

The Beauty of the Lord

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Bible Text: Psalm 27:4
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Let us pray.

Now, our Lord, here we are, as the hymn says, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without. So lead us in your truth and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation. Give us a glad glimpse of the King of glory, that we may find our delight and assurance and satisfaction and perseverance in him. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Our Scripture this evening comes from Psalm 27. We'll read half of the psalm, verses 1 to 6 focusing on verse 4. Psalm 27 is a statement of confidence in the first half of the psalm, and a cry for help in the second half. It's the psalm of David.

1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? 2 When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. 3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. 4 One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple. 5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock. 6 And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Focusing then on verse 4 for our text tonight,

4 One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.

Well, we were driving from west to east across the southern part of Kansas about a year ago on US Highway 160. I found it delightful. I was contemplating the beauty of Kansas. I don't know why some of you are laughing because if you really marinate there, it grows on you. It's a kind of a rustic beauty. It's a spacious beauty. And I enjoyed that drive

immensely across that southern area of Kansas but you may not have thought of the beauty of Kansas, and you may not have thought particularly about the beauty of the Lord either, but that's what David was preoccupied with. He said that he wanted to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to gaze upon the beauty the Lord. How is the Lord beautiful or delightful, however you want to put it? And what might David have meant here when he said he wanted to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord? It's his passion, it's preoccupation, it's one thing I have in mind that I've asked for, that all the days of my life I might dwell in the house of the Lord, to this purpose, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. You know, that might be a little bit of a problem for David to be doing that because in his days, before Solomon built the temple, the tabernacle was split up. You can see that in 2 Chronicles 1, verses 3 and 4. David had recovered the Ark of the Covenant and brought it up to Jerusalem, 2 Samuel 6. It had been neglected in the days of Saul. But there was the Ark of the Covenant that ordinarily was in that innermost compartment of the tabernacle, the Exodus tabernacle, called the Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place. But it was in Jerusalem where David had pitched a tent for it, when he had brought it back to Jerusalem. But the rest of the tabernacle was up in Gibeon, six miles northwest of Jerusalem. It's a kind of a split affair. Yet at the same time, I think when David went to the house of the Lord, he would remember that originally it was all one. He would remember that tabernacle in Exodus with the most holy place, with the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred box in it, and then the holy place with the altar of incense and the lampstand and the table of the bread of the presence, and then the outer court with the laver and the altar of burnt offering, he would have remembered it all together, but how, how, when he was in the house of the Lord, did he see the beauty of the Lord?

Well, I want to suggest how that might be. In the first place, he may have seen the beauty of the Lord in his condescension, in his condescension. In fact, that he was in the tabernacle, and the tabernacle was, it's a tent. You go back to the book of Exodus, and you know how the book of Exodus goes. It's divided up into three big chunks, chapters 1 to 18, 19 to 24, 25 to 40, and you remember that you can take three words, four-letter words, and you can summarize that. The first section is bush, the second section is hill, and the third section is tent. He's the God of the bush, Exodus 3 in chapters 1 to 18 really. The God of the bush who meets Moses and promises to rescue his people from slavery. And then he's the God of the hill, of the smoking mountain Sinai, where in chapters 19 to 24 he gives his covenant law to his people. And then he's the God of the tent, who in chapters 25 to 40 says, "They shall make for me," and this is the climax of the book of Exodus chapter 25 verse 8, "and they shall make for me a sanctuary and I shall dwell in their midst." It's the most tedious part of the book of Exodus to you, but it's really the climax of the whole thing. It's not the deliverance at the sea. It's not the smoking mountain. It's Yahweh dwelling among his people in a tent, in the midst of their tents, all around them. He's the God who's accessible to his people, and he's beautiful, is he not, in his condescension, and at the high and the holy one comes down and makes himself known in the midst of his people. As he stoops down and places his tent in the midst of his people's tent, the testimony of Exodus 25 to 40 is simply that God can't get close enough to his people. He simply must be among them and he's beautiful, is he not, in his condescension.

