

“Who Shall Ascend?”
Psalm 24

**First Presbyterian Church
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As you’ve noticed, we’ve been carrying on in the psalms that connect us to Jesus’ life long after Resurrection Sunday has come and gone. In fact, we still have another week after this one to cover more ground before saying goodbye for a time to the book of Psalms! This should be a reminder to us that Jesus’ work did not end at the Cross, nor did it even end at the empty tomb. Psalm 24 gives us a plain picture and reminder of that very thing. So, as we approach God’s Word, let’s ask his help to open our hearts to what he might say.

Everlasting Father, you gave these words to your servant, David, by the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit that your people might know you and praise you. Therefore, Holy Spirit, breathe out this song afresh in our hearts and lift us up to join in its glory, its praise, which is to you alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Read Psalm 24]

Some things — be they songs, movies, or books — can be isolated to one age and stage of life. They remind us of a bygone era, but nothing more. Others, however, can age along with us and, as time goes on, new layers of meaning emerge as we go through new stages of life. This psalm is like many others that we’ve seen in that way as it speaks of a contemporary situation around the time of its composition as well as what would come to pass under the Messiah’s arrival. It seems like this song was used to triumphantly announce the arrival of King David with the Ark of the Covenant, returning it to the tabernacle in Israel after a long time being kept elsewhere. It invites us to praise our God as King, a holy King, a mighty and conquering King. “Our God is the one, the only, the true and living God,” it invites us to say. Yet, as appropriate as it was for God’s people to sing it in that day, 1,000 years before the Messiah came, there are a few aspects of the song that stick out as somewhat dissonant notes left in that original context. It’s

only when those layers of the psalm are brought out by viewing it through the lens of the Messiah, Jesus, that the rough edges become smooth and the real meaning of Psalm 24 emerges.

The first of three dissonant notes comes at the very beginning of Psalm 24. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” This opening strain praises God as King over all creation and this is most certainly true! God made all things by the word of his power and he upholds them and governs all their motions. He is King! But upon further reflection, the original audience might have wondered, “God is certainly our King, but the whole earth? All the nations and peoples?” At that time, one might bring up a question here because only a small strip of land in the whole earth on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean belonged to God’s people. The earth and its fullness? And he was only faithfully worshiped by one tiny nation of people who descended from Abraham. All those who dwell therein?

Only when we begin to view this psalm through Christ does the kingship described make sense, because up until his arrival, the nations had been allowed to walk in their own darkened minds and hearts, serving and being lorded over by dark powers. The event that we need to read this psalm through is likewise described just a few hundred years later by the prophet Daniel in Daniel 7, where he describes a vision of something that was yet to come.

Behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Did you catch that? What event does that sound like? Like I mentioned earlier, we may tend sometimes to see the Cross as the triumphant moment of Christ’s earthly life, and that’s understandable. It’s a key plot point, the Lamb of God slain for the people to take away their sin. But it’s not the end. Nor is the empty tomb and the resurrection! Again, key plot point, that the God-man having descended into death and hell, bearing the punishment for

sinful man, would rise triumphant over the grave. But the event Daniel 7 describes as well as Psalm 24 is the final and triumphant event of Christ's earthly life and ministry in his first coming. It's the ascension! Jesus is exalted upon the clouds of heaven and brought back to his home, back to the Father's side. And, as he is presented there, a coronation ceremony ensues that we get a glimpse of here. The King has come back, and now he is given the crown that he has earned. Having put the cosmic powers of darkness to open shame through the Cross, having placed his heel firmly upon the serpent's head, having bound the strong man — the dragon, Satan — he has robbed them of their power and authority to blind the nations of the earth. For, Jesus says in Matthew 28, "all authority in heaven *and on Earth* have been given to me."

Therefore, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Jesus rules over every square inch and molecule of creation. The earth and all those who dwell therein are his! He holds the scepter of authority in his hands, having won it at great price. He reigns from the Father's side, and the Father has said to him (as recorded in Psalm 2), "Ask of me, and I shall make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." He came from heaven to bring peoples trapped in sin and darkness, slavery to self and the devil, into his light and he reigns now as the Lord and King of all. King of kings and Lord of lords.

Before we move forward in Psalm 24, I want us to dwell on this truth for a moment because I think many of us go around with the tacit assumption that this is actually not the case. We look at the world, specifically the state of the West and its moral slide over the last 60, 70 years and begin to despair. Because we're so short-sighted, we insert ourselves into what we presume to be the last act of history. We think we're being heavenly-minded when we assume the best thing that could happen would be for Jesus to come back and rapture us away, leaving this cold, broken world behind to be destroyed as we make our way home to heaven.

Do you see how this way of thinking is totally antithetical to what we've been talking about? If Christ is King, risen, ascended, and reigning at the Father's side, there's no room for a pessimistic view of history, no room for doom and gloom and perusing the headlines for prophetic fulfillment that the antichrist is here. Without getting into all the details of why such a view

of the end is misguided, think of what Daniel says about Messiah's kingdom in describing the vision in Daniel 2. This stone that struck the statue which represented the kingdoms of Earth grew and became a mountain, and this mountain filled the whole earth. Habakkuk tells us that the knowledge of the Lord will cover the Earth as the waters cover the sea. If all this is true, and it is, then we of all people ought to be optimists to our core. The King is on his throne and we are his subjects, citizens of the only kingdom that cannot fall or fail. No one can tear him down from his seat of power. No one can thwart his purpose. And if that's so, we should share the gospel with bold hope that Christ's sheep will hear his voice. We should start and invest in Christian businesses and institutions believing that Christ has called us to build and better our community. We should seek to love the world around us and think responsibly with how we do agriculture and business because we are God's vice-regents called to rule and steward creation. We should enjoy the good gifts that God gives in his world and savor the sweetness of honey, the calming scent and sound of a campfire, laughter and the company of friends because, in these good things, God gives us a glimpse of what it's like to enjoy him. Christ has ascended, therefore he reigns over Earth and heaven. Take courage, Christians, and be optimists.

