

Psalm 24

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[0:00] Well, as you heard the psalm read, and I deliberately read it quite slowly, I wonder what ideas came into your minds.! If you know Handel's Messiah, you will have recognised verses 7-10.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be lifted up, ye everlasting doors, for the King of Glory may come in. You may even have found yourself singing along in your minds, something I usually do if texts from the Messiah turn up.

And because it's from Handel's Messiah, you will know that many Christians have connected these last verses with Jesus. They have something to do with Jesus, although exactly what may not be immediately clear to you.

What is said about him? It is said that he is the King of Glory. He is the Lord of Hosts. He is a good fighter, he wins battles. And the gates and the doors are addressed again, get up, lift yourselves up, and be lifted up, and open to allow him to enter.

He comes in, he enters the city as the head of a mighty conquering army, the Lord of Hosts. So this is clearly a psalm which is celebrating the victory of God, and God's King, and the accomplishment of God's purposes.

[1:29] And this victory provokes wild celebration at the gates of the city as the people cheer him on. Thinking about entering a city, particularly this city, the city of Jerusalem, and being cheered on, may have reminded you about the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Accepting the praises of the people, and telling off those who wanted his praises to be silenced. And so we have thoughts of battle, conflict, victory, triumph, and connecting with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his death and resurrection.

The hymn says, ride on, ride on in majesty, in lowly pomp, ride on to die. But to begin at the beginning, with verse 1, this verse tells us that the earth belongs to God.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. The world and all those who live on it. Every single person or creature.

Every single type of person or creature. Including those persons or creatures that are purely spiritual.

[2:47] Including the angels. All belong to him. Well what on earth does that mean? And how can the psalmist say it?

If you watched the news last night, I try to avoid watching the news, but if you did watch the news last night, did the world that was portrayed look and sound like a world owned by God?

Did the people on the news behave as though they belonged to God? As if they owed God anything? So is the psalmist completely nuts when he says this?

When he says that the earth belongs to God? Well what sort of world did he live in? See I think that people sometimes think about these ancient poets, I mean this writing is around about, probably about 3,000 years old, as rather naive.

And if not stupid, nobody who wrote this could be stupid, it's too beautiful. But if not stupid, at least ill informed.

[3:58] After all we know so much better now. We know for example that the way in verse 2 that God made the world is the way that is described here.

It says he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. But we know better don't we? Our scientists have told us that that's not right. So the psalm must be wrong.

Right? And he didn't have the mass communications we had. And he didn't know about places like Iraq and Gaza. He didn't see film from those places every night on his TV screens.

Of course it's not his fault. But when we get the news, it accentuates to us how badly things have gone wrong with this world. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

And what on earth is God doing about it, if that's true? If you think a bit further, you will remember that the psalmist did have a life expectancy rather less than ours.

[5:01] He did leave much closer to creation than we do. He had much less protection against sickness. He had no painkillers.

Or very rudimentary ones. Infant mortality would have been high. And when the harvest failed, there really was nothing to eat. It didn't just mean food prices going up.

There was nothing that would come between him and drought. Or pestilence. Or disease. There was no NHS. There was no drugs. And if anything, he had more reason to understand than we did. How often the world doesn't work the way it should. But he is not persuaded by that fact to deny God, his creator, the worship and adoration, which is his due.

And neither is he persuaded to deny the fact that the world in which he lived was created by God. In fact, historically, it's only in relatively recent years that the idea of suffering a natural disaster has been taken as a reason to suggest that actually the God of the Bible can't be who the Bible says he is.

[6:24] It's only in the last 200 to 300 years that that idea has really taken off. In the days and weeks following the earthquake in Haiti a few years ago, there were newspaper reports.

I don't know if you remember them. The Times seemed to want to do this. Almost every day for about a week, there were reports of miraculous or seemingly miraculous deliverances of people. There were reports that the churches, those which hadn't been destroyed, were full. The temporary camps that people had made for themselves were places of song and praise to God, as well as places where people were mourning their losses.

And beginning to think about how to put their lives back together again. They turned to the God who made them, and having worshipped him, they asked for his help.

They wept for their losses and found comfort and strength to pick up the pieces of their lives and begin again. And this would not be possible unless the earth is the Lord's.

[7:33] This is simply not possible in a world without God. This psalmist is looking back to ancient history.

He's looking back to the creation of the world. He looks back, remembering Genesis chapter 1. God said, let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear, and it was so.

God called the dry land earth. And the waters that were gathered together he called the seas. And God saw that it was good. And you remember at the end of the account of creation, God looked at all that he had made, and saw that it was very good.

And the point here isn't really how God made the world, or when he made the world, or how long it took him. The point is that God did make it. The point is that when God made it, it was perfect.

It was ideal. It worked. And God pronounced it very good. Enter the first man and the first woman. Enter the serpent, Satan the deceiver.

[8:42] And soon after, the first disobedience. And soon after, sin, death, suffering, alienation, guilt, shame, the flu virus, as one example, and conflict.

But this psalm is a rejoicing, a celebration about a God who has not let go of his world.

Who has not allowed his enemies, the enemies and our enemies, to have the last word. Because this psalm remembers two mighty acts of God.

The first one we've touched on is creation. The second one is redemption. This God is called Yahweh.

That's why the word Lord is in capital letters. And when you read in the Psalms, that word Yahweh, what you are reading is a memory of hundreds of years of God being involved with his people.

[9:56] Beginning when God called Abraham out of Ur, in northern Iraq. When he promised that he would make him of his descendants into a great nation.

When he promised that from the seed, the descendants of Abraham, there would be blessing on the whole world. 400 years later, 500 or so years later, when he called out of slavery in Egypt, the

people of Israel.

