

An Advent Mystery
Andrew Kneeland, December 18, 2022
Psalm 24

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Everyone loves a good mystery.

An engaging story where we follow the main characters on their journey to uncover the truth by discovering clues, interviewing witnesses, and finding the eventual and inevitable twist at the climax of the story.

Mysteries are some of the most popular stories because we like to follow along on the mystery – we connect and relate to the main characters and we think that maybe we can solve the mystery before they can!

Our Psalm today is a mystery story! It's just ten short verses but it has all the elements of a best-selling mystery. It's not a who-dunnit... but a who-can-do it.

I'll explain, but let's pray first: *Father God, thank you for your Word. Bless our time diving into this word together this morning. These are holy Scriptures, God, and are filled with powerful words. Draw us closer to you as we explore Psalm 24. In your name we pray, amen.*

Let's look back at Psalm 24 to walk through this Advent Mystery step-by-step.

Verses 1-2: *"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers."*

This is the establishing shot of the movie, the first scene that sets the stage and lets the audience know where we're at. David writes this Psalm and he's reminding us right away that there's a difference between God and us. The Lord, Yahweh, is the creator of everything and we are very much not.

This might seem like common knowledge to us, but how important is it for us to know that we aren't the center of our own universes? It's not all about us; we don't get to decide what's right and what's wrong; we don't get to decide how things work or when things happen. God is the creator, everything belongs to him.

But there's more to unpack here, too. God is *creator* and we are *creatures*, but

also: God is *perfect* and we are not. That means there is a chasm of separation between God and us. An unbridgeable gap that prevents communion and fellowship, which is news that should be jarring and upsetting to us.

It certainly would have been upsetting to the people first hearing David's psalm, because they knew what kind of a world they lived in. It was like ours; maybe even worse. They knew the violence and sickness and poverty and suffering that was all-too present around them; they knew that things weren't right and that evil was roaming through the world like a hungry lion.

They felt separate from God; because they were. There was a disconnect between what God had promised to them, and what they were experiencing. And so David puts a voice to this angst in verse 3: *"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?"*

The stage has been set and the seeds of mystery have been planted. The Israelites knew that their God—Yahweh, the creator of the universe and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—lived in the Most Holy Place on the Temple Mount. He lived on that holy hill. They knew that sinful people could not be near that Most Holy Place on that holy hill, but they yearned for God. Their hearts ached to be with God, to have God be with them, and for God to make things right with the world like it once had been.

They needed someone to climb the hill for them! They couldn't do it; they needed someone else to go for them. And they knew that whoever this person would be needed to be special.

David lays out the requirements in verse 4: *"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."*

The Israelites knew what they needed and they knew they couldn't do it. "Clean hands" meant someone whose works are always good and loving. "Pure heart" meant someone whose motivations are also genuine and never selfish. This unknown, hoped-for representative needed to be someone who never clung to a lie, and someone who was never dishonest.

That was a tall order. But there was more. Verse five: This person, David says, *"Will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his*

salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.”

The sinful and broken Israelites needed someone to climb the hill of the Lord to make things right with the world, but this unknown hill-climber needed to be perfect. Not only perfect in what he did, but perfect in who he was. Perfect on the outside, and perfect on the inside. Only someone clothed in God’s perfect righteousness could ever ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in perfect communion and fellowship with God.

To everyone else, it was hopeless. There could be no chance of healing, or forgiveness, or restoration. If it were up to us, the things that are broken and ugly in this world would stay broken and ugly. The families that are torn apart would stay splintered, the death, disease, warfare, and violence would only continue. Unless a hero is found who can climb the hill of the Lord for us... we will never realize the life of rest and peace that God has promised to us.

Unless. This is the dramatic pause in our mystery story. The lowest, darkest, most helpless point that comes right before the magnificent grand reveal.

All hope is lost. But then... you can hear a voice loudly shouting in the distance: *“Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors!”*

Someone was coming! Someone IS worthy enough to climb the hill of the Lord! Open the gates and let him in! Someone IS able to meet the requirements and bridge the chasm between perfect God and imperfect us!

