

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP: SUMMER IN THE PSALMS

In Praise of Praise

Psalm 24

June 21, 2026

I wish that I could claim that the title for this morning's sermon came to me in a mysterious, otherworldly vision, or perhaps through hours of fervent prayer through the night. But, the truth is, I found it in the waiting room at my dentist's office.

I picked up a copy of *Forbes Magazine*. The title of one particular column — *In Praise of Praise* — caught my eye. It struck me as potentially relevant for my line of work, so I took a picture of each page of the column and quickly filed it in the folder on my phone titled "sermon stuff."

The piece, which was written by a management consultant, makes the case that praise is "powerful and underutilized" in the workplace. The benefits, according to the author, are numerous, beginning with this: it requires minimal effort and costs you nothing. But perhaps most importantly of all, at least according to this management guru, it prompts employees to work harder. And so, he closes with a pithy recommendation that summarizes the column. "Make praise a key part of your managerial mix."

It makes perfect sense in the pages of *Forbes Magazine*, but you know we are not here to be made more efficient. We are here to be transformed by an encounter.

Psalm 24 is in praise of praise. It opens by telling us who the manager is. *The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it*. Or, if you—like me—prefer the old King James version of this particular verse: *the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness there of. The world, and all who live in it*.

In other words, the 24th psalm begins with a clear statement of who is in charge, who is managing this mix, this mess. Creation is not our possession. The world belongs to God, held in the hands of the One who stretched it out across the waters. This is no small,

sedentary, or sectarian God, and it is no small claim from the psalmist. The world, the whole world, and every single person in it, belongs to the same God.

Remember that, because everything else I'm going to say depends on it.

The psalmist then brings us to a gate, a gate where someone asks a question to the whole crowd that has assembled there, gathered before the gates. *Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in God's holy place?*

It sounds to me like an *entrance* exam. The answer to the question is this: *those with clean hands and pure hearts, anyone who does not lift up their souls to what is false*.

But here's the thing. If this is indeed a test, an exam, the gates will stay shut forever and we will be left stranded on the steps below, because none of us, not one single one of us, can pass this entrance exam.

Thanks be to God, this is **not** a test. It is a call to worship. That phrase—lifting up the soul to what is false—is scripture's language for idolatry. What is idolatry but taking the deepest part of yourself, the part made to praise God, and aiming it at something unworthy of the gift?

The psalm understands something about you and about me: we are going to lift our soul toward something. We were built to, fashioned to, created to. In other words, praise is not a religious activity we add to a life that would otherwise get along just fine without it. It is the native language of the human heart. Praise is the native language of the human heart. "You have made us for yourself," St. Augustine prayed, "and our hearts remain restless until they rest in you."

We were made to worship. We were made to adore. We were made to look beyond ourselves. The only question is the object of our praise. Toward what will we aim our worship? Your answer to that question matters more than almost anything else in your life because you will become a reflection of what you worship.

If you are in search of evidence, you need not go far. It turns out, those who worship wealth come to measure worth in numbers and carry the shame of never having quite enough. It turns out, those who worship power will do almost anything not to be perceived as powerless. If you worship your own grievance, you will slowly become that grievance. If you worship yourself, your love will gradually shrink to include only those who are useful to your grand design. If you worship certainty, you will slowly lose the capacity for wonder. Whatever you magnify is what you become. Like a rock in the river, we are shaped by what our souls are lifted toward.

I watch what happens to people—good people, faithful people—when they begin to give their ultimate allegiance to things that cannot bear its weight. I watch as contempt for others slowly poisons pure hearts. I watch as cruelty defended because power demands it becomes the way of life. I watch fear stand in the way, blocking the path to courageous faith. And I watch the slow malformation made possible when we choose to praise that which is deceitful, that which is dehumanizing, that which is divisive. Almost imperceptibly, over time, like that rock in the river, the heart is hardened. We gradually become servants of another lord.

How does it happen? Where does it start? I'll tell you what I think. I think we've aimed the heart in the wrong direction. Perhaps you've noticed. We keep looking down. Our eyes set on what's in *our* hands. We've taken the most valuable resource we have, that is our attention, and we've turned it downward, inward, toward the self. We curate ourselves. We optimize ourselves. We perform for an audience that we will never satisfy. We take a heart made to magnify something larger than itself, and we aim it instead at the mirror. In seeking to find ourselves, create ourselves, construct ourselves, defend ourselves, we have lost ourselves. You cannot stare into a mirror, or a screen, all day and remain

generous toward those around you. You cannot worship your own reflection and stay humble. You cannot be fed a constant diet of causes for outrage and remain tender. When we bow over our own image, we lose sight of the world as it is—which is to say, as God's.

