

## “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” Pss 15 & 24

When you can walk, you never think about your ankle. It just helps you pivot and bend your foot. It works. But when it doesn't work, you notice. Recently, I injured my ankle. I can probably say with honesty that I have never been more appreciative of a working than I am now with an injured ankle.

And I think a similar thing holds true for us who enjoy access to God. We assume that this is the norm. Like a working ankle, we assume and under-appreciate our access to God.

But it hasn't always been this way. And I don't just mean before you trusted Jesus for your salvation. For a long time, almost nobody could experience the presence of God. The universe just didn't have a mechanism for it. **In fact, one of the main problems of the Old Testament is: *how can we see God? How can we enter his presence?***

And this will be the main point today: as Christians, we should **appreciate** our **access** to God because God changed the world to make it happen; and because God's presence gives us **joy** and sustaining **hope**.

The Psalms talk about the dual reality of trying to get in to God's presence and looking forward to seeing God. And that takes up the main theme of Psalms 15 and 24.

In these psalms, we see (1) the desire to enter into God's presence, (2) the problem of entering God's presence, and (2) the way to enter into God's presence.

**Thesis: I want to take a look at these two psalms so that we can appreciate our access to God, enjoy it, and grasp our hope even when life seems hard.**

### **(1) Desire God's presence (Ps 15)**

Psalm 15 opens by defining the genre and author of the psalm, “A PSALM OF DAVID” and then asking a question: “O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?”

Psalm 24 opens in almost the same way, asking in the third verse: “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?”

Both psalms ask the question: how can we go into the temple of God and stand before him? Who can do it?

Now the desire to see God streams through the psalms:

- In Psalm 16:11, David says “in your presence is abundant joy”
- In Psalm 17:15, David says, “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.”
- In Psalm 18, God answers David’s cry from God’s temple in heaven (Ps 18:6, 9).
- In Psalm 19, God’s presence comes through his Word and through Nature.
- In Psalm 20, God’s salvation is said to come once again from his sanctuary in heaven (20:2, 6).
- In Psalm 21, God’s presence brings David joy (v. 6).
- In Psalm 22, God seems to take away his presence from the psalmist (so vv. 1, 19). But soon we learn that God answers the cry of the psalmist, returning to him in some sense.
- In Psalm 23, the king speaks of God preparing a table for him within the house of the Lord, that is, within God’s presence (vv. 5-6).

The themes of God’s presence, his lack of presence, and his rescue from heaven pop up through these psalms.

But one thing seems **lacking**: somehow God’s presence is joy, yet God’s lives in heaven. That’s where he answers prayers. Somehow there needs to be bridging of the gap.

The question “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” assumes that it’s not easy to get to God’s presence. Yet the desire to be there is a huge focus in the Psalms and the rest of the Scripture.

I mean: David encourages Israel to desire God’s presence in Psalms 15 and 24.

And he leads by example as he says in Psalm 27:4: “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.”

David wanted to get to the mountain top. He wanted to stay there to gaze at Yahweh's beauty. He wanted to be in God's presence. He wanted the exile to the east of God to end; he wanted to find a way for God and humans to dwell together.

**Here's the point:** The central goal, the central purpose of being human is to know God. We were created in his image, and we were created to be with him.

Our first and foundational desire should be God. Have you ever thought about what you really *desire in life*? Does it start with job, education, or money? What is the thing that you'd like to gaze at? For David, it's God.

Something about being human means that we are at base *desiring creatures*. I know that most of us have heard something like: humans are rational.

But have you ever watched reality TV? Have you seen the 1 Trillion dollar debt incurred upon students in the US? We end up making decisions on what we want the most. Our rationality gets sidelined by our heart.

You have to get your heart and your mind united. We need to learn to desire God and then use reason to guide our desires to him. But at base: it has to start with a desire to gaze at the beauty of the Lord. We need to desire to enter into the mountain of God.

To see God's face is all. Nothing is more important.

And this is because, as Christians, we believe something incredibly counter-cultural. We believe that our belief in an invisible reality, God, *actually and truly changes how we feel and the world around us*.

God supernaturally pours joy into our hearts by the Spirit. He answers prayers.

Yet it starts with our **desire**. If we don't want to ascend the mountain to God's presence, we should never expect to receive that fullness of goodness, that unspeakable joy, and that fulfilling vision of God to which we will all hope.

When tears wipe away. When God's name is on our forehead. When pain ceases. When love endures. When faith becomes sight. When hope is realized. This is the vision of God; this is God's presence; this is the end of exile from God.

That's the presence of God. We need it desperately. We have it in part, and then in full.

The foundation of this is all is our desire to be in God's presence.

*But there is a big problem. It takes work to enter God's presence.*

## **(2) Realize the Problem of Entering God's presence (Ps 15, Pss 16-23)**

*And understanding this problem will help us to appreciate our experience of God's presence. It will help us to desire God rightly because we know how difficult it is to enter his presence.*

In our psalms, there are two problems with entering into God's presence. **First**, why is David leading a psalm that Israelites presumably sang about entering into the temple?

