

3 A Way to End

The widow is our example of perseverance despite long odds. The deck was stacked against her: the judge was a scoundrel, she had no husband or son to take her side, and she was the “wrong” gender to defend herself. Yet she pressed on and eventually overcame.

So it is with prayer. When the situation looks hopeless, that’s when we should pray the hardest. The possibility of prayer challenges us to rise to the occasion.

○ Dear Prayerer

Jesus’ parable challenges the idea that God is distant or uncaring. Unlike the unjust judge, God does not delay long in helping those who cry out for justice.

Discuss what it’s like to pray for something for so long that you fear the answer will never come.

Provide paper and pens or pencils for each participant. Have them write letters to themselves in which the widow in the parable encourages them to keep praying. As time permits, invite participants to share something of what they wrote.

○ Praying for Justice

Provide paper and pens or pencils for each participant. Have them journal about a justice issue that they feel hasn’t received a fair hearing. Challenge them to think small: not merely “racism,” for example, but the recent incident of racism in your own community. Encourage them to pray about this issue and to commit to doing something practical and tangible to address it.

○ Perseverance



Distribute copies of the resource page “Perseverance.” In groups of two or three, have participants read the quotations provided. Which of these quotations speaks most strongly to them? In which of these do they most clearly see the widow from today’s lesson? Bring the class back together

and let people share their insights.

Close by praying for greater perseverance in prayer.

Resources

Justo L. González, *The Story Luke Tells: Luke’s Unique Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

Ross Shephard Kraemer & Mary Rose D’Angelo, eds., *Women & Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

SMYTH &
HELWYS
BOOKS

Save 10% on your
entire book order*

During checkout at www.helwys.com,
enter the following code: **SD20**

*Code not valid on curriculum orders.

October 4, 2020

The Earth Is the Lord’s

Psalm 24

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the *Learner’s Study Guide*. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.



Bible Background

The Book of Psalms

The collection of prayers and hymns we find in the book of Psalms is complex in its forms and themes and diverse in its authors and historical contexts. Some psalms may be read as poetry; others work best as personal prayers, community hymns, or conversations with God or with the leaders of worship. Some, like Psalm 24, likely had specific purposes in the practices of ancient Israel’s worship, while others were deeply personal laments or joyous praises.

Taken as a broad collection, the collection known as the Psalter reflects the whole scope of human life. It expresses our experiences and teaches us how to live as God’s people. Psalms plays a unique role among the books of the Bible. The psalms function both as a way for people to speak to God and for God to speak to us. They are both prayer and Scripture.

We may sing or pray a psalm, using its words to call out to God and express our fear, grief, joy, loneliness, and confession—only to hear God speaking back to us in those very same words, offering protection, comfort, delight, relationship, and forgiveness. The psalms also bridge the personal and the communal. Through songs shared in worship, they communicate individual experience.

Entering into Worship

Among the vast diversity of psalms, two have the specific function of a liturgy for entrance into worship. Psalm 15 and Psalm 24 share similarities in structure and content, providing an outline for the worshiping community as the people enter the temple. It is easy to imagine this liturgical drama being acted out as throngs of pilgrims approach the sanctuary in a processional. It begins with acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty over all the world, then moves into a structured call and response between the congregation and the priests.

The specific authorship of each individual psalm is not always clear. Some psalms have superscriptions or headings that suggest who the writer was and perhaps the purposes for which it was written. Psalm 24 has the superscription “Of David. A Psalm.” This simple expression can mean several things. The Hebrew term “of David” may not imply authorship as we understand the term. It could also rightly be translated “for David,” “about David,” or even something like “in a Davidic style.” Thus, though Psalm 24 is “of David,” its importance is not in who wrote it but in its connection to the community of faith, its relevance to their traditions of worship, and its association with the heritage of David as expressed by the people of God.

Psalm 24 is not only about the people entering the temple grounds on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. The liturgy it describes

may have also involved the ark of the covenant being carried there in procession. The ark was the physical representation of God's presence on earth, and the "hill" (v. 3) of Zion was the representation of God's home on earth (see 2 Sam 6; Ps 132:8-10; Ezek 43-44). God comes into the sanctuary to abide among the people. Those who come to meet God there express faith in their Creator (vv. 1-2), request admission to God's house (v. 3), learn what they must do to be welcomed in (v. 4), and then receive the blessing of the priests as they come into the presence of their King and Creator (v. 5). Once inside the holy place, their voices rise in praise.

