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June 6

Series: Summer in the Psalms

Psalm 24

Today we look at the royal psalms in the Psalter. These are Psalms that celebrate God as King or were Psalms that were written for royal occasions such as a coronation. At first, they might strike us as inaccessible, after all, our times today are marked mostly by democracies rather than monarchies. But at the same time, the idea of a king and a kingdom runs deep in our core of what it means to be human, evidenced by the fairy tales we love so much often being centered in the idea of a King and Queen. During the centuries in which the Psalms were written, nations were ruled by kings and so it was a very natural step for Israel to understand and relate to God with royal imagery, and that's exactly what these psalms do. They celebrate kings who ruled justly, and they have a forward-leaning sense of looking to Jesus as the ultimate King. Today, I want to walk us through a case study of one royal Psalm, Psalm 24.

Psalm 24 divides into three stanzas, so if you have your bibles, you can follow along with these three stanzas: verses 1-2, 3-6, and 7-10 from which we will focus on three points. The Psalmist begins by asking the ultimate exam question: who can intimately know a holy God? When you were in school, didn't you really appreciate the teachers that told you what questions would be on the exam and gave you direction on how to study? That's what this Psalm does: it tells us of the ultimate exam day that is coming and what the requirements are to pass the exam. The exam is the day when each

of us will stand in God's presence and answer for our lives. The result of the exam, Jesus very clearly tells us, will determine whether we spend eternity in his presence, glory, and grace, or whether we are cast into the darkness, where Jesus warns in Luke 13 that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's absolutely urgent that we prepare for this final exam!

And the Psalmist helps us prepare to meet the entrance requirements. This psalm is for people who want to know that they are ready to face God's examination, who want to live with God and enjoy him forever. The psalm is mostly an answer to the two questions that are raised in verse 3.

1. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
2. Who shall stand in his holy place?

It's a psalm for people who want to get as close to God as they possibly can—in this lifetime and in the lifetime to come. What does God require of those who would want to come close to him and be made like him? How can we be prepared to meet him? This psalm answers those questions.

1. God establishes his right to examine us, Verses 1-2

The psalmist speaks in plain language as he tells us why God has the right to examine us as he claims God's power as the creator of the entire universe. *"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell in it."* God made the world from nothing. He fills the earth and sustains the earth. The seas haven't run out of water,

though many clouds have ascended from the seas. The air hasn't expired though billions of people are breathing it right now. The soil hasn't run out of nourishment though trillions of plants draw their life from it.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." He sustains the earth's life and the lives of people who live on the earth. We are God's tenants, his stewards of creation. We borrow life from him and depend on life from him. We are completely dependent on God to sustain our life and the life of the earth. Hebrews 1:3 says Jesus sustains the universe by the word of his power. Should Jesus stop sustaining the world for one moment, it would fall back into nothingness. Jesus fills the earth, gives life to it, and gives life to everyone who lives on it. So in light of this, one of the questions we will face when we stand before Jesus is, "How have you responded to Jesus' authority over you?"

How have you lived before him? Have you lived in such a way to bring God glory? That is the reason for our creation. Revelation 4:11 echoes these themes with creatures crying out to God around his throne:

*"Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
To receive glory and honour and power,
For you created all things,
And by your will they existed and were created."*

How do we respond to this knowledge of who God is? Has your heart been filled with thankfulness to the Lord for all his bounty to you? Thankfulness kills pride and makes us

joyful. Grateful people are glad people. Miserable people are often unthankful. Have you been thankful to Jesus? Have you taken the life he has given you and allowed it to flourish into a life that gives him glory, or have you squandered your life? Do you live your life for your own pleasure? Have you defied his authority and opposed his will for your life? These are the kinds of questions we will face when we stand before our Creator. And he has the right to ask us those questions.

Sometimes I've seen students face an exam with an arrogant attitude. They say, "This is stupid. I shouldn't have to take this test." They don't study and their grade often reflects that attitude. Don't let arrogant folly characterize you. Acknowledge God's rightful authority over your life. Yield to him all you have and all you are because it all belongs to him, anyway. That's the message of verses 1-2.

