

Psalm 20 “A Prayer for the King”
Psalm 20
John 18:28-19:22

March 19, 2023

We have been working through book one of the Psalter.

The Psalms are divided into 5 books –
sort of like the 5 books of Moses –
except here you might call it the 5 books of David.
Book One consists of Psalms 1-41.

Psalms 1-2 function as the introduction to Book One –
and to the book of Psalms as a whole.

Psalm 1 is the song of the Blessed Man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
but who delights in the Law – the *torah* – of the LORD.

Psalm 2 then is the song of the King – the LORD’s anointed – the *messiah* –
the Son of God.

Psalm 1 opens “blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.”

Psalm 2 closes “blessed are all who take refuge” in the Son.

When you read Psalms 1 and 2 together,

you quickly realize that the “blessed man” of Psalm 1
is the exalted Son of Psalm 2 –
and so therefore *we* are blessed when *we* take refuge in the blessed man,
our Lord Jesus Christ.

And then – as we’ve seen over the last few months –

Psalms 3-18, then are largely Psalms of refuge.

There are many themes and pictures that are used –
but the recurring picture that returns over and over again
is that of God as our rock, our refuge, and our fortress.

Many of these Psalms are connected to particular events in the life of David,
culminating in the glorious Psalm 18 –

“A Psalm of David, the servant of the LORD,
who addressed the words of this song to the LORD
on the day when the LORD rescued him
from the hand of all his enemies,
and from the hand of Saul.”

Psalms 18-19 then return to that opening theme in Psalms 1-2
between the Messiah – the LORD’s anointed –
and the Torah – the law of the LORD.

When you are rightly connected to the LORD’s Messiah –
then you are rightly related to the LORD’s Law.

And that theme that we have seen in the last two weeks from Psalms 18-19,
will now stay at the center of our focus in Psalms 20-25.

In Psalm 20, we pray for the king,
because we know that *our only hope* is if God saves the king!
If God hears *him* and answers *him* – then we are saved as well!

Sing Psalm 20
Read John 18:28-19:22

In Psalm 20, we pray for the king,
because we know that *our only hope* is if God saves the king!
If God hears *him* and answers *him* – then we are saved as well!

And if you think about it –
that is exactly true in Jesus.

In John 18-19, Jesus acknowledges that he *is* a king –
but “my kingdom is not of this world” – or “not from this world.”

Jesus is the Son of David.
He is the King of Psalm 20.
It is only if God hears Jesus that we can be saved.

Pilate thinks that he is just annoying the priests by writing “King of the Jews.”
But then they say “we have no king but Caesar!”

And in so doing, they reject the message of Psalm 20 –
our only hope is if God saves the king!
Only if God hears *him* and answers *him* can we be saved!

To the Choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

Psalm 20 has a lot of verbal parallels to Psalm 18.
In verse 1, “May the LORD answer you” –
the same word is used in Psalm 18:35,
where the LORD’s answer made David great.
Likewise the “day of trouble” in verse 1
connects to the trouble of 18:6;
we pray that the LORD will sustain the king (v2) –
just as the LORD sustained David (18:35);
and we say that the name of the God of Jacob will protect the king,
just as David made music to the *name* of the LORD.

There are several more!
I mention it here because Psalm 20 is inviting you to pray for the king –

and ask God to do what he has promised for our King.

1. We Pray for the King (v1-5)

In verses 1-5, we pray for the king.

There are seven petitions in these five verses –
the first four asking that God *would* answer the king –
the next three focusing on our celebration
when God *does* answer the king!

a. May the LORD Answer You! (1-3)

May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!

May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!

The first thing to note is that in Psalm 20 the “you” is singular.

“May the LORD answer *you* in the day of trouble.”

“May he send you help from the sanctuary.”

“May *we* shout for joy over *your* salvation.”

This is Israel speaking to the King – *praying for* the king.

We should think of Israel gathered around the Davidic king
as he is preparing to go forth into battle!

And indeed, it is quite possible that Israel sang this song in that context.

For instance, in 2 Chronicles 20, the Moabites and Ammonites
were coming against King Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat was afraid – and so he called for a day of fasting –
and all Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD.

We have Jehoshaphat’s prayer in 2 Chronicles 20:6-12.

⁵ And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, ⁶ and said, “O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. ⁷ Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? ⁸ And they have lived in it and have built for you in it a sanctuary for your name, saying, ⁹ ‘If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, ^[c] or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before you—for your name is in this house—and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save.’ ¹⁰ And now behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy— ¹¹ behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. ¹² O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

Jehoshaphat remembers what God had promised Solomon.

If the LORD's anointed prays to the LORD before his holy temple,
and trusts in the LORD – rather than in chariots and horses –
then God will answer his prayer.

Whether they sang Psalm 20 on that occasion, I do not know!

But Psalm 20 would have been a perfect fit!

“May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!”

When is the day of trouble?

Think about it!

Because the example of Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20 is helpful.

The day of trouble is when your enemies are attacking.

When the Moabites and Ammonites are coming –

all the people of God gathered to pray that God would save their king.

