

Prayers

To God

Leave aside all unworthy thoughts as you come before God today. You know what they are and you are used to just holding them there in your soul even while you do your praying or worshipping. Now is the time to get rid of them.

For myself

Weekly theme: social media

Pray for those who are developing the social media of the future, and will affect the lives of billions of people. Pray for Christian and godly people to use their good influence in these fields of development.

For others

Lord Jesus Christ, inventor and ingenious mind, carer and gentle lover of souls, friend and wonderful companion, come afresh into the lives of all those who need You at this very moment of time. You can speak into the heart, You can stop people when they are going the wrong way, and You can give visions that demand our attention. Draw more people to Your side, we pray, and may we be the agents who gladly serve you all our days! **Alleluia!**

Meditation

As the microscope sees impossible detail
And now delves the secrets of atomic structure,
So the Love of God searches the heart and the soul.

As the telescope views into outer space,
Seeing the future by looking into the past,
So the forgiveness of God transcends time and space.

As the X-ray or scanner observes within
What the human eye cannot see from outside,
So the Spirit of God breathes eternally through our being.

As a simple light bulb changes the world
And light that is shone makes everything better,
So the compassion of God works for the good of all things.

As the inventor finds a powerful new way
To make a new idea into something achievable.
So the faithfulness of God makes the impossible, possible.

As the results of science and engineering
Touch the lives of everyone for good or for ill,
So the Salvation of God transforms the entire Creation.

Glory be to You, O Lord, for all this, and for so much more.

Bible Passage

Psalm 24

Of David. A psalm.

- ¹ The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
² for he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters.
- ³ Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?
Who may stand in His holy place?
⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false.
⁵ He will receive blessing from the LORD
and vindication from God his Saviour.
⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek Him,
who seek your face, O God of Jacob.

Selah

- ⁷ Lift up your heads, O you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
⁸ Who is this King of glory?
The LORD strong and mighty,
the LORD mighty in battle.
⁹ Lift up your heads, O you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
¹⁰ Who is He, this King of glory?
The LORD Almighty
He is the King of glory.

Selah

Review

After the glories of Psalms 22 and 23, it is difficult to see where we can go to find comparable inspiration! The compilers of the Psalms have excelled themselves, however, in providing us with a sequence of psalms of the highest spiritual quality, right through to this psalm. That is not to say that God's Word is found any more or less in a particular psalm, rather that some of them have a spiritual ability to speak to the generations with immediacy and clarity which makes them stand out. We thank God for these psalms, knowing that they hold a special place in the affection of generations.

Psalms 24 continues in this rich vein; though it undoubtedly has some mysterious and intriguing parts which are not readily understood by a modern reader (such as the idea of 'gates' lifting up their 'heads' – v7ff). Our imaginations can fill gaps, but that may be very different from the meaning of the Word of God as it was originally written, because due to the passage of time we have lost touch with any substantial knowledge of the rites and ceremonies in which these Psalms were originally used.

If you look closely at Psalm 24, it is not too easy to be certain as to what it is all about. The opening verses 1 & 2 are a poem of praise to God as Creator, the next, verses 3 to 6 are in the form of a question and answer session about who is worthy to come into the presence of God, and thirdly, the last verses, 7 to 10 are an intriguing affirmation of praise to God as He returns to His Holy Place. It is all quite magnificent as a song of praise to God, but what the details mean is quite uncertain.

Going Deeper

Pilgrims coming up to Jerusalem

If you read books about the psalms, you will find that it is generally accepted that this Psalm reflects a group of pilgrims coming up to Mount Zion to praise God, the words of the opening verses being something of a hymn of praise. So far, so good. The following verses are thought to be a chant which took place between priest and people about the requirements of entry into the Holy City (Jerusalem, or Zion), and the travellers were required to affirm their holiness in the presence of a priest. The Psalm begins with a great pronouncement of the creative activity of God in verses 1 and 2 which was probably a chant or a hymn. This was followed by a call from a priest to the people (v3) which challenged the pilgrims about their right of access.

Verse 4 is a simple response from the people, which they were presumably expected to know. It is a description of holiness, which means those characteristics which make a person worthy to come into the presence of a holy God. It is a simple but powerful description combining the human responsibilities of right action (clean hands) and honest intent (pure heart); together with two of the Ten Commandments concerning the way we honour God's holiness, the second 'you shall not worship false idols' (Ex 20:4,5,6) and the third 'you shall not take my name in vain' (Ex 20:7). The verse reads very much like Psalm 15, which also contains descriptions of holiness which combine duty to others and duty to God.

In verse 5, the pilgrims go on to claim their right of access. If they have done what is right and kept the commands of God, they expect the blessings of God, and 'vindication' from God who was their 'Saviour'. By saying these words they claimed what they had come to Jerusalem for; blessings and righteous judgement.

In order to understand the next verse; we will have to do a small detour. There is much debate about how to translate the end of verse 6. Literally, it reads 'such is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Your face, Jacob'. In order to make it sound as if a priest says these words by way of accepting the claims of the pilgrims, most translations of the Bible have at the end of verse 6 not simply '... Jacob', but '... God of Jacob'. I have left the translation like this because it is what most of you will read in your Bibles. However, I suspect that it is possible that these words are still the words of those who are claiming their right of entry, and they do so because they claim Jacob as their forefather. If this were the case, the best way to translate the verse would be something like this, as if the people were calling out 'We, (sons of) Jacob, are the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Your face'.

Letting the 'King of Glory' into the Temple at Jerusalem through gates?

