

Lift Up Your Heads, O You Gates
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
October 3, 2021-PM Service
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Psalm 24

Let's dig into Psalm 24 tonight. Many of you know that the Psalms were Israel's songbook. The Psalms functioned a little like our *Lift Up Your Hearts* hymnal. They were a set of songs and liturgies that Israel used for worship and personal devotion. Israel used these psalms to process all life's experiences - all of life's ups and downs, before the face of the Lord. And, just as you find in our hymnal, there were texts for specific community events. You can find baptism liturgies and Lord's Supper liturgies and profession of faith liturgies in this hymnal. In the book of Psalms there are also texts designed for specific occasions. Psalm 72 is a Psalm for the coronation of a king. Psalm 30 is a Psalm for the dedication of the temple. The Psalms of ascent - Psalms 120 to 134 - are meant to be sung by pilgrims on their way to the temple for one of the great Israelite festivals.

Dig into Psalm 24, and you'll see that it too is one of those liturgical Psalms. Commentators and scholars pretty much agree that Psalm 24 was used by Israel on a specific liturgical occasion. What occasion was that? Psalm 24 is an entrance liturgy. It is an entrance liturgy for the return of the ark of the covenant to the temple (or tabernacle). After taking the ark of the covenant out for battle (something that Israel did sometimes), the warriors would return from their fight with the ark. They would come to the temple and ask for admittance. They would ask the priests to open the gates so that the King of Glory, enthroned on the ark, might come in.

When you realize that this is the setting of the Psalm, you see something like a conversation happening in Psalm 24. You realize that there is a back and forth between the people outside the temple carrying the ark, and the priests inside. Open your Bibles and let's see if we can imagine the scene together.

The warriors return from the battlefield after a great victory. They are tired and they are eager to be refreshed by the presence of God. They are eager to praise him and to receive a blessing. As they approach the temple they sing their opening hymn - a general hymn of praise and adoration to the Creator God. That is verses one and two. The priests inside the temple sing verse one "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world and all who live in it." The returning pilgrims respond with verse 2. "For he founded it upon the seas, and established it on the waters." Just like our opening hymns offer general praise for God's goodness and mercy, the pilgrims begin with a word of adoration.

When the hymn is done, from inside the temple, the priests inside ask the pilgrims a question, a question which is like our call to confession: "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?" What sort of person may come into this temple and stand in the presence of God? The pilgrims outside the temple respond with the ritual answer. "The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god." The priests respond, "That's right! Those sorts of people will receive a blessing from the Lord and vindication from God their Savior." The pilgrims respond with verse 6. "Such is the generation of those who seek him." "That's us!" They say, "we long to be pure and holy! We want to see the face of the God of Jacob."

With that response the entry begins. The priests call out to the gate keepers, “Lift up your heads you gates! Be lifted up you ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in!” And then they say to the pilgrims, “who is the King of Glory!” “The Lord strong and mighty!” say the pilgrims, “The Lord mighty in battle!” Again the priests call for the gates to be opened. Again they ask the pilgrims, “who is the king of Glory?” And as they march through the temple gates, with the ark gleaming in the midst of them, as the pilgrims came into the city carrying the ark, the returning warriors cry out “The Lord Almighty – he is the King of Glory!!”

Can you picture the scene? I have to be honest: We can’t be completely sure about who says what during the entrance. Scholars are confident that Psalm 24 is an entrance liturgy for the ark, but they are less sure about who says what as the procession comes in. I read multiple accounts this week. But this is a pretty good guess, and if we picture it this way we will have a good sense of the Psalm in its original context.

Now that we have a picture of the Psalm in its original context, I want to point out a couple of things about the Psalm and this procession. First, notice that it’s very strong on God’s almighty power over his enemies. The beginning of the Psalm proclaims God’s power in creation. How he founded creation upon the waters; how he triumphed over chaos and turned the formless void into order and life. And then at the end of the Psalm as the worshipers enter they praise “the Lord mighty in battle!” In verse 10 they actually use one of God’s official titles to praise him. They call God the ‘Lord Almighty.’ Notice both ‘Lord’ and ‘Almighty’ are capitalized – that’s the New International Version’s way of telling you that an official title is being used. In the Hebrew that official title is Yahweh Sabaoth, a title which shows up more than 200 times in the Old Testament. Literally, Yahweh Sabaoth means the ‘Lord of Hosts.’ ‘Yahweh’ means Lord. ‘Sabaoth’ is derived from the word for warrior, and it means ‘Army Hosts.’ It’s a title that shows up in the hymn ‘A Mighty Fortress is Our God.’ Remember? ‘Lord Sabaoth his name. From age to age the same. And he shall win the battle.’ In his Bible paraphrase *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders this title as ‘the God of the angel armies.’ To call God the Lord of Hosts is to picture him in heaven, enthroned between the cherubim, surrounded by the angel throngs, and girded for battle. It’s to picture him as the God who will rise up and vanquish his enemies.

Second notice that these pilgrims returning from the battlefield want to see God’s face. Verse 6 “We are the ones who seek your face O God of Jacob!” That desire to see God’s face is a desire to be close to God. It’s interesting: in the Psalms you have different levels of seeing God. Sometimes the Psalmist praises God for the works of his hands. Psalm 8. “Lord, when I consider the works of your hands – the moon and the stars – What are human beings that you should be mindful of them.” To see the work of God’s hands is to see the signs of his presence, signs that he leaves everywhere and every day. That’s level 1.