You see that played out and fleshed out, don't you, in the New Testament, because you read in John chapter 1, you know, the Word always was God, and then verse 14, and the Word became flesh, and then you have the tabernacle verb, and he pitched his tent among us. And you have it not only in redemptive history like that, but you have it also in experiential terms. In John 14:23, "If anyone loves me," Jesus says, "he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." That's the beauty of God's condescension and isn't it true that any time you see the condescension taking place, and you wouldn't necessarily expect it, isn't it true that oftentimes you get the goosebumps on your spine when you see it?

There's a marvelous sentence in Robert Massey's book on Peter the Great of Russia. It's not a part of the book that deals with Peter the Great directly. He's, Massey's really talking about Charles XII, the King of Sweden, and he was an 18-year-old king. And there they were going to attack Narva. It's on the Gulf of Finland. I don't know if the Russians held it or if they were threatening to take it. In any case, Charles XII thought they needed to make sure the Russians didn't get it and so he was going to lead his troops against the Russians there. The trouble is, that is about 1700, the trouble is it was getting late in the war term. It was late autumn and so on, and you know what can happen in late autumn. It's not a good time to try to fight wars. But nevertheless, on November 13th, Charles took off with a little over 12,000 of his men who could still march and went toward Narva. and the conditions, as they knew, were appalling. The roads were mired with autumn rains. The men had to march and sleep in thick syrupy mud. The Russians had conducted a ravaged countryside. They had burned out all the farmhouses. They had burned the crops and so on, there's no fodder for horses, there's no food except what the Swedish soldiers have in their knapsacks and so on, and a steady cold November rain drenched the men to the skin as they marched. And then at night, the temperature would drop, and the rain would turn to sleet or to snow and the ground began to freeze, and then this marvelous sentence, I quote, "The king slept with his men under the open sky, receiving the rain and the snow on his face." Isn't that beautiful? Charles XII doesn't have some special place off by himself with a kind of a bit of a royal shelter where he has a fire and nicer accommodations. Oh no, he says, "The king slept with his men under the open sky receiving the rain and snow on his face." He slept in the slop that his men slept in.

What condescension. In a way, that's beautiful, isn't it, and how much more when you see it in your God, that the Lord is not just the God of the flaming bush and the smoking mountain, but of the pitched tent, that his obsession is to be among his people, and there's something beautiful about that condescension. But then secondly, you see the beauty of the Lord here in his revelation. I think we could imply that, in his revelation. What do we mean? Well, perhaps while David was worshiping, I know, I can't be sure, can I, but perhaps while David was worshiping, his thoughts went to that place in Jerusalem where he had pitched the tent for the Ark of the Covenant, and perhaps he remembered back to the days of the Exodus tabernacle when that Ark of the Covenant was in that innermost room of the tabernacle in the Holy of Holies, that sacred box covered with gold plate and so on, and the most important thing that was in that sacred box that symbolized the very presence of God were the tablets of stone, the covenant documents that God gave Moses

at Sinai. What were those? That was what God put down as his will for his people. He revealed his covenant law in those tablets, the covenant tablets and so on. He was telling his people how he wanted them to live. It was fleshed out later, yes, Exodus 21 to 23, Moses will expand on what all was involved in that covenant law for Israel. He'll do even more in the book of Deuteronomy before they enter the Promised Land, etc. Time will come when, as Psalm 1 says, the blessed man is the one who meditates on the Torah of Yahweh, the law of the Lord, day and night, because it's even written down then in a Torah, an instruction, a law document. But it was right back there in those covenant tablets that were in the Ark of the Covenant, that was God's commanding word. That was his revealed will for his people. You say, "Yeah, well big deal, I know that." That wasn't the case, you know, for everybody. That's really part of the beauty of the Lord, that he reveals to his people, you know, not that he's saying, you do this in order to earn my saving favor or something like that, but it was that Yahweh was saying, "I've delivered you from bondage in Egypt, I have entered into a covenant with you, I've made you my people, now here's how I want my people to live." And he gives them the ten words, or the ten commandments. "Because you are my people, here I'm revealing to you how I want you to flesh out your lives." But he reveals that to them.

