

A SONG OF TRIUMPH

Songs Of The Savior Our Messiah Revealed In The Psalms

by Doug Goins

The psalms that we have been enjoying together in this series began with the song Jesus sang to his Father just before he left the portals of heaven to become a man (Psalm 40): "I delight to do Thy will, O my God...." Jesus gave up the power and the privilege of his deity to take on human flesh. In that psalm we examined the profound mystery of the incarnation. Then in Psalm 78 and Psalm 100 we saw how Jesus lived life on earth so fully by the power of the Holy Spirit that he completely fulfilled every demand of the Law of God. At last there was a human being who was able to live in complete obedience before God. We saw in those two psalms that Jesus taught, served, preached, led, and shepherded; and in all of his life he glorified his Father in heaven and consistently pointed men and women to him.

Psalm 118 and Psalm 22 focus on Jesus' suffering, death and his resurrection. That death is the centerpiece of all human history. In these psalms we saw that in his death as the Passover Lamb, he reconciled God and man. He was the righteous, sinless, innocent one, and we were sinners. Yet in his death he became sin for us so that we could become righteous before the Lord. We saw that while he was dying, even as he had lived, there were words to sing from the Psalter, the hymnal of Israel. In the latter section of Psalm 22 we saw that even though Jesus died, death wasn't strong enough to hold him. The power of God burst forth on Easter Sunday morning the same power that had created the universe, delivered Israel from the slavery of Egypt, and saved men and women of faith from all kinds of difficulties and struggles throughout human history and raised Jesus from the dead.

All of these events that we have surveyed were really part of the song that Jesus sang. But there is another song to sing: a song of final triumph yet to come over all the evil that lies over the world and controls every human life. There is still ahead the victory song in which the risen, exalted, glorified Lamb of God returns to earth as the conquering hero. We will all call him King of kings and Lord of lords with glory forever. This song of triumph, Psalm 24, also prefigures the triumphal entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem on that long-ago Palm Sunday morning.

The superscription of Psalm 24 says that it is a psalm of David, the king of Israel. David wrote this psalm out of a difficult time in his own life, the effort to bring the ark of the covenant to the city of Jerusalem. The history of the ark of the covenant, and even David's involvement with it, is an amazing story. It is dramatic, even frightening at points. It is a story of fulfillment only partially achieved, of longing, of painful tragedy, yet of hope. So Psalm 24 is a story of the road to Jerusalem which was traveled first by King David as he brought the ark to the city, and which a thousand years later was traveled by Jesus as he entered the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And it is a road that Jesus is going to travel one more time when he comes again in triumph.

Let me summarize for you a bit of the history of the ark of the covenant, because that is important for us to understand the significance of this psalm. It is difficult for us as twentieth-century Christians to appreciate fully the importance that the ark of the covenant had for the people of Israel. From the moment David became king over the united tribes, he was concerned to find the ark and to bring it to its place in Jerusalem. Our psalm celebrates the climax of the journey of the ark of the covenant from the wilderness to its place in the tabernacle that David had brought and assembled in the holy city of Jerusalem. Its journey was one that actually took four hundred years in the national history.

The ark was a box that was about 45 inches long, 27 inches wide, and 27 inches deep. It was made out of acacia wood, beautifully crafted and covered in gold. The lid was of solid gold and was called the mercy seat. On it were two cherubim, angel-like figures, with their wings spread over it. That central space of the mercy seat was where God's word was heard. The ark had been made under Moses' supervision in the desert. It was a symbol of God's holiness, God's presence, and God's power at work among his people. It was the throne

where God was symbolically seated to reign, the symbol of his lordship.

The ark had accompanied Israel all through the wilderness wanderings from Sinai. From the time of the conquest of the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, it had been kept at Shiloh. Then under the leadership of Saul, the first king of the nation, Israel lost a battle with the Philistines. The battle was fought with no consciousness of God's desires or God's empowerment; instead they treated the ark like a talisman and put it out in front of the army on the assumption that its presence there would ensure success. But the army was crushed. Thousands of Israelite soldiers lost their lives. The ark was captured by the Philistines, and they displayed it as a trophy of war until it became a problem for them. Plague swept through Philistia, and they realized that the God of Israel was angry with them. They didn't want any more trouble, so they gave the ark back to the nation Israel.

Upon its return the ark was placed in the village of Beth-shemesh. But soon after Israel got control of it again, there were seventy men in the village who were overcome with curiosity about it, so they opened the lid to look inside, and God struck them dead. After that, understandably, the ark lay neglected for twenty years in a field near the village of Kiriathjearim.