Seeing God's Face

The worshipers' request to see God's face (v. 6) is deeply personal. Entering the Lord's presence isn't about membership rolls or orthodoxy. Rather, the first two requirements for those who are invited into God's dwelling place are to have "clean hands and pure hearts" (v. 4). In other words, their actions and motivations are in keeping with the promises of God's reign.

Though religious traditions may set outward rules of admission, God's standards are subtle ethical considerations that shape faithful living. Clean hands do good works, take care, give. Pure hearts motivate the hands' work, yearning for goodness, carefulness, and generosity. Clean hands and pure hearts respond to what they have known of God—that God is a Creator who makes everything and calls it good, who cares for all people, and who gives generously. Clean hands and pure hearts can't be earned, only experienced and expressed. They are the ways we connect with, touch, and serve one another.

The third requirement for the people of God is that they do not honor or practice falsehood (v. 4). Close on the heels of "clean hands" and "pure hearts," the priests remind the people of their dedication to the truth. Service to God, whether

in worship or in care of the world, can't be built on deception. God's blessing will only be given to those who live in truth.

Psalm 24's imagery of the divine presence is prefaced by the confession that God reigns over all the earth. The whole world and everything in it belongs to God

Outline FOR TEACHING

- I. Worship with the Psalms
 - A. The scope of the book of Psalms includes every aspect of a faithful life.
 - B. Psalms reveals a diverse collection of forms: personal and communal; prayer, poem, song, liturgy.
 - C. The authorship of most of the psalms is subject to debate.
 - D. The psalms are both prayer and Scripture: humans speaking to God and God speaking to us.

- II. Entering God's Presence (Ps 24)
 - A. Psalm 24 is an entrance liturgy. The ark of the covenant, the physical symbol of God's presence, enters the sanctuary, the physical symbol of God's dwelling place. The people request admission into the divine presence.
 - B. A Profession of Faith (vv. 1-2). The entire world is God's; we too were created and are part of the creation.
 - C. A Responsive Liturgy (vv. 3-6)
 1. The people request admission.
 2. The priests explain the requirements. These are not legalistic checkboxes but an invitation to clean hands, pure hearts, and truthfulness.
 3. What does it mean to be the people of God? Those whose lives reflect God's reign will see God's face and receive God's blessing.
 - D. Celebrate (v. 7-10)! The King enters the sanctuary.

- III. Who Is this King? Psalm 24 describes God as the Creator, the One who brings order out of chaos, the King of glory, and the LORD of hosts.

because God created it, put it in order, and created us within it. The seas and rivers (v. 2) symbolize chaos, the disordered waters that God separated and contained in creation. The people as well are part of this created order, so when they process to the temple to worship, they are reminded of *who* they worship: the Creator of all things, King of glory, the LORD of hosts.

The King of Glory

The phrase "King of glory" occurs five times in verses 7-10. Repetition is a common technique in poetry generally and throughout the Bible. It is a means of

adding emphasis to a particular theme. There is no question in Psalm 24 whose reign is at hand. In fact, the phrase "King of glory" is unique to this psalm.

"LORD of hosts" (v. 10) involves military imagery, depicting God at the head of a mighty army. "Hosts" refers to armies, as in Psalms 11; 46:7; 48:8. The word is also used in Scripture to refer to the heavenly beings who escort the ark (Pss 29:1-2; 82:1; 89:6-8; Isa 6:5; 1 Sam 4:3-4). This phrase reinforces the notion of the God who is "mighty in battle" (v. 8) against the forces of chaos. God reigns, and no malevolent power can oppose God.

1 A Way to Begin

Psalm 24 celebrates the entrance of God and God's people into the place of worship to meet each other face to face. Begin today's lesson by exploring the ways we come together with one another and with God.

○ Entrance Rituals

Consider the rituals people use to mark beginnings by asking the following questions.

