

“The King and His People”

Psalm 24

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I listened to a fascinating story the other day about the City of Chicago around the turn of the century. It was a time when the city was booming and growing very quickly, but that growth was causing a pretty big problem. There was trash everywhere. There wasn't a proper sewer system in place and all of the sewage in the city ran into the Chicago River. Which was fine with them, except for one thing: the Chicago River fed into Lake Michigan. And Lake Michigan is where they go their drinking water.

One engineer came up with a very bold plan. It was two-fold: Let's raise the city 10 feet and build a sewer system under it, and then, let's make our river that carries all that sewage drain somewhere other than the lake we get our drinking water from. Literally, let's reverse the flow of the river. And they did it. The Chicago River now flows the opposite direction from which it once ran. It's one of the great engineering accomplishments of the century.

The Psalms are helpful worship tools for us. One reason is that they allow us to kind of “reverse the flow” of our normal thinking about worship. I think most of us come to worship and sing songs and think that the flow of worship goes from our hearts to our mouths. What is in our hearts flows to our mouths and that's worship. Well, of course, that's true. But what is also true, and maybe even more important, is that worship flows the other way as well. From our mouths to our hearts. We sing and we speak and we read and what we say is meant to flow to our hearts. To shape us.

Psalm 24 is almost certainly a song. A worship song. A song that was sung by God's people in worship. And it's a song, like so many of the Psalms, that is meant to shape us. The flow is meant to go from our mouths to our hearts.

So if it's a song, what's the song about?

Well, first, it is about God. In fact, it starts with God. In your English Bibles, the first word is “The earth.” But in Hebrew, the first word is Yahweh. The Lord. It reads, “To the Lord—the earth. . .” To Yahweh belongs the earth. To Yahweh the earth, and all of it. The world and all those who dwell on in.

Right out of the gate, this song celebrates God’s ownership of all things. It all belongs to him. I swell with pride at times when I come home and see my house and I think, “that’s mine. I own that.” Unless of course, it needs repair, in which case I wish someone else owned it.

The image here is of God looking at all his creation and saying, “that’s mine. All of it. It belongs to me.”

And why does David say that the earth belongs to the Lord? Simple, he made it! We’re building a chicken coop in our back yard and on one of the boards, all of our names are written. Our names are on it not just because it belongs to us, but it belongs to us because we made it! We drilled the screws in and hammered the nails. The Lord lays claim to all of creation because he is the creator of it all.

Yet the Bible says repeatedly that though the Lord created everything and though he owns it all, he doesn’t stand aloof. He doesn’t stand far off and impersonal. Just the opposite. The Lord, the creator and owner of all things, has chosen to dwell with his people. He has chosen to make himself known and present with the people he has made.

In Exodus 19, God tells Israel, “I’ve chosen you. Even though all the earth is mine, I’ve chosen you. Even though I own everything, I’ve chosen you. And I’ve chosen to come and dwell with you. The presence of the owner of the world is accessible to his people.

Verse 3 asks who can ascend the hill of the Lord. That hill that David writes of is a real place. The mountain in Jerusalem on which God’s Temple was built. In fact, this whole psalm is about the Lord coming IN to the place he has chosen to dwell. Coming in to be with his people.

That is occasion for praise. It is for David, and it is for Israel, and it is for us too. It is occasion for rejoicing. The owner of everything has called me into his presence. What a glorious privilege. The one to whom everything belongs has chosen to reveal himself to his creation and has called me into his presence. Wow.

But if you're thinking at all, you're thinking "what kind of people do we need to be to come into the presence of the owner of the cosmos? What kind of people can do that?"

I'm glad you asked. Because that leads us to the second thing that this song is about. It's about God's people.

The Psalm announces the Lord's procession into His dwelling place, which, for Israel, was the Temple—God's chosen dwelling place with his people. We know from the New Testament that God now dwells with His people in an even more intimate way. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God's People, the Church, have become His Temple, being united with Christ, who is the ultimate fulfillment of what the Temple was meant to accomplish.

