

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Lift Up Your Heads for the King of Glory”

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Psalm 24

King Saul took little interest in the religious life of Israel. For example, during his reign the ark of the covenant remained in a country house, mostly forgotten.

Saul's successor, David, set about correcting this state of affairs. He wanted to restore the ark, sign of God's presence, to its rightful place at the center of the nation's religious life. He wanted to bring it to Jerusalem. There was no temple yet. Once through the city gates, he erected a large tent, the tabernacle, and set the ark within.

David wrote Psalm 24, and he may well have written it to mark the return of the ark of the covenant to the tabernacle. It was one of the greatest days in David's life. It's when he stripped down to his skivvies and danced before the Lord with all his might. That's the context of Psalm 24, which celebrates the Lord's entrance into Jerusalem. We'll take it verse by verse.

Verse 1: “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.” We don't own the place. It belongs to God. Every living thing that has breath and life; every inanimate part of creation too, it all belongs to God because God created it all. You can still see the telltale signs of his brilliant and beautiful work. In fact, it requires great but mislead faith to declare it all an accident. And there are certainly ulterior motives because if our Creator does not exist, then we are not accountable to Him, and if not accountable, we can do whatever we want.

John Polkinghorne died last year. He was a professor of mathematical physics at Cambridge University and eventually became its president. He was also a devout Christian, not so much in spite of his scientific knowledge, but because of it. For example, in his book “Questions of Truth: Fifty-one Responses to Questions about God, Science and Belief” he said, “The only place in the universe where carbon is made is in the nuclear furnaces of the stars. Every atom of carbon in our bodies was once inside a star. . . If the laws of nuclear physics had been even a little bit different, there would have been no carbon and thus no you and me.”

He cites many more examples of this fine-tuning that made our earth suitable for life, and then asks, “What are we to make of this? It would be intellectually lazy” he says, “to say it was all a happy accident” (pp. 13-14). His conclusion? “Belief in God makes it intelligible”.

“The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.” All creation belongs to its Creator. This means we are His guests, temporary guests at that. We've been rude guests, haven't we? See how we've trashed the place! We have polluted the atmosphere and oceans, the lakes, streams and rivers, the soil . . . even outer space is growing full of space junk orbiting our planet. Add to that global warming, disappearing species. But remember, we are guests; we don't own it. It'd be like a squatter moving into your house and trashing the place, smoking weed, leaving behind empty beer cans, a half-eaten pizza and a clogged toilette.

“The earth is the Lord's, everything in it, the world and those who dwell therein.” All creation belongs to God the Creator. Your body is not yours to do with as you please. It belongs to Him. Your children are not your children. They belong to Him, and it is your duty to make sure they know it. Your family land, your bank account, your home, your most valued possessions . . . they all belong to him. You are stewards of these things, and only for a moment in history. It will all slip through your hands, and will soon be someone else's to manage for a moment. “Who knows”, mutters Solomon, “whether he will be a wise man or a fool?” (Eccl. 2:19).

Still, as the Creator and Sustainer and Possessor of the whole world, the LORD is worthy of our worship and praise. But are we worthy to praise Him?

Verse 3, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” The Bible often speaks of “going up to Jerusalem.” It's not about direction, going south to north. Rather, Jerusalem was strategically situated at 2500 feet above sea level on a relatively high mountain ridge. Virtually every visitor to the city had to climb the upward grade until they came to the walls of Jerusalem, which were also thick and high. But it's not merely geography. Jerusalem would also be the site of the temple of God, “the Mountain of the Lord's House.” Who's worthy to climb to the Lord's holy presence? I'm surely not, nor are you. Sin has created distance and dissonance with the Lord.

So, who's worthy to worship the Lord in His presence? **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.”** This means right and acceptable worship

does not depend on one's relation to Abraham, as if only for Jews and not Gentiles. It does not depend on being rich or poor, male or female, young or old. It does not depend on all those costly sacrifices or the mere performance of rites and ceremonies. It does not depend on just saying all the right words. The true worshipper worships the Lord and Him alone, not just with the lips but also with the heart. Clean hands and pure heart. Externally and inwardly different from the world; wholly devoted to the Lord, striving to do right.

Still, no man has clean hands and pure heart by his own efforts. We can scrub our hands like a surgeon, but they will not be clean until they are washed in the blood of the lamb. Our hearts too are desperately wicked. "Out of the heart" Jesus said, "come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Mt. 15:19). The sorry list goes on and on. If we are to have clean hands and a pure heart, it will have to be given us by grace. "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10).

This brings us to **Verse 5, "He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation."** We do not become righteous by our works. God declares us righteous and we receive this righteousness by faith. Galatians 3:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." God gives us an external righteousness that doesn't belong to us. It is the Lord's.

Verse 6: "Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob." The Hebrew word for seek means to look for, yes, but also to care about, examine and inquire. We seek the Lord through the study of His Word and prayer. Unbelievers do not seek the Lord. Unbelievers don't care about the Lord or His Word.

Verse 7: "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." When climbing up to Jerusalem, ancient worshippers eventually came to those tall, thick walls. There's no way in other than through the gates. Gates that open like doors, (with enough men and a battering ram) are relatively easy to breach. Gates in the form of a portcullis (woven iron bars) had to be "lifted up" by weights and pulleys. They were more difficult to breach, and could also be let down on an enemy trying to push their way in. The "heads" of the gates were at the top and were often ornamented. So here we have the people preceding the ark and addressing the gates of Jerusalem as if they had ears. "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." Even the gates are to honor the Lord. If the gates are to lift up their heads in praise, how much more should God's people rejoice in His gracious presence.

"Be lifted up, O ancient doors, to make way for Yahweh." The refrain is said three times, implying the triune nature of God. So, this psalm begs us to think forward in time to how the crowds of people hailed Jesus as He entered through the gates. They spread their cloaks on the road and cut branches from the trees and laid them before him. They shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (The Son of David!) "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Jesus is openly acclaimed as the promised Messiah who came not to conquer by force, but to die on a cross, lowly and humble. Jesus communicates this humility by riding into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey, not a mighty war horse.

In the psalm the question is asked, "Who is this King of glory?". The question is echoed in our Gospel lesson. Verse 10, "The whole city was stirred up, saying, 'Who is this?'" "This is Jesus" the crowds answered, "from Nazareth of Galilee."

From here, the psalm begs us to think forward a little further to when the Lord comes again as King of glory, not in an old ark made of acacia wood, not in a manger in Bethlehem. Think forward when He comes with all power and might and with all the angels and archangels. "Lift up your heads, O gates!" In other words, "Come, Lord Jesus."

It makes me think of those terrible signs of His return, with wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, widespread heresy and persecution of the truth. When you see these things, Jesus said, "stand up and lift up your heads, for your redemption is near" (Lk. 21:28).

Think then of the resurrection of all flesh and Jesus and His angels ascending *with us* to the gates of heaven, to the New Jerusalem, and demanding entrance, not for himself, because He owns heaven too, but for us, for by His work He has opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

"Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." Finally, may this apply also to our hearts today and every day. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me." (Rev. 3:20).

We know the Holy Spirit lifts high the gates and doors of our hearts through His Word. His Word serves as the weights and pulleys that lift high the portcullis. He comes to us not as a temporary guest. Remember, He is and always has been the rightful owner. "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all those who dwell therein." This is the demand of the Gospel. If the iron gates of old Jerusalem are to be lifted up to receive the ark of the covenant, how much more so should we rejoice to receive His Word and Sacrament. Amen.