Questions

- What is the first thing you do when you arrive at work?
- What do students do at the start of a school day?
- What do we do at the beginning of a church potluck or business meeting?
- What do we do when we meet a longtime friend? A coworker? A neighbor?
- Which of these rituals are of our own making, and which were taught to us by others?

Our routines contribute to our sense of comfort, our readiness for tasks, or our experience of the sacred. How do these everyday entrance rituals set the stage for what's about to happen?

○ Preparing to Worship

Collect several church bulletins to share with participants. These can be from your own church or others. Many churches put their bulletins online. Have participants look for various ways worshipers are invited into God's presence in these worship services. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- According to these orders of service, what attitudes should people have as they prepare to worship? (Joy? Humility? Sorrow over sin?)
- Are different attitudes appropriate in different situations? Explain.
- How do you personally prepare your heart for worship?

2 A Way to Explore Scripture

The psalmist notes that because God created all things, we are fully dependent on God. Explore how this dependence plays out in participants' lives. How do God's blessings shape the way we worship and serve?

○ Our Dependence on God

Have participants reflect on things they couldn't live without: food, shelter, friendship, etc. List these on the board.

Read Psalm 24. Using information from the Bible Background and the Learner's Study Guide, explain the historical context of this psalm as an entrance liturgy at the temple in Jerusalem. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Is it hard to admit that we depend on God? Explain.
- How does our culture struggle to admit this dependence?
- What do we gain when we acknowledge this dependence?
- Why are clean hands and pure hearts necessary to stand before God (vv. 3-4)?
- What blessings come to those who meet this requirement?
- What is the role of moral requirements to enter God's presence? What is the role of grace?

When we recognize God as Creator, it points to our own status as creatures and our connection with the rest of creation. We couldn't live without God's provision of life, order, and grace. Discuss the implications of this realization in the stewardship of God's blessings.

Return to the list of things participants couldn't live without. Discuss how we can be good stewards of these things as an expression of dependence on God and as a worshipful "thank you" to God's generous gifts.

○ Clean Hands and Pure Hearts



Distribute copies of the resource page "Clean Hands and Pure Hearts."

Read Psalm 24. Divide the class into groups of three or four. Have them use the resource provided to search the text of this psalm, the Ten Commandments, and the Beatitudes for tangible expressions of "clean hands," "pure hearts," and a love for the truth (Ps 24:3-4).

Bring the class back together and ask the following questions.

Questions

- How do these additional passages describe the behavior of God's people?
- What do these passages teach us about God's presence among God's people?
- Psalm 24:5-6 refers to the blessings and vindication of those who seek God. Where do we see these themes in Matthew and Exodus?
- How do grace and obedience prepare us to meet God? How do they prepare us to share our gifts with others in God's name?

3 A Way to End

We live, work, and worship in God's presence—in the sacred space of a church sanctuary, but also in all the spaces of our daily lives as they are made sacred by God's presence with us. Conclude the lesson by focusing on how believers receive blessing and express praise.

○ Virtuous Stewardship

The psalmist describes the qualifications for entry into God's presence: clean hands, pure hearts, and no deceit. These qualifications are introspective and personal, and we can only consider them within our own hearts and express them with our own lives.

Ask participants to think of these moral touchstones in the context of personal and congregational stewardship.

Questions

- When has stewardship reflected different values: for example, a response to scarcity, fear, or seeking power or prestige?
- What is the bigger challenge: giving or giving sincerely?
- Does it really matter if our hands are clean and our hearts are pure? If so, to whom?
- How is God's work affected if it isn't performed with these virtues?

Conclude with prayer, asking for God's blessing on the work of clean hands, pure hearts, and truth-seeking in the week ahead.

○ Prayer and Praise

Invite participants to list details about the creative work, presence, and reign of God as expressed in Psalm 24. Have them share ways they have experienced God's creativity, presence, and power this week.

In the final verses of Psalm 24, the worshipping people join their voices in praise of the King of glory—the King whose reign comes and in whose world we live. Conclude the session with prayer and praise. Invite participants to express their prayers by finishing the acclamation, "King of glory, we praise you for ____."

Resources

Adele Berlin, "Introduction to Hebrew Poetry," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1994).

J. Clinton McCann Jr., "The Book of Psalms," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

Laurance Wieder, ed., *The Poets' Book of Psalms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).