Finally David found the ark, and on two different occasions he tried to bring it back up to Jerusalem. The first time he moved it as if it were a piece of furniture he put it in a cart pulled by a couple of oxen, just as the Philistines moved things around. But the law of God required that it be moved by having the priests' carrying it with poles. David, excited about getting it to the city and impulsive, didn't pay close attention to God's desires about how the ark was to be handled. Because of that a man named Uzzah lost his life. The ark started to topple a bit and he put his hand out, innocently enough, to try to steady it. He died. The second time David tried to bring the ark to Jerusalem, about three months later, he obeyed God's instructions for moving the ark, and the priests carried it. They offered sacrifices and wore the sacred vestments that the law called for. The ark arrived in Jerusalem with a huge celebration of joy. David ordered many sacrifices to Yahweh, and there was a great feast for all the people to enjoy in the city of Jerusalem.

But the most serious question of all remained: Who could stand before the holy ark, considering its history? Who could come before a holy God? This gives us the context for Psalm 24. At the heart of the psalm David asks that poignant question, and it is central to all our struggles to know who God is and how we are to relate to him. Look at verse 3:

'Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?
And who may stand in His holy place?'

While the ark was a mystery, physically it was just a box. It wasn't magic, as Steven Spielberg portrayed it in the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. But symbolically it was more than just a box. It represented, again, the holiness, presence, and power of God.

In the wrong hands the ark had led to devastation, judgment, and terrible illness. In curious hands, it had led to the stilling judgment of God. Even in well-meaning but improper hands it had led to death. Everybody suffered when they abused the holy ark, whether it was rebellious Israelites, pagan Philistines, or even godly Hebrews. In all of the events surrounding the adventures of the ark, the one undeniable factor was the sovereignty of God. He was in control, and he would not be manipulated, compromised, or trivialized. Whether the offending parties were misinformed, well-meaning but ignorant, or sinful, God's character wasn't going to change.

The sovereignty of God

Once the ark was in place in the temporary housing that David had prepared for it, he wrote Psalm 24 asking the central question of how one may rightly approach an indescribably holy God. The psalm opens in verses 1-2 with an affirmation of God's sovereignty:

The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains,

The world, and those who dwell in it.
For He has founded it upon the seas,
And established it upon the rivers.

Verse 1 makes it clear that the earth, everything in it, and all who live on it including we ourselves belong to God. And he will do as he wills. He is absolutely free to be God; otherwise, he is not God. This may seem unpleasant to us, even unpalatable to some, but it is a necessary element in our view of the character of God.

In verse 2 the psalmist gives us the reason for the sovereignty of the Lord. The wording about God's founding the earth on the seas and establishing it on the rivers may seem a bit strange to us from our modern perspective, but it is built on common imagery in the ancient world. There was a recurring poetic idea concerning the power of God that said he was stronger than the oceans, which were viewed as the most powerful natural force on the earth. Some of the ancient pagan cosmologies, or explanations of how the world came into being, spoke of evil, powerful forces of the deep who waged war, and out of this cosmic battle the earth was created. But this verse is the Bible's way of saying that was not true. There is one God who created and placed the earth in position, launching its rotation on its axis. And he is sovereign.

Who can approach the holy God?

That brings us back to the question of his approachability. Who can stand before his holiness and sovereignty? He is frightening. Verses 3-6:

Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?
And who may stand in His holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood,
And has not sworn deceitfully.

He shall receive a blessing from the Lord
And righteousness from the God of his salvation.

This is the generation of those who seek Him,
Who seek Thy face even Jacob.

With a very high view of God's holiness the question comes naturally: Who can approach him? That was the question the people of Beth-shemesh asked after God struck down the seventy men who presumed to look inside the holy ark In I Samuel 6:20 they cried out, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?" That was also the question David asked after God struck down Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6:9: "How can the ark of the Lord [ever] come to me?" speaking of his own fear before God's greatness and holiness.

There are two answers here in verses 3-6. One is provisional, or short-term. But the most important answer is ultimate. Provisionally, God in grace gave the nation Israel the Law, or Torah. He made a pathway for sinful men and women to come into his presence, not on the basis of their own righteousness, but having become righteous in him by accepting his forgiveness mediated through the sacrificial system. There were demands that he placed on them of ritual and moral purity. The book of Leviticus was given to Israel describing the sacrificial system for dealing with sin to make that way of access clear, so they could be sure about it. God might be approached by those who came to him in the way he made possible. For the people of Israel that certainly was one way to look at verses 4 and 5. They could keep the Ten Commandments and maintain loyalty to Yahweh. They could live a lifestyle consistent with faith. They could go to the temple to have their sins forgiven through the sacrificial system.

But in verse 6 there is a surprise that suggests that more than ordinary human piety or morality is intended. Psalm 24 calls for ultimate purity. It is not calling for someone who fits the standard catalogue of relative piety.

It is looking for the real thing, for somebody who can stand every test of fidelity to Yahweh. If we retranslate verse 6 literally from the Hebrew language it says this:

"This generation is seeking him, They are seeking your face, O Jacob."

This is a very difficult construction in the original language, and the usual solution in most translations is to assume that it is God who is being sought. But those translations are based on secondary evidence rather than the principle Hebrew readings. A strict reading of the Hebrew text of this verse suggests that God is not being sought here, but a human being. That is in line with the central question in our psalm: What man or woman can stand before God? What man in all of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel, can say, "I'm the one I can stand before the Lord with absolute purity of motives and purity of action, absolute integrity, absolute confidence in my righteousness, and complete confidence in God's blessing on my life"?

But in this psalm, at least, no one answers. No one dares to step forward because everyone remembers Saul, the Philistines, the men of Beth-shemesh, and Uzzah. They remember how fearful David was to approach the ark. Who else would presume to step forward? And at the lack of response, the hearts of the people sank. Everybody was saddened that there was no one to stand before the Lord.

This is the universal struggle of all humanity. We all live with a vague sense of guilt and condemnation. We can't claim purity of motives and absolute integrity in our actions. We aren't confident of right relationships, even within ourselves, or with people around us, or for sure with the God of the universe. We are uncertain of God's willingness to lovingly bless us. We live in a world of moral relativity. Black and white absolutes have been replaced with a pervasive gray pall. Yet we long for the purity described here in these verses, for the innocence of one who can stand before the Lord.

I believe that is why millions of moviegoers have vicariously identified with the innocence of Forrest Gump, a man with a pure heart. I read an article last week by John Cooper, a reviewer trying to come to grips with what he saw as spiritual truth in the movie Forrest Gump. (Apparently the people in Hollywood don't have a clue what the real message of the movie is. It means different things to different people.) Cooper's conviction is that the story's ultimate message is, "He who is innocent is blessed." He goes on to say, "It doesn't matter that Forrest Gump may have been innocent of his own innocence. This it, is a truth. For those who believe in it, it's a comfort. For those who do not, an offense. No one is truly innocent, yet many people cherish the thought of innocence in their hearts." We do cherish innocence, but by and large it is cherished sadly with a poignant longing.

The King of Glory

That takes us back to the pervasive sadness in King David's Jerusalem. Verses 7-10 suggest poetically that even the city of Jerusalem itself was affected. The walls of the city seem to slump, the gates sag, the doors buckle. Why was the holy ark brought inside Jerusalem if there was no one who could stand before it in full confidence, in full praise of God? So the years pass and the centuries pass, and then One comes, and Psalm 24 becomes a psalm of victory. His name is not Forrest Gump, name is Jesus, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. He comes as the King of glory. These verses are a tremendous climax to the psalm:

Lift up your heads, O gates,
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
That the King of glory may come in!

Who is the King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
The Lord mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O gates,
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
That the King of glory may come in!

Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
He is the King of glory.

For a thousand years after David asked the question, no one stepped forward. Then on Palm Sunday, there he came, Jesus of Nazareth, riding on a donkey, receiving the praise of the crowd. It was a praise that became an unintended call for his death, because when the crowd shouted "Hosanna!" they were singing the words of Psalm 118:25, "O Yahweh save us!" That is precisely what he was committed to. Jesus was the one who could ascend unto the hill of the Lord He was the one who could stand in his holy place. He came without fear, without guilt, in complete innocence. His coming was so much anticipated by the Lord and by all the angels that when he entered Jerusalem, he had to be praised that morning. When the religious leaders attempted to stop the praise of the children in Matthew 21 as he entered the temple, Jesus said that God had put those words of praise in the mouths of the children, and if the people were quiet, even the rocks would cry out in praise to him! For he came in the name of the Lord. He was able to meet every demand of the most holy God, to receive blessing from the Father.

Now, what we find out in the gospel is that he was declared righteous on our behalf. Listen to the apostle Paul in Romans 4:23-5:2 describe what Christ, the innocent one, did for us. This is the solution to our impure motives, our sense of guilt and condemnation, our lack of integrity, the awareness of our own unrighteousness. Paul is writing about Abraham, who by faith was declared righteous by God: "...The words 'it was credited to [Abraham]' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" In Christ we can ascend the hill of the Lord In him we may stand in his holy place because of grace.