And this psalm is asking God's people to come and worship him. To ascend with him, to stand with him. To join the procession. It's asking God's people to come and join the parade. To be a part of the Krewe. To march in the victory procession.

So how do we do that? How do we come to worship? How do we come to the Lord in prayer? How are we to walk before Him? What kind of people do we need to be to come into the presence of the owner of the cosmos? What kind of people can do that?

The answer comes in verses 4 through 6. Those with clean hands, pure hearts and correctly-directed desires.

What does it mean to have clean hands? It basically means that you are Innocent of wrong against others. It's the opposite of having blood on your hands. It's most particularly about our horizontal relationships—our interactions with others. What we do and what we fail to do with the people we have been called to love.

One with clean hands is one who keeps from gossip. From classism and egoism and racism. One who goes out of his way to do no injury to another but rather to help. One who doesn't use others to get what he or she wants. One who engages those around him patiently and gently.

How about a pure heart? This is really more about the vertical relationship—your heart before the Lord. It describes one who is innocent of deceit and true to God. Who doesn't follow the empty idols of power and control and acceptance and pleasure. Who rather than lifting up his soul to what is false, directing his desires to created things, directs his desires to the creator.

David really sums it up for us in verse 6. Those who shall join the Lord's parade are those who seek his face, who seek his presence.

Many of us know what it feels like to be far from the Lord. To know that the Lord has promised to be with us, to care for us, to eternally provide for us, but to feel far from his face. We are being called here to seek him. To draw near to him.

It's like being in a desert and not understanding why you are so thirsty. You are thirsty because you haven't taken a drink. The Lord is calling us to come and drink from the deep well that he has given us. To draw near to him. To seek his face.

We could sum up these last few verses like this, "What kind of people do we need to be to march in the parade of the owner of the cosmos? The kind of people who are faithful to God and to their neighbor. To borrow a phrase from Eugene Peterson, to be a people whose lives are a long obedience in the same direction.

They are people who have come to realize that if the Lord owns everything then he owns me. I must be faithful to him and to those he has put around me.

These are big requests. I know you are thinking, "that's too much for me. I can't do that." Some of you may be thinking, "see... this Christianity thing is just like I thought it was—be better. Do more. If you do, God will love you. Well, guess what, I can't. So I quit."

If that's you, don't quit on me yet. Put that thought on hold as we take a look at the third thing this song is about...

It's a song that is about God. It's a song about his people. And it's about the King.

The back and forth talking that begins in verse 7 is about who is to be let in to the city gates. Lift up your heads... take a look... who is coming? Who is requesting entrance? These few verses are an entrance liturgy. They are demanding to know who has the right to come in to the gates. *Because the gates only let in the king.* There is only one who has the right to enter and the gates are not going to let anyone else through.

A couple of nights ago, Elizabeth Parker was at our house and my kids, as is their custom, were trying to get into her phone to see what games and songs she had on it. I have to tell you, they are master code breakers. Joy and I are on a continual shuffle of passcodes that we have to change all the time because our kids are like expert locksmiths when it comes to getting into our phones.

But as they picked up Elizabeth's phone, she just looked at them and said, "good luck with that one. It has thumbprint recognition, so unless you have my thumb, you aren't getting anywhere."

The gates only let in the King. And as they call out, "who is this King of glory," the answer comes back...

It is the Lord. The King is Yahweh, The God who has promised himself to His people. The God who owns the cosmos and all that is in it. The creator of all things. Strong and mighty. Victorious in battle. Glorious King and ruler of the world. That's who is coming in. That's who is here to reign. That's who is setting up shop with his creation.

Now, remember. This is a song. A worship song. A worship song that has been sung by God's people for thousands of years. So let's take a quick tour through the history of God's people and see how they might have sung this hymn.