A great way to tell whether you acknowledge the authority of Jesus is if you want to get to know him better. There's something magnetic about worship. The closer you get to God's majesty, the more you're drawn to it. Those who know God, desire God. It's impossible to know the God whose glory fills the earth and not find your heart on a quest to know him better. That takes us to the second stanza.

2. God declares his entrance requirements, verses 3-6

God, after establishing his right to examine us, now announces his entrance requirements. He starts with two questions, "*Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?*" We're fairly certain that the event that triggered the writing of this psalm was during King David's life when the ark of the covenant was brought back

to Jerusalem after being taken by the Philistines for two decades, the story is in 1 Samuel 7. The ark of the covenant was where God's presence was most potently concentrated in those days. When it was brought back to Jerusalem, there was a massive celebration, culminated with David dancing before the Lord! As the ark was brought to Jerusalem, David and his companions stood back. "Who can stand there? Who can ascend that holy hill?"

An uphill climb is indicated here. God dwells in the towering heights. You see this imagery of the mount of ascent early on in the story of scripture with Moses ascending Mount Sinai to be near God and to receive the Ten Commandments from God. God dwells in the towering heights. The places of his majesty are a rarefied atmosphere. Not everyone can climb the heights. The psalmist tells us that you must have two things: 1) clean hands, and 2) a pure heart. Clean hands refer to our actions and how we live and a pure heart refers to inward transformation. The psalmist is telling us that there must be consistency with both the inward and the outward. With what we say is in our hearts and how we actually live. It's not enough to just come to church and sing songs and say, "I worshiped God this week." The question is, "Do you live a life of worship the other six days?" Your life must demonstrate that you worship the living God in how you work, rest, care for creation, think, socialize, and engage your community.

So God says in verse 4 that if we want to come into God's presence, to ascend to that holy hill, we need outward and inward transformation. Then, he says we need to have

a right relationship with God and with others. Look at the middle of verse 4, “...*who does not lift up his soul to what is false.*”

To lift up your soul is to trust in something; to look to something for your security. The only One to Whom we should lift up our souls, the only One Who is worthy of our trust, the only One to Whom we should look for security, power and provision is the One true and living God. The one who comes into God’s presence must not lift up his soul—must not run after—things that are false and empty.

So not only must the one who ascends have a right relationship with God, they also need a right relationship with humanity. Verse 4 continues, “...*does not swear deceitfully.*” Their word is trustworthy. They are honest and truthful in all their ways.

Often idolatry before God breeds dishonesty with humanity. When we’re lifting up our souls to what is false, we’re also willing to speak falsehood to others. You cannot have fellowship with the God of truth unless you turn away from every false way.

As we look at these entrance requirements, we see that God is going to completely examine us—our actions, attitudes, motives, thoughts, words, and relationships. Everything about us will be naked and exposed before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account. God is looking for a person who is honest, sincere, and true. A person who doesn’t just say, “I have faith” but whose life lives out their faith.

What David is saying here runs parallel to what James, the brother of Jesus, says in his letter. “You have faith? Show me your faith by your works. Prove the genuineness of your faith by the way you live” (James 2:18). God is looking for things like:

- An inward transformation of our life through grace and by faith in Jesus
- A grace that has amazed and transformed you
- A grace that shows up in how you speak
- In how you worship
- In whether you speak the truth and are trustworthy

Those are the kinds of things God is looking for. Verse 4 is key because it makes our exam day very clear. First, I cannot know God without holiness. But also, I can't manufacture that holiness on my own. That's why in verse 6 we see that the people who ascend the hill are people who seek God's face. They look to him. They say to him in the words of St. Augustine, “Oh God, command what you will but give what you command.” Lord, you say I must be holy to know you and be close to you and be like you—so would you save me from unholiness and baptize me into your holiness.

