

October 28, 2018

EXULTING IN OUR KING OF GLORY

Psalm 24

(8 of 8 in a series of selected Psalms)

I remember a fearful moment Lili and I had on vacation just a few years ago. We were at the beach, and Michael and Marie were old enough that they had wandered out into the water by themselves without Lili or me paying attention to them. On that particular day, the beach was crowded. Everywhere you looked, you would see groups of people. They were yelling, playing, and all seemed good. Therefore, with the younger ones building a sand cast beside us, Lili and I each became consumed in a book or in building the sand castle. And several minutes past without us looking up to make sure that Michael and Marie were doing okay.

Suddenly, however, it dawned on me that it had been a while since we'd looked up to check on them, and so I did that very thing, only I didn't see them. I stood up to get a better look, thinking perhaps the waves may simply be blocking my vision of them. But they weren't in front of us. So, I looked to my left and my right, as far as I could see. They weren't there either, in the water or on the beach. This is when I said to Lili, "I can't find Michael and Marie." Sure enough, as she stood up and looked, she couldn't find them either. And so, feeling quite anxious, I told her that if she'd stay here with the younger two, I'd go walking along the beach to see if I could find them.

And you can imagine, how unnerving of a walk that was, realizing with every step how big and how crowded this beach was. Finally, after several feet from where I started, I saw Michael and Marie walking on the beach toward me. And, as you've perhaps experienced if you've been in a similar situation, my first reaction was one of relief, quickly followed my accusation. I asked them why in the world they'd decided to wander off so far from our place on the beach where Lili and I could no longer see them. But as they described to me what happened, it became apparent, that they had never intended to wander so far from us. It is simply that as they played in the water, the current of the ocean was constantly pulling them to the left of where they'd started such that when they came straight into the shore, they were several feet away from where they'd started.

Since that day, every trip to the beach has involved a conversation where we say, "Now remember, if you're out in the ocean, look up periodically and make sure that you're still in front of us." And I realize that this may mean that half of your time out playing in the water involves looking up, realizing you've drifted, and fighting to get back over where you need to be.

I think that Scripture can function this same way in our lives. It's not by mistake that the author of Hebrews speaks of God's promise to us as an "anchor of the soul." It's because he knows that we're prone to drift or wander, and we need something to hold us steady against the current, something we can set our eyes on and make sure we're where we should be walking. And most of the time, what anchors us or brings us back to the place where we need to stand isn't some

new piece of information or knowledge that we've never had before. It's simply seeing in the Scripture what we already know but may have forgotten or ignored and simply renewing our mind to that truth, which is no doubt why Paul tells us in Romans 12:1-2 that the way not to be conformed to the world but transformed is by renewing our minds to what God has spoken to us in his word.

And the good news for us that Psalm 24 is a great opportunity for us to do that very thing this morning, renewing our minds to some glorious truths, and I think this psalm actually had that function historically. Let me see if I can make an argument for this psalm having a renewing-of-one's-mind-to-important-truths kind of function historically, and then we'll look at these truths and renew our minds to them this morning.

There is no clear consensus among commentators as to what was the original setting for this psalm, but the closest thing to a consensus is the idea that this psalm celebrates and commemorates the moment when David brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem. You may remember that at one point the Israelites had thought that if they brought the ark of the covenant out with them into battle, then their victory was assured. It was a way they had come up with to manipulate God, so they thought. If the ark symbolizes God's very presence, and we have the ark with us, how could we be defeated? The problem, however, is that God would not be manipulated, the Israelites were defeated by the Philistines, and the ark was captured.

The problem for the Philistines, however, was that they'd gotten more than they bargained for. While they had the ark, we read in 1 Samuel 5:6 that "the hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors." So, they moved it to another city, but the same thing happened, and finally they put it on a cart, hitched the cart to two cows, and sent them away, so that the ark ultimately ended up at the house of Abinadab, where it stayed for twenty years until David decided to go get it and bring it to Jerusalem. And though it was a treacherous journey, with Uzzah dying along the way, there was ultimately a great celebration as the ark entered the city, and most commentators believe David wrote this psalm as part of that celebration (perhaps a song to be rehearsed again and again, as I mentioned, as a focusing reminder of sorts).

