

PREPARING TO WORSHIP

Psalm 24

Dr. George O. Wood

Psalm 24. Out of the first twenty-four psalms, twenty-three of them are from David's pen. Only the first psalm was non-Davidic. Psalm 24 is a psalm which celebrates the glory of God. For our purposes and applying it to our life I've entitled this psalm "Preparing to Worship." I think that the use of this psalm is appropriate for personal or corporate worship. It is a very valuable and helpful experience in our life.

As you know if you've been with us in previous psalms, the psalms strike different notes on the piano. Different responses in our life. There seems to be a psalm for every season, every moment of our spiritual experience. One of our most important spiritual experiences is to open our hearts wide to God in worship on a daily level and in a meeting like this when we're gathered together. I think this psalm addresses that preparing to worship.

This psalm bears some resemblance to some previous psalms. For example, if you look at Psalm 15 it asks the same questions that Psalm 24 will ask. "LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?" (verse 1, NIV). The answer comes back a little bit more extended in Psalm 15 than it does in Psalm 24. But Psalm 15 goes on to detail "He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the LORD, who keeps his oath even when it hurts, who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken" (verses 2-5, NIV). That's the theme of verses 3-6 of Psalm 24 only it's more condensed there. Then also another facet of Psalm 24 that's picked up in

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previous psalms is the celebration of God the Creator. The two psalms that have already built upon this are Psalm 8, which speaks of God's majesty and our dignity. You can recall the key line from that: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens" (verse 1, NIV). Here Psalm 24 is saying, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it" (verse 1, NIV). Psalm 8 speaks of God, the creator of the heavens. Psalm 24: "The world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters" (verse 1, NIV). The earth.

Therefore there is also an interlinkage with Psalm 19, which celebrates God's glory in skies and Scriptures. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (verse 1, NIV). Then David in Psalm 19 goes on to speak of the metaphor of the sun rising in the day and stretching its course across the heavens like a bridegroom coming from the pavilion to be a kind of recognition of how we ought to celebrate each coming day—with enthusiasm and with delight. We live by virtue of the One who created this great expanse above us.

Now Psalm 24 comes along and picks up another thread to the creative aspect of God and that is not only the heavens telling of the glory of the Lord and His name is majestic in the heavens. But here the earth is the Lord's and everything that's in it. Some feel that David originally wrote Psalm 24 when the ark of the covenant came for the first time into Jerusalem. A situation described in 2 Samuel 6. The ark of the covenant was the most sacred object within Jewish worship from the time of Moses until the fall of Israel in the sixth century when Babylon conquered Judah and the ark disappeared from history. If the ark of the covenant is ever found, it will be without a doubt the most significant theological find ever in the history of the human race. That will be a find.

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In David's day the ark of the covenant was already at least two to four hundred years old. This was four centuries old by 2 Samuel 6. A wooden box overlaid with gold, which had within it the tablets of the law, Aaron's rod that budded and a pot of manna. David had conquered Jerusalem, which would be the capital, the citadel. The ark had never rested in Jerusalem. David finally after a series of delays that had been caused by improper touching of the ark, the ark is brought into Jerusalem. David at that occasion dances before the Lord. His wife despises him for it. But it's a tremendous time of joy when the ark is proceeding to its habitation in the sanctuary or in the tabernacle because it was before the temple on God's holy hill.

So some feel that this psalm was originally composed by David to celebrate that occasion. What David is talking about in this psalm is a procession of God coming to His central place on earth. David does not want to leave the misunderstanding that God dwells only in Jerusalem or only on the temple mount.

So he starts out by noting that the procession begins in the provinces. "The earth is the LORD's." He is coming from His far pavilions. The ark is coming in. But there's no provincialization of God. No localization of God. As Solomon will later say at the dedication of the temple, "Heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee. Much less this little building that I've built for You" (1 Kings 8:27). So even though there was a centering of focus on the events that were occurring on Mount Zion, nevertheless, the people that were involved always spoke by the Holy Spirit that God's location was not limited to that special place. So what David is doing is starting out by saying all the world belongs to Him and who can come into the hill of the Lord. The person can come to worship Him who has clean hands. Let the worshipper have his heart cleansed.