That wasn't the way it was in paganism. There was just a morass in paganism. I've told you before about the way the editors of one of the collections of some pagan materials have entitled one of the prayers. It's called, "The Prayer to Every God." And it's this fellow who is suffering apparently sickness or some plague of some kind, and he's sure it's because of some sin he's committed. But he's in terrible condition because he doesn't know what god or goddess he's offended. That's why he prays to all of them that he possibly can think of. And he doesn't know what it is that he's done that is wrong. He thinks there's some guilt there, but he doesn't know what he's done that's wrong. What a horrid situation to be in and that's because pagan deities didn't tell their worshipers what they required of them. He didn't know. Quite different, isn't it, when you have a God who tells you what he wants of you, who reveals to you the way he wants you to live.

And so paganism in one way was a kind of a, I mean, if you took it seriously, it could be kind of like a pin the tail on the donkey religion. You don't know what deity you've offended, and you don't know what it is you've done. You see the morass that's there, how frustrating that is and you say, "Well, yes, but pagans had laws too, didn't they? I mean, don't we have law collections in the ancient Near East, like the laws of Hammurabi, you know, from 1700-something B.C.?" Yes, we have that. But those laws of Hammurabi, for instance, were not laws from a god to a people. They weren't laws from a god. No, no, they were laws that Hammurabi put down, not necessarily and probably not for his people to know and to live by, oh no. No, it was his way of probably defending his kingship to his god. In other words, sometimes the kings near the end of their reign would put together a collection of laws to show that they had executed a just and upright reign, and it was sort of their defense to their deity. It had nothing to do with how his people were to live, and it certainly didn't come from any alleged god. But in Israel, you have something different. You see, in Israel, law was public law, and it was meant to be brought into the lives, to be lived in the life and the relations and the thinking

and the worship of God's people. Amazing that law should be something that's actually done and fleshed out in life.

You don't have that in paganism but you have it in the Bible. You see, in paganism, nothing was really clear but in the Bible, you have a God who tells you what he wants and there's some beauty in that because clarity is always a relief, even if it's not necessarily welcome. There was a time when Harry Truman was president and while he was still a Senator before he became president, Claire Booth Luce had, well, she had criticized Truman's wife Bess. She had called her payroll Bess because Truman's wife was on his Senate payroll. She actually worked in his Senate office and Truman laid out what it was she did, etc., but Claire Booth Luce just kept criticizing this and calling her payroll Bess, etc. etc. Well, after Truman became president, Henry Luce, Claire Booth Luce's husband, one time asked Truman why he had never invited, and his wife, Claire Booth Luce, had never received an invitation to the White House. And so Truman told him, he said, "I've been in politics for 35 years and everything that could be said about a human being has been said about me, but my wife has never been in politics, and she has always conducted herself in a circumspect manner. No one has a right to make derogatory remarks about Mrs. T. Your wife has said many unkind and untrue things about her, and as long as I'm in residence here, she'll never be a guest in the White House." Now, you may not like to hear that, but that's clear. You know exactly where you stand.

Now, that's the thing about the revelation of God. He's a God who speaks, who tells you what he wants of you, his people. You're not in doubt. You've got a word that's clear, and that's part of the beauty of the Lord. Now thirdly, you can see here also, I think, that the Lord is beautiful in his sustenance, in his sustenance. We can't take up everything, of course, but there was a part in that holy place, and David, of course, never went in there, but if he had, and you would look to the north side, you would see a table that's sometimes called the table of showbread or the bread of the presence, and there were 12 loaves that would be put on that table, replaced every week, and so on. And if you go to 1 Samuel 21, you'll find that David on one occasion had an experience with the high priest and with those loaves, and was able to obtain some for himself and his men. I can't go into that now, but when you think of that, and if he was thinking about what he knew was actually in the tabernacle and in, say, the holy place, even though he never went there, but he would think about that bread of the presence, that was not there for God to eat, no, but it probably signified something about the Lord himself, that he was the God who was the sustainer of his people, because on the way out of Egypt, to remember, Israel themselves had an experience of that nature with Yahweh, who in Exodus chapter 16 provided them, you remember, with the bread from heaven, with the manna. And it says that they gathered it morning by morning in their wilderness journey. Yahweh was the God who sustained his people and might David's mind as he meditated on his Lord in the tabernacle, might his mind have gone, especially in light of his experience in 1 Samuel 21, to think about the table of showbread and the bread of the presence and to think of how that spoke of Yahweh as the God who sustains and nourishes and provides for his people in all their troubles and needs.