Sometimes the Psalmist will praise God for the direct experience of God’s hand. ‘You make your saving help my shield, and your right hand sustains me.’ Psalm 18:35. Now It’s not just one of God’s creations that evokes praise; now it is God himself. The Psalmist feels the hand of God in his life moving and steering him. That’s a deeper experience of God. A direct experience of his hand. That’s level 2.

There is a third level of connection with God in the Psalms. It’s the deepest level. That’s the desire to see God’s face. Psalm 27:8 – “my heart says seek his face. Your face, O Lord, I will seek.” Psalm 4, “Lord let the light of your face shine upon us.” And in our Psalm: “we are the generation who seek your face.” When you want to see God’s face, you don’t just want his help, you want to know him. You don’t just want to feel his hand; you want to know his character.

You want to be in communion with him. You want to look into his face to see the flash of recognition and affection in his eyes as He sees you. That's the connection sought by the pilgrims who enter God's temple in Psalm 24. Lord God we want to see your face.

As the pilgrims came back from battle carrying the ark and entered into the courts of the Lord, as they expressed their desire to see God's face, I wonder what they thought God's face might look like. If the desire of their heart was granted and they got to see God face to face, I wonder what they expected to see? In the context of the Psalm, I imagine they see the Lord of Hosts as a mighty warrior. I imagine they expected to see a face fierce with power. A face of one who dashes his enemies to pieces like a potter's vessel. The face of someone who shoots his arrows and scatters his enemies. Someone like the Psalmist imagines in Psalm 18 – smoke rising from his nostrils and fire coming from his mouth. The God of the angel armies.

Of course those returning pilgrims never got to see the face of the king of glory. God almost never shows his face in the Old Testament. There are a couple of exceptions, Jacob wrestling on the banks of the Jabbok river in the middle of the night, sees the face of God under the cover of darkness. The elders of Israel go up Mount Sinai in Exodus 24 and it says they see the face of God. But the people carrying the ark in Psalm 24 never got to see God's face.

1000 years later however, the King of Glory shows his face to the world. For years, people have been praying to see the face of the King of Glory and, in Jesus, God shows his face.

When I read Psalm 24 today, I always picture a scene in my mind. A kind of re-enactment of the Psalm. I imagine standing with all the people of Jerusalem inside the city, waiting for the king of glory to come to us and show his face. We all cry out the words of the Psalm, "Who is the king of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle!" And then we cry, "Lift up your heads O gates! Be lifted up you ancient doors that the king of glory might come in!" And with the clank of chains and the groan of wood, the ancient doors are lifted up, and slowly the king of Glory is revealed. There he is – the Lord of the Angel Armies standing in front of us. He's not some muscled warrior with a square jaw, he's a peasant carpenter. He's not surrounded by an army of the angel host, he's standing by himself looking small and vulnerable. He's not carrying a sword or some great instrument of battle, he's carrying a cross and he's bent over under its terrible weight.

And then there's his face. That face we've all been seeking. There is a warrior's determination in his eyes. He has the look of someone on a mission. But there is so much more than fierceness in that face. What we see in his face is something stronger and more terrible than the face of a warrior with smoke rising from his nostrils and fire in his eyes, it is the face of love. "It is a face half ruined by suffering and fierce with joy (Fredrick Buechner)." It is a tear-stained face – lined with the pain of a thousand generations. It's a face that bears the weight of every horror perpetrated by humans, and who has somehow managed to keep loving through all of it.

The ancient gate finishes opening. It grinds to a halt, and as it does a voice – I think it might be Pontius Pilate's – cries out, "Behold your king!" The crowd falls silent. How will we react to the sight of this wounded King of Glory, smitten and afflicted and vulnerable? Not well. "We choose Barabbas" yell some of us. Those of us who want to be delivered by more efficient power yell out, "We have no king but Caesar." All of us cry out, "crucify him." And that's what we do. But even this affront, even this atrocity is borne by the King of Glory. He endures even this sin for us and for our salvation.

When the original singers of Psalm 24 sang about the King of Glory coming in, did they know who they were singing about? I doubt it. When we sing our processional hymns at the

beginning of our services here, do we understand the love and power and grace of our God? Not really. He is infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Yet he continues to open gates for us. This broken carpenter will go down all the way into death. He will stand before the gates of death and hell, and the gates of hell will not prevail against him. Before the power of his sacrifice those ancient doors will shatter. With a few drops of his blood, he will dash them in pieces.

And someday we will come to the gate of heaven. Whether there is an actual gate there or not, I don't know and probably there isn't, but we will find ourselves at the threshold, and standing there we will know that the requirement for entrance is clean hands and a pure heart. We will know that we have neither clean hands nor a pure heart. But just as our fear is about to rise, a voice from inside, a voice which we've never heard before, but yet somehow, a voice that we've known our entire life, will cry, "Lift up your heads, O you gates, be lifted up you ancient doors, let this little child come in. He belongs to the king. He is washed in my blood. He has been clothed in my righteousness, let him come in. Then the gates will open and we will see his face. Who is the King of Glory, The Lord Jesus Christ strong in mighty, the Lord Jesus strong and mighty in battle. He is the king of glory."

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