It is even more difficult to unravel the last few verses. They are quite magnificent. A picture is painted of the Lord coming up, in procession, to the 'ancient' doors of Jerusalem, or perhaps the Temple in Jerusalem (it doesn't say). There appears to be a recital of words proclaiming the Lord as a King returning from battle (v8) or at least affirming His power to protect His people. However, it is very difficult to see what the origins of such a procession could be in ancient Israel. The Lord was considered to be present in the 'Ark of the Covenant' which had been kept in a tent by priests ever since it was built in the time of Moses. Before the Temple was built in Jerusalem, it was carried into battle (e.g. Joshua 6ff), but it stayed there once the Temple was built, and there was no reason for the 'King of Glory' to 'come up' to Jerusalem (v7) because He was already there! All this is debated by scholars, many of whom have concluded that this psalm describes an annual ritual enthronement of God as King in the Temple at Jerusalem after the times of David and Solomon (and consequently after the Temple was established). The only trouble with this idea is that there is absolutely no evidence for any such annual practice within scripture, nor anywhere else in ancient Hebrew texts!

So what do we have left, and how can we interpret these verses? To what do they refer? I think it best to strip the psalm of all this conjecture, because it seems to me that none of this can get us anywhere. We simply do not know enough about ancient practices of worship around the time of David or Solomon to be sure about what was going on. Psalm 24 is, however, a piece of poetry. As such, I believe it puts together ancient phrases to make a hymn of praise to God that would have fitted much more with the time in Israelite history when the people had to rebuild their great temple after the terrible Babylonian invasion (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah) and recover their vision of God's presence amongst the people at the 'hill of the Lord', where they were rebuilding Jerusalem. God was no longer in an 'Ark' (it had been destroyed by the Babylonians), but amongst His people.

If you read the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, you will discover that the people were often attacked during this work and ascribed their victories in these battles and skirmishes 'to the Lord'. Then, if you read the book of Malachi, you will find there a great deal of concern about the purity of the Lord's people who 'come up to Jerusalem'. This is the closest we can get to the sentiments of this psalm within scripture. It is found not by looking back to the time of David, but to later times in Israel's history. It is quite possible that these people put together parts of their ancient hymns and liturgies to create songs which expressed their current experience, and although we do not easily see the connections today, they would have been more obvious then. These songs were blessed by the Holy Spirit over hundreds of years and were part of scripture in Jesus' day, and hence are part of our Bible.

Discipleship

Application

Jesus in the Psalms

Placed alongside Psalms 22 and 23, the early Christians could, I believe, find much in Psalm 24 that helped them to understand God's work in Jesus Christ. Those who put this psalm together in its present form, perhaps around four hundred years before Christ, did indeed have a Messianic hope of a Saviour, and expressed it in their work. This, I believe, is what the early Christian disciples picked up. These are some of the suggestions.

If 'the Lord' of Psalm 22 and 'my Shepherd' of Psalm 23 were easily identified by early Christians as Jesus, then a phrase such as 'The earth is the Lord's' at the beginning of Psalm 24 puts Jesus together with God right at the beginning of creation! This was always a radical idea for those who were used to the traditional language about creation from Genesis 1, and it is possible the Gospel writer John used this idea when writing the famous opening of his Gospel; 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... all things came into being through Him' (John 1:1ff). John was a Jewish person who knew Psalm 24 and was in touch with the Spirit of God, and it is quite possible that he should seek to make sense of the life and death of Jesus in terms of what he knew from scriptures about the worship of the true and living God.

Following Jesus

The central verses of Psalm 24 would have meant even more. To 'ascend the hill of the Lord' would have sounded very close to our Lord's call to 'take up your cross and follow me'. This is because Jesus' ministry was thought of by all the Gospel writers as a pilgrimage in which Jesus began His ministry in the Galilean countryside, but 'came up' to Jerusalem, and 'ascended' to the place where he was crucified on a hill. Verses 4 to 6 of Psalm 24 would have been seen as a code of acceptability for those who would take the call of Christ and follow the same spiritual pilgrimage, which demanded a standard of discipleship which put together the moral purity of 'clean hearts' with the practical ethos of obedience to God's commands (v4).

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

If we look at the last few verses, all this becomes more specific, as it is relatively easy for us to see within the Psalm's poetic words some prophetic pointers to the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. After He came up to Jerusalem on a donkey, He was the victim of the duplicitous reaction of the crowds who greeted Him but later questioned who He was, yet by following this path, Jesus was in the process of winning the biggest battle of all time, against evil itself. He did this on our behalf, and it is very sad that those who hailed him on his final journey and who also knew Psalm 24 did not understand its prophecies well enough to see how Jesus fulfilled them.

There are many treasures within Psalm 24. In this case, I do not believe they can be found by trying to locate the words of the psalm in any of the known ancient practices of the people of Israel. The psalm can be best used by viewing it as a piece of rich poetry which God can use to help us to understand the life and work of Jesus Christ, and the requirements of holiness that are placed upon us if we wish to follow in His footsteps

Ideas for what to do

- The foremost challenge of this psalm is contained in verse 4. The challenge to purity and holiness before God is tough, and many people feel it is not for them, even though they wish to call themselves 'Christian'. It is so important to demonstrate in our lives that although we aspire to holiness and 'doing good' as an expression of it, that our ability to do anything or appear to be 'good' in any way is all a reflection of the work of God within us, by the power of His Holy Spirit. This is true discipleship.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which part of Psalm 24 attracts your attention? The opening praise? The central moral requirements? Or the final triumphant victory parade?
2. Do you think that the psalm has a better home in the Old testament than I have given it in these notes?
3. Do you find it easy or difficult to use words such as 'the Lord mighty in battle'; can you find a use for these words today which lessens the military implications?

Final Prayer

Gracious Lord, Your joy is to provide for all your creation. May I not be so unthankful that I forget to honour You in every hour of my day, and if I cannot do that consciously, may my life be so full of Your Spirit that all my actions become a reflection of my gratitude to the one who died for me. Hallelujah!