

Psalm 21 “Thank God for Saving the King!”
Psalm 21
Matthew 20:17-21:17

April 2, 2023

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

Psalm 21 has an interesting structure.

First, the liturgy begins with the congregation (or priest) giving thanks to the Lord for what he has done on behalf of the King.

Then, there is a transition (verse 7).

Here both the king and the Lord are addressed in the 3rd person.

In the next section (8-12), a prophet or priest addresses the king (in 2nd person).

Finally, the liturgy ends with a congregational response (v. 13).

It is this structure that led the Free Church of Scotland to the musical setting that we use.

There is something of a refrain that we sing after stanzas 3 and 5.

They recognized that there were two distinct moods in the poem,
so they wanted to express this in two musical sections.

The “A” section carries the main focus on the King (verses 1-6 and 8-12),
while the “B” section captures the transition and the conclusion.

Since there aren’t many tunes that do this sort of thing,
they commissioned a tune from Isobel Scott.

When it comes to music, we don’t really fit in the normal “spectrum” of churches.

We are not especially “contemporary.”

But neither are we your typical “traditional church.”

We take the view that we should sing “the best of the best of all ages.”

Some churches seem like they are stuck in the 19th century.

And so they seem rather irrelevant to the present day.

Other churches seem like they are stuck in the 21st century!

You might say – but what’s the problem with that?

We live in the 21st century!

But a church that is stuck in the 21st century

will also have nothing to say to the 21st century!

We need the wisdom of the church in all generations.

We need their words – we need their music –

to order to remind us that we are part of something bigger –
something better than our own day!

But there doesn’t need to be a war!

We can keep singing the old –

while gradually adding the new.

Over time we will find that some of the oldies weren't really all that good –
and some new compositions are truly excellent.

Back in 2004, we started our Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs project.
A few years later, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church adopted it –
and then, five years ago, the OPC and the United Reformed Churches
published the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* –
a blend of the Psalms that you have in your white folders,
with 400 hymns – mostly from the *Trinity Hymnal*,
but including several contemporary compositions,
along with a number of other Psalm arrangements.

We can never say that “we have arrived” at the perfection of church music.
We are a pilgrim people – and we walk with the saints from all ages.
We should cherish the good gifts that God has given to the church in the past.
And we should nurture those gifts in the present – towards the future.

Sing Psalm 21
Matthew 20:17-21:17

On Palm Sunday we remember the coming of our Lord Jesus to Jerusalem –
as he rode on a donkey.

The picture that Matthew draws here is of the King coming in peace to his city.
Solomon had ridden on a donkey to his coronation.
And now Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem
with the crowds singing Psalm 118 –
“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.”

Jesus is King.

We live in a culture shaped by democracy –
our Constitution says that the highest authority is “we, the people.”

So it's not surprising that our culture has tried to make religion more democratic as well.
But the religion of the Bible is uncompromisingly monarchical.
Jesus is King.
We are not.

That point should provide a great deal of help in our prayer life.
Jesus is King.
I am not.

Therefore, what *I* think about what needs to happen is not all that important.
What *Jesus* thinks is what matters.
After all, *he's the king!*

Last time we looked at Psalm 20.

In Psalm 20 we prayed that God would save the King.
We will be saved *only* if God saves the king.

Now in Psalm 21, we thank God that he saves the king –
because *now* the king can protect us!

And this is a great Psalm for Palm Sunday!

1. The King Rejoices Because of What You, O LORD, Have Done(v1-6)

*21 O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices,
and in your salvation how greatly he exults!*

It is important to pay attention to the way this prayer works.

There are lots of different prayers in scripture –
so this is not the *only* way to pray.
But we should – at least occasionally – pray like this.

We pray to God –
but we pray to God *not* about our own joy and praise –
but about the *king's* joy and praise.

Presidential campaigning is getting going again –
and you can see how this works all around you.
(Some) people are getting all worked up about their candidate.

This reflects a good and proper instinct in all of humanity.
Everyone *knows* that they need a King.
But we need a king who rejoices in God's strength – and exults in *his* salvation.

Therefore, we come to you, our God and Father,
because you have heard the cry of our King – your Son, Jesus Christ.
We praise you, O God, because Jesus exults in your salvation.

Why does Jesus rejoice in God's strength?
There are five reasons given in verses 2-6.

First,

a. You Have Given Him His Heart's Desire (v2)

² *You have given him his heart's desire
and have not withheld the request of his lips. Selah*

We saw this last time when we were praying for the king –
Psalm 20, verse 4 –
“May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfill all your plans.”
Now we testify that God has done what we asked in Psalm 20!

You, O LORD, you *have* given him his heart's desire!

This is why we read Hebrews 4-5 a few weeks ago.

Hebrews 5:5 quotes from Psalm 2 –

“You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”

Jesus is the Davidic King –

he is the Messiah – the anointed one.

But Hebrews 5:6 quotes from Psalm 110:4 –

“You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

Jesus is both king and priest –

just like Melchizedek.

Psalm 110 points us to the day when the King would also become the priest.

Hebrews brings all of this together:

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,
with loud cries and tears,

to him who was able to save him from death,

and he was heard because of his reverence.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

And being made perfect, he became the source of salvation

to all who obey him,

being designated by God a high priest

after the order of Melchizedek.”

Think about what Hebrews is saying.

When Jesus was on earth – in the days of his flesh –

he offered up prayers and supplications.

Think about his great high priestly prayer in John 17 –

which could also be called his great prophetic prayer –

or, for that matter, his great kingly prayer!

Or think about his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus cried out to “him who was able to save him from death”

(precisely the point here in Psalm 21!) –

“and he was heard because of his reverence.”

This is why the Lord Jesus must be both fully God and fully man!

He must be fully man because he had to be the prophet, priest, and king
that Moses, Aaron, and David could never be!

But no mere mortal whom God ever called to be prophets, priests, and kings
could ever manage to save his people from their sins.

Sure – there were good prophets like Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah –

there were good priests like Aaron, Jehoiada, and Hilkiah –

and there were good kings like David, Hezekiah, and Josiah –
but at their best, they did their jobs faithfully, and then died.

And that's the problem.

They died.

So long as our prophets, priests, and kings keep dying,
we have no permanent future!

But Jesus is not only true man, he is also true God.

Therefore he has the power of an indestructible life.

So when Jesus *as man*

fulfills all that Moses, and Aaron, and David could never do

he thus becomes the source of salvation to all who obey him –

as Hebrews 5:8 puts it:

“Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

And being made perfect, he became the source of salvation

to all who obey him,

being designated by God a high priest

after the order of Melchizedek.”

Now what does it mean that Jesus was “made perfect”!

Wasn't he already perfect?!

If you think about, the word “perfect” can have at least two different meanings.

First, it can mean “moral perfection” – or “sinless.”

In that sense, Jesus was already morally perfect.

He was sinless already.

So “being made perfect” does not mean that he was previously flawed!

But second, “perfect” can also mean “complete” – “mature.”

In order for Jesus to be our Savior,

he had to pass through suffering and death to glory.

So, until he passed through suffering and death to glory –

he hadn't yet been made perfect.

Think of how we get diamonds.

That lump of carbon is *going* to be a diamond –

but it can only get there through the right temperature and pressure.

Otherwise, you might just wind up with a lump of graphite!

But the only way for a man to survive the high temperature and pressure of God's wrath,
was for the Word to become flesh and dwell among us.

The only way a Son of David – a Son of Adam – to be “made perfect”

was for the Son of God to be born of the Virgin.

We often focus on how Jesus paid for *my* sin – individually.

And yes, Jesus did that!

But in our individualistic, democratic age,

we should remember that we needed more than just an individual savior.

We needed God to save *our King* –

so that he could deliver *his people* from their sins.

Yes, in one sense salvation is individual – God saves *persons*.

But in another sense salvation is corporate – God saves *a people* –

and when you are united to Christ, you are thereby united to *his people*.

You are part of his family – part of his body.

Psalm 21:2-6 highlights this feature of our salvation.

We are giving thanks to God that God has saved our king!

As in verse 3:

b. You Crowned Him (v3)

³ *For you meet him with rich blessings;
you set a crown of fine gold upon his head.*

We thank you, our God, that you have blessed our king Jesus –
that you have crowned him with glory and honor!

c. You Gave Him Eternal Life (v4)

⁴ *He asked life of you; you gave it to him,
length of days forever and ever.*

God had *promised* this to David.

God promised David that his descendant would sit at his right hand forever.

It may be that Israel usually thought of this

in terms of a never-ending line of descent –

that David's dynasty would last forever.

But that's *not* what God said – and it's *not* what Psalm 21 says either!

It's not that Psalm 21 had *one meaning* for David,

another meaning for Christ,

and a third meaning for us.

Rather, you see the *point* of Psalm 21 clearly in the prayer of Jesus on the cross:

“He asked life of you; you gave it to him,
length of days forever and ever.”

And in the resurrection:

d. You Bestowed Splendor and Majesty on Him (v5)

⁵ *His glory is great through your salvation;
splendor and majesty you bestow on him.*

All of this had been *true* of David and his sons as well!

David and his sons – at least the good ones! –
had passed through suffering to glory in small ways
(thus foreshadowing Christ).

Israel had been able to sing Psalm 21 through all those centuries,
knowing that God is faithful and would bring all these things to pass.

e. You Make Him Blessed Forever (v6)

⁶ *For you make him most blessed forever;^[a]
you make him glad with the joy of your presence.*

When God blessed the king – when he saved the king from the hand of his enemies –
then the king was glad with the joy of God’s presence.

This was true every time the king returned victorious in battle –
but it was especially true when the Father seated his beloved Son at his right hand,
after Jesus won the great victory over sin and death!

Interlude: The King Trusts in the LORD (v7)

⁷ *For the king trusts in the LORD,
and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.*

In verse 7, the voice shifts.

Whereas verses 1-6 address the LORD in the second person,
verse 7 speaks of the LORD in the third person.

The main point of this shift is to signal the change that follows in verses 8-12.

The result is that verse 7 stands as the centerpiece of the Psalm.

This is the key point.

This is the chief takeaway.

What do you need to remember from Psalm 21?

“The King trusts in the LORD,
and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.”

The next verses will all speak about what the king will do *because of this* –
but if it wasn’t for verse 7 – then verses 8-12 will never happen!

You see, it really isn’t all that important whether God hears *me*.

What matters is that God hears *Jesus*.

And here’s the best part:

Jesus has promised that *he* will intercede for us –
so therefore God *will* hear you
because he hears Jesus!

That's why it is so important that we pray *in Jesus' name*.
Praying in Jesus' name is not a magical formula.
It doesn't mean if I use the words, then I get what I want!

To pray in Jesus' name is very much like being baptized in Jesus' name.
It means that that I am identifying with him.
When I pray in Jesus' name – when I pray *according to his will* –
I am being conformed to his image.

God has promised that he will grant all that the king asks.
Everything that Jesus' wants, the Father will do for him.

And so we need to learn how to pray for what Jesus' wants!
And how do we know what Jesus' wants?

Well, that's why we have the whole Word of God!

But as a particular example, we have verses 8-12 of Psalm 21!

2. You, O King, Will Triumph Over All Your Enemies (v8-12)

Jesus wants to triumph over his enemies!
In other words, he wants *his kingdom* to come!

In verses 1-6, the Psalmist addressed the LORD in praying about the King.
Now, in verses 8-12, the Psalmist addresses the King.
It may seem odd that OT Israel sang to the King in worship!
After all, David was *not* God!

But the Davidic King foreshadows Jesus.
The King is *supposed* to look like God.
(After all, God created *Adam* to look like God –
he created him after his own image and likeness!)

Notice how verse 8-9 do this:

a. The Appearance of the King Is Like the Appearance of the LORD (v8-9)

⁸ *Your hand will find out all your enemies;
your right hand will find out those who hate you.*
⁹ *You will make them as a blazing oven
when you appear.
The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath,
and fire will consume them.*

Notice what happens when the *king* appears!

The *king* makes his enemies like a blazing oven.
And the fire of the LORD consumes them.

The appearance of the King is like the appearance of the LORD.
Malachi 4:1 will speak of how “the day is coming, burning like an oven,
when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.
The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts.”

But here is where we see another benefit of praying the Psalms *in Christ*.
If we put ourselves at the center of the Psalms,
then we will face a real difficulty in praying them!
Jesus taught us to *love* our enemies – and *pray* for those who persecute you.
How then can we sing Psalms that call for the LORD
to swallow them up in his wrath?!

How can we say:

b. The Wicked Have No Future (v10)

¹⁰ *You will destroy their descendants from the earth,
and their offspring from among the children of man.*

First, we need to remember that the Psalms are talking about the enemies *of the king* –
those who oppose Christ and *his kingdom*.

We’re not talking about the jerk who cut you off as you were driving yesterday!
(That could have been a Christian teenager who was just learning to drive!
It’s amazing how charitable I have become towards other drivers
now that I have teenagers...)
But the enemies of verses 8-12 are those who are *hostile* to Jesus.

That may take shape in their hostility towards Christians –
but the enemies here are attempting to overthrow the Kingdom of Christ.

And second, our prayer that Christ would destroy his enemies
is entirely consistent with the call for us to *love* them and *pray for them*.

It is not loving to wish that the wicked would continue in their wickedness.
We pray that God would change their hearts –
that they would repent and believe the gospel –
but if he will not turn their hearts,
then, as the old Irish curse puts it,
may he turn their ankles, so that we’ll know them by their limping!
Something has to change!

And God has made it clear, that it is *not* our job to bring vengeance.
“Vengeance is *mine*, says the Lord.”
But if vengeance belongs to the Lord –

then it is *right* to ask him to do his job.

As Paul says to the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 1:6,
“God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you.”

King Jesus *will* make all thing right!
As our Shorter Catechism says:

Q. 26. *How doth Christ execute the office of a king?*

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.

And remember that at one time *you* were strangers and aliens –
you were enemies of Christ!
And yet he has subdued *you* to himself!
You have been conquered by King Jesus.
And therefore, *you pray* that he would continue to do this.

How do we pray for this?
Again as our Shorter Catechism puts it:

Q. 102. *What do we pray for in the second petition?*

A. In the second petition, which is, Thy kingdom come, we pray that Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.

After all, what we are praying against is *not* mere flesh and blood!
We are praying against the principalities and powers –
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph 6).

And in that light, verses 11-12 make a lot more sense:

c. The Plans of the Wicked Cannot Succeed (v11-12)

¹¹ *Though they plan evil against you, [Lord Jesus]
though they devise mischief, they will not succeed.*
¹² *For you will put them to flight;
you will aim at their faces with your bows.*

There are moments when I look at our current culture,
and I shake my head in dismay.

At times, it sure looks like evil is winning.
If things continue on the present path, I shudder to think where this will end!
But that is the very thing that the Psalmist says will *not happen!*

“Though they plan evil against you –

though they devise mischief, they will not succeed.”

You need to believe this!

They may succeed at making your life miserable for a while!

(Think of Absalom’s rebellion in David’s life!)

But in the end, they will not succeed.

Because Jesus is Lord.

The King sits enthroned in the heavens!

We do not *yet* see everything under his feet –

but we see Jesus – crowned with glory and honor

because of the suffering of death.

We do not fear suffering –

because suffering for the sake of Christ is what we are called to!

The politics of the kingdom of God

does not map neatly onto American political discourse.

Jesus does not vote Republican or Democrat – or any other party!

This is why I’m never worried about the outcome of any particular election!

Be thoughtful.

Be responsible in your exercise of your civil rights under the US Constitution.

Don’t *join* in the plots and plans of the wicked!

Don’t *help* to devise mischief!

But if you can vote for a candidate with a clear conscience before God –

then do so!

And if you can’t – then don’t.

But remember Jesus is King.

God has saved the King and seated him at his right hand in glory.

Therefore, God will hear all that Jesus asks –

and he will *do* all that Jesus requests.

And Jesus *will* bring judgment on all those who oppose his reign.

Psalm 21 concludes by praising God for what he does for the King.

Conclusion: We Praise the LORD for His Mighty Power (v13)

¹³ *Be exalted, O LORD, in your strength!*

We will sing and praise your power.

We live in a broken world.

We live in a world where things are *not* the way they should be.

Who has the power to fix this mess?
Who has the strength to put things back together –
to make things *right* again?

This is why we sing and praise the power of God revealed in Jesus Christ.
In Jesus, the power of God is revealed –
the strength of God is made known *in weakness*.

One final point:
what does all this mean for day-to-day life?

If Jesus is King – what does this mean for us?
It means that we *live* as though Jesus is King (because he *is*)!
And because the *appearance* of the King is to reflect the appearance of God –
we who have been united to Jesus are to reflect his appearing!

What does this look like?

A young woman in our congregation once appeared before a county official –
on behalf of a friend.

Through her mediation, she obtained justