

How David Entered Jerusalem

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"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" (24:1) These are the questions that David raised in the 24th Psalm. Whenever there's going to be some great event in public life there's always some special music composed to celebrate the occasion. Next year the Queen celebrates the Golden Jubilee of her Reign and I can almost hear Westminster Abbey echoing with the sounds of the trumpets and mighty organ. But even in more every day life it still applies. When we get married it's usual for the organist to play a suitable wedding march.

The same urge to celebrate red-letter days to the sound of music and singing existed in Bible days. Psalm 24 is a song for a special occasion. It was to be sung as a processional song as David brought the Ark of the Covenant into the newly captured city of Jerusalem. It was to be a great day for at long last David had finished fighting to gain control of the country. The city of Jebus was the last enemy stronghold to fall into his hands. It was just the place that David wanted for his capital city. It had never really belonged to the northern kingdom of Israel nor to the southern kingdom of Judah and so neither the people of the north or of the south of the country would be offended by David's choice. Yes, this was to be a great occasion, when he would ceremonially take possession of Jebus, and rename it Jerusalem, Zion, the city of God. David took great care in preparing for this outstanding event and part of this was in composing a beautiful psalm that would be sung as he triumphantly took possession of the city.

As David pondered over his plans he began to realise that coming up to Jerusalem with the Ark wasn't only a physical journey, it was a spiritual experience of the greatest importance as well. Like all the other inspired prophetic figures of the Bible his awareness of God was heightened as the Holy Spirit came upon him. He forgot that his conquest of Jerusalem was the crowning point of his career; he forgot about his hopes of setting up his own home for the first time. He came to the conclusion that:

TO KNOW GOD IS THE REASON FOR OUR EARTHLY LIFE

First he thought of God and His creation: "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (1). The God whom David worshipped was He who made and owns this universe, wholly, complete and without exception. And then it seems that the vision came nearer as he thought of the inhabited world: "the world, and all that live in it." God is the rightful owner of all: "for he founded it ... he established it" (2). Some call into question the existence of a personal God. There are those would claim that the God of the Bible's revelation is dead. But David would have nothing of this. His God was alive, the all-powerful Creator - He was "the Lord".

David was so convinced of this that he wrote in another psalm: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (14:1). If you study the most primitive peoples in the world you find that they have a sense of a Higher Being. They may express it in various ways - worship of stones or trees, or ancestor spirits, but they all have got this sense of a superior being of a God who is beyond all other gods. It's only as man got more sophisticated that he fooled himself into believing that "there is no God."

After getting his perspective right David was guided by the Spirit to his own relationship with this great God of creation. So it was that he asked the question, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?" That was the most pertinent question David could ask. Who is qualified to enter the presence of God Almighty? It's a question we are well advised to know the answer to, and to be absolutely certain we conform to its requirements. So often we fail to get that perspective right because we're so close to earthly life that we see nothing else. Our lives in the goodness of God may stretch over 70 years or even more, but what's that when seen the perspective of an endless eternity. Let's follow David's line of thought as he asks, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?" David flashes out the answer without hesitation. It's a fourfold:

QUALIFICATION FOR ENTRY INTO GOD'S KINGDOM

"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" (4). In other words, what God wants is the person who is righteous, honest and honourable. These are in fact the

moral attributes of God Himself. This is confirmed by the description given of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He's described as "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners" (Heb 7:26). That's the man who can stand in the presence of God. That's the man or woman, David goes on to say, who "will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Saviour" (5). But who, who on earth, can achieve this? It's utterly impossible to meet this requirement.

I wonder how David felt after writing these words? Distinctly uneasy I would think, for in setting out those four conditions of entry into Zion, the city of God - clean hands, pure heart, no base values, no cheating - he had just condemned himself by his own words. David had written that the person who God can accept must have:

Clean Hands

But had he? It's extraordinary how one's conscience can recall an awkward memory from years before. This could have happened to David in this instance. 20 years previously he had killed the giant Goliath. The popularity that came David's way angered King Saul and he hatched a thinly veiled plot to get rid of David. Saul offered David his younger daughter provided he brought back evidence of the death of 100 Philistines. Just to spite the king he did so, plus another hundred for good measure. Whatever the phrase "clean hands" means, David's conscience surely must have told him that this unprovoked killing certainly put an end to his hopes of standing in God's presence with clean hands. The writer to the Hebrews tells us "the word of God is alive and active. It cuts more keenly than any two-edged sword ... It sifts the purposes and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12). "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?" If we let the Spirit of God speak to us as happened to David when he asked these questions it isn't a comfortable experience. Clean hands? Then there's the second condition of a:

Pure Heart

If his hands were unclean, did he have a pure heart? God sees everything. He knew about David's hands, now what about his heart? Once again David's conscience could well have made him uncomfortable. It might have brought to his mind an incident that took place when Saul was pursuing him and his faithful followers as outlaws.