That's only for one person. The high priest who enters into God's presence once per year for the day of atonement.

Like: nobody else gets in there. Nadab and Abihu may have tried (Lev 10). God struck them down. In Numbers, the Korahites wanted to enter God's presence, but God struck them down (Num 16).

Nobody gets in there. Or at least almost nobody. A high priest has to sacrifice for his own sins (Heb 9:7). Then he gets in for a short time. But it's a dangerous business.

David writes two psalms that are meant for Israelites to sing them. And so he leads the congregation to desire something that they could not possibly attain.

Or could they?

This leads to the **second** problem. A perfect person can enter into God's sanctuary. So hypothetically anyone who is clean and righteous could enter God's presence. Look at 15:2-5 (read). And look also at 24:4-6 (read).

As Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8).

But that's not so easy. The only way for us to see God is to be perfect, pure in heart, and whole.

And the whole history of humanity is rife with falling away from God's presence due to sin.

Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, were exiled from the garden that was in the land of Eden, and Cherubim stood guard at the east gate of the garden. Ezekiel 28 calls the garden of Eden the mountain of God. And Genesis 2 describes the garden in ways that are suspiciously similar to the tabernacle or temple.

From rivers flowing down from the garden, to the precious metals, to even Adam's call to keep and to tend the garden, which are words that are only used elsewhere in the Pentateuch of priests. Then you have a tree in the garden---which seems suspiciously like the menorah in the tabernacle that is a tree, flowers and all.

So Adam and Eve sin. They get exiled. They go east. They still live in Eden, but the garden where God is, where the tree of life is, they cannot go.

Cain murders Abel. **Cain** is exiled to the east.

People keep sinning. Instead of exiling people, he **floods** them. And instead of staying the garden temple, God leaves to heaven. The **bow** in heaven represents a border between God and man. The promise that the rainbow symbolizes is that God will never again flood the world again. The reason why that works is because God is no longer present on earth.

Remember God actually comes DOWN from heaven when he sees the tower of Babel. He's left the earth because if he stays, there will be another flood.

Adam, Enoch, and Noah walked **with** God. After the flood, this no longer happens. Abraham is said to walk before God. There's a huge change.

A holy God cannot be in the presence of his opposite: polluted sinners who reek of death. To be holy is to be life. So the tree of life, so the menorah, so the whole story of the Bible: God is life. Death is outside the camp.

The tabernacle and temple were God's way of coming down from heaven to one location and to allow people into his presence.

But even then, there are multiple books in the Bible explaining how to do the right sacrifices and so on to appear before God. And even then, only one priest once per year can get in.

It's not easy.

**Here's the point:** the whole purpose of humanity is to see God, to know him, to be in his presence. We started that way. **Then we slowly migrated east of Eden.** Even the tabernacle and temple could only provide a complicated and partial way to God's presence.

*And yet: David says that all Israelites should sing their hearts out to know God. Who can ascend the mount? Well, we can if only we are pure in heart. That's hope. Because gazing on the beauty of the Lord is where joy is. And that's where life after death is.*

God is life and light. Death is away from God. Life is with God. David says, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light" (Ps 36:9). In the tabernacle, the menorah was a tree with lamps that shone upon the 12 loaves of bread, representing Israel.

The Aaronic blessing is that "the LORD make his face to shine upon you" (Num 6:25). Revelation 22 describes a tree of life in the new heavens and new earth as well there being no light because God will be the light of the world.

In his light, in his holy presence, we will live. That's the basic symbolism of being in God's presence. God is life.

But we thrive on death because we thrive on sin. The more we sin, the more we migrate east of Eden. We go into the wasteland where death is. Only in God's presence do we have that tree of life, that light of God's presence.

God's presence is the end of our exile to the east Eden. It's the end of our death. It's life itself. And where life is, there is joy and hope. We crave God because in him is life, eternal life.

### **(3) Know that Christ has Opened a New and Living Way into God's Presence (Ps 24:7-10)**

A lot of surprising things happen to us in life.

Baby story. On February 3rd in the early morning, I ended up delivering a baby in the middle of my living room. Now, that was surprising.

I was upstairs drawing a bath for my wife. She was downstairs having her water break. Of course, I didn't hear her calls for me.

When I did come down the stairs and heard her, I was ready to support her while we waited for the midwives. We had called the midwives (yes, like the TV Show) because we knew something was up—but like in an hour or so. Not in just minutes.

She assured me that the baby was coming. I was sure that it was just contractions. But when her contraction didn't end and she started bear down, I figured that something was amiss.

So I took a gander. And there I saw a human head staring at me. Surprise!

She said: This baby is coming, you are delivering it!

I was forced to conceded the point.

His little head turned. His shoulders were clear of the hips. And my wife told me to pull him out.

*What? Like: pull him?*

She asked again.

I conceded the point.

So I just ... like ... grabbed the baby by the head. Pulled him out. And I caught him on Superbowl Sunday—the best catch of the day because that was the most boring Super Bowl in recent memory.