I think that could be quite likely and the beauty of the Lord there is partly in the way that's so different, again, from ancient paganism because, you see, ancient paganism didn't think that way. Just an example, there's sometimes called a Babylonian, sometimes it's called a creation myth, it's really not, but it has some overlap with some of the Genesis materials, and in this is Marduk is the chief deity and so on, and Marduk and his associated gods are victorious over a number of gods whom they defeated and so on and they made the defeated gods do the dirty work in serving themselves, the victorious gods. Well, the defeated gods and goddesses apparently had a sort of a defeated gods union meeting, and they complained about having to do the dirty work in serving the victorious gods and so on. So finally a solution was reached, and they decided, "I've got it. We'll create man. We'll take the blood of Kingu," who was one who had rebelled against the gods, "and from his blood we'll make man, and we'll make the duty of the gods be upon man." You see the way paganism thinks. Man's an accident. He's an afterthought. And he's not, as in the Bible, a son, as at the climax of Genesis 1, but he's a slave. Man's job is to do the dirty work of servicing and nourishing and caring for the gods.

That's paganism's view but that's not the Bible's view, is it? That's why you ought to rejoice and clap your hands when you read Genesis 1, and you get down to that revolutionary verse, verse 29, and you read, "And God said, 'Behold, I've given you every plant-yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed and its fruit, you shall have them for food.'" Revolutionary. You see, the God of the Bible is not a God that you have to support. He's not the God whom you have to nourish. No, no, he's the God who provides for you. He's the God who sustains you. And David, David knew this and you remember what he said in Psalm 23, verse 5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." What's he saying there? He's not saying that you give me a quick snack that I can grab and run in the presence of my enemy. You prepare a table. I sit and I eat and I enjoy it and my enemies can't do anything to interrupt it. But you see the point that's being made there. David is saying, the Lord sustains me in the most adverse of circumstances and he's giving you something that you can take to the table in that text, because he's saying to you, isn't he, that if the Lord can sustain you and provide for you in the presence of your enemies, if he can do it in circumstances that extreme, then is there any situation and any set of circumstances in which the Lord cannot sustain and nourish and care for you? You see, you don't have to hold up the Lord. You don't have to carry him. He carries you.

He's beautiful in his sustenance but then I want to push you just a little bit more. I think we need to see that you see the beauty of the Lord in his atonement. In his atonement. When David would go into the outer court, to which he did have access, the outer court of the tabernacle, the first piece of furniture he would see would be the altar of burnt offering, the bronze altar where a sacrifice was offered. That would be the first piece of furniture he faced, and David saw it many times. You go into the first chapter of Leviticus, and if a worshiper comes in to offer a burnt offering, and the purpose of it was to make atonement for one, it says, after the worshiper slits the throat, etc., and kills his animal, and so on, the priests would gather the blood, and the priests would throw the blood against the altar. It was the place where atonement began. Now when you look at that and that whole, as we sometimes call it, sacrificial system, you have to remember

that that wasn't some way in which the Israelites were bribing the Lord for his favor, etc. Rather, they were using the gift of his provision. There's a very important text you need to keep in mind, Leviticus 17:11, where the Lord says to his people, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls." I've given you the sacrificial blood on the altar to make atonement for your souls. This is my gift to you! It's the means by which you maintain fellowship with a Holy God. This is a gift of grace. The sacrificial system is not some form of celestial bribery at all. It's God's gracious provision.

