

Compare and Contrast...

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Psalm 24 and Psalm 82



It's an added challenge this week to the Midweek Musing; we're going to briefly compare two Psalms. The reason that these have been selected is that they are from the Church of England Lectionary readings for this week. If you're intrigued by the thought of using a suggested reading from another denomination, you'll be pleased to know that I'm sticking to my non-conformist affiliation; these Psalms are meant to be for next year and the year after, so I'm going against the grain with choosing them now. Such is the rebellious freedom that we Baptists have...

But spend a moment reading these two Psalms. The first one comes immediately after the most famous Psalm in the world and not just because it's the theme tune to "The Vicar of Dibley". "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1) starts us on a journey of triumph and joy. The Psalmist paints a picture of majesty and splendour, where God is very much in control, in command and those who are allowed to join in do so at his bidding and under his authority. This is a world in harmony, with God playing the parts of composer, conductor and orchestra.

The "hero" of Psalm 24 is totally in tune with God. He has the attributes necessary to play a full part, with obedience and good character his qualifications. As the inspirational leader of the people, his example is followed by his subjects. All who come under his command are as faithful as he is, so the way to God is

open for all. It's a harmonious Psalm of a world in unity under God.

Contrast this with Psalm 82. Here we see a world in conflict. The rulers have their own agendas to follow, and there is a call for God to arbitrate. Unlike Psalm 24, there are those who are "in" and those who are "out". Instead of one nation united under God, we see division and discord. Those in authority are not to be trusted to make the right decisions, particularly in regard to those on the margins and fringes. This Psalm paints a picture of damaged lives and a broken society.

The Psalmist in Psalm 82 pleads with God to bring these rulers to task. Unlike the triumph of Psalm 24, with those under the king's authority enjoying the fruits of obedience and cohesion, society is imbalanced, and the rulers have taken their eye off the ball. God is petitioned to step in and take back control, for his justice to reassert itself and for society to be realigned.

These two Psalms set us up to reflect on the world today. We may well long for a world as seen in Psalm 24, while recognising that we live in a reality far more reflective of Psalm 82.

But, before we lose hope in the world today, an arresting question: is the world of Psalm 24 realistic? Did it ever really exist? Certainly not in David's time as King. There was very little evidence of the harmonious world of Psalm 24 in his lifetime; he veered from battles with Saul's family to his own family crises with little respite for the sort of triumph that we read about. Maybe it was for a small period of time when Jerusalem was reclaimed as the seat of his power, but at such great cost (read more about this in 2 Samuel 6 and 7). But even this was a brief respite before wars were re-joined and David's eye was caught by a bathing lady.

So maybe Psalm 24 gives an unrealistic view of the world, but it also gives an image to strive for. We probably more readily recognise the similarities between us and Psalm 82 than in Psalm 24, but that doesn't mean that we should give up on the ambition to see a world created in Psalm 24's image.

Casting forward to Jesus' time, we do well to remind ourselves of the minimal impact of his ministry in the world during his lifetime. The Roman occupation was extensive, but even that covered less of the world's surface than we might imagine. At its height, some 80 years after Jesus' crucifixion, the Romans still hadn't made it into Northern Europe, let alone the majority of Africa or Asia. In a global sense, the effect of Jesus on the contemporary world was a mere drop in the ocean. However, it didn't stop him or his disciples trying to see God's Kingdom come on their bit of the earth as it is in heaven.

Maybe we won't see the whole world as we read in Psalm 24, but we can certainly strive to see our bit of it affected for good. To challenge the injustices in our community, to champion the "poor and oppressed... the weak and needy" (Psalm 82:3-4) is a good starting point. To be one who seeks after God, to see him at work in our own lives and the lives of those around us (Psalm 24:6), that should certainly put us on track.

The world may resemble Psalm 82, but the declaration that begins Psalm 24 is worth repeating. "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." To see it become a reality in our lives, we might want to make it a personal declaration, a prayer of intent and commitment:

"I am the Lord's and everything in me, my life and all I live for."

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