So life brings us surprises.

*But what's perhaps the most surprising thing ever is what the end of Psalm 24 says.*

Listen to this:

7 Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And be lifted up, O 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 gates!  
And lift them up, O ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.  
10 Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,  
he is the King of glory! Selah

Who can ascend the mountain of God? Well, the king of glory. In fact, he opens up the ancient doors to the mountain of God.

Yahweh himself ascends up to himself.

### **3.1 What does this mean?**



We get hints of in Psalm 24 as well as some of the earlier psalms. Psalm 24:1 affirms God's ownership of everything. It's his, and he can do whatever he wants with it.

Then we learn that only a person of clean hands, a pure heart, and who speaks truly can enter God's sanctuary. We learn that this is the requirement for those who seek the face of God (v. 6).

Then God suddenly on the scene. And he opens up the ancient doors of his heavenly temple. The way is open. Walk through it!

### **3.2 How?**

Well, Psalm 23 calls Yahweh the shepherd. He takes care of his sheep. And in fact, the great shepherd has prepared his house for David in vv. 5-6.

So God shepherds us into his house, his temple, his sanctuary.

### **3.3 How did we get there?**

Psalm 22:1: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Sound familiar? We know of another Davidic king who said these words.

But that's not the whole story. Psalm 22:21 "You saved (literally, answered) me!" God did forsake his anointed one. And God's rescue of the anointed one means that the whole earth bows before God, v. 27. And to a people yet unborn salvation comes, v. 31.

As 22:16 says, the messiah's hands were pierced. But Psalm 16:10 tells us that God will not let his Messiah see corruption in Sheol, death.

### **3.4 How?**

The Psalms provide hints of this everywhere. But eventually, it hits us on the nose. Psalm 45:7 tells us that God anoints God and so God's throne is one of justice and eternity (v. 6).

Then Psalm 110 tells us that the Lord speaks to another Lord, and that Lord is an eternal priest and inherits the kingdom. Jesus says that Psalm 110 is about the Messiah in Matthew 23. The messiah is the Lord, God, the divine one.

Psalm 24 shocks us because God himself becomes the person with a pure heart, clean hands, and a truth-speaking voice. He is the one who makes it to the temple of God.

But he doesn't go alone. He opens the ancient gates for us.

**Here's the point.** God changed the entire world system so that we could be in his presence. That's why the New Testament calls our age a new Aeon, a new world order.

Hebrews 9:8 says this of Israel's religious system and specifically the day of atonement: "By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age)."

The day of atonement and the temple was meant to create a *desire in us, to indicate to us that the WAY to God's holy presence was not yet open*. But Jesus opened up the ancient doors to the most holy place.

Hebrews 10:19 and 20 say: "we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the **new and living way** that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh." The Holy Spirit says the WAY is not yet open in Hebrews 9:8; but in Hebrews 10:19–20, Jesus opened up a new and living way—through his body, his flesh.

Because of him, we no longer move east of Eden. We no longer need the **rainbow** in the clouds to protect ourselves from God's presence. We no longer need the religious system of Israel to make it to God's tent.

We couldn't do it. God did it. He came down and took our pollution. And by his perfect life, he made us clean. He took our uncleanness and by his perfect life made us clean. He bore our sin and atoned for it at the cross. He rose from the dead and gave us life itself, the Spirit of God.

When God shone in our hearts, he said, “let there be light.” The Spirit blossomed life in our hearts. And then came we were filled with the new creation of God.

In Christ, we gaze at the face of the Father through Holy Spirit moving one level of glory to another.

We have an unspeakable joy and hope in him. We have something that generations prior to us could not conceive of. We have direct access to God because HE HIMSELF opened the ancient gates of his heavenly temple.

And what happens when we enter the gates in Christ? Joy.

- In Psalm 16:11, David says “in your presence is abundant joy”
- In Psalm 21, God’s presence brings David joy (v. 6).
- In Psalm 23, the king speaks of God preparing a table for him within the house of the Lord, that is, within God’s presence (vv. 5-6).
- In Psalm 48:1–2 says that “His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth.”

God is the source of all joy and happiness. So desiring his presence is the key to it all. But the problem is sin and death. And the solution is God himself opening the door for us into God’s presence by becoming human, living a perfect, dying a atoning death, and rising to new life for us and for our salvation.

And when we don’t experience joy today, we have the hope that our joy will be full when Christ returns and ushers us fully into God’s presence. There all tears will be wiped away. And we will have joy forevermore.

So let’s realize this great privilege we have. It is ours in Christ. He opened the door of joy and hope for us, because he opened a new and living way into God’s presence.

If you take away one thing today, it’s this: appreciate the wonder of being in Christ and being in God’s presence so that we can approach the throne of grace. God is our desire, our end, our joy our hope.

We have what all humanity is made to desire but could not attain because of sin: God himself.

Let me close by reading Hebrews 10:19–25:

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

*Let me pray for us.*