As we move on into verse 3 and following, another dissonant note stands out from the original context; perhaps you already noticed it. In describing the ascent to the hill of the Lord, the earthly place of worship on Mount Zion in that day, the psalmist perhaps incidentally refers to what the book of Hebrews makes clear to be the heavenly reality that always stood behind the earthly copy of the tabernacle and later Temple. "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord" thus becomes more spiritual than physical. Who can ascend to heaven, into God's throne room? The criteria is given: he who has clean hands and a pure heart. Outward and inward holiness.

The question is therefore much more than just a general observation about how people should approach the worship place of God on Earth. It dares to ask, who can stand before a holy God? Who could rightly claim the privilege of access before a radiantly pure Lord? No one. No one born of man, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. This question should make us think also of the question of Revelation 5. Who is worthy to

take the scroll and open its seals? Who is worthy? You'll remember that, as John heard this, there was no one to answer. Silence. And he wept. Yet, while he wept, behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah came and appeared as a lamb who had been slain. He is worthy. He can stand before his Father. He fulfills the righteous requirement of the Law. He, the unstained one, finally fulfills the criteria of clean hands and a pure heart.

Why does that matter? Because if Christ has ascended as the one who can rightly stand before his Father, and more, to sit at his right hand with clean hands and a pure heart, we have hope to follow after him. Where he is, there we shall be. And much of the reason why is because when Jesus went up to be exalted at the Father's side, he did not shed his physical human form. No, he took it with him. So now, for the first time ever, glorified human flesh dwells in the heavenly throne room. Even more, a man — *the Man* — sits on the throne of heaven.

When someone we know or even who comes from our hometown is nationally recognized and honored, we somehow feel honored alongside them. Perhaps you swell with pride to know that we have a congressman from our state as Speaker of the House. I swell with pride to think of George Karlaftis, a defensive end for Purdue who now is a two-time Super Bowl champion with the Kansas City Chiefs. He's from West Lafayette, where I grew up. I played against his high school football team a time or two. When we see someone that's "one of our own, one of us" and that person is honored, we feel as though a part of us has gone with them. Their honor becomes ours. In a similar and even more profound way, Jesus, having taken humanity up with him to heaven, has brought us with him. If we have believed *into* Jesus and have been *united* with him, his taking human flesh into heaven is a pledge that we may follow him there.

And we don't get to go before the presence of God with Jesus because somehow we slip through the cracks of heaven and get in via a loophole. No, we are given what verse 4 requires: clean hands, a pure heart. His righteousness is given to us as a gracious gift, totally unearned, because he paid in the debt of sin on our behalf. Our ticket is fully paid in advance.

But remember also that God doesn't want us at the wedding feast without being made ready. Even if you're invited to a wedding, if you show up in shorts and a graphic t-shirt, you'll likely get some odd looks. In order

to spare our blushes and to make us ready for the wedding, God gradually clothes us appropriately in genuine holiness. The ascended Lord pours out his Spirit who, in large part, is responsible for getting us dolled up. This Spirit enables us to put to death the deeds of the body. This Spirit enables us to please God. Yes, we can never earn God's favor and salvation. It is all of grace. Christ went up with clean hands and a pure heart because we never could. But the beauty of this grace is only amplified when we see how he has then richly supplied us with hope and confidence to pursue Christlikeness, to strive for genuine holiness without which no one will see the Lord, knowing all the while that our position before God is as secure as Christ's seat on the throne. Christ has ascended, therefore we follow in hope and holiness.

Psalm 24 comes to its final movement in verse 7 and onward, and there we get one last glimpse of a scene fulfilled at the ascension of Christ. The gates are commanded to open. The question is asked, who is it that would so boldly come? Who is this king of glory? It's the Lord I AM. The God of heaven's armies. To him, the gates of Jerusalem were opened as he rode in humbly on a donkey. To him, the gates of death were swung wide as he rose victorious over sin and grave. To him, the gates of heaven were pinned open. Gates that were once shut to sinful man have now been opened. And we know that what he has opened, no one can shut.

As we close considering this image of the conquering King returning to his own, let's remember how he got there. I mentioned earlier that some pieces of media get better with age because new layers come out as time goes by. For me, that's most true of the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life." We always watched it at Christmas when I was a kid, and I liked it, but not for any reason beyond it being about Christmastime. Yet, as I've aged, I've grown to appreciate it more because of what the main character goes through. George Bailey's tale is one of sacrifice and selflessness, a story of hardship that makes the joy of the ending that much more sweet.

Our Savior passed through Psalm 22 before Psalm 24 could become the lyrics for his life. He plunged into God-forsakenness and death. He laid down his life for his sheep. The Crown came at the cost of the Cross. Never forget that. This triumphant King, mighty in battle, has won his victory by

dying. And if the gates of the grave are no bar to him, nothing can separate you from his love for nothing can stand in his way.

Then, as we stand in awe of a mighty, conquering Lord, we're invited to marvel that this King of Kings is also the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23. The battle-hardened and victorious warrior-king that should cause his enemies to tremble delights to gently lead his own. To lead us to green pastures and beside still waters. This is our King. Risen, victorious, gentle and mighty. Won't you lift up your eyes to him today? Won't you swing wide the gates of your heart that the king of glory may come in?