

Psalms of Advent Week 3: Preparing for God-Focused Celebration by Worship and Praise

Advent calls us to contemplate our King and Savior's Incarnation and Ultimate Return. (**Psalms 72, 122, 126, 132**) It calls us to lament the darkness in the world and in ourselves. In this penitential season, we cry out, "*Turn us to you, our King and Savior.*" (**Psalms 80, 85 and 126**) We notice again both the deadly hopelessness of our lives apart from God and the flourishing hope we have in Christ and his Church, the beginning of his New Creation.

The remaining Psalms of Advent, **Psalms 24, 50, and 146**, will "stir us up" to be increasingly God-focused, God-centered in our celebrating. *Two liturgies*, one for tabernacle/temple worship for a military victory (**Psalm 24**), the other for a time of covenant renewal (**Psalm 50**), and a resounding *hymn of praise* (**Psalm 146**) remind us of the magnitude of God's power to redeem his people and his world. So we each humbly ask, "*Prepare me for God-focused celebration—my King of Glory, Righteous Judge, and Strong Deliverer.*"

Here's a comprehensive, yet concise, statement about *the essence of worship*:

True worship is

the celebration of being in covenant fellowship with the sovereign and holy triune God,

by means of

the reverent adoration and spontaneous praise of God's nature and works,

the expressed commitment of trust and obedience to the covenant responsibilities, and

the memorial reenactment of entering into covenant through ritual acts,

all with the confident anticipation of the fulfillment of the covenant promises in glory.

(Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* , pp. 67-68)

"Covenant" refers to a treaty, pact, agreement. God used this well-known form to assure his people that he was their God and they were his people, and the "old" covenant was sealed by the shedding of blood in a sacrifice ritual, foreshadowing the crucifixion. The New Covenant or Testament that connects believers with God and one another now was established by the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, who sealed it with his own blood, making believers eternally secure in union with him. This is the heart of Christian worship. All that

being said as background, let's join the psalmists to experience God-focused worship, celebration, instruction and praise.

Psalms 24 and **50** are set in Israel's temple worship, which provides the opening setting of Luke's gospel. In the Temple setting, Luke takes us back into Israel's worshipping community with John the Baptist's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and with faithful Anna and Simeon who meet Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus in the temple (Luke 1 and 2). Imagine praying **Psalms 24** and **50** as one of these faithful Israelites. These are people who live authentically in dependence on the merciful grace of God. They are not self-righteous people; they relate to God by sincere worship, praise, repentance and the humble offering of atoning sacrifices.

Psalm 24

Psalm 24 is an *entrance liturgy* that was likely a song written to celebrate the entrance of the Ark into Jerusalem. (Maybe 2 Samuel 6.) The place where the Ten Commandments and other historical artifacts were housed, the Ark was a symbol of *God's actual presence* among his people. (**Psalm 24** was eventually sung on Sundays by daily worshipers at the Second Temple and in synagogues. Using it to give thanks on Sundays was also recommended by Athanasius and later Augustine in the early church.)

Q1. Mark **Psalm 24's** *three* parts: verses 1-2, 3-6, and 7-10.

What reminder does this psalm start with in **24:1-2**?

What would it mean to an Ancient Near Easterner to hear that Israel's God founded the earth and world "on the seas...on the waters"? What hope does that capacity of God offer you now? What helps you to acknowledge your absolute dependence on God for your being, sustenance, and continued existence? (**Psalm 50** develops this theme too.)

Q2. What does **24:3-6** reveal about preparation for worship? In addition to its Old Testament context of heartfelt repentance and animal sacrifice for forgiveness of sin, try reading this part Christocentrically rather than moralistically. Jesus is the blessed person of **Psalms 1, 15** and **24**, the one who has clean hands and a pure heart and is our perfect sacrifice for sin. Our union with him brings us into the presence of the victorious and Sovereign Creator God, yet he still asks us to follow him in his way of life, the way of self-giving love. "Turn me to you, my King of Glory." Our Triune God is always the agent, the initiator of our salvation and ongoing transformation.

The scene shifts in **24:7**. Those who seek God (hunger for His presence) are admitted to worship. They joyfully await the arrival of God Himself. Imagine a large group of people responding in this question-answer format.

