

IT'S NICE TO BE "IN"

Pastor Jeff Wood

July 9, 2017

If I were to ask you about the most quoted pieces of scripture, it would take but an answer or two before someone said, "Psalm 23." If I were to ask a scholar about the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament, they would say, "The Psalms." If I were to poll pastors asking, "When you go to the hospital, do you want the New Testament alone or the one that has the Psalms at the back," they would all say, "The one with the Psalms." The Psalms, a beloved and important book of holy scripture.

Actually, it isn't a book in the sense of a treatise (like Romans) or a book in the sense of a story with a plotline (like Mark). It is a book more in the sense of an anthology and, in this case, an anthology of prayers, poems and songs.

Psalms comes from a Greek word fixed as the title over the book with the meaning "songs." The Hebrew word that is fixed as the title of the book is Tehillah, meaning praise. It is a collection of prayers, poems and songs that *arose out of* private and public worship, that *was used in* private and public worship.¹

So in the psalms we learn about devotion and we need to be schooled in this. A boy who is devoted to a gal

¹ I worked with a great man once named Ed. He did the pastoral prayer in our worship services. They were so touching that someone collected them and published the weekly prayers into a single book. Then it happened again and there's a volume 2. Now people will occasionally take a prayer out of his book and pray it again in a worship service where it seems to fit. See? The anthology arose out of our weekly worship and then became useful in further worship services.

shouldn't show his devotion any old way. Let him learn about holding doors and bringing flowers. We will find as we are schooled that the psalms, songs of praise, have praise including pieces that have tears in them, anguish also, and even anger. We learn from the psalms about devotion and worship.

Now the Psalms are instructive not only for telling us about worship, how to do that, how to express devotion but for telling us about the human soul as well. The Presbyterians' ancestral father, John Calvin, said that the Psalms were a mirror showing all parts of the human soul. Look at them and you see reflected the soul of a human being. You look into a mirror.

Mirrors show us many parts of ourselves – our fronts and our backs. Years ago there was a grid named the JoHari Window that explained there are parts of us we see that no one else does, parts of us we see that everyone else does, and parts of us that we don't see that everyone else does. The psalms take us through all three parts of the grid.

Now the Psalm I want us to direct our attention to this morning is an entry psalm. It is not Psalm 1, a first to the anthology and therefore an entry point to the collection, but nonetheless it is *about* entry. It is a psalm used at Advent, when the divine enters the world. It is a psalm used on Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem.

Access and entry are every day issues. Some of you will go home today and your neighborhood is a "gated community." Not everyone can go freely in. Access and entry. Some of us will stop at SAMS club to shop this week. But you have to have a member's card to do so. Access and entry. Some of you will go on a trip from the

airport this summer or go to pick up a friend and there will be a nice security person who says, “Only ticketed passengers may go beyond this point.” Access and entry. Some of us will get online to check our bank account and you have to have the right password to do so. Access and entry.

And it is not only places we’re talking about but it can also have to do with relationships. I remember in college a very popular professor who hung out regularly at the college coffee shop (it was called, “The Stupe” for some reason I’ve forgotten) and usually he had a little circle of favorite students around him. His name was Ruprecht and they called those guys, “Ruprecht’s Boys.” I wasn’t in Ruprecht’s class but I always wished I had a favorite professor who has a couple of us as his favorite students and who would hang out like that. How do you get into a special spot like that? How do you enter?

I remember camping and canoeing. One dark night, cold and wet, seeing a campfire on the shore. The light danced and spoke of warmth. And companions in the midst of wilderness. We saw it from the darkness of the lake. But could we just paddle up and join them for the night? How do you get into that special circle of light, warmth, companionship? How do you enter? Well, that’s the issue of the Psalm we are going to read today. But, of course, the question isn’t about gated communities or coffee shops exactly, it is about God. How can we be with him and he with us? This is one of the deepest of all questions in the human soul.

Let’s pray.

In the name then of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit these words: Psalm 24:1-10

*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;*

*[2] for he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters.*

*[3] Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?*

*[4] He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false.*

*[5] He will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God his Savior.*

*[6] Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, O God of Jacob.*

*[7] Lift up your heads, O you gates;
be lifted up, you 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 you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.*

*[10] Who is he, this King of glory?
The Lord Almighty--
he is the King of glory.*

*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace
and truth and from his fullness have we all received, grace
upon grace.*

Our Psalm opens speaking of the world's largest landowner and that gives him status. I've just gotten back

from Texas there are some landowners. Remember that Texan who boasts to some disbelieving soul who doesn't understand Texas, "My ranch is so big that I get in my truck and it takes me all day to drive from one end of my ranch to the other"? And the listener replies, "Yeah, I once had a truck like that"?

God is who we are talking about and the entire earth belongs to him. Every island. Every mountain. Territorial rights. Mineral rights. Airspace. His ... and all who live therein! His ... and being his he has say-so.