“Be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.” The hero is coming! You can just make out his figure approaching on the horizon. You squint to see who it could be.

Who is this hero? Who is the person who is able to make things right? The person who can climb the hill of Yahweh and meet Yahweh’s requirements and satisfy Yahweh’s standards?

Verse 8: “Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!”

This hero is Yahweh himself! The Lord of the universe, the creator and sustainer of everything, the Lord himself is the one who can climb the hill of the Lord and

stand in the holy place.

He is the one who made the promises to God's people, and He is the one who will keep them. The Lord will be the hero we so desperately need and have so spectacularly failed to be on our own.

This mystery figure approaching, arriving, is Yahweh Himself.

On that first Christmas morning so many years ago, a little baby boy was born who was Yahweh Himself. Fully and completely man; fully and completely God. Our God stepped into human history to climb the holy hill for us.

This Advent season we gaze into the distance, trying to see who this approaching hero is. We meet him on Christmas morning.

Verses 9 and 10: *"Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!"*

There's actually a sequel to this mystery. Many years after David wrote this Psalm, the Apostle John got a glimpse of what the last days will look like and he wrote it down in the book of Revelation. Early in the book, in chapter five, John is watching a vision of the beginning of the end. But before the end can come—before Christ can come again and end our suffering and take us home to eternal life—the scroll of life needed to be unrolled.

John said in verse 1: *"Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?'"*

This scroll was being held by God the Father Himself, sitting on his majestic throne over all creatures and creation. He held this scroll in his right hand, the hand the Bible says he uses to work salvation for his people. This was a scroll that would bring salvation and fulfillment and rescue for God's chosen people. This was a scroll that would right the wrongs with the world; it would heal the sick, release the captives, restore families, and vindicate the oppressed.

This scroll was held by God Almighty. But God couldn't open it. John, standing in the distance, watching this cosmic revelation unfold before his eyes, could feel

the anticipation building. At this point in his life he was in prison, put in chains by the authorities for spreading the news about Jesus. His friends, the other apostles, had spread all across the world to tell others about Jesus but they were all being killed, tortured, and crucified. John and his friends had suffered and were suffering. John wanted this scroll to be opened, he *needed* this scroll to be opened, to bring healing and rescue and release to all the suffering and evil that was rampant in this world.

But verse 3, John said: *“And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.”*

John wept loudly. Someone needed to open the scroll, but no one was worthy. If the mighty angel with the loud voice wasn't able to, and if God the Father himself wasn't able to, surely John couldn't be of any help. John wept loudly. Would the suffering continue forever? Would John's precious friends and family die painful deaths in vain? Would this message of forgiveness and salvation found in Christ be a brief spark that eventually dies out, like a flash in a pan?

John wept loudly. And it makes us want to weep, too. But then, verse 5: *“And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’”*

The mystery is solved! Who is worthy? The Lion is worthy! Jesus Christ, the God-who-became-man, the Word of the Father who had stepped into the creation he had breathed into existence, HE was worthy. He had accomplished what the Father required and had met the perfect standard of holiness that was required for perfect communion and fellowship forever. The promised descendent of Judah and King David had conquered sin, death, and the devil himself to earn the right to open this scroll. He died on the cross for you, and he rose from the dead for you.

The Lamb was worthy!

Listen to the rest of John's story: Verse 6: *“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right*

hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Christ is worthy. Christ is worthy to ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in God's holy place, and Christ is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals.

'Advent' is a word that means 'arrival.' At Advent we remember the arrival of this same Christ as he was born as a baby in a manger outside Bethlehem. We also await his next arrival.

We, too, feel the disconnect the Israelites felt between what God promised and what our lives look like. We, too, weep loudly with John as we want and *need* someone to be able to open the scroll that brings life and perfect rest to us all.

Christ is coming again. The time and date are an Advent Mystery to us, but we can be confident and hopeful, because we know one thing: Jesus, our King of Glory, is worthy.

Amen.