

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Psalm 24 (25)

This psalm is taken from the first book of psalms (psalms 1–41) and is attributed to David. Books 1, 4 and 5 tend to use 'Lord' (Yahweh) as the name of God, whereas books 2 and 3 use 'God' (Elohim).

This is an acrostic psalm, each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first letter, '*aleph*', comes from a Hebrew root meaning 'to learn'. Such psalms usually contain a series of statements that are loosely connected. Today we look at five of the 21 verses of the complete psalm. These chosen verses focus on the psalmist's need for guidance and direction from a merciful God.



Psalm 24 as a whole is seen as the prayer of one in who is in danger, but is also a confident prayer for forgiveness and guidance. The psalmist is asking for help. He humbly acknowledges his need of God to keep him on the right path: '*Lord, make me know your ways.*' This experience of 'walking with God' fills the

wayfarer with a sense of hope once again. It is a special time of new intimacy with God, of confident surrender to his faithful love.

The psalmist repeats his plea for instruction: '*teach me*'; and also his desire that the Lord will '*remember*' him. The final verse, referring to the humble and the poor, shows his confidence and faith in the Lord who cares for all people.

For us, these verses can be a prayer that accompanies us throughout the day, turning every moment, whether joyful or sad, into a stepping stone along our journey.

Gospel Mark 1: 12–15

Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, begins his mission. He is driven out into the desert, the barren wilderness around the Dead Sea. Here he remains for forty days, a number that signifies a time of testing, as when Israel was tested during Moses's forty days on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24: 18; 32: 1), and during the forty years in the desert (Deuteronomy 8: 2).

The **desert** is depicted in Scripture as the realm of evil powers, symbolised by the predatory beasts that lurk there (Leviticus 16: 10; Isaiah 35: 7–9; Ezekiel 34: 25). Jesus goes there to be tempted (or 'put to the test') by Satan: that is, to be tested in his resolve to carry out his Messianic mission in accordance with the Father's will.

'**Satan**' means adversary and is synonymous with the devil, the prince of demons (Mark 3: 23–26), who will oppose Jesus at every turn. Jesus enters into Satan's territory willingly to begin his mission against the powers of evil. He will confront Satan in his frail human nature, empowered by the Spirit.



James Tissot,
Jesus Ministered to by Angels (1886-4)

Mark's mention of Jesus being **among wild beasts**, though evidently without harm, recalls Isaiah's prophecy that at the coming of the Messiah even wild beasts would be tamed (Isaiah 11: 1–9; Ezekiel 34: 25–28), restoring God's order to creation.

The **angels ministered to him**, just as they had accompanied Israel in the desert (Exodus 14: 19) and provided food for Elijah (1 Kings 19: 5–7). An angel will also come to Jesus in Gethsemane.

John had been arrested: the Greek word is (*paradidomi*) literally meaning 'handed over'. The same word is applied to Jesus in his Passion narrative (14: 10–11, 18), where it is translated as 'betrayed'.

'The time has come ...'

Verse 15 sums up the core of Jesus's message. The '**Kingdom of God**' is a favourite theme in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the term Jesus used to signify what he is about.

'Repent and believe'

Jesus is taking up a theme of the prophets to repent (Nehemiah, Isaiah, Hosea and John the Baptist), but Jesus adds the invitation to '*believe*'.

Adapted from Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark* (Baker Books: 2008).