And if you look at the psalm, it makes sense. Imagine, if you will, the ark of God, symbolizing God's very presence, coming into Jerusalem, and the mere presence of the ark among God's enemies had been sufficient to afflict and torment them. They naturally would have celebrated the fact that God owns and rules over all the world, as we see noted in verses 1-2. God owns all the earth and those in it because he created it, we are told. And this would have been a note sounded loud and clear as he had afflicted the Philistines without the help of any human being. He, after all, owns the earth and those who dwell on it, and that included the Philistines. So, he could do with them all that he wanted.

Then, as the ark gets closer to the city, the Levites may well have come out to greet David and the others moving the ark, and they entered into a liturgical question and answer script, which we see in verses 3-6. Now, the reason I think this was a repeated script of worship is because

nearly the same words and very much the same idea is captured in Psalm 15. Thus, by repeating this question and answer format, the people of Israel were reminded of the important truths God wanted them to remember (kind of like what we do with catechism questions), and in this case the specific truth was what kind of person could enter God's presence.

So, for example, you could imagine the Levites coming out to meet David as the ark was about to enter the city, going through this liturgical question and answer time, asking, "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?" (v. 3). And the people would answer, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation" (vv. 4-5).

That is, the people would acknowledge that one who is going to enter God's presence needs to be holy as God is holy. It must be one whose actions are not tainted by sin, as referenced by "clean hands," and one whose motives are pure, as referenced by "a pure heart." One whose worship is only and always directed toward God, as referenced by not lifting one's "soul to what is false," and one who is truthful, as referenced by the phrase, "does not swear deceitfully." This one will receive the Lord's blessing, his favor, his justification, and be welcomed into his presence.

Now, instantly, this would be a reminder to any intellectually honest person that he or she is disqualified. Even the prophet Isaiah instantly realized as he gazed upon the holy God that he was unclean. But instead of the Israelites answering that these necessary qualifications obviously excluded them, they answered, "Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob" (v. 6).

What are they saying here? Well, again, I think the mention of "Jacob" is key, even as we saw last week as we looked at Psalm 20. The ESV translates this as the people saying that they are those who "seek the face of the *God of Jacob*," but it is more literally "those who seek your face, Jacob," perhaps identifying themselves as "Jacob" instead of describing God as the God of Jacob.¹ But either way you take it, I think the point is the same. The reference to Jacob is a reminder of one of the patriarchs who sought the Lord's blessing and favor, despite his many failings and undeserved nature. The Israelites, in referencing him would have been saying, in essence, "Like Jacob who did not deserve your blessing but sought your favor nonetheless, obviously dependent on your mercy, so we seek your mercy and favor and blessing now." It was a recognition of the need for God's mercy if indeed they are to be recipients of God's favor and blessing.

And this would have then led to the Levites saying, "Come on in" (or something like that), but it wouldn't have been the Israelites alone who were coming. They were bringing the ark, the symbol of the very presence of God. Thus, the people would have declared to the city, "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." And that would have provoked a question, "Who is this King of glory?" which the people would have answered, "The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O

gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in,” and so it would have continued as we see in v. 10, as they would have brought the ark into the city.

So, it seems that something like the ark entering Jerusalem, as recorded in 2 Samuel 6, does indeed make sense of this psalm, and the fact that a portion of this psalm is already seen in Psalm 15 also reinforces the fact that this psalm was used (or at least has elements that were used) in a liturgical fashion where the people may have asked and answered certain questions which were to be a means of renewing their minds to truths that they needed to remember and hold onto. Therefore, in our remaining time together, I simply want to repeat these truths and think through why these truths are so crucial for us to remember and call to mind again and again.

The Lord owns and rules over everything

As we noted, that’s the argument of verses 1-2. The Lord owns and rules over everything and everyone, and the reason David tells us we can know the truth of that is because he made everything and everyone. He is the Creator.

Think for a moment about the letters written to the churches in the early chapters of Revelation. The Lord says to the church at Smyrna, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

Here are a people who are going to suffer, be thrown into prison, and some executed for their faith. And Jesus isn’t telling them that he’s going to intervene and stop it. That’s not the foundation for his exhortation, “Do not fear.” No, the foundation for why they don’t have to fear was laid earlier when he was introduced in Revelation 1 as “the ruler of the kings on earth . . . who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,” who holds authority over death. In essence, he’s saying to them not to fear because all of this is happening under his loving, sovereign control.