Then as the ark comes into the area proper, "Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in" (verse 7, NIV). That is, open up the gates and

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let the ark come in and the King of Glory will come in. The *shekinah* presence of God will rest and abide upon that place. The glory of God is so strong no man can enter it or stand within it.

Again, we don't know if this is the precise event that triggered the writing of this psalm. But it seems as good a guess as any I've heard. We then transpose out of that our own application for our life today.

Christians have used this to be a psalm that no longer looks at the Old Testament ark of the covenant but looks in either of two directions. Some have suggested that this is to be taken as a Psalm of Ascension. That is, it is a psalm to celebrate the moment of Christ leaving earth coming into glory.

Who may ascend into His holy hill? None other than Christ himself who has clean hands and who has done no wrong. The only mortal who can lay claim to that.

Therefore, let heaven lift up its gates and the King of Glory will come in. That is, one sees the great liturgy and worship of heaven as the Messiah comes out of earth having won His victory in the cross and bringing many people with Him and all heaven is alive with this great psalm or procession.

Others have suggested that another way we can understand Psalm 24 in a sense of using it as Christians is that it is also a psalm which can be used to describe Christ's return to earth. That He is coming back. The attitude therefore of the person on earth is to "lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in" (verse 7). Here is the King who knocks at the door of His city. The city of man represented in symbolic form through the city of Jerusalem. The closed eastern gate.

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We use it in three different ways. This little short psalm of ten verses is divided into three different stanzas. Verses 1–2, verses 3–6 and verses 7–10. These three divisions represent three distinct units of thought that apply to worship.

I. The first thing that applies to worship in verses 1–2 is that in worship it is always well to focus first on the greatness of God.

“The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters” (verses 1–2, NIV). When we come to Him in worship we are not just coming into the presence of another person. We need to stop and take a moment to gather ourselves together for the fact that we are coming into God’s presence. “Thou art coming to a king, large petitions with thee bring. For his grace and power are such, none will ever ask too much.” The earth is the Lord’s and everything that is in it.

Paul says, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). All of our residences are just temporary except “in God.” We’re not the owner of anything. Scriptures teach us we as mortals own nothing. We are simply trustees. We are simply lease holders. Everything I have I don’t own. It is only given to me for a time to use. And God is going to ask me to use that well. And He is going to one day call me into account as one of His managers. If I understand the parable of the talents right and the managers rightly, He’s going to call me and He’s going to call you and He’s going to say, “You didn’t own anything. I gave you some stuff to use. How did you use it?” So when I come to the Lord in prayer I’m reminding myself of my humanity and His ownership and His divinity and I’m placing myself in under Him.

David goes on to say that when God made the earth, He made a fruitful earth—“everything in it.” He made a peopled earth—“all who live in it.” And He made a solid earth—“founded...upon the seas and established...upon the waters.” This is poetic metaphor not to suggest a literal view

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that the earth is floating on a pond of water. But that in the creation, when God created the earth, out of the chaos of the earth God brought order into the chaos. Therefore the earth founded and established that God is always at work in his creation to bring something substantive out of the chaos. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

II. How do you meet with such a God?

How do you get an appointment with Him? The earth is the Lord's and everything that's in it.

The psalmist is saying we have access. He talks about that in the next part of the psalm. Not only are we to focus on His greatness but we are to prepare our hearts to meet with Him. How do you get to Him? Is it on the basis of wealth? The wealthy meet the wealthy? Is it on the basis of power? If you're powerful you get to meet with Him? The powerful meet the powerful.

There are a lot of things in our faith we just take for granted. When you think on earth how difficult it is to get to people who are in high positions, it makes me appreciate in prayer what the Scriptures are telling us about the approachability of God. It also makes me appreciate the moral and spiritual foundations on which the Scriptures rest. The Scriptures lay a whole different basis for human worth and dignity than simply what a person accumulates or what titles they wear or what deeds they do. God is looking for a different kind of criteria in terms of the people who get an appointment with Him. The psalmist asks this question, "Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?" (verse 3, NIV).