Now God is owner of the earth by virtue of this simple fact: He made it. If I make a little pot out of clay, I say it is mine. If God made the planet, it's his. I didn't make the clay with which I made the pot but I still claim the little pot as mine ... because I shaped it and glazed it and fired it. If God makes a planet and makes the materials out of which the planet is made, then twice over it is his!

Now the Psalm talks about God making the earth in a way that seems perhaps a little odd to us. It goes, "He founded it on the seas and established it on the waters." The ancient view of the world was that it was a bubble of air and carpet of land in an otherwise watery space. Look up and you see blue like the water. Look up long enough and water will start dripping down through the sky. Walk along on the earth and you'll come to see water bubbling up here and there. Walk far enough and you'll come to the edge of carpet and water begins. It made a certain amount of sense. But whether we see it the same way or not, the one who made where we live whether it is a bubble of air in watery space or a bubble of air in outer space, is God.

God has the status of a great landowner. He has the status of a great artist or engineer, making it all. He also has the status of a great authority. I went to Union Seminary in Richmond for some of my training and there in the library was a fine collection of tapes and many of them had labels which read, "Not for duplication" or "Not for use outside library." Who says that the tapes were to be used in this way? The speakers who made them. They have that authority because they made them.

But now we have a question: Who gets to meet with such an stupendous being? If you want to be with the President of the United States, you might get to if you make a big campaign contribution. What does it take to be with God?

And this isn't just a matter of desire or privilege, it is also a matter of stamina and strength. Remember when God rested on Mount Sinai for Israel, the people trembled worried about falling dead if they got too close. Soooo ... yes, it is who gets to meet with and enjoy the attention of this great one. But it is also who can *withstand* meeting this great one. Or as we have it in the Psalm, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord and who may stand in his holy place?"

The answer is forthright: The only criteria for admittance to God's presence and the only necessity to withstand God's presence is purity. Clean hands, outward purity. Pure heart, inward. Who does not lift up his soul to an idol (vertically appropriate). Who does not swear by what is false (perhaps you could say this is being horizontally appropriate as in truthful with others).

To stay in the White House's Lincoln Bedroom it is thought that a sizeable political contribution is necessary. But here with God, wealth is not demanded. A certain

kind of dress is not required. Extreme intelligence or sparkling personality are not the issues. Going to Sunday School a lot isn't the point. The character quality of a person's life is the issue.

And that isn't the character quality of your life or mine compared to an axe murderer. It is the character quality under God's eye. Integrity. Living soundly with respect to God and life and others. This kind of person gets to be with God. This kind of person has strength to be with God. This kind of person gets open and free and good treatment with respect to God.²

Okay, that's nice to know. But wait a minute, who is this? who is truly pure? You? Me? We know better than that. Grousing. Half-truths. Dark thoughts. Like Paul we know, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We want to get up into that lighted, warm circle around the fire that is God but...but....

Now the Psalmist in this case doesn't have a disqualifying word the way we may think on the basis of Paul for he says, "Such is the generation of those who seek your face, O God of Jacob." 'Sincerity and integrity and true desire for God, and that's us!' It is as if the Psalmist is saying their trying, their seeking, their sincere desire to live in God's way is something that God knows and that will count for something with God. When a person truly longs for God, wants to be with him, and live in deep and good relationship with him, God sees that and God opens up to us. That is true. The psalm says so.

² ('They receive blessing and *righteousness* from God' and that means from his perspective that they are in good or *right* standing with him, that they have a *right* relationship with him. God says, "Between you and me everything is all *right*.)

But as the pages of the Bible turn and the ages of the generations go by, the matter of purity isn't in the end claimed. The verdict is well said by the prophet Isaiah, "I am a man of unclean lips in the midst of a people of unclean lips." So in the end, again how do we be with God?

The answer has to do with one who did have clean hands and pure heart. The first time I ever went to a SAMS Club years ago, I didn't belong. I wanted to but I didn't have the money. I needed car tires and they had the best prices. I didn't have much money so I needed the best prices. I sincerely wanted to come in. "Open up the doors and let me in." But they did not say, "Come on in." Ahh, but I was with Joe who had a membership card and because I was with him, I could go in.

When we approached those doors, the SAMS Club gatekeeper lifted up his head, not ceremonial heads at the gateposts but a head nonetheless, and that person let me in.

We ascend toward God and heaven, the ornamental heads lift up and the doors fling open as Jesus, the pure one, says, "He's with me."

But embedded in this psalm is not only a question of how we can be with God. There is a question of how God can be with us. Jesus said, "I stand at the door and ...knock, knock." Who's there? Jesus, the King of Glory. Who is this King of Glory? The one mighty in battle over your sin, disappointment, and death. Will you open the doors of your worship to him? The doors of your heart to him? O let the king of Glory in!