And that’s the same foundation that is laid for us in Psalm 24:1-2. God owns everything and everyone. He’s the sovereign ruler and creator. This means that nothing and no one has the upper hand on him. This means that nothing going on in your life or set to come into your life does so apart from his allowance. This is what provided Spurgeon so much comfort in the midst of his trials. He once wrote, “It would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me, that the bitter cup was never filled by his hand, that my trials were never measured out by him, nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity.”²

The one who loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us, who promises to work all for our good, and who sings over us in love and delight is the one who owns and rules over everything. Be comforted under his loving, caring, ruling hand, even as you walk through the

valley of the shadow of death. That's the theme that begins Psalm 24—the Lord rules over and owns all. And this psalm also reminds us that the Lord is holy but teaches us to seek his grace.

The Lord is holy but teaches us to seek his grace

In every other religion, if there is mercy, there is a compromise of standards by the so-called “god.” There is a moment where the god must say, “Well, I’ll merely relax any standards, and what you’ve done is good enough.” But all other religions are man-made religions and all other gods are the products of man’s imagination. The one true God is holy, and he makes clear that he is holy.

This is what verses 3-6 are about. When David asks, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” he is asking who dares come into the very presence of God. Throughout the Bible the Lord is pictured as if he dwells on a mountain. So, for example, as he made himself known to Moses in giving the law, it was on Mount Sinai. In Ezekiel 28, he pictures his dwelling as the “mountain of God” (v. 14). When we come to the Lord in Hebrews 12, we come to Mount Zion. So, when David asks who will ascend the hill or mountain of the Lord, he is saying, “Who dares come into the very dwelling, the very presence, of God?”

And this is why he holds up the standard of perfect obedience. Clean hands and a pure heart isn't the Lord's way of saying someone who is pretty good. He's saying we must be absolutely righteous. None of us qualifies. We are all like Isaiah, gazing on the holiness of God and noting, “I am a man of unclean lips.” And we might add, “And unclean hands, and an impure heart, and have at times been given to idolatry and falsehood.” As the Scripture elsewhere testifies, all of us have gone astray. There is none who is righteous, no not one.

And yet, the Lord teaches us to seek his grace, doesn't he? The Israelites didn't turn away in verse 6 but instead said, “We're seeking your favor like Jacob.” And because Psalm 24 is the very word of God, this is God instructing us as his unclean people to seek his favor, to seek his face, to press on and desire to be in his very presence, seeking his grace. But how? How can an unclean people be in the presence of a holy God who by no means relaxes his standards or demands for perfect righteousness? That brings us to our last point, namely, that the Lord has come and accomplished our salvation.

The Lord has come and accomplished our salvation

Psalm 24 basically rolls out the glory of the gospel. The creator God who rules over all in perfect holiness has made a way for an unholy people to be made holy and enter his presence. And he did it by coming to us. In the history of the church, on this side of Christ's death and resurrection, it's hard to read Psalm 24 without thinking about the work of Jesus Christ for us. For this reason this psalm was often read in celebration of Christ's ascension. It's easy to imagine, for example, all of God's people standing on this side of heaven, seeing that it is impossible for us, as those who are unclean and impure, to ascend the hill of the Lord into God's presence.

But God sent his Son to us who become one of us, taking on a fully human nature, so that he might represent us. And he did have clean hands, a pure heart, never lifted his soul to what was false, and always spoke truly. He alone merits presence into the divine throne room. But he came to bring *us* to glory. He died to pay the penalty our uncleanness and impurity deserved. He obeyed as our representative so that we might be clothed in his righteousness. He was raised so that he might live forever and represent us forever. And I like to think that when Christ ascended back to the Father's right hand that Psalm 24:7-10 was spoken. Our conquering King had come to us, and sin, death, and the devil had been conquered. So on his way back into heaven, as he was raising our human nature in the clouds to God's right hand, he said, "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." And heaven asked, "Who is this King of glory?" And the glorious conquering King, God the Son responded, "The LORD, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle!" And he is *our* King, *our* representative, *our* high priest, and *our* Savior. So let us remember these things: the God who loves us rules and reigns, he demands perfect holiness to enter his presence, and he has accomplished that holiness for us through the work of his Son. And if we belong to him by faith, then we will enter those glorious gates clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, who is ours by faith alone.

That truth is the foundation and fuel for living a life of loving obedience before God. We love him because we know that he has first loved us. So, this morning, let this be like a truth that re-centers us, anchors us, and encourages to live obedient lives of love toward our God. Amen.

¹Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 582.

²Quoted by John Piper in *A Camaraderie of Confidence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 49.