As David wrote this there is geographical concreteness to this phrase. Anywhere in Jerusalem you'd be looking up except if you're on the top of the Mount of Olives. Who may be on God's hill? "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob" (verses 4-6,

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NIV). Obviously, the New Testament interprets the Old Testament. So we're reading this psalm from a New Testament perspective. We say that the New Testament has given to us the revelation that the only way we get clean hands and a pure heart is through the righteousness which Jesus Christ gives us through grace by the confession of our faith. That righteousness is not through the keeping of the law of Moses because we've all failed in keeping that law. But having said that, we fall back upon God. As we come to Him in worship, He wants us—after we've focused upon His greatness—to take a moment and look at the authenticity of our life. Is worship proving to be a cleansing experience for us? Or do we use prayer because it's habit or because it's the thing to do? Or because it's ritual? Does it produce a look at the inside?

Integral in the worship of God is a clean life. Who can get to this holy hill? The person who takes God not only as creator but as the God who insists on a standard of righteousness. A moral God. God is not only great but He is good. Essentially good, morally good. He asks that goodness come into His presence. For people who have clean hands. People with clean hands are people whose actions are right. Hands are not dirty. They have not shed blood violently. Clean hands.

And a pure heart. Not only are our actions right but the intent is right.

And does not lift up their eyes to an idol. Loyalty is undivided.

God is really asking for these things as we come to Him in worship. Right actions, right intent, undivided loyalty and pure words—who does not swear by what is false.

Who can get to His holy place? Those who seek that kind of righteousness. The righteousness of Christ can be applied to our life. Because the blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from all sin we may come with direct access into God's presence. There is no restriction on our entry. We come through the blood of Christ and we're invited to come.

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But we don't come as persons who are cavalier about our sense of life and moral order. We seek as we come to really have pure attitudes and a pure heart. This whole phrase is so paradoxical because after giving this great list of having clean hands and a pure heart then the phrase concludes in verse 6, "Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob." Which is the Lord's way of saying you may be like Jacob who did not have clean hands on occasions. Or did not have a pure heart on occasion. Who did not speak always the truth. And who even on occasion had an idol. That's the God of Jacob. So there's hope.

Where can God be found? Who can find Him? A person who seeks to live in His righteousness and who like Jacob wrestles with God and prevails. When these qualities are lacked comes back to God and asks for them one more time.

III. This then leads to the third part of the psalm, verses 7–10.

Which brings us to the third element of preparation for worship. Not only focus on the greatness of God and preparing our own hearts to meet Him. But thirdly, I think there is an encouragement in the third part of this psalm to become the holy place where God enters. If I am applying verses 7–10 to my own life I let myself represent the holy hill and the tabernacle which God wants to dwell in and reign in. Using the metaphor that the New Testament uses that you are the temple of God; people.

When I read in the gospel that Jesus cleansed the temple I never let that just be a historical event. I try to let that be a personal event. "Lord, if You were to come marching into my life what money changing tables would You want to throw out of my soul and existence?"

The imagery of the psalm shifts from that of locating us on the hill of the Lord, verse 3, and locates God himself as entering through the gates, that is entering into us. Probably what happened in the Old Testament setting and maybe if this did occur in connection with the events

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of 2 Samuel 6 there was a liturgical dialogue that went something like this. Imagine the ark of the covenant being carried by the Levitical priests as they are coming up to the mount. Either one person is a soloist or the whole group of priests speak to the gatekeeper “Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in” (verse 7, NIV). What does it mean to “lift up your heads, O you gates”? As I understand it we’re talking about the lintel over the door. If you’ve got a tall person or a large object that is coming through you may need to raise it up. Like, for example, in Roman times when there was a victory, the greater the triumph the greater the height of the arch to signify the magnitude of the victory. So if the Lord personified in the ark of the covenant is coming through the gate, this represented a great victory. Therefore the arch has to move up. Lift up the arch and push out the sides of the door. All associated with the idea of “Lift up your heads, O ye gates.” It’s to enlarge the opening so that the King of Glory may come in.

The gatekeeper calls back, “Who is this King of glory?” (verse 8, NIV). And the priests chant back, “The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in” (verses 8-9, NIV). And the gatekeepers call back, “Who is he, this king of glory?” (verse 10, NIV). Then all join in, “The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory” (verse 10, NIV).