When he delivered them miraculously from the hand of Pharaoh. Fighting a battle that they could not possibly fight and win. All of this memory, all of this history is concentrated here.

It's taken as read by the writer of this psalm and by the original readers. They have this wonderful salvation, this wonderful history of God being with them to look back on.

And so this psalm celebrates both. God isn't simply a creator. But he is concerned for his people. He is active on their behalf.

[11:11] And he will be active on their behalf again. The third section of the psalm.

I'm going back to the second section after I've dealt with the third. It reminds us of the historical setting in which the psalm was written. It's written celebrating the return of the ark of God.

And the bringing of it up to Jerusalem. And putting it very briefly, the ark of God is simply the centre of the worship of God.

It's a wooden box. Inside the wooden box are the stone tablets of which God had written the law.

The rod, I think, or may get this bit wrong.

The rod of Aaron which budded. Above the box are two carved figures of angels, cherubim. And above them is the mercy seat.

[12:15] It's just a space. And it's the space where God made his presence known. It's where the high priest could enter once a year having made atonement for the sin of the people.

It's the central symbol that they had. That God is present with his people. And what had happened was that, very foolishly, they had taken the ark onto the battlefield.

Because they thought, we're bound to win. God's with us, we're bound to win. Superstition rather than faith. God had not promised them this.

And they had no business moving the ark from where it was. And what happened was they got heavily defeated by the Philistines. The ark was captured and taken off to Ashdod.

And from there, there is a most extraordinary series of events, which I haven't time to go through, whereby the ark, in effect, doesn't allow itself to remain in captivity.

[13:19] And the Philistines end up returning it. But it was stuck in a barn. King David defeated the Philistines completely.

And united Israel under his rule. And the first thing he did after he had done that was arrange for the ark to be brought to Jerusalem. A statement that his victories had been given to him by God.

And that the true king was God. And this is the setting for this psalm. As they bring the ark to the gates of the city.

Massive gates. Lift up your heads, O gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the king of glory may come in to take his rightful place at the centre of the kingdom.

To take his rightful place where all they come to worship him. Which poses a question, the question that verse 3 asks us.

[14:28] Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? What about holiness?

What sort of people who come into his presence and worship him? Can anyone stand before God? What about you?

If you want to reach this God, how would you do it? Do you have clean hands? Do you have a pure heart? You might have washed your hands. But clean hands are about your deeds.

They're about what you've done. Have you always acted rightly? Have you always acted fairly? Is there no one that you have not wronged?

Do you have a pure heart? Your thoughts? You do? You're sure? You're sure? The Bible tells us that the human heart is rotten to the core.

[15:44] The psalmist did not think that he could screw himself up to the last pitch of goodness that he was capable of and present himself before this God and be accepted and nor should you.

In fact, if you have any idea that this is a way in which to come into his presence, it means that you've never really understood what he is like. And because the earth is his and because you are his, you are accountable to him.

And you need to come in the way that he says you can come. In fact, you need to be grateful that he has provided a way for you to come at all.

The Bible's ultimate answer as to how we can come before God, how we can stand in his presence, is very simple. It's very clear.

You come by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When you come to him in repentance and faith, you receive the promises. That are made in verse 5.

[16:50] You will receive blessing from God. You will receive righteousness from the God of your salvation. You will receive as you repent of your sin and trust in the Lord Jesus.

You will receive the gift of his Holy Spirit. You will receive new life. Described in the Old Testament as a heart of flesh to replace a heart of stone.

A heart of flesh on which God by his Spirit will write his law. And we will give you the ability by faith to substantially keep the law.

As we stand knowing that Jesus has died in our place and taken the penalty that is due for our sin, we can truly stand and say because of Jesus we are counted righteous but only because of Jesus. There is also a hint of the final day of history here. Writing of Jesus Paul says this God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so that the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[18:20] You see this coming of this box there is no magic in the box. It's only as God led his presence that there was anything special about this box.

If you've seen Harrison Ford Raiders of the Lost Ark try and forget it. It's not helpful. It's a symbol it's a sign that God is with his people.

It points to the reality. The reality was in Jesus Christ who John says in chapter 1 of his gospel tabernacled with us he presented himself with us he was God made man he was God presence in the midst of us.

And he having died and having risen and having ascended he is still present with us by his spirit. That's the reality to which this psalm points. That's what's worth celebrating. If these people were excited and a box coming to the gates of their city how much more excited should we be about the reality of Jesus Christ the Son of God making himself present in our lives as we trust in him and as he forgives our sin.

[19:48] How exciting is that? How worth celebrating is that? Appearing before God is not optional for those who want it.

It is inevitable for all people. The day will come. You better be ready. Isaiah at a low point in Israel's history longed for the reality of God's presence. The ending of human suffering and misery.

He longed for the day when those who ignore and disobey God would be put to shame. Prophet Isaiah He prayed this, Oh that you would rent the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake, at your presence.

From Isaiah 64. As we look out at the world as Christians we echo that prayer. Things are still all over the place. Things are still not right.

I was reminded, a friend of mine was sitting on the jury of that poor woman that was murdered. Eleven weeks of her life taking up in deciding whether the three people in the dock were innocent or guilty.

[20:55] we echo this prayer but we take comfort and we rejoice in the realisation that God already has come.

And that by his coming the world has hope and you have hope. And if you are conscious, if you are here today and you are conscious that you are seeking him or he is seeking you but he is not, you have that sense that he's not quite there, if you are putting up doors and gates and other barriers to his coming into your life, take them down.

Open up those gates so that the king of glory may come in. let's pray together.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together.