Or in John 18

The day of trouble is when the chief priests and Herod and Pontius Pilate
are all in league against your king.

When Jesus stood before Pilate – the people *should* have been singing Psalm 20!

But instead of singing “O LORD, save the king” –
they sang “We have no king but Caesar...”

When do we sing Psalm 20?

We sing Psalm 20 in the “day of trouble” for King Jesus.

When is Jesus in trouble?

That may seem like an odd question.

After all, Jesus *won* – the battle is over!

He is enthroned at the right hand of the Father!

All his troubles are over – right?

That's not what Jesus says.

What did Jesus himself say to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus?

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me?*” (Acts 9:4)

Who are you, Lord?

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9:5)

The day of trouble, for King Jesus, is *any day* that his people are suffering.

Such is the connection between Christ and his people –
that when *we suffer, he suffers*.

Now let's be clear:

he already suffered for our sins!

He doesn't need to do that again!

But when we endure hardship *for Christ's sake* –
that is the day of trouble for *you* –
and because you have been joined to Christ –
therefore, that is the day of trouble for Christ!

The second line in verse 1 adds to this:

May the name of the God of Jacob protect you.

God's name protects the king.

In Jehoshaphat's day,
Israel had to rely on fallible kings.

Jehoshaphat was a good one – and God saved him and delivered Judah.
But because of the sins of the house of David,
by the time of the prophet Jeremiah,
God said that he would *no longer hear* the prayers of the king.
The house of David failed to produce a never-ending line of faithful kings.

But God will always hear Jesus –
because Jesus is the Son of God who has become the Son of David –
so that the *name of God* would forever protect him.

Verse 2 then focuses attention on the temple and the sacrifices:

May he send help from the sanctuary and give you support in Zion!

In the days of David, the ark of the covenant had been brought to Zion –
and David began the preparations for the building of the temple.
The sanctuary – the holy place – is the place where God meets with his people.
It is also the place of offering and sacrifice:

May he remember all your offerings and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices!

The King was not the one who slaughtered the offerings himself!
(After all, when King *Saul* did not wait for Samuel,
and went ahead with the sacrifices by himself –
God tore the kingdom from Saul's hand!
God had no favor for Saul's sacrifices,
because Saul's offerings were given in a spirit of rebellion,
which Samuel says is no better than idolatry!

We need a king whose offerings and sacrifices *are* accepted by God.

This prayer was answered when our Lord Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

As Augustine puts it,
“May God remember all you sacrificed, [Lord Jesus]
and make us mindful of all the tortures and insults you bore for our sake...
may he turn into resurrection joy that cross on which you were offered up
in your entirety to God.” (159)

because – and this is why we read Galatians 2 a couple weeks ago –
“I have been crucified with Christ”

b. So That We May Rejoice in Your Salvation (4-5)

May he grant you your heart's desire and fulfill all your plans!

May we shout for joy over your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners!

May the LORD fulfill all your petitions!

We rejoice that God has saved our king.

And again – there is both our rejoicing that God *has* raised Jesus from the dead.
Jesus *has* won the victory!

But we still live in the middle of the day of trouble –
and we do not yet see everything in subjection under Jesus' feet (Heb 2) –
but we see *Jesus*.

And so we pray that God would grant to Jesus “your heart's desire” –
that God would fulfill all of Jesus' plans.

Whose desires do you pray for?

Our Shorter Catechism says that

“prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God...”

And it is.

But what is your desire?

What is it that you want?

In a few weeks we will come to Psalm 37:4 –

“delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

Psalm 37:4 was my dad's favorite verse.

He used to say that if you delight in the LORD –
then your heart's desire is to be with him!

And so of course – if you delight in the LORD,
he will give you the desires of your heart!

He will give you that which you most long for –
because what you most long for... is God himself!

Apart from that, my heart's desires aren't really worth very much.

We pray that God would give to Jesus *his* heart's desire.

Let me ask you something:

how often do you pray that God would give Jesus what Jesus wants?

How do you normally pray?

“Lord, give me what I want!”

When you start to pray, “O God, please give Jesus what he wants” –
it begins to change you.

Because then you start paying attention to “what does Jesus want?”

If I'm praying for what Jesus wants –

then my heart's desire begins to be conformed to the desires of Jesus.

After all, what is one of the chief things that Jesus wants?

He wants *your desires* to be conformed to his!

And so we “set up our banners” in the name of our God.

Setting up banners is what you do after the victory.

(Think of the famous statue of the Marines on Iwo Jima raising the American flag)

And again pay attention to the importance of the *name* of our God.

As in verse 1 – “may the name of the God of Jacob protect you” –

so now here in verse 5, it is in the “name of our God”
that we “set up our banners.”

We are not waving banners trying to attract attention to ourselves.

We are pointing to Jesus.

And so we rejoice that God has saved our king!

Jesus has been delivered from death and raised to the right hand of the Father.

