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**Psalm 24, ESV.**

**24 A PSALM OF DAVID.**

- <sup>1</sup> *The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,  
the world and those who dwell therein,*
- <sup>2</sup> *for he has founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?*
- <sup>4</sup> *He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to what is false  
and does not swear deceitfully.*
- <sup>5</sup> *He will receive blessing from the LORD  
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.*
- <sup>6</sup> *Such is the generation of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah*
- <sup>7</sup> *Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle!*
- <sup>9</sup> *Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And lift them up, O ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,  
he is the King of glory!*

## **Safe [sic] the trees.**

The other day, while trying to get rid of junk we no longer need, Wendy came across a bookmark made by one of our kids, Isabelle, probably twenty-five years ago. It's made of thick white paper. Isabelle put three stickers on it: a leaf, a deer in the woods, and a tree. At the top she wrote "Safe", with an "f". In the middle, she wrote "the", and at the bottom she wrote "earth", then crossed that out and wrote "trees". Guess trees are more important than the Earth. We're going to look at Psalm 24. Although it isn't about saving the trees, it's about saving the Earth.

This Psalm is attributed to King David. The first two verses tell us something extremely important about our responsibility to this planet:

*The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,  
the world and those who dwell therein,  
2 for he has founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers.*

The Earth does belong to God and not to us. It's not ours to mess up. We belong to God, too, as well as the seas and the rivers. This Psalm is widely believed to be an "entrance liturgy", sung as an accompaniment to a procession of people entering the Temple in Jerusalem, perhaps while carrying the Ark of the Covenant. The reason that "seas and rivers" are specifically mentioned, rather than other natural things that dot the world is because they are symbolically very

important. They represent to chaos of the world, as seen through the eyes of those who lived in the ancient Near East. Though God created a beautiful home for us, God also made it highly unpredictable. That's part of its nature and its beauty – and a part of what we must always protect. One thing that is hard for us to fully appreciate is how powerful this statement of God's possession was to the Israelites. Neighboring pagan Gods made the same claim, that they owned the Earth. But the People of our God declare in this Psalm that their God is the one, true God. For us, as modern people, there is an extra layer of meaning in these verses: It is God, and not the semi-random processes of nature that created our home. Next, we hear of the high standard that we must all meet:

*Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?*

*And who shall stand in his holy place?*

*<sup>4</sup> He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to what is false  
and does not swear deceitfully.*

Remember that we form a procession, entering the Temple, seeking God. We stand in a holy place. To come before God, we must be clean of hands and have pure hearts. Clean hands represent our actions and pure hearts represent what is in our minds. Our souls must be lifted up only to what is true and good. We will also never be deceitful when making statements about our neighbors. We see here a

restatement of a couple of the ten commands as given by God to his people in Exodus. Then we see in the next verse a reminder of what we earn when we live according to God's commandments, as dictated by the Old Covenant:

<sup>5</sup> *He will receive blessing from the LORD  
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.*

If we fully trust God, and if we think and act according to the laws of God, we will receive earthly blessings, and to the Israelites this meant that their daily needs would be met. We will also earn salvation, but this does not refer to the Christian notion of eternal salvation. It refers to earthly protection.

<sup>6</sup> *Such is the generation of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*

This is an interesting line – and the point is to state, in strong language, that those who proceed into the Temple to face God must be fit. To us, it seems that referring to the people who enter the Temple as seeking the face of the “God of Jacob” is merely poetic. But it is much deeper than this. Consider this from Genesis, Chapter 32. It describes Jacob confronting God, and I have abbreviated it:

*Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.  
<sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” <sup>28</sup> Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” <sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell*

*me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”*

This is the great ancestor, Jacob, who lied to his father to get his father’s blessing and inheritance, and thus, his position as the patriarch of God’s People. Jacob is in fear of his life, because his brother Esau is angry at him for stealing Esau’s birthright. Jacob finds himself alone in the desert. He is confronted by an angelic visitor from God. They wrestle though the night and into daybreak. Jacob is crippled by a blow to his hip. This will give him a limp for the rest of his life. But Jacob survives – it is then that he realizes God has spared him. Jacob is renamed by God “Israel”, because he now represents the people of Israel. Jacob renames the place where is, calling it Peniel, meaning “the face of God”. In verse 6 those of us who, in the procession, seek the face of the God of Jacob, must themselves wrestle with God and be cleansed by God. Only then are they worthy of coming before God.