That last phrase, "the hope of the glory of God," means that one day in the future he will come again. And what a day that is going to be. When he comes the next time, it won't be like the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday morning (see Matthew 21). Revelation 19:11 tell us what it is going to be like: "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are 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. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

"KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS"

The next time he will be riding a white charger, not a donkey. The next time he will come as victor over all enemies. The next time he won't come to face judgment or cruel derision or death. The next time he will come to receive glory and honor and power and wealth and wisdom and might and blessing for ever and ever, and to receive our worship and praise. Next time Psalm 24:7-10 will be sung together by all the angels, by the nation Israel, by the church of Jesus Christ, all redeemed humanity, and by all kinds of created beings that we can't even imagine that are described in the Revelation. They will sing these words of praise:

"Lift up your heads, O gates,
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
That the King of glory may come in!

Who is the King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,

The Lord mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O gates,
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
That the King of glory may come in!

Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
He is the King of glory."

Two thousand years have passed since Jesus' Palm Sunday triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In this interim we are waiting for the next triumphal entry. There is a sense in which the gates of Jerusalem still sag, the walls still slump. But one day when he comes back those gates will lift up their heads.

Twice I have been in the city of Jerusalem and stood outside the old city wall. I have stood at the foot of the gate through which Jesus entered two thousand years ago. It is called the Golden Gate, or in the New Testament the Beautiful Gate. The one I saw isn't the identical gate through which he came, of course, but a gate built at about the same spot as the one long ago. It is the gate to the temple mount on the eastern wall of the city. It faces the Mount of Olives. That Palm Sunday Jesus came down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and up the road through the Golden Gate into the city. This is also the gate through which Jesus our King of glory will re-enter his city. In Zechariah 14 we are told that when he comes again to earth he will come first to the Mount of Olives. He will enter the city from that point to establish his kingdom. Zechariah 14:9 continues: "The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name."

As I looked up on those two occasions at the gate that stands there today, I was looking at a structure that dates back to the time of the Turkish sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. He rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in 1536. But the foundation stones go back to Solomon's time. The gate that I saw is one of the ancient doors, the sagging gates, of Psalm 24. Even though it is not in use today, it is still magnificent; there are vestiges of its original beauty. But there is also something strange about that gate: Although you can see the outline of the original gate, there is a wall built solidly across the front of it. There is also an Islamic graveyard directly in front of the gate. I had to stand in the graveyard to see the gate. Many years ago, the Turkish Muslim forces occupying Israel learned that the Jewish and Christian Messiah would enter the holy city of Jerusalem through this gate, so they buried their dead in front of it and walled it in to keep him out. How long do you think those stones are going to hold back the Lord, strong and mighty in battle, before he enters his city to establish his kingdom? Those gates are his, and the King of glory will come in!

Our song of praise

The gates are his, but this song is ours. As we think of Psalm 24, we find that the singing is ours to do. This is a psalm of our Savior, but it is not a psalm by our Savior. Many of the psalms we have studied have been songs that came from his own lips. This is our song to sing. One day we're going to join all of creation in singing these words of joy, because Jesus is the Lord of song and he has given us a song to sing as well. But our song is not just the future song of praise for the time when he enters his holy city. Our song is for the present. He has given us the song of salvation, and it is a new song that he has placed in our mouths. Many will hear and fear and will place their faith in Jesus, and they will join us as we join others from all of time, including all those yet to come. And we will lift our voices together as a huge, eternal choir, praising him who is the King of glory, the Lord of hosts.

There is a great Palm Sunday hymn, All Glory, Laud and Honor, written in the ninth century by a godly French pastor, poet, and bishop of the church, Theodulf. It is the only hymn we have that he wrote. It is fascinating to me that he wrote this hymn at the end of his life when he was in prison for his faith (in about 820 A.D.). That same year he was martyred. We have the joy of concluding our psalm of triumph with this prison hymn of eternal victory. Imagine this godly man Theodulf imprisoned for his faith, knowing he would probably face execution, and yet having been given a great view of eternity that transcended his circumstances.

His own limitations and his own impending death didn't change the power and the glory of Jesus and what Jesus would accomplish on earth. Here is his hymn.

All glory, laud and honor
To Thee, Redeemer, King,
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring:
Thou art the King of Israel,
Thou David's royal Son,
Who in the Lord 's name comest,
The King and blessed One!

The company of angels
Are praising Thee on high,
And mortal men and all things
Created make reply:
The people of the Hebrews
With palms before Thee went:
Our praise and prayer and anthems
Before Thee we present.

To Thee, before Thy passion,
They sang their hymns of praise;
To Thee, now high exalted,
Our melody we raise:
Thou didst accept their praises
Accept the praise we bring
Who in all good delightest,
Thou good and gracious King!

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