

The Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 is the King of Glory of Psalm 24. The last line of Psalm 23, “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Ps 23:6), moves the worshiper into the presence of God and sets up the next psalm. Psalm 24 is a creation psalm with a Second Coming trajectory. The enduring ministry of the Incarnate One – the Shepherd and Host (Psalm 23) is followed by a triumphant vision of the King of glory. The psalter’s opening sequence of the Son of Man (Psalm 1) and the Son of God (Psalm 2) is repeated here in the two-fold picture of Christ as Shepherd (Psalm 23) and King (Psalm 24). In the context of these royal-redemptive psalms, Psalm 24 is a creation psalm linked to Psalm 25 an acrostic-torah psalm. This pattern is similar to Psalms 8 and 9-10 and encourages believers to see Christ as the center of creation and redemption.

The Lord of the Universe

*The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.*

Psalm 24:1-2

“When I was considering the possibility of embracing Christian faith as a young college student,” writes Mark Labberton, “what I feared most was that it would make my life smaller rather than larger – less love, less joy, less creativity, less wonder, less engagement.” Labberton, who is now president of Fuller Theological Seminary, discovered “that Jesus saves people from the very smallness I feared. I saw that the very essence of the kingdom of God is a life bigger than I would ever find outside it.”¹ This largeness rests in the conviction that the earth belongs to the covenant-keeping, love-redeeming, Lord of the universe and hope of the world.

David begins with the fundamental truth that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Gen 1:1-2). Yahweh owns this earth and the cosmos in which it floats. Yahweh designed it, engineered it, and secured it. This faith-conviction counters ancient Canaanite beliefs and modern theories of materialism and naturalism. We are not told how Yahweh “founded it on the seas and established it on the waters,” that is the purview of scientific discovery, but we are told who owns the world: “the earth is the Lord’s.”

The brevity and clarity of David’s poetic declaration requires no apology or argument, but the significance of his conviction invites reflection. We are not the accidental product of an impersonal universe, subject to blind chance and random forces, existing in a sphere of energy devoid of promise, plan, purpose and fulfillment. There is a sacramental cast to life that encourages life’s beauty and positive richness. Yahweh’s world is life-affirming, rather than life-

¹ Labberton, *Called*, 5.

rejecting.² We are stewards of God’s creation, not masters of the universe. God’s ownership leads to a preeminently positive view of life. “A living Christian mind,” writes British author Harry Blamires, “would elucidate for the young a finely articulated Christian sacramentalism which would make sense of, and give value to, the adolescent’s cravings towards the grandeur of natural scenery, towards the potent emotionalism of music and art, and towards the opposite sex.”³

The sacramental truth of Psalm 24 is expressed in the New Testament. James wrote, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). The apostle Paul quoted Psalm 24:1 when he sought to put the conscience of believers at Corinth at ease. “Eat anything sold in the market without raising questions of conscience, for, ‘The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it’” (1 Cor 10:25-26).

David means for us to grasp the largeness of God’s world. In his novel *Saturday*, Ian McEwan captures the general ethos of the modern world-view through the eyes of Theo, an eighteen-year-old. Theo belongs to a “sincerely godless generation.” “No one in his bright, plate-glass, forward-looking school ever asked him to pray, or sing an impenetrable cheery hymn. There’s no entity [like a loving, redeeming God] for him to doubt. His initiation, in front of the TV, before the dissolving towers [World Trade Center towers], was intense but he had adapted quickly.”⁴

Theo has his own unique philosophy for coping with life, but it is really not a philosophy as much as an aphorism—a maxim. It’s only a saying, not even a sentence, but it reduces everything down to a manageable size. Theo’s advice is this: “the bigger you think, the crappier it looks.” He explains, “When we go on about big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer in—you know, a girl I’ve just met. . .or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto—think small.”⁵

Think small is Theo’s strategy for self-preservation; *think big* is David’s strategy for praising God. Theo and David are both dealing with the meaning of life. Theo’s coping strategy is fairly typical of Western affluent people who have little to live for apart from the immediate moment. Theo limits his imagination out of fear, so as not to be overwhelmed by human tragedy. David is filled with praise and ready to worship Yahweh.

If the earth is the Lord and everything in it then *we the people* are not limited to *my people*. We are defined first and foremost as one human race in relationship to our Creator. Our ethnicity or our nationality or our gender does not increase our status in God’s eyes. The most important truth about us is that we are made in God’s image (Gen 1:26). The creation mandate substantiates the goal of salvation: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and

² Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, 173.

³ Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, 175.

⁴ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28); the great multitude that no one can count is drawn “from every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev 7:9). Reflecting on Psalm 24:1 Charles Spurgeon wrote in the 1860s, “What a rebuke this is to those wiseacres who speak of the Negro and other despised races as though they were not cared for by the God of heaven! If a man is but a man the Lord claims him, and who dares to brand him as a mere piece of merchandise!” For Spurgeon Jesus Christ put an end to “the exclusiveness of nationalities.”⁶

True Worshipers

Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?

Who may stand in his holy place?

The one who has clean hands

and a pure heart,

who does not trust in an idol

or swear by a false god.

They will receive blessing from the Lord

and vindication from God their Savior.

Such is the generation of those who seek him,

who seek your face, God of Jacob.

Psalm 24:3-6

What may impress the scholar and the reader as an abrupt transition serves the listener well.⁷ Effective communicators know the power of a quick turn of thought. The psalmist moves deftly from the Lord of the universe to those who seek his face so as to hold both realities in tension. The wide-angled theological lens zeroes in on the personal portrait of the worshiper. To quote Mark Labberton again, “The kingdom of God is always intimate but never small.”⁸

We are reminded that Hebrew pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem to celebrate the great worship festivals, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The city is the highest point geographically in Palestine. The whole process of “going up” required willed commitment, physical effort, and spiritual self-examination. The normal routines of work and family life were set aside for the people of God to participate together in a faith journey. It was in Jerusalem that Yahweh had made provision for worship. Unlike Mount Sinai, this “mountain of the Lord” was approachable through carefully prescribed rituals of cleansing and sacrifice. The expectation that the religion of Mount Sinai will one day be replaced categorically by something better is already in the works. The upward call of God to Jerusalem will be fulfilled in the upward call of God in Christ. “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14).

The metaphor of the mountain invokes in the Christian imagination the description in Hebrews of two mountains: the mountain of fear and the mountain of joy. The author of Hebrews writes,

⁶ Spurgeon, Treasury of David: Ps 24, at <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps024.php>

⁷ Goldingay, Psalms, 356. Goldingay writes, “The psalm comprises three self-contained brief sections that are unusually unrelated to each other. The psalm is baffling in this respect. Perhaps the sections are of independent origin. . .”

⁸ Labberton, Called, 9.

“You have *not* come to a mountain that can be touched // and that is burning with fire; // and to darkness, // and to gloom, // and to storm; // and to a trumpet blast, // and to a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear’” (Heb 12:18-21).

The physical, tangible, and visceral experience of God at Sinai served the Divine purpose, but now the pastor/preacher sees that purpose fulfilled and eclipsed by the gospel of Mount Zion. The pastor encourages us to embrace Sinai as the necessary ground for the better way of Christ. But what he does reject categorically is a reliance on Sinai religion. The gospel of Christ cannot be brought back into the old traditions of rituals and ceremonies and priestly orders and sacred edifices. That day has passed decisively. Any harkening back to the religious system instituted at Sinai violates the way of the cross. The contrast between the two descriptions could not be greater. All the identifying qualities of Mount Zion are relationally God-centered and culminate in Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, whose sprinkled, sacrificial blood is powerful to save.

“But you have come to Mount Zion, // and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, // and you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, // and to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, // and you have come to God, the Judge of all, // and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, // and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, // and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:22-24).

Instead of Sinai’s awful terror, darkness, and gloom, Zion is pulsating with awe-inspiring worship, joy, and love. There are “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly” and all the righteous are the firstborn children of God, living by faith, known by name, and perfected by Jesus. In the parallel descriptions of Sinai and Zion, God is actively speaking and judging. At Sinai, the voice of God strikes terror and the people plead for relief. No one can bear the holy presence of God. But on Mount Zion, the saints are exhorted to hear the voice of God: “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks” (Heb 12:25). The gospel of Jesus Christ gives us a new vision of the mountain of the Lord. Mount Sinai and the temple mount in Jerusalem have been replaced by the redemptive vision of Mount Zion.

True worshipers “ascend” into the presence of the Lord of Creation, who is Holy and Almighty, with “clean hands and a pure heart.” The ascent implies “a deliberate quest.”⁹ Nothing else matters. Worship involves an all-absorbing purpose, vision and passion, signified by both outward preparation (“clean hands”) and inward purification (“a pure heart”). Nothing is allowed to distract from the worshiper’s singular purpose, neither visible idols nor false motivations.

