Swifties and Swallows
Psalm 84

I…am not a swiftie. I don't dislike Taylor Swift's music, nor do I find it as incredible as many of my peers do. I'm…mostly indifferent to Taylor Swift. I'll dance when "Shake it Off" comes on the radio, but I'm not jumping up and down with excitement every four months when a new album comes out. And I'm certainly not about to drop a grand on tickets to see one of her shows.

Which appears to put me in the minority. Taylor's Eras Tour has become the first-ever billion-dollar concert tour. When Taylor arrives in Toronto for six shows in November, it will be the highest-grossing live music event in the city's history.

An estimated 31 million people tried to join the virtual wait list for tickets, with many being turned away disappointed.

The average ticket costs $1100, with seats on the second level ranging closer to $2000.

Rogers is spending $14,000 to turn the two kilometers between Nathan Phillips Square and the Rogers Center into "Taylor Swift Way" for the month of November, and the Toronto sign will be lit in Swiftie red.

There is an entire culture built around Taylor Swift. Fans exchange and collect friendship bracelets with each other. They drive for hours to attend album release listening parties, where they decode songs looking for Easter eggs. They spend weeks living in tents to score tickets to her shows. In an LA Times article from April, one fan said, "Swifties are my life. I don't have other communities outside of this – it's harder to connect with people. With the Swifties, I can be a total stranger to someone and then be able to have something in common with them. Taylor is probably the biggest part of my life. I've dedicated so much of

my life to her and I've seen so many other thousands of people have done the same and it's so easy to connect with those people."

Now, before some of you start scoffing, I'd point out that this isn't dissimilar to some of the culture around sporting events, where people also spend way too much money on tickets to big games and drive for hours, following their team around, and paint their faces and feel a sense of community with total strangers with similarly painted faces.

Humans like to be part of things. We like to get caught up in something, to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to dedicate our lives to something, to feel camaraderie and kinship with others. We've always been like this.

Case in point…Psalm 84.

If you went up to a group of Swifties standing in line, waiting to get into a concert, and asked them how they were feeling, it would probably sound something like Psalm 84. Because this is a pilgrimage psalm, one of the psalms of Zion. It's an exuberant declaration of anticipation, looking forward to arriving at the temple of God for an experience with the living God.

The psalmist starts by anticipating entering the temple to worship God. It's likely that the author only goes to the temple once or twice a year, traveling long distances in order to worship Yahweh in his house in Jerusalem. There is a longing in these words, a desperate desire to be in the courts of the Lord.

For where the Lord is there is rest and protection and blessing. Even the smallest of birds, the sparrow and the swallow, find a place to nest here in God's presence. With an open-roofed courtyard, we can imagine that all kinds of birds might make their home in the crooks and crannies of the temple structure, adding their own chirps and songs to the voices

raised in praise of the Creator. The psalmist is *jealous* of these birds: "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you."

After anticipating entering the temple, the psalmist reflects back on the journey toward the sanctuary. Long and arduous as the trip might be, those who embark on it are buoyed by the anticipation of encountering God. The Hebrew word Baka refers to a type of "weeping" tree, one that drips resin or gum. The Valley of Baka is thus likely a valley filled with these trees, but poetically is the Valley of Weeping. Even here, however, those who seek God will see their tears transformed…the "pools" that are created by the autumn rains might also be translated as "blessings." A heart set on God will not be overcome, but will experience the gracious presence of the God who upholds.

The psalmist then moves to prayer. Having declared the blessing that comes with God's presence, the psalmist asks God to be present to the king, the anointed one, the people's shield, who also resides in Jerusalem.

Finally, the psalmist circles back, ending where she began, in anticipation of entering the courts of the Lord. She isn't looking for special access tickets, or a VIP experience. Just to stand in the door of the house of God for a day would be better than an opulent life anywhere else. Walter Brueggemann suggests that "the tents of the wicked" probably doesn't refer to a specific place or group of people, but to any setting in which the guiding principle is service of self rather than service of God.

For the Lord, and the Lord alone, is the giver of good things. The Lord is the King, the Almighty, the sun, giving life, and the shield, offering protection. An encounter with this God, the living God…worshipping

this God in his courts, is the greatest experience the psalmist can imagine.

I wonder…if we feel the same.

I wonder if we could say, “My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.”

Now God, of course, isn’t found in church in the same way he was found in the temple. We find God in the person of Jesus, in whom, says Colossians, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And we find God in persons in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells, for we are, says 1 Corinthians, temples of the living God.

But our church buildings are still places that are dedicated to God, where we gather together in the name of Jesus to meet God, to worship God, to focus our minds and our attentions on God.

Do we walk through those doors expecting to have an encounter with the living God?

The CRC pastor and preacher Stan Mast says there’s usually an awful lot we bring into church, but it’s not always that kind of anticipation. “Think about,” he writes, “the various moods in which we come to church…angry, distracted, annoyed, curious, wanting to be entertained, hoping to sing some “good” songs, steaming from a fight with your spouse, resentful because your parents dragged you here, exhausted from a late Saturday night party, worried out of your mind about a problem at work, feeling sick from a bad cold, upset about something in church. It’s no wonder we don’t find God in church! If you want to find God here, you must come through the door seeking him, yearning for the living God, wanting to meet God more than anything else.”

