



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## Things to Know As You Approach the Temple

Psalm 24

David Anguish

### *Introduction*

Lament—Confession—Praise. That pattern appears repeatedly in Psalms. Since we've met people who believe that bold and honest complaints are tantamount to rejecting God, we know some will find its recurrence remarkable. But such a view is not realistic, for in truth, we often find ourselves wondering about God's ways in times of trial.

It's necessary, then, whether we study the connection of these themes in one text (e.g., Pss 22; 42–43) or spread across different passages (e.g., Pss 22–24), to look, and then look again, at these passages. We *will* have trials (James 1.2 says “when,” not “if”) and, especially if we are unprepared for them, they may shake us to the core. We must, therefore, learn the biblical, and faithful, way to respond.

This sermon completes a three-part study across Psalms 22–24. To review: Psalm 22 is mainly lament, but also praise—a self-contained unit. But we also see indications of lament in Psalm 23 (vv. 4–5), in the middle of its great confession. The point is to keep our lives focused on God and remain determined to follow him, even traversing our darkest valleys. When we do, we are ready to proceed with true and deep-felt worship.

That's what Psalm 24 is about. As a statement of praise and the reasons for it, this was likely composed to prepare the people to enter the temple. Its point is that there is a right way to approach God with our worship.

### *Seek to See God's Fullness in Worship (vv. 1–2)*

The Psalm begins with three statements about reality. The first is a statement of ownership: “The earth is the LORD'S and the fullness thereof” (v. 1). Second, that general statement is given the widest possible inclusiveness: “the world and those who dwell therein” (v. 1).

Third, the claim is stated in contrast to pretenders to the throne: “for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers” (v. 2). Some background is necessary to see the point. In the ancient Near East, seas and rivers were associated with unstable chaos, “hostile to the

ordered world" (Mays 1994, 120). This view was especially characteristic of pagan religions. In the creation narratives of ancient Mesopotamia, for example,

The ancient chaotic waters were gods who resisted the creative movement toward stability and order associated with the younger gods. Creation took place in the context of divine struggle, in which the younger gods were the ultimate victors. Marduk, who led the younger gods to victory, used the bodies of defeated water gods ... to set the protective boundaries of the inhabitable world. As in the biblical narrative, the chaotic waters were banished to below the earth and above the heavens, where the gods controlled their introduction into the world as rain coming down or springs bubbling up.

In Canaanite myth, Yam (the Hebrew word for "sea") is one name for the water god who struggles with Baal for control of the world; Yam's alternate name is Judge Nahar (from the same Hebrew word for 'waters' that appears in Ps. 24:2) (Wilson 2002, 449-450).

In light of this context, the point in Psalm 24 is that YHWH is supreme over all pretenders to the throne. This is the first step for true worship and has implications for how we are to approach God. James Mays elaborates:

What the confession excludes in the modern world must be made clear by the congregation who profess it. It excludes any scientism that takes the world to be merely the result of inexplicable and purposeless causes. It raises questions about every tendency of human beings to absolutize ownership. To whom do we think practically and operationally the world belongs? To a roster of nations? To the state? To corporations? To whoever has the money to get title to pieces of it? The confession qualifies every conceivable answer to such questions (Mays 1994, 120).

Since most of us would say "Amen" to those statements, we need to press the point further. It is tempting—and easy—to take a "God-plus" approach to our ultimate allegiance. We're for God, we intend to honor God, but we bring other things along too. One way that can affect our worship is seen in how we fit worship into our schedules instead of making it the priority of our lives to which we'll devote our all in time and energy. Jesus spoke to this issue in Matthew 6.19–34.

### *Properly Prepare to Worship (vv. 3–6)*

Verse 3 addresses the question of what it takes to enter the temple mount and holy presence of God and assumes a humble approach: "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?" These questions, which some suggest may have been addressed to the people by the priests as they about to enter the temple, illustrate the importance of humble reflection on our need for repentance and divine mercy before we approach God. We acknowledge our dependence on God's merciful grace before we enter his presence (see Wilson 2002, 450).

In light of the background of their understanding of the Mosaic covenant, some are surprised by the expectations found in verse 4: "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." It is true that the Mosaic covenant emphasized the distinction between clean and unclean and stipulated purification rituals to address cultic uncleanness. But the emphasis in this verse is on character. The words *clean* and *pure* are ethics terms, not ritual purification words. *Clean hands* stand for being innocent of wrong against others, especially the sin of shedding the blood of innocent victims. Reference to a *pure heart* shifts the emphasis from external action to internal character.

