THE NEW SHOFAR

We (Christians) are always in the presence of God. There is never a non-sacred moment! His presence never diminishes. Our awareness of His presence may falter, but the reality of His presence never changes. ***Max Lucado***

FEBRUARY 2

We dare come into the presence of Almighty God?

Psalm 24 is a fabulous, popular song, one sung by pilgrims as they climbed the mountain on their way to offering prayers and sacrifices in the Temple. It is about the coming of men and women into the presence of God, and the mutual entering of the King of glory into the presence of "those who seek the face of God." Its own internal structure highlights the psalmist's message of pilgrimage:

[1] *Declaration of the Lord as creator of all (verses 1–2)* **[2]** *Liturgy of the entrance of humans into God's sphere (verses 3–6)* **[3]** *Liturgy of the entrance of the Lord into the human sphere (verses 7–10)*

The King of Glory of verses 8 and 10 is the same Lord who first established his kingship, creating and founding the world (verse 1).

The Lord God - Creator of All

The opening verses begin by highlighting that the earth belongs to the Lord because it was created by the Lord. The rhetorical point being made is that the earthly sphere, into which the Lord moves in this psalm, is already the Lord's because he created it. The Lord's coming is not the hostile act of an invader conquering that which properly belongs to another. Rather, the Lord comes precisely as the proper lord of earth.

Entering God's Space

In the second stanza, the focus of the liturgy zooms in from the universal focus to a focus on the Jerusalem Temple—the place heaven and earth meet. Who may move from the profane space of the world into the holy space of God's Temple? The surprise is that the requirements to do so are not ritual—as in much of the rest of the Old Testament and indeed throughout the ancient Near East—**but moral**.

The adjectives 'clean' and 'pure' used in this psalm do not belong to the Old Testament vocabulary of ritual purification. They are ethical terms and should be understood in terms of moral living and in light of the Decalogue (the ten commandments) prohibition against taking up the name of the Lord falsely. Cleanliness and purity are not for our own sake, but for that of the neighbour.

If the first half of this second stanza (verses 3–4) is about law (what is required of humans when entering into God's presence), the second half (verses 5–6) is about promise (what is bestowed on humans when entering into God's presence).

If entering God's sphere requires one to leave something at the altar, as it were, one also leaves the altar *with* something sacred: a blessing from the Lord. The connection between what is left and what one leaves God's altar with is reinforced

by the Hebrew verb “take up” or “lift,” which is used in both halves of the second stanza.

One does not “take up my life falsely,” and when one leaves, one will take a blessing from the Lord. Thus, there is a promise to balance the law. And like the law, the blessing is bestowed not for the sake of the individual per se, but for the sake of the neighbour, for Israel.

The Coming of the King of Glory

The second stanza describes the coming of mortals into God’s space, while the final stanza heralds the coming of the King of Glory into the human space. The psalm’s key word “lift” now appears four more times in stanza three (verses 7 and 9). Ancient gates had no parts that moved up and down—this is not a metaphor for the raising of a portcullis to allow entrance. Rather, the metaphor refers to the lifting of one’s head to acknowledge the entrance of one who is greater, more important, more gracious than the self. To lift one’s head at God’s entrance is to acknowledge God as God.

This reverent and faithful attitude, metaphorically commanded of the Temple gates, is the proper stance of all life toward the Lord. It is the confession that is required when the Lord enters human space to acknowledge the Lord as king. As with all confessions of faith, to confess one truth is to deny competing claims. To confess the Lord as king is to deny all other claims to sovereignty. To confess the Lord as king means that I am not the ruler of my own life.

But really, who is the King of Glory?

Once more the psalm asks, “Who is the king of glory?” The Lord, strong and mighty. But according to the New Testament, the strength and might of this king are unlike those of any earthly king. This King—who from eternity had the power, authority, even sovereignty—gave it up. Rather than kill, he chose to be killed. “*You who were once estranged and hostile in mind … he has now reconciled in the body of his flesh through death*” (**Colossians 1:21**).

And in his death, moreover, death has already reached out to grasp the world so that we need not die in the same way. “*We have been buried with him by baptism into death … we have been united with him in a death like his, and we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*” (**Romans 6:4**). Who is the king of glory? Jesus Christ—who did not count sovereignty or equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself into a manger, being born in human likeness, in human form.

The Father calls us into His presence – Alleluia!

Of course, God always saves his children and does so by divine grace that that is ours by faith. However, we do not see our salvation as license to do what we choose. We recognize that those whom God has given much have much obedience and faithfulness to give to the Lord in return. As we approach God, whether in corporate worship or prayer, we always ask ourselves whether we have kept clean hands and pure hearts. Even as we continue to experience God’s acceptance and loving provision for life, where we have failed, we confess our sin and beg for God’s ongoing forgiveness. All of this in order that others may come to know and to love God.