Q3. Psalm 24 glories in the fact that God created the cosmos and rules over it and yet comes down to his people and lives among them because of his covenant with them (vv.3-10) Why do you think the Church has long used **Psalm 24** in Advent? How do you think it foreshadows both the Incarnation and the Second Coming?

Psalm 50

Psalm 50 is a *covenant renewal liturgy*, instructing both the faithful and the hypocrites (the wicked) who come to the Temple. Many psalms are prayers to God, but **Psalm 50** is a *divine oracle* in which God speaks to humanity and his covenant people about the heart of worship. If you didn't know it was a psalm, you would think it was prophecy, an *oracle of judgement*. It sounds like one of Israel's prophets, and Asaph is actually described as both a musician/choir director and a seer (prophet) in Old Testament references (1 Chronicles 6:39, 2 Chronicles 29:30, Nehemiah 12:48).

Q4. Mark the 3 main parts of **Psalm 50** and its summary:

- **50:1-6** "Gather to me" - God summons the earth to assemble before Him.
- **50:7-15** "I don't need your sacrifices" - He speaks to His people: Worship Him from the heart.
- **50:16-22** "You are evil" - He speaks to the "wicked": He rebukes them.
- **50:23** "Honor Me" - He sums it up: Worship Him with the heart.

Q5. What words describe the judge, the jury (**50:1** and **4**), the defendants (**50:4-5**)? What's it like to see God as your judge? Notice that God wants to exercise his righteous rule over people, not necessarily punish them.

Q6. How would you describe God the Judge's audience in **50:7-15**? What is his message to them? They apparently had misconceptions (perhaps from their Near Eastern culture) about how to worship God. How did they have the purpose of their worship backwards? (Who needs whom? **50:15**)

What does God teach them (and us!) in **50:14-15**? Why are offering sacrifices of thanksgiving and performing vows right uses of sacrifice (Lev. 7:11-12, 16)? God wants them to make grateful sacrifices that are shared as a meal with others, with God as the host. (Eucharist=give thanks.)

Q7. Imagine being a sincere Levite, serving in the Temple, as you see people with no penitential attitude at all coming to offer sacrifices. Then read God's instructions to "the wicked" in **50:16-22**. God rebukes doctrinal profession of belief without life change (Keller, *Songs of Jesus*, p. 107)

What evidences of hypocrisy do you see in **50:16-20**?

Before we get too hard on “those hypocrites,” we are compelled to examine our own lives too. How much are we participating together with all God’s people in the great project of “showing forth true humanity for the sake of the world” (ESV Study Bible, p. 1111)? We are to be living in Christ and sharing Him, the truest human ever! In Christ, we are challenged to “be” and to be embodying his love in all situations, obedient to him with our thoughts, words, actions, finances....How is that possible?!

Q8. Notice how gracious God is with “the wicked” in **50:22**. What does he want for them? How does he underscore the seriousness of his instruction?

Look for the good news, the gospel, in the words “lest I tear you apart and there be none to deliver.” Who was “torn apart” for the judgment we each deserve? Who endured the shame and suffering so that there would be One to deliver us?

How does **50:23** summarize the core elements of “the heart of worship” that God is teaching all people about in **Psalm 50**?

God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

Psalm 146-150: The Endless Hallelujah

The Book of Psalms begins (1:1) with “Blessed is the man” and ends with five *hymns of praise* focused on God, equivalent to “Blessed be the LORD.”

There is a step-by-step progression in this *praise*:

It begins with the **individual** (146), like Mary in her Magnificat, involves the **community** (147), extends to heaven and earth, all **creation** (148), encompasses a King with his **kingdom**, subjects, and mission (149) and ends calling for **everything** that has breath to praise the Lord (150).

Jesus was always “plugging” his Father. Like him, we boast, brag about, and speak well of who and what we truly love and enjoy. Jesus’s mother Mary loved the LORD and believed, like the psalmist of **Psalm 146**, that the LORD was a sure hope for suffering people (Luke 1:46-55).

May these Advent psalms inspire us to pray, “Keep us, your sheep, God-focused in our celebrating—our King of Glory, Righteous Judge, and Strong Deliverer.” Amen—so be it!