In addition, both *clean hands* and *a pure heart* are explained in terms of the object of our allegiance and development of integrity. The verse's middle phrase, "who does not lift up his soul to what is false," can be translated, "who does not lift up his self to emptiness." The NIV translates, "who does not trust in an idol," a reasonable rendering in view of verse 2. The reference is to purity of motive. The person who does not yield his soul to what is false is the one who seeks to develop a transparent integrity that is qualitatively like the holy God who cannot look on evil (cf. Hab 1.13).

The benefit of developing such character is the theme of verse 5: "He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation." "Blessing" refers to "the divine gift of provision for and support of life" (Mays 1994, 121).

"Righteousness" is "the divine gift of acceptance into and renewal of a relation with God that enables and encourages human righteousness in living" (Mays 1994, 122). The NIV's "vindication" is helpful since the word [דָּקָה; *ṣ'ḏāqāh*] "is a legal term that denotes a ruling by a judge regarding what should have occurred in a case under judgment. One who has fulfilled properly the expectations of justice in a case is declared *ṣaddiq* ('righteous')" after which he will receive a "*ṣedaqah*, a public acknowledgment of compliance of the expectations in the case" (Wilson 2002, 452). An acknowledgment of this nature is necessary to be allowed permission to enter God's presence.

The idea is more forceful in the Hebrew wordplay associated with "lifting up" than in the English translations (Wilson 2002, 452). "Lift" (24.4b; cf. 25.1) is the same word translated "receive" (נָסַב; *nāsāb*) in 24.5. It is also the key word in verses 7–10 where it appears four times. As we lift up the right character, with the right spirit and focus, we in turn are lifted up. Both the prophets (cf. Amos 5.21–24) and Jesus (Matt 5.21–26) make the same point.

Verse 6 pulls the ideas together: here are the people with whom God is pleased. "Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob."

*Remember: We Are Entering God's Presence (vv. 7–10).*

In verses 7–10, the literary style changes to an antiphonal liturgy that reflects Near Eastern custom, in both Mesopotamia and Canaan, wherein "the god who was victorious over the primeval sea gained kingship and the right to a temple-palace that represented his sovereignty" (Mays 1994, 123). The occasion for performing this entrance liturgy in Israel's religious life may have been a procession bringing the ark into the temple area as part of a celebration of the Lord's reign. As such, it constitutes "the dramatic version of the confession of verses 1–2" (Mays 1994, 123).

The antiphonal repetition builds a crescendo of honor for God as the one who is triumphant over all (the figures in verse 8 are military). Notice the repetition of "glory" (כְּבוֹד; *kāḇod*) in each of these four verses (twice in v. 10). In light of verses 3–6, the point is that "when humans, rightly prepared in heart and action, wait for Yahweh in worship, the 'King of glory' comes! ... Yahweh deigns to be present with 'the generation of those who seek ... your face'" (Wilson 2002, 454).

The application is not hard to discern. We must give attention to our focus when we worship. While it should be regular, worship should not be habitual in the sense of operating on

autopilot. It should not be seen as something that is mainly about *us*; the benefits we receive from worship are reflective, not primary. Finally, we should not enter into worship casually.

### *Conclusion*

Karl Barth once said, “Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life” (Elliott 2013). Everett Harrison explains why: “In its purest and most exalted sense it refers to the soul’s preoccupation with the Almighty in the attitude of adoration” (Harrison 1985, 131).

In a world filled with trouble, where we experience trials that sometimes make us wonder about God and his ways, it is vital for us to have the right attitude toward honoring God. It’s not just a good idea, not just “the right things we do.” It’s a way to stimulate the attitude of adoration that gets us through life.

As you reflect on that, re-read verses 7–10. Who is the object of glory in your life?

### **Works Cited**

- Scott Elliott. 2013. “Some Collected Quotes on Worship.” *Resurrected Living (blog)*. June 11, 2013. <https://resurrectedliving.wordpress.com/2013/06/11/some-collected-quotes-on-worship-2/>
- Everett F. Harrison. 1985. *The Apostolic Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- James L. Mays. 1994. *Psalms*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
- Gerald H. Wilson. 2002. *Psalms—Volume 1*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

*www.davidanguish.com*