But do we want to meet God more than anything else? Do we yearn for God?

For years, even decades, we've been aware that Christianity is on a downward trend in the Western World. Fewer and fewer people are attending church regularly, or state that they believe in God whenever the pollsters ask. We know about atheists, and agnostics, and the rising group of "nones." But I discovered a new term this week – "apatheists."

Apatheists are people who are ambivalent about belief. An atheist still cares very strongly about belief – they adamantly don't have it. An agnostic doesn't know what they believe. An apatheist, on the other hand, has belief…they just feel apathetic towards that belief. It's not really that important to them.

There are a lot of reasons for this sense of apathy towards God. On the one hand, most of us in the Western world live a pretty comfortable life. In an age when food comes in microwavable containers and science has extended the average life expectancy by 10 years over the last half century, who needs God? We're more secure than we've ever been before…what does God give us that a day at the spa and a gym membership can't provide?

On the other hand, we're more distracted than ever before. The pastor Kyle Beshears said on a podcast, "our smartphones and sources of technology are so distracting and have leveled out our attention across so many different things that contemplating on life, the ultimate source and meaning, and God, is just not worth it. We don't have the bandwidth anymore because we're so distracted today." Our hearts and our minds are barraged by an endless amount of information, all clamoring for our attention…what time or energy do we have left to contemplate God?

And this is not just a phenomenon we see outside of the church. In 2022 LifeWay Research polled 1000 pastors, across denominations, about the biggest challenges they see in their own congregations. Over

75% of pastors said that the biggest "people dynamic" challenge they faced today…was apathy.

Even within the church, even among people who believe in God…we're kind of indifferent about our faith. We might go through the motions, we may come to church for the social aspect, we may come away inspired, or enjoy singing particular songs. But do we come to church, or go through our days in between Sundays, expecting to encounter God? Longing to encounter God? Do we want to make our home *in* God? Or is God just in the background of our lives, on the periphery, like a set of curtains we've grown so used to we couldn't actually say what colour they are anymore?

I think many of us, if we were honest, would say that we find it difficult to identity with Psalm 84.

At the same time, I think many of us would say that we strongly identify with the sense of yearning that is expressed in Psalm 84.

Because we are all searching for home. Elizabeth Oldfied, my new favourite podcaster, said in a recent episode "we long to be seen and we long to be known and we long for a deep intimacy and we long for our lives to mean something. And we long to be part of a story bigger than ourselves." The Swiftie, the football fan…we're all longing for community, for intimacy, for meaning, to be part of a story bigger than ourselves.

Which means that all of us, within and without of the church, are being drawn to something. There's some part of us that is oriented, says Beshears, towards God's objective sense of love, beauty, meaning, significance, and truth. But, distracted and comfortable as we are, we don't pursue these things far enough. So says C.S. Lewis in his famous sermon "The Weight of Glory:"

"If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. *We are far too easily pleased.*"

How do we move beyond the mud pies? How do we call forth, in ourselves and in one another, a desire to pursue God, to seek God, to expect an encounter with the living God?

Well, we have to show people – or remind ourselves - that faith matters, that God matters, that God is worth getting involved with. Which we do, in large part, by telling stories. By tapping into people's sense of imagination, and helping them see that maybe what they long for can actually be found. As the 16th century thinker Blaise Pascal put it rather succinctly, "make religion attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is."

C. S. Lewis himself came to faith because a friend showed him that everything he was searching for in mythology, poetry, and literature was, in fact, grounded in God. The stories that seemed most meaningful for him contained the seeds of truth that were fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

So tell the stories of how God has been present in your life. When have you walked through a Valley of Baka and experienced the steadying hand of God? When have you been overwhelmed by a sense of God's goodness? When have you had an encounter with the living God? When have you felt the Spirit move within you during worship?

We tend to shy away from these stories because they sound kind of weird, or maybe even hokey. Us good rational Reformed people get kind of suspicious when it comes to miracles, or mountaintop experiences, or movements of the Spirit. But I think people are looking for weird. The rational world only gets us so far. It can't provide the meaning we long for. So…let's make Christianity weird again. Let's give people something that matters, something they can't find anywhere else. Let's give people something to long for.

Because the God that we yearn for? Also yearns for us. Is seeking us. Longs to bless us and uphold us and make his presence known to us. Longs to give us a home, a place to lay our nest. So, the hymnwriter once sang, "I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me; it was not I that found, O Savior true; no, I was found of Thee."

Would you pray with me?

O God, help us to seek you.
Stir up in us a longing for you that cannot be satisfied by anything else.
May we know your goodness in our lives, and be bold to tell our stories of your presence,
so that others might know there is an answer to their longings.
As we gather in worship, remind us of the old stories of faith,
re-focus our vision,
and send us into the world with a renewed passion for you,
so that the ends of all the earth will hear,
the nations seek the Lord;
and worship you, the King of Kings,
in earth and heaven adored.
Amen.