Who is not to say that there isn’t a moment where this psalm is initially used, where that kind of liturgical response is used?

How do we put this in our own life? I think what we do in prayer is we’re opening our life to the personality of God. The Holy Spirit is saying to us, “Lift you your heads, o ye gates. Open up your heart. And be lifted up you ancient doors that the King of Glory may come in.” I respond, “Who is this King of Glory?” And the Holy Spirit says, “The LORD strong and mighty.”

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Remember He's the one who came back from the dead. Remember He's the one who healed the leper. Remember He's the one who raised Lazarus. Remember He's the creator of the heaven and the earth. Remember He's your redeemer. Remember He brought you out of darkness and night. Remember the home He is preparing for you. "The LORD strong and mighty. The LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads O ye gates. Lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory?" And the Holy Spirit responds, "The LORD Almighty. He is the King of glory."

I think this psalm may be suggesting that our hearts can be locked up. They can exclude God and even others because gates are for protective and exclusionary purposes. When the gates are closed they exclude and protect. I think this psalm on a worship level is envisioning that there may be moments in our life where for whatever reasons, conscious or subconscious, we are closing off the gates of our life. We're saying, "Lord, I don't want You in here. I want to make my own decision. I want to have my own way on this matter." The Holy Spirit is saying, "Lift up the gates. Let Him in. Do not bar Him out of your life."

I think this psalm also may be suggesting to us that there can be moments of what I call effusive praise. I think there are moments in worship to do something dramatic and let the heart call forth. Open up and the King of Glory will come in. Not just being quiet and mental rather than verbal. But verbally and responsively from the inner depths staying open to God.

This psalm is calling us to recognize who He is and open up the gates of our heart. So a prayer to pray is "Lord, help me to keep my heart unlocked to You. Help me to keep my voice ready to welcome you."

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So preparation for worship. Lord, You're great! Lord, I prepare my heart as I come to You. Lord, in worship, You come to me. It's not just me coming to You but Lord, You come to me. My heart is open to You. Will You, the King of Glory, come in?

Closing Prayer

Praise Your name, Lord. We welcome You into our hearts and lives. We take just a moment to internalize this psalm in our hearts. The earth is the Lord's. We're only here, Lord, for a little while. Then we are gone. But You are forever and forever and forever. Praise You, Lord. Praise You. Thank You for Your greatness. Thank You that in this world You made us, that we came to exist. Thank You, Lord. We open our hearts to You, Lord. You're concerned about us. You want us in Your presence. You don't want us down in the deep valley wondering how in the world we can ever crawl up to Zion. You reach down and lift us up to Zion. Just one mighty act of grace. You want to cleanse our hearts, Lord. We take a moment and ask as we look inside of us, is there any willful rebellion against You? Any deliberate decision within us to reject Your lordship and Your Word in any area of our life? Remove it from us, Lord. If there is bitterness in our life we want a pure heart. If we've fallen into speech patterns that are destructive we want pure words. If we're bound by anything stronger than us and don't have the willpower to break it, we want Your power to reach inside our life and create in us purity and cleansing. We hear Your word. You said when the Holy Spirit would come He would rise up within us as a well, as inner water. We want that cleansing inner well springing up in our life to purify us in Your presence. Make us holy, Lord Jesus. Really holy. And Lord as we receive Your grace, receive Your purity, we enlarge our hearts. If we've made the mistake of not knocking out the lintel in our life or expanding the door post on the side maybe the whole way we've been relating to You is we've let You become too small. We haven't done some enlarging of possibilities of faith in our life.

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We've just settled in the status quo and we've approached each day. This is about the size of my need. Would You accommodate Yourself to my human-size faith, my human-size perspective of You? We take a moment to lift the head of the gate up. Create a large, tall, wide arch in our life. Through which You, the King of Glory, may come in. Thank You, Lord, in Your greatness. No matter how large we make the door, we're still so small compared to Your mighty power. Thank You for coming in. Thank You for abiding with us. Thank You for Your presence. We worship You. Praise Your name.