First, let's look at the time shortly after the psalm was written. Under Israel's united Kingdom. Solomon is the King and the Temple in place and God's presence is dwelling there. Imagine God's people marching back in from battle, the Ark of the Lord leading them, entering Jerusalem and marching toward the temple. Who is the King? It is Yahweh, our deliverer, The one who pardons our sin and dwells with us. Who has won victorious over our enemies. The one who has set up his reign on earth. Lift up your heads and welcome the King.

Now, fast-forward. Israel is a divided kingdom. Solomon's sons have not followed the Lord. The kingdom has divided in two, north and south. And if you live in Judah, the southern kingdom, the Temple is still with you, but something is incomplete. All of God's people are not united, and what's more, king after king, the ones who are supposed to be leading the people to seek God's face, are leading them astray. And finally, after years of the Lord pleading with them to repent, seek his face, follow his leading, they have turned fully away and they are headed into exile.

How do you sing this song now? It's a lament, isn't it? It's crying out for a righteous King to rule God's people. It's a lookout for the coming King.

And as a people in exile, and even afterward, as those who are looking for God to fulfill his promise to dwell again with them as their King, you are singing an advent tune... We need a king to come and rule. We are waiting. We are looking. We are singing of the coming king. The promised messiah.

Now, how about for us? For Christians? Who is our King? Well, of course, the glorious revelation of the New Testament is that the King is Jesus. The promised Messiah that Israel was waiting for has come. He has come triumphantly into the gates of not only Jerusalem but our hearts. He is the owner of the world. The one through whom the cosmos was created and in whom everything holds together. The King and the creator are one and the same. He is the owner of it all. Jesus is the King of all creation.

And He is mighty in battle, having defeated our greatest enemies of death and destruction, of sin and guilt and shame. He is strong and triumphant.

And furthermore, he is not only the king, he is the true worshiper. He alone has clean hands, a pure heart. He alone seeks righteousness. He alone seeks fully the face of God. He's the one who is most perfectly faithful to God and to neighbor. And what no one would have seen coming—he has laid down his life so that we might be forgiven of our sin. So that we might find our identity and meaning in him.

And here now is the answer to those of us who have been asking, “how in the world can God accept me? My hands are filthy. My heart is impure. My motives are suspect at best. I feel like most of my life is spent running away from God.”

What the Bible says is that by faith, we are made one with him. Jesus has unified us with him so that we might be able to march in his victory parade. And being found in him, we are those whose hands are clean. Whose hearts are pure. Who have been brought near to the very face of God.

See, if you read verses 3-6 as requirement for entering into God's saving presence, you will only end up confused and frustrated. You'll never be the kind of worshiper the Lord deserves. You'll never be the kind of subject the King really needs. Because if you are honest, you will see the real state of your hands and your heart.

But if you read it and say, “well, I can't do that, so I don't even need to pay attention here,” then you'll miss what the Psalm is intended to do in you—to shape you. To flow from your mouth to your heart so that your heart might actually be changed. That it might bit by bit come to look more like the true worshiper. That it might come to look more and more like the King. That in singing your desires would be molded to his. Your hands put to his use.

What we are being called to here is relationship rather than requirement. As one commentator said, “it is the rehearsal of a purpose and a possibility” and it is the person of Jesus who makes the rehearsal possible

For Christians, Psalm 24 is a proclamation of the Lord's ownership over all creation and His kingship over our lives. It is the proclamation of the coming of a

King who has conquered our enemies and made us his own. It is an Easter hymn that celebrates his resurrection glory. And it is an advent hymn that looks toward his coming again in glory, entering the gates of the new heavens and new earth as the one who has made all things new.

It is a calling to be shaped into the kind of grateful subjects that He desires. It is a hymn that seeks to make us love our King. A song that seeks to flow from our lips to our hearts.

Who is the King of glory? He is our savior, brother, friend. The King of glory is the one who has laid himself down for his subjects. So that we might be brought into his presence and be shaped into his image. So that we might love him, follow him, and seek him.