The Lord Jesus will identify the pure in heart in his sixth Beatitude by deliberately drawing on the language of Psalm 24. The purity of heart that he had in mind was a life of single-minded

⁹Kidner, Psalms, 114.

devotion to God. If the soul rejects all idols, then the true inner self, the real you, that is, the vital, living being of the person, the center of emotion, desire, intelligence, memory and passions, rejects everything that interferes, evades, subverts and distracts from pure devotion to God. And if the person refuses to swear by what is false it means that all deception, cleverness, manipulation, flattery and flippancy are rejected in favor of truth, clarity, integrity, and honesty. Commitment and confession line-up together and the outer life is consistent with the interior life. Devotion to God is from the heart, rather than a performance to be seen by others. We should emphasize that these baseline qualifications for true worship are founded on God's gracious acceptance and forgiveness. The person who has clean hands and a pure heart is already living in a state of grace. Whoever refuses the emptiness of idolatry and the evils of deception and falsehood is living in gratitude for God's mercy.

The psalmist is not trying to impress potential worshipers with their sinfulness – a truth he undoubtedly assumed as we do (Isa 64:6; Rom 3:23). Nor is he implying that worship is based on a meritocracy of righteous deeds. His purpose is not to impose an impossible standard on potential worshipers, in order to convince them of the necessity of rituals of purification, as much as to inspire a life of faith and devotion. David leads us into the work of self-examination and personal responsibility, in much the same that the prophet Micah did when he compared extravagant religious rituals to what the Lord really wanted: “To act justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

The benefits for this outward behavior and inward devotion are not man-made but God given, as is emphasized by the three-fold reference to the Lord. The simple clarity of what God expects from us is matched extravagantly by our Lord and Savior who makes himself known to us personally. The cryptic reference to Jacob at the end of the description of those who seek the face of God may be read this way: “This is the generation / seeking him, // seeking your face / Jacob.”¹⁰ The company of seekers is represented by the name Jacob. We may interpret this as a reminder of Yahweh's loyal love and the divine humility that refuses to give up on the promise and the blessing, even though all there is to work with is a fast-talking, shifty-eyed, self-serving person like Jacob.

The Lord Almighty

*Lift up your heads, you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.*

¹⁰ Ross, Psalms, 583. Goldingay, Psalms, 360. Goldingay translates the line: “Such is the company of those who have recourse to him, those who seek your face – Jacob.”

*Who is he, this King of glory?
The Lord Almighty –
he is the King of glory.
Psalm 24:7-10*

The original occasion for this psalm may have been when King David brought the ark of God, “which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty,” from the house of Obed-Edom to Jerusalem. The Samuel narrative focuses on the tragic death of Uzzah. The person who committed an “irreverent act” by reaching out and touching the ark of God. Then the attention seems to shift to David’s wife Michal. She despised him in her heart because he danced before the Lord with all his might wearing only a linen ephod (2 Sam 6:1-23). These two events seem to overshadow the underlying story – the defeat of the Philistines and the safe return of the ark of God to Jerusalem. We see David presiding over a joyful processional. Every six steps the ark bearers stopped and a bull or fatted calf was sacrificed. In spite of Uzzah and Michal, the power of this victorious moment shines through.

Psalm 24 may have been sung by a processional choir and David may have danced to the rhythm of its praise. The victorious description of the Lord as strong and mighty – mighty in battle, fits the occasion. As the worshipers approached the City of David, they shouted, “Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.” And those in the city responded antiphonally, “Who is the King of glory?” and the choir answered, “The Lord Almighty, the Lord mighty in battle.”

Echoes of this worship scene play in our praying imagination. The prophet Isaiah expressed similar themes when he announced, “You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. . .” (Isa 40:9-10).

Hints of Psalm 24 come through in the apostle Paul’s exclamation, “Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession. . .” (2 Cor 2:14). Psalm 24 and the apostle Paul remind us that the militancy of the Church is on an altogether different plane: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor 10:3-5).

Even the shout, “be lifted up, you ancient doors” (Ps 24:7) causes me to think of Jesus Christ standing at the door and knocking, saying, “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Rev 3:20). The picture of pilgrim worshipers ascending the mountain of the Lord is eclipsed by the coming of the Lord, who not only comes as the King of kings and Lord of lords but as the Friend who stands at the door and knocks. The typology of Psalm 24 reaches its archetypal zenith in the rider who is called Faithful and True, whose eyes are like blazing fire and he is wearing many crowns. “He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his

name is the Word of God” (Rev 19:11-16).