It was difficult to get sufficient food to keep body and soul together for 600 men. It appears that they attempted to extract protection money from Nabel, a wealthy landlord. David was insulted by Nabel's blunt refusal and the only thing that prevented him from taking vengeance was Nabel's wife, Abigail, who brought him a generous present. David's hands might perhaps have stayed clean but how could he possibly claim that his heart was pure when it had been filled with thoughts of murder? Was it pure enough to ascend into the hill of the Lord? Pure enough to stand in His holy place? And what about our own position before God? His standards for us are just as exacting, quite as high as they were when David faced up to spiritual realities. Like David we may find ourselves disqualified from standing in the presence of God because of unjustified anger and thoughts of false vengeance in our hearts. Unclean hands, impure heart. But David's moment of truth wasn't over yet. What about the third condition of entering Zion, the City of God. Had he ever had:

Base Values

This can mean to choose the cheap, the unworthy course of action at the cost of what is noble and great; to give self the preference at the expense of others. Have we, like David, to admit to an uneasy conscience on this count as well? It happened soon after he finally parted from Saul. David was afraid the jealous king might kill him and so went to Ahimelech, the priest of Nob, and a dear old man who David knew and loved. David spun him a tale completely misleading the old priest who gave him all he wanted, but with tragic consequences. The matter was reported to Saul who, in his anger, executed all the priests in the locality - all because David tricked an innocent man in the achievement of his own ends. It's easy to criticise David but when we're faced with awkward personal situations it's sometimes all too simple to resort to half-truths to extricate ourselves. This is lifting up our soul to what is false. The last condition for ascending the hill of the Lord and standing in His holy place was that of:

No Cheating

In the words of the Psalm it was not being guilty to swearing by what is false. This too could make David hang his head in shame. At one stage in his efforts to escape from Saul, David and his men had found refuge in a town belonging to the Philistines, the traditional enemies of Israel. This was all very well, but David was a man of action and couldn't settle down quietly. On several occasions he led his band of fighting men and swooped down on outlying villages. There was total, ruthless massacre. Not a single soul was left alive to tell the tale. Then back they came with all the spoil. The king of the Philistines asked David where he got it all from.

Without a qualm of conscience David told him repeatedly that he had been killing the king's enemies when in fact it had been his own people. It was unashamed deception. Of course David was under pressure - Saul was pursuing him for no just cause but instead of trusting in God for protection he allowed the cunning and calculation of his sinful nature to take over the reins of his life.

"Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?" The only person who can gain entrance into God's kingdom is the man who hasn't got unclean hands, who hasn't got an impure heart, who hasn't allowed his soul to go after things of false value, and who doesn't swear deceitfully. That's the only person who can come to God, whom God can accept. David recorded that that man "will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from God his Saviour" (5) but that man isn't David, nor is it any one of us.

Someone has written that we're all a bundle of contradictions and fundamentally much closer to David than we might care to confess. In the words of St Paul, "There is no just man, not one; ... all have swerved aside, all alike have become debased" (Rom 3:11,12). We have to confess that we're all sinners before God unable to stand before a holy God. True enough we may have come a long way socially and culturally since David wrote this Psalm, but that's only a thin veneer which can't change the underlying evil nature of mankind. But David didn't despair because he knew God as a:

GOD WHO CHANGES THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO SEEK HIM

Why was David so certain that God would accept him? It's because God had revealed Himself as the "God of Jacob" (6). God had allowed Himself to be identified with Jacob - the man who at one time was as crooked and twisted as could be imagined. This is what gave such hope to David. He knew what Jacob had been - certainly not someone who had fulfilled the conditions of ascending the hill of the Lord. And yet God had revealed Himself as the "God of Jacob". If God hadn't changed, and He's unchanging, it must have been Jacob who had changed.

The book of Genesis tells how Jacob had a crisis experience with a heavenly messenger. Jacob's world had fallen apart but he wrestled with his opponent and at last, in great weakness, he cried out, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" (32:26). From this point on Jacob was a changed man. It was the defining moment of his life and he was given the new name of "Israel". David, too, had a similar experience. It's that conversion experience that we all need, when we realise that we're sinners and come to Jesus in repentance and faith. If the perfection that God seeks in us is ever to be found, then God must put it there, so that He sees us through the imputed righteousness of Jesus.

God's revelation of Himself as the God of our salvation was still a thousand years before its climax, the coming of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ but David had received a special anticipation of it. Our Saviour's sacrifice of His own life's blood on the Cross is the complete atonement for sin. The penalty of sin has been paid, forgiveness, renewal, eternal life is God's gift to the world. We can't change ourselves anymore than could David. It would be futile to try to. But God could and did change him.

David points us to the only way of obtaining eternal life: "Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob" (6). He's the God of our salvation. How can we be sure of our entrance into God's Kingdom? The psalm pictures the gates of Jerusalem as the entrance of the Kingdom. The gates are closed to the procession but a herald calls for them to be opened, "Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up you ancient doors that the King of glory may come in" (7). From the walls of the city comes the challenge, "Who is this King of glory?" The answer that none can challenge is made, "The Lord Almighty - he is the King of glory" (10).

Jesus is our only hope, for we can only enter the Kingdom as part of His redeemed people, depending solely on His righteousness. Only if we do that can we answer with confidence the most important of life's questions, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place?"