He's the one who deals with my guilt and that's part of the beauty of the Lord, that there is atonement that deals with my guilt. There's an altar of sacrifice where blood is shed, where a life can be substituted for my life. There's an altar where guilt is paid for by the blood of a substitute and is that not the beauty of the Lord when you see him in his atonement? I think probably the edge has been taken off of that for us because maybe we've gotten too used to hearing it. We can get deadened to it. Sometimes we need to see it with the surprise of someone perhaps who had no knowledge of it. Dr. John White, the Canadian Christian psychiatrist, tells of a time when he had a 40-year-old bachelor who had already spent several weeks in the psychiatric ward. He thought he had cancer and that they were all lying to him when they told him there was no evidence of it. He had no energy, no appetite, he couldn't sleep. He was given antipsychotic pills, mood-elevating pills, ten electroconvulsive treatments, and there was no change. So White said, I had him in my office trying to get a better handle on what could be wrong and as he talked about the earlier years in his life, there were two things that seemed to really bother him. One was that he had drunk a beer when his doctor had told him not to. And the other was, more significantly, that he had avoided enlisting in World War II and felt badly when some of his friends had died in Europe. And White says, curiously, he seemed to feel equally bad about both his sins. Well, they talked, and White said something mysterious happened. I asked him, "What about forgiveness?" He said, "I want it so bad." "What's your religion?" Russian Orthodox. "And what does your priest say about how you get to be forgiven?" He doesn't talk too much. We go to confession. "And what does that do?" I don't often go. So White said he groped for words. He said, "But if you do go, why would God forgive you?" Because Christ died. He shed blood. "So?" But I'm too bad for that. White says, and you've got to love this in a psychiatrist, "Unaccountably I grew angry, no logical reason, it just happened. What do you mean you're too bad?" And his voice rose as well. "I don't deserve ever to be forgiven." You're darn right you don't. He looked up, surprised. He said, "I can't be a hypocrite. I've got to make amends." Now he said, "It may be hard to believe, but I found my anger increasing and I said to him, and who do you think you are to say Christ's death was not enough for you? Who are you to feel you must add your miserable pittance to the great gift God offers you? Is his sacrifice not enough for the likes of you?" We continued to stare at each other, he said and suddenly, he began both to cry and to pray at the same time. "There's something indescribably refreshing," White said, "about the first real prayer a man prays, especially when he doesn't know proper prayer talk." White said, "As nearly as I recall, he said something like, God, I didn't know. I'm real sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." Sobs, tears, running nose. White passes him a box of Kleenex. "God, thank you. It's amazing. I didn't know it worked like that. I thought, but God, I don't know much. Gee, God, I don't know how to

say it. Thank you. Thanks an awful lot. Gee, God, thank you." White said he prayed. His normal fluency was interrupted a bit by the emotion as this fellow mopped his face in Kleenex. His eyes were shining. He said he shook my hand and he said, "Thanks Doc, thanks a lot. How come nobody ever told me before?" White says we cut out all the medication. During the following week, White greeted him when he happened to see him very briefly because he wanted his staff to notice the progress and it was there, there were remarks on the charts. "Remarkable improvement. No longer seems depressed. Making realistic plans for the future." He was almost whole. Then one day he got hold of Dr. White and he said, "Doc, I know you're busy, but I've just got to talk to you." And as soon as he sat down, he started, "I don't know how to say it, Doc, but it's like I've been blind all my life and now, well, now I can see." White says he had never read a Bible, never sung an evangelical hymn. He didn't know. He was quoting. But he knew that God was beautiful in his atonement that dealt with his guilt. And the risen Jesus essentially says the same thing to you. He comes to you and he points you back to his empty cross and he says to you the words of Leviticus 17:11 as he points to that cross, "I have given it for you to make atonement for your souls." Oh Lord, that's part of the beauty of the Lord when you see him in his atonement. But can't you see if you open your eyes, the beauty of the Lord in the house of the Lord.

O Lord, you simply overflow for the needs of your people and once again, we are brought to you in the glad chains of thanksgiving, and we would offer our praise to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.