God, we are accountable to our siblings—each other. To not act with love, honesty, truthfulness and respect is to let down our fellow brothers and sisters of this community, allowing them to suffer when we have chosen poorly.

We are accountable to God and to each other.

But, that accountability must be coupled with mercy. Let's face it, none of us acts lovingly, honestly, and respectfully all the time. We all fall short of the glory of God. And just as it is in our own homes when we harm one another and face the need for forgiveness and another chance, so also do we fail as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is important that we hold up the standard of accountability that God demands of us. However, it is also important that we reach out with love and forgiveness when a member of the family has stumbled and fallen.

When the apostle Paul wrote his letters to the church in Corinth, he wrote because he had been given some information concerning some moral irregularities in the church. And of course, Paul writes to them encouraging them to correct their erroneous ways. But, in addition to this, Paul recognizes that the Corinthian church is God's church. It's not atypical, but typical. It is the people of God, held to a high standard, but made up of sinners. And that household of God, in addition to the ones we are a part of today, is always in need of mercy and forgiveness.

Author and Pastor Dan Brown, of Stonybrook Community Church, once wrote of this real-life scenario. "You move to a new place, and you start going to church. And everything is new, and it's all exciting. The fellowship

is great. The teaching is solid — you've never heard such wonderful Bible exposition ....

“And then you start to really get to know people. The bubble bursts. You discover that the person who sits next to you with that ecstatic, holy look on her face in worship is, in real life, a terrible gossip. And you find out that the person who makes the big show of putting money in the offering is a terrible miser. You discover a congregation filled with people who do awful things. There are complainers and gossips, people who yell at their kids, and kick their dogs, and cheat on their taxes. And the deeper you dig, the worse you'll find: substance abusers, people whose families are falling apart. And at this point you'll do one of two things. Either you'll bag it and look for greener pastures and go through the process all over again (probably many times). Or, if you stick it out, you'll have to struggle with this question: How could this possibly be the church of God? How could God call people like this his children, his saints? Surely there is some mistake.

“But if we accept what Paul says here, there is no mistake. The church at Corinth was about as bad as it gets. But it was the church of God. The Corinthians were sanctified and they were sinners.”

We are sanctified by the spirit, and yet we are sinners in need of redemption. We are held accountable within the household of God, and yet we are called to be merciful and forgiving to members of our family.

Our congregation here is, guess what, filled with sinners. We're a group that takes seriously our calling to be accountable to each other in our calling. Yet, we stumble.

And so, because we realize how we ourselves come up short, we have a tendency to side on mercy when it comes to how we treat each other.

And that spirit of both accountability and mercy, then, makes for a place for people feel welcome.

Anne Lamotte, in her book *Travelling Mercies*, tells this story: "When [my pastor Veronica] was about 7, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until finally she saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

"And that is why I have stayed so close to mine - because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."

How lovely is the house of the Lord when it is filled with accountability and mercy. It is God's dwelling place. And it's home to us.