As Augustine puts it,

“We shall rejoice in your salvation –

we rejoice that death will not harm you,

for so you will show us that it will not harm us either.” (Augustine, 159)

And so

“May the Lord grant all your requests –

not only the petitions you offered on earth

but those also by which you intercede for us in heaven.” (Augustine, 159)

2. We Know That the LORD Saves His Anointed (6-8)

Now I know the LORD saves his anointed;

he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand.

In verse 6, the voice changes – from the plural “we” to the singular “I.”

(In verse 7 it switches back to the plural).

In the Psalms of David,
when you get a first person singular, it is almost always the voice of David –
the voice of the LORD's anointed.

This one is less clear –
because the LORD's anointed is referred to in the third person.
But there are a couple of times in the Psalms
where David seems to address the Messiah in the third person
(Psalm 110 is the most famous one –
when David says, “the LORD [Yahweh] says to *my Lord*,
‘sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a
footstool for your feet.’”).
Jesus in Matthew 22 says that this is important –

(I try not to disagree with Jesus – especially when I'm preaching!)

Jesus says that the first person singular is the voice of David.
So if David says “I know that the LORD saves his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven
with the saving might of his right hand” –
then that would mean that David understood that God's purpose
was to do for his Son (Ps 20) what God had done for him (Ps 18)

The shift in voice from the plural to the singular provides a stark contrast.
Verse 6 also stands out because of its shift in verb.
After the string of “May God” do this, May God do that –
we are struck with the confident tone:
“I know that the LORD saves his anointed.”

Here is the confidence of the saints:
the LORD saves his anointed.
And because the LORD saves his anointed,
therefore, we will be saved as well!

Notice the parallel between v2 where God sends help from the sanctuary—from Zion—
and verse 6 where God answers from “his holy heaven.”
The heavenly sanctuary is the true source of salvation.
Yes, Jehoshaphat prays in the earthly temple –
but the LORD answers from his holy heaven!

There is a very real sense in which there is *only one place* where we can worship God.
It's not a place on earth!
But as Jesus says in John 4,
the true worshiper will worship the Father
in Spirit and in truth.
If you do not worship in the Spirit and in truth – then you are in the wrong place!

*Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.*

Do we trust in the *name* of the LORD our God?

Do we trust in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit?

What is more powerful?

Baptism? Or Ballot boxes?

Prayer? Or Political action?

I'm not saying that Christians shouldn't vote – or shouldn't be politically active.
After all, David and his sons *all had* chariots and horses.

But do not *trust* in chariots and horses.

(David's sons got overran by those who had *more* chariots and horses!)

Do not put your hope in candidates or parties or elections.

Rather, put your *trust* in the *name* of God.

In your baptism, God put his name upon you –

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In your baptism, God united you to the death of his Son,

as Paul says in Romans 6:3 –

“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into his death?

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that,
just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,
we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his,
we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

If you believe in the resurrection of the body –

if you believe that you belong – body and soul – to Jesus –

then why are you worried about increasing persecution?

Some people seem to think that Jesus suffered so that I don't have to!

But that's only true in terms of enduring the eternal wrath and curse of God!

In terms of persecution and suffering in *this age* –

it would be better to say that Jesus passed through suffering and death to glory,
so that we might also pass through suffering and death to glory!

*They collapse and fall,
but we rise and stand upright.*

As one old preacher said:

“We will rise upright as others are collapsing, because our King is saved, and arising from the dead he ascends into the heavens, and as he sits at the right hand of God the Father, he hears us in the day we call him.” (Arnobius the Younger, 160)

3. Therefore May the King Answer Us (9)

Think about verse 9 for a moment:

*O LORD, save the king!
May he answer us when we call.*

Israel is supposed to have such confidence in the king, that they actually pray to him!

The king was to be a mirror in which they saw the image of God.

That *was* what Israel was supposed to be.
But the fact that Israel needed a king meant that Israel had failed to be and to do what God called Israel to be and to do.

The sons of David were the LORD’s anointed who were to deliver the people of God.

It is only if God saves the king that the king will be able to answer us!
After all, if God had left Jesus in the grave,
what would become of us?

As John Calvin puts it,

“God had not promised that his people would be saved in any other way than by the hand and conduct of the king whom he had given them.

In the present day, when Christ is now manifested to us,

let us learn to yield him this honor –
to renounce all hope of salvation from any other quarter,
and to trust to that salvation only which he shall bring to us
from God his Father.

And of this we shall then only become partakers when,
being all gathered together into one body, under the same Head,
we shall have mutual care one of another,
and when none of us will have his attention so engrossed
with his own advantage and individual interest,
as to be indifferent to the welfare and happiness of others.”

(Calvin’s Commentary on Psalm 20)

After all, Psalm 20 teaches us to sing this *together*.

May the king answer *us* when *we* call.

May *Jesus* answer us when we call.

In the same way that the Father will always hear Jesus –
so also Jesus will always hear us.

And because Jesus always hears us – therefore the Father will always hear us!

Athanasius says it well:

“When you see others in affliction,
comfort them by praying with them in the words of Psalm 20.” (158)

God hears Jesus!

And so – when you delight yourself in Jesus –
when you come to the Father *in Jesus’ name* –
he hears you!