

Psalm 24—Approaching God

Traditionally, Psalm 24 was written by David after the occasion of his bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem to take its place in the Tabernacle. The Ark was that box, inlaid with gold with the cherubim on top, in which the tablets containing the Ten Commandments were kept. Also from Hebrews 9:4, we know that it contained a golden jar of the manna that God provided in the wilderness for Israel, and also Aaron's rod which miraculously budded. To Israel, the Ark represented the presence of God, and once a year the High Priest would enter the room in the Tabernacle called the Holy of Holies, where the Ark was kept, to offer a blood sacrifice for the sins of the whole nation on the Day of Atonement. In 1 Samuel 4 we read that against God's will, the Israelites took the Ark out of the Tabernacle and carried it into battle. Israel lost the battle to the Philistines, and the Ark was captured. Israel's reaction was "The glory of God has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God was taken." Nevertheless, God caused the Philistines to be "ravaged" by tumors until they sent the Ark back to Israel where it stayed in Kiriath-jearim at the house of Abinadab for 20 years. This confirms to us that for over 300 years during the time of the Judges and the reign of King Saul, Israel did not worship God at the Tabernacle according to the Law of Moses. In 2 Samuel 6, David had become King of Israel and made his capital Jerusalem. David assembled the people to retrieve the Ark from Kiriath-jearim and bring it to the Tabernacle in Jerusalem. The Ark had just been hanging around the house of Abinadab (maybe in his garage or something) all that time. David and his men went to Abinadab's house and put the Ark on a cart driven by a guy named Uzza. During the journey back up to Jerusalem, the Ark began slipping off the cart so Uzza grabbed it with his hand. This angered the Lord, so He struck Uzza down.

At this point we are all wondering how this could be fair since Uzza meant well. We must remember that Israel had been very disobedient and very careless regarding the Ark for many years. The covenant they made with God to keep His Law and carry out the Day of Atonement had been neglected for about 300 years. When David's men came to get it, they broke every rule God had given Israel concerning the Ark. Despite David's zeal for the Lord, they failed to show the respect for the sanctity of the Ark, which represented God's presence and holiness. Exodus 25 explicitly forbade moving the Ark in any way except by Levite priests carrying it by poles put through the rings on the Ark. God found it necessary to give them a "wake-up call" by taking out Uzzah to get their attention (makes me wonder what God may have in store to wake us up today). Israel had neglected God's law for so long that they didn't

even know how to transport the Ark anymore. If they were going to begin to approach God with the respect and praise He deserved they needed to get started again on the right path instead of just haphazardly. David's initial reaction was to be mad at God (1 Chronicles 13:11), but after three months David consulted the Law of God and discovered the proper way to do it. David prepared the Tabernacle, and the Holy of Holies to house the Ark. Then he gave careful instructions to the Levite priests to "consecrate themselves" that they might bring the Ark in the proper way. This would mark a turning point in the history of Israel's approach to worship God. In 1 Chronicles 15:15, at David's instruction, the Levite priests carried the Ark using the poles on their shoulders, and placed the Ark in the Tabernacle as God had commanded. Then for the first time in a long time, Israel began celebrating the Passover, Day of Atonement, and all the other rituals and sacrifices that God had commanded through Moses in the wilderness. Sometime after these events, David wrote Psalm 24 to commemorate the event and instruct Israel on the proper way to approach the Lord.

The Reason God Deserves such Respect

In Psalm 24:1-2, we read that God created the world and every living thing in it. God started it, He sustains it, and God owns it. God has creative authority over the earth, its contents, and all living inhabitants. God made it so God owns it, and it depends on Him for its continued existence. God gives the world life, but also its stability, order, and permanence. There is no independent existence apart from God. Therefore, don't think of God in exclusive or nationalistic terms—everyone in the world owes Him allegiance. We owe God our allegiance, worship, and obedience because of who He is. Our awe (fear), reverence, and consecration are due. We have to get settled on who we are dealing with here. God is not your good buddy, not your loving grandpa, or Santa Claus. We are not on equal footing with Him, we have no entitlements, and God is not there to fulfill our every wish and desire, or to bail us out of trouble.

Perhaps a really good illustration of this is found in the Mosaic Law concerning the "Year of Jubilee". In Leviticus 25, the legislation was given Israel that all agricultural land had to lie fallow every 7th year. The land was not under the ownership or control of men, but under God's authority. In addition to that, after seven cycles of these seven years (49 years), the 50th year would be the Year of Jubilee when all debts were cancelled and all property was returned to its original owners. God had allotted the land to them after the Exodus, and it was

to revert to its original allotment. Therefore, the land could not be really possessed, but only held as an agent of God. We don't own anything because we are just temporary tenants.

Who May Approach God ?

In Psalm 24:3-6, we find a description of who may approach God. Who may ascend up to God's presence and stand in the Holy place? It is an interesting question, and one in which mankind's answers differ significantly. Should it be the best climber? Should it be the hardest worker? Should it be the strongest, fastest, or best looking? No, the one qualified has "clean hands and a pure heart". The one qualified doesn't worship the god of materialism, but is a seeker of the Lord. We must be clean both externally and internally. Our hands can only be clean if they are washed in the blood of God's atoning sacrifice of His Son. "Pure heart" shifts the issue of righteousness from external action to the interior nature of a person. Outward acts are consistent with and flow out of an inner attitude and commitment to God. As God said in 1 Samuel 16:7, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart". Our hearts are more us than our hands are us, and there must be a work of God's grace to clean our heart. Maybe you are thinking, "I shall never enter God's presence, for I have neither clean hands nor a clean heart". This is good, for now you are ready for Christ to come into your life and give you "clean hands and a pure heart". After believing in Christ, God is faithful to forgive you and begin to transform you to approach Him. Christ has already ascended that hill to heaven, and only He knows the way. Christ alone can ascend that hill to God because His hands are clean and His heart is pure. None may approach God based on their obedience to the Law, or the good works they have done. Only grace can make us eligible to be in God's presence. Only within that relationship made possible by the sacrifice of Christ can we approach God.

The image of David and Israel approaching the Tabernacle only according to God's truth, and seeking God served as a sober reminder to Israel. Psalm 24:7-10 have "the King of glory" approaching the gates of the Tabernacle. Then the congregation asks "Who is the King of glory?" The Psalmist answers that the strong and mighty Lord is, then again in verse 10, he answers again that the King of glory is "the Lord of hosts". I believe this was a prophetic revelation of the coming of the Messiah/Christ, the true King of Israel. Jesus came to Jerusalem, and He alone was qualified to enter the gates of the Temple with "clean hands" and a "pure heart".

The coming of the Lord as King at the end of Ps.24, foresees both God's intended provision to give His people clean hands and a pure heart, but also provides anticipation of judgment on the earth. When Jesus comes back, His coming will result in either great blessing for those that acknowledge their belief in Him, or judgment for those who do not.

The facts here in Psalm 24 of God's complete ownership of all things, undermine all human pretensions of ownership and control. This may be tough for us because human ownership and control appeals to our vanity, and is the basic principle of capitalism. I remember the first time I read William Henley's poem "Invictus". Invictus is Latin for unconquered, and the poem expresses his unconquerable attitude in the face of pain and suffering. The poem ends with "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." The vanity of man would like to think this is true, and I felt that pride well up inside me; but the truth is Henley was just passing through, he took nothing with him, and had no control over the eternal destiny of his soul. Henley died in 1903 from complications of tuberculosis, so he definitely was not "the master of my fate". In contrast to Henley's poem, David had it right in Psalm 24 that "the earth is the Lord's and all it contains", and the fate of our eternal soul is in God's hands alone.

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