

The King of Glory Comes!

Psalms 24 (NIV)

Of David. A psalm. ¹ The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; ² for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters. ³ Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? ⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. ⁵ They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Savior. ⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, God of Jacob. ⁷ Lift up your heads, 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, 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.

Look up at the mountains. No, seriously, if you live here in Utah, go ahead. Step over to a window and peer out or - if you haven't yet today - step outside and look. Those mountains - they're pretty big. They're beautiful with the snowcaps still there. Maybe you wish you could have one more go down the slopes, but then you remember that all the resorts are closed now. But it's getting warmer. Maybe you can hike them, climb them.

I look at our Wasatch Range, and I think that they don't look too bad for a hike. It's just a mile up. I can do that. I say that now, but actually make me go out and start hiking it, climbing it, I'm pretty sure that I would change my mind very quickly. But, give me some more time, more training, supplies, etc., and I think I could do it. You know what, though, I haven't actually ascended those mountains. I know that I am probably vastly underestimating them.

This past year, one of our members ascended Mount Kilimanjaro with its highest peak at 19,000 feet. He trained for it, but, once he got there to the base of the mountain, he had a lot of anxiety and nervousness. Had I trained enough? Did I pack right, make the best use of the space I have? Do I have the right kind of layers, enough layers? Will I make it to the top?

Now image you are at the base of Mount Everest with its highest peak at 29,000 feet. That's 5 and a half miles up! Now that is daunting, but people still climb it. About 500 make it to the summit every year. It's almost turned deadly Everest into a vacation destination, a tourist attraction. Yes, those people train hard; they have Sherpas; they have the proper equipment; they wait for the ideal conditions. But they climb it. It's extremely hard but doable to ascend Mount Everest.

What if your eternal life with God depended on you reaching the summit of Mount Everest? What if you had to do it right now, with no training, no Sherpas, no equipment, that you have to make it on your own determination, grit, and effort? Not a single one of us would make it. Who could ever ascend Mount Everest without proper training, the exact right conditions, and loads of help?

The idea of ascending an impossible mountain is on David's mind as he writes Psalm 24. Now, Mount Zion, the hill that Jerusalem sits atop - and, yes, it's a hill rather than a true mountain - is only 2500 feet in elevation. That's doable for most of us, but even that elevation is too much for some of us. But David isn't eyeing up literal Mount Zion thinking of scaling it. He is eyeing up the mountain of the LORD, the place where God dwells. "Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?" (verse 3)

Who can go up to the perfect God and stand in his holy presence? David's answer to his own question: "The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god." (verse 4) If I want to go up to the LORD, if I want to stand in his presence, it's not about training, it's not about endurance, it's not about the equipment I packed, it's not even about help from others. Going up to the LORD is about cleanness. David knows that he does not have clean hands or a pure heart. His hands were bloodied from all the battles and wars that he had fought. His heart was impure from lusting after Bathsheba, another man's wife, and having an affair with her, getting her pregnant. His hands were dirty from arranging the murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, and posing it as a tragic war casualty. His heart was impure as he refused to confess or repent of his sins for over a year. These are just a couple of the dirty and impure things that David did in his life that God records for us in the Bible.

How about us? Can any of us to claim to have clean hands? (Well, in one way, I certainly hope so because you're all washing your hands for 20 seconds to the point where your knuckles are dry, cracking, and hurting, right?) But God, of course, is not talking about external cleanness; he's talking about internal cleanness. Only the one with a pure heart can stand before the holy God. Is your heart pure? Or does your heart have impurities? Are you truly cleansed from every iota of selfishness? Have you never daydreamed or lusted over a person? Is your heart free from all worry - which worry is a sin as this is what we do when we are not putting our trust in God? Is my heart free from all hate? Can I honestly say that I have clean hands and a pure heart?

As sinful thoughts and actions flow from us, we have to admit: we have dirty hands and impure hearts. We are not holy. We can no more ascend the mountain of the LORD than David could. Ascending the mountain of the LORD might as well be ascending Mount Everest out of season, without training, without equipment, without Sherpas. It's impossible for us to do.

But today is Palm Sunday. So, lift up your heads to see God's solution to our impossible task. "Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." (verse 7) Who is this King of glory? He doesn't look like much. He looks like an average man – like you or me. There's nothing really about his appearance that would attract us to him. No, he comes lowly, humbly, riding on a donkey. Yet this man is the LORD, God in flesh. "He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:7-8)

Who is this guy? "Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle... The LORD Almighty— he is the King of glory." (verses 8, 10) As Jesus rides into Jerusalem and rides on to his death, he knows just like any mountain climber that going up the mountain for us, this journey is hard and terrible while people are telling him he's awesome for doing it, that this is a trip of a lifetime. But he knows how hard and terrible the remainder of his climb will be. He does. He ascends the mountain of the LORD. He does it knowing that his sacrifice will cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. He does it as the LORD Almighty. He does it because if he does not, then no one makes it up the mountain of the LORD and stands in his holy place. This is the King of glory!

Today, we get to welcome again someone who does the impossible. We welcome a man who has clean hands and a pure heart. We welcome Jesus, the King of glory, who committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth. He never thought a sinful thought, never committed a single sinful action. He never hated, never lusted. He lives holiness at all times. And so he stands in the presence of God. He did not trust in anyone but his Father. He sought only to serve and obey the Father's will. He did so by coming to Jerusalem knowing that by the end of the week he would suffer horribly and die. By all these things, Jesus - both true God and true Man, holy, righteous, pure - does what we could not. He ascends the mountain of the LORD - without any help, without any guide or Sherpas. He does it on his strength. He trudged that path of holiness, of righteousness; he trudged it just like a mountain climber barely keeping one foot in front of the other. And he does it for us. He does this to bring us "blessing from the LORD and vindication from God [our] Savior." (verse 5)

What is this vindication that we receive from the LORD? The word that is translated as "vindication" is much more frequently translated as "righteousness." We receive righteousness - clean hands and a pure heart - from the King of glory who comes. He descends the mountain of the LORD because he is the LORD Almighty, only to turn right around and ascend it for each and every single one of us. He kept his hands clean and his heart pure so that he could vindicate us, give us his righteousness, his holiness. Because he did this, we now also ascend the mountain of the LORD by his efforts and stand in his holy presence. Jesus' holiness, his cleanness, his purity covers us. His efforts get us there, not ours, and allow us to stand before God. He willingly goes through all that effort for you so that the mountain is ascended without you doing a single thing.

Lift up your heads, you gates. It's time to stop looking at ourselves, on our merits, on our efforts, on our dirty hands, on our impure hearts, to try to ascend the mountain of the LORD. Instead, as another psalm says, "I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2) We look to the LORD for our help, for our righteousness, the one who ascends the mountain of the LORD for us and covers us with his perfection so that we can stand in his holy place. We seek the face of the God of Jacob, the one who came down to live for us and then die for us to make us righteous and so save us. We seek him as we gather around his Word in worship as we are doing right now. We seek him as he does the impossible for us, washing away our dirtiness and impurity with his blood.

Lift up your heads to see the King of glory, the LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. We raise to him our "Hosannas!" We call, "Save us!" to the one who descended the mountain of the LORD. And he does indeed save us by going right back up that mountain with clean hands and a pure heart. He is the LORD our Righteousness. We have received this blessing from the LORD, this vindication, this righteousness, from God our Savior. He is the King of glory! Hosanna, we shout! Amen.