

## WHO MAY APPROACH GOD?

### Psalms 15 & 24

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*Catch-22* is a 1961 novel by Joseph Heller about the madness of war. In 1970, the book became a movie and the basis for the TV series M\*A\*S\*H. The phrase “catch-22” has come into common use to mean a cyclical conundrum—that’s a fancy way of saying a circular dilemma. A “catch-22” is circular logic that creates a “no-win situation.” The storyline of the novel is simple: Captain John Yossarian is trying desperately to be certified insane during World War II so he can stop flying bombing missions.

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one’s safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn’t have to; but if he didn’t want to he was sane and had to.<sup>1</sup>

Such, then, is Yossarian’s no-win situation. He can be discharged from military service because of insanity, so he claims that he is insane only to find out that by claiming that he is insane he has proved that he is obviously sane—since any sane person would claim that they are insane in order to avoid flying bombing missions.

Catch-22—it’s a circular dilemma from which there is no escape. For example, you can’t get published until you have an agent, and you can’t get an agent until you have been published. Or, you can’t get a job until you have experience, and you can’t get experience until you get a job.

Whenever we talk about worship, and there is much talk about worship these days, there is, it seems to me, a sort of Catch-22. It goes like this. Sinners need to come into the presence of God, but only saints are worthy to come into the presence of God. The unholy cannot see God, yet the unholy become holy by seeing God. We must be holy to worship God, and we must worship God to be holy. We can’t worship until we are holy, and we can’t be holy until we worship.

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (Simon and Schuster, 1961). Quote taken from internet:

I am not trying to be silly; I am very serious. Everything I have said is for the purpose of demonstrating the essence of worship. *What is worship? It is a means by which the holy God transforms unholy people into His holy people.* That's worship. As we will see in Psalms 15 and 24, we enter the presence of God like resident aliens because we have no inherent right to be there; the privilege must be granted. The holy God is the gracious God who grants us an audience. Otherwise, we would be helpless and hopeless in our unholiness. Worship is not a right; it is an invite. We have no right to come before God, but He invites us. Worship is not a right; it is an invite.

First, listen to the words of Psalm 15:

O LORD, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;  
who do not slander with their tongue,  
and do no evil to their friends,  
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
in whose eyes the wicked are despised,  
but who honor those who fear the LORD;  
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;  
who do not lend money at interest,  
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved (NRSV).

Now, listen to Psalm 24:

The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.  
They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.  
Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. *Selah*

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!

that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.  
Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted 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. *Selah*  
(NRSV).

According to Jewish tradition, at Mount Sinai the Israelites received 613 commandments; David came and reduced them to 11—as set forth in Psalm 15.<sup>2</sup> To put it another way, this psalm captures and capsulizes the central core of God’s commandments.

Both Psalms 15 and 24 focus on one primary point: *the nature and meaning of encountering God within the sacred precincts of the Temple*. Furthermore, these two psalms are distinguished by the same unusual feature; and that is, a question-and-answer procedure that sets forth the desirable standards. This pattern of question and answer may possibly be modeled on what took place at certain sanctuaries in the ancient world, with the worshipper asking the conditions of admittance, and the priest making his reply. But while the expected answer might have been a list of ritual requirements, here, strikingly, the Lord’s reply searches the heart, soul, and conscience of the would-be worshipper. The result is not a catalog of conditions but a snapshot of the character of persons whose lives have been shaped in conformity with God’s character. As one scholar says, “We have a picture, not a prescription.”<sup>3</sup> For those who see the world first and foremost as the sphere of God’s reign, every human activity and every ethical decision—personal, political, ecological, and otherwise—will be grounded in and result from unflinching trust in God and the desire to embody God’s loving, life-giving purposes for “the world, and all who live in it.”

Worship in contemporary contexts is typically oriented toward the worshippers. We usually understand worship to fulfill one of several purposes. (1) Sometimes it is designed to please worshippers so that they can escape the problems of the world for an

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<sup>2</sup>(Talmud) Makkot 23b-24a.

<sup>3</sup>My paraphrase of James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (John Knox Press, 1994), 84.

hour and lose themselves in an aesthetically satisfying experience. (2) Or sometimes worship serves as therapy, intended to provide spiritual healing and enable the worshippers to feel better. (3) Or sometimes its purpose is to educate the worshippers about the Christian life, which basically means preaching longer sermons. All of these purposes orient worship toward the worshipper.

The worship the psalmist describes is initially directed away from the worshipper and toward the living God who is the King of glory. Annie Dillard is correct when she says that we do not come before the living God as “cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute.” Rather as we enter the assembly we should all be wearing crash helmets!<sup>4</sup> Maybe we should have, not flight attendants, but worship attendants who welcome us to worship and, as we enter, issue life preservers and signal flares, and then seat-belt us to our pews and announce: “Be sure that you are seated in an upright manner and that you are securely fastened into your body harness before take-off. If we reach too high an altitude during this worship, oxygen masks will automatically drop from the ceiling.”<sup>5</sup> After all, we are in the presence of the Holy God, the Creator of the universe!

This is the starting point for acceptable worship before God. It is not our comfort level. Actually it’s just the opposite. It’s our discomfort in the presence of a holy God with our sinfulness. In His hallowed presence we feel more keenly our humanness and the burden of our own transgressions. We should leave worship feeling awe-struck and overwhelmed because we have been in the presence of the living God.

In past generations there was more of a persona of fear and trepidation that was generated when one came into the public assembly. Today the dominant posture that we assume is a casual one. God is my friend, my buddy; God and I are tight. We walk through gardens and fields together. “We walk and talk as good friends should and do.”<sup>6</sup> But coming into the presence of the living God is an awesome and overwhelming experience. The New Testament Book of Hebrews reminds us that although we do not experience the earth shake or the blazing fire and smoke that Israel saw and felt at Sinai in God’s presence, we still offer “God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for

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<sup>4</sup>Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (Harper & Row, 1982), 40.

<sup>5</sup>Dave Bland, “Worshipping God” in David Fleer and David Bland, eds., *Preaching the Eighth Century Prophets*, Rochester College Lectures on Preaching, vol. 5 (ACU Press, 2004), 203.

<sup>6</sup>See the hymn “My God and I.”

indeed our God is a consuming fire.”<sup>7</sup>

Coming before the living God begins with a broken and contrite heart. The posture in which we come into the presence of the Lord God Almighty, creator of the universe, is a posture that humbly acknowledges our sin. The call to worship causes each of us to cry out in anguish “Woe is me.”<sup>8</sup>

When we come into the presence of the sovereign transcendent God, all bases for boasting are destroyed. All have sinned and fallen short of God’s holiness.<sup>9</sup> Maybe we should begin worship the way Alcoholics Anonymous teaches its members to introduce themselves: “I’m Jane, and I’m an alcoholic, but by the help of a higher power, a recovering one.” This is the only posture that I can stand before God and before you today, “I’m Royce, and I’m a sinner. But by the amazing grace of God, I’m a recovering one.” Only then can worship begin.

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<sup>7</sup>Heb 12:18-29.

<sup>8</sup>See Isa 6:5.

<sup>9</sup>Rom 3:23.