There are two words in verse 6 that really encourage me. The word *generation* indicates that there will be a multitude of people saved by God. And the word *Jacob*—“the God of Jacob.” Who was Jacob in the bible? He was a deceiver. Jacob didn't meet the requirements of God, but in God's grace, he did a transforming work in Jacob's life so that God was not ashamed to call himself “the God of Jacob.”

Before we move to the last stanza, let's come back once more to the book of James 4:8-10. Turn there in your bibles if you will. Listen to verse 10, where James also answers the question of who can ascend the hill of the Lord. *"Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."* What does it look like to draw near to God? James answers, *"Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."* James also says in verse 9 *"Let your laughter be turned to weeping."* James is urging us to get serious. Realize you must prepare yourself to come before God now. Don't just live for your own pleasure. Don't let life pass you by. Stop being titillated by all the world's pleasures. James says, *"Humble yourself before the Lord and he will exalt you."*

In John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the main character, Christian, ascends the hill of Calvary with the heavy burden of sin on his back. When he comes to the top of the hill, he finds the cross, and the heavy burden rolls down the hill and is buried in the empty tomb of the risen Christ. Bunyan answers the centuries old question of asking "Who can ascend the hill of the Lord" by showing that it is Christ himself who is on the mountain top as he is lifted up for our own sins. And when Christian looks to Christ, the burdens of sin are broken off his back.

Upward I look and see him there.

Who made an end to all my sin.

3. Heaven celebrates the victory, verse 7-10

The Psalm ends with celebrating the one who is qualified to bring us to the hill of holiness. The one who met the entrance requirements. The one who ascended the hill of the Lord. He ascended on our behalf, as our representative and forerunner. Here we get to eavesdrop on the triumphal entry of Christ the king into the gates of heaven. He has fought the enemy and defeated him. He has emerged from the grave victorious. Finally, here is the one who is qualified to ascend the hill of the Lord and to stand in his presence.

Psalm 24 was used as part of the weekly liturgy in Jewish worship, and it was sung regularly on Sundays. So, on Palm Sunday, our Lord Jesus mounted a donkey and ascended the rocky hill to Jerusalem. And the people of the city cried out, “Save us, hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” But, before Jesus could ascend that hill, he first would have to ascend the hill of Calvary. A gruesome hill. A place of sin and shame, called Golgotha—the place of the skull.

Lifted up to die, the King of glory would do battle against our greatest foes, against Satan, sin, and death itself. As he was lifted up, his blood being poured out to meet the ancient requirement of sacrifice for atonement of sins, his own blood cleansed our filthy hands and purified our stained hearts.

On that cross, Jesus wrestled with death itself—and strangled it. Through his dying and rising, death no longer has a hold on him—and it cannot destroy those who belong to him.

So we sing,

*“Behold Him there the risen Lamb,
My perfect spotless righteousness,
The great unchangeable I am,
The King of glory and of grace,
One with Himself I cannot die.
My soul is purchased by His blood,
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ my Savior and my God!”*

In the end, or perhaps in the true beginning there is an unexpected ending to the great story of the King and his kingdom. The hill of ascent—heaven itself—comes down to earth. We call it the final culmination or the ultimate restoration. The book of Revelation tells us that John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, saw in a vision of what is to come, he saw heaven coming down to earth. The dwelling place of the Royal King will be with his people here on earth. Revelation tells us there will no longer be a temple, an ark of the covenant, or a “place” where God’s glory dwells, for God himself will dwell among us. The city doesn’t even need the light of the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light!

So we glory in Christ, our great Redeemer who not only makes us worthy on the day of the final exam, but who brings heaven down to earth and dwells with us in pure and glorious and joy-filled light. Hallelujah! Come, Lord Jesus, come!

Benediction

Children of God

Called into the royal family of God where we are all one in Christ

Remember the power of the Spirit at work in you as you too ascend the hill of holiness, recognizing that it is Christ who redeemed you and is redeeming you by the power of the Spirit.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:16, 17 NIV)