*<sup>7</sup> Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.*

*<sup>8</sup> Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle!*

*<sup>9</sup> Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And lift them up, O ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.*

*<sup>10</sup> Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory!*

There is something in these verses that makes some modern readers uncomfortable. It is believed that these lines celebrate the entry of the Ark of the Covenant not just into the Temple, but through the gates of Jerusalem and into the holy city itself. Then, the doors of the Temple open. This represents the Ark entering the city and the Temple – and we, along with the Ark, are approaching God. And who is our God, our king? Verse 8 says that God is “strong” and “mighty in battle”. So why would we compare God to a warrior? Remember that in verse 2, we are reminded that God created everything:

*for he has founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers*

A common theme in the ancient world, among not just the Israelites, but also the other peoples who surrounded them, is that creation was a sort of battle, a battle against chaos. This verse leverages this ancient vision. God overcame chaos and created our world. In verse 10, we are told that our God is “the Lord of hosts” - which is a military reference - to God being in command of a vast army. These verses tell us that we are entering the holy city and the Temple and approaching God. Our God is almighty, the conqueror of Chaos, the creator of all that exists.

This Psalm celebrates our God who created and owns everything. To join the procession that approaches God, we must be clean of hands and heart, and

we must obey the commandments of God. We must struggle with God just as Jacob did, and God must validate our righteousness. It is an incredible blessing to be part of the procession that passes through the gates of Jerusalem and the doors of the Temple. And we must remember that the God whom we approach created and owns everything on this planet.

What this Psalm tells us is that we are dependent upon God for our home, this planet, as well as our very lives. We should therefore protect what our lives depend upon – and what is, in fact, not even ours. Traditionally, Christians have taken two different approaches to studying ecology. The first is based on Genesis, where God gives us dominion over the Earth:

*26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

Clearly, we are responsible to protect what God gives us dominion over. The other approach has to do with God giving us the Earth to use as we wish:

*28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it."*

Again, clearly, if we have the right to subdue the Earth, if God gives us that power, we must use it in a way God would approve of. But these traditional views often strike modern non-believers the wrong way.

Ecology-minded people direct this complaint at Christians: embedded in our holy book is a statement that God gave us dominion over the Earth, that we are to subdue it. Non-Christians see it as self-assigned permission to do whatever we want to the planet. It allows us to abuse the Earth for short term, selfish gains. But there is another view, one that explains why we are not good stewards of this planet. There are several books that make up the Apocrypha, which means “things that are hidden”; in other words, we don’t fully know the origins of these books. They are not part of most Protestant Bibles, but Catholics and some Protestants do consider them official canon. One of them is called the Book of Wisdom, or the Wisdom of Solomon, and it was probably written around 50 years before Jesus was born. It was apparently written by a Jew, but it was written in Greek, not Hebrew. Here is a brief passage from Chapter 5 of this book:

*The universe will war with him against the foolhardy;*

<sup>21</sup> *Well-aimed bolts of lightning will go forth*

*and from the clouds will leap to the mark as from a well-drawn bow;*

<sup>22</sup> *and as from a sling, wrathful hailstones shall be hurled.*

*The waters of the sea will be enraged*

*and flooding rivers will overwhelm them;*

<sup>23</sup> *A mighty wind will confront them*

*and winnow them like a tempest.*

This context of this passage is that the tendency of humans toward sin has destroyed our natural relationship with nature, and nature will rise against the



sinful in rebellion. Our sinful nature will thus lead to the Earth destroying those who sin. Thus, the line: *The universe will war with him against the foolhardy.*

Isabelle created a bookmark telling the user to save the trees. If we are to have clean hands and a pure heart when we walk through the gates of the holy city and through the doors of the Temple, and then present ourselves to God, we must acknowledge that the Earth is indeed the Lord's. We may have dominion over it. We may have the ability to subdue it. However, the reason we damage nature isn't because our Bible says it's okay. It's for the same reason we often harm innocent people. We do fall to the temptation of being selfish. In the Old Testament, God often used human armies to punish his people. Maybe someday God will use the Earth itself to teach us a massive lesson. But I'm not trying to deliver a hell fire and damnation message. The point is that we have been given dominion over this planet and all that is on it, including ourselves. It's generous of God to trust us with what God owns. It should give us great joy to honor God by doing a responsible job of caring for God's possessions.

Here is something very significant: Part of what God owns is us. To be good stewards of God's creations, we must take care of each other. We need to work hard to end workplace, domestic, and street violence. We need to help people who are without food, homes, clothing, or medical care. We must open our

hearts and our minds, pay attention to the suffering around us, and take action.

And it all starts with ourselves. We must care for ourselves because God created us. As Christians, that's a major reason to not take drugs, to be get medical help if we have an addiction to alcohol or gambling or anything else. We must keep ourselves as healthy as possible, and a primary form of health care that we tend to neglect is spiritual health. Even if we are very sick physically, we can still be healthy in our relationships with God. To honor what God has created we must remain close to God every day, every hour, every minute. Please pray with me.

*God, we come before you as part of the cosmos that you created, that you own. You have given us the gift of this earth as our temporary home. We ask that you not cut us any slack. Do not let us forget that to have clean hands and pure hearts, we must do all we can to protect what is yours. Amen.*