True praise lifts our hearts toward what is worthy. Praise is not flattery aimed at heaven. To praise is to see the world as it truly is, the way it was created. And when you see it that way, you respond the only way you can. You praise the Creator. You praise God. And when you praise God, you are not escaping reality. You are acknowledging reality: *the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness there of. The earth belongs to God, and every single person in it.* Including that neighbor, you know the one, the one you find difficult to love. *The earth is the lord's and everyone in it*, including the stranger, you know the ones, the ones you struggle to welcome. *The earth is the Lord's and everyone in it*, including the ones you are tempted to hold in contempt. They belong to God. You cannot accept that truth and despise them at the same time.

Here is the mercy hidden in the 24th Psalm. It does not leave us bowed over a mirror or bent toward a screen, trying to maximize ourselves. The Psalm does not end with us proving that we are worthy to be let through the gates. Instead, it concludes with the arrival of the only one worthy of our worship.

Lift up your heads, O gates. Be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

Now, one word on ancient engineering, a subject about which I knew nothing seven days ago, but have done extensive research, and so I can vouch for what I'm about to say. Those ancient gates had no moving parts. There was nothing that raised or lowered. So, this is not a picture of doors swinging open or a drawbridge being let down or gates being lifted to open the path forward. Lifting your head is what you do when someone who is greater than you enters the room. You raise your eyes. You lift up your heart. You stop looking down. "Lift up your heads" is a command to take your eyes off the mirror, off the screen, off the self, and direct them toward the One who has come.

To lift your heads to this King is to make a costly counter-cultural confession: I am not, after all, the ruler of my life. Who is? The Psalm asks the question twice, louder the second time. *Who is the King of glory? Who is this King of glory?* And perhaps we brace ourselves, expecting the answer to be yet another strongman, perhaps a bigger and better model. More impressive. Optimized. Maximized.

But it is not. Oh yes, the Lord *is* strong and mighty, but the strength of this King is unlike any power the world has ever chosen to worship. This King, having all authority and power, chose to give it away. This King, the creator of life itself, chose to be killed rather than kill. This King, the King of creation, emptied himself into a manger and poured himself out on a cross. This King, the King of glory, comes through the gate not to conquer us but to reconcile us.

And that changes everything. Remember, we become what we worship. If you lift your head to a King like this, if you sing praise to a God like this, if you give yourself to a Lord like this, a Lord whose glory is found in self-giving love, then slowly, over a lifetime of lifting your eyes, you are made into his likeness. You do not become meaner; you become tender. You do not tighten your grip on what you have; you open your hands in generosity and faith. We will reflect what we choose to behold. And this is who we are beholding.

Ben Campbell Johnson was my mentor, a kind of spiritual father to me, and one of the most faithful men I have ever known. We found out that we were having our second son just after he died, and I pray that our Ben carries some of that great man's spirit. What I will never forget about Ben Campbell Johnson is how he began every prayer with the same words: "We are before you, God." It was not an empty phrase. Ben wanted to center us in reality. He wanted us to know that we were not trying to reach God, we were not working our way up to God. We are before you, God—we are already in your presence, always already in your presence, always already fully known and deeply loved, always already held along with all of creation, in your hands.

Earlier this morning, we commissioned the leaders of our annual Vacation Bible School. We sent them into

this week with our prayers. And I do not want, for a single moment, any person in this room to think of this week as childcare. It is not. This is the church's most serious work. We are forming the hearts of the youngest among us. We are teaching them which way to turn their eyes, their hearts, and their lives. And believe me when I say, they are watching to see which way you turn yours. They can tell when our heads are down—when we are absorbed in ourselves, or consumed by the mirror, or lost in the glow of screens or the noise of outrage.

This week, we received a prayer card written in the careful, looping handwriting of a nine-year-old in this congregation named Amelia. I want to read you exactly what she wrote. "I hope and pray that people take care of this church, and respect it, and think of it as a happy place." Me too, Amelia.

It is a deceptively simple but deeply searching prayer. Amelia, age nine, already understands something too many of us forget: a church does not become what it says it is; it becomes what it pays its attention to. She is asking us to lift our heads, to look beyond ourselves, and become the kind of people who will reflect what we behold.

This week, we will all be looking somewhere. We can choose to look down. Down at our phones. Down at the mirror. Down at the endless stream of things demanding our attention. Down at other people.

The Psalm offers another posture.

Lift up your heads.

Lift up your heads—because the world belongs to God, and it is glorious.

Lift up your heads—not to escape what's real, but to finally see it.

Lift up your heads—because the King of glory is already here. Not the King we expected, but the King who gave himself away.

We are before you, God.

The more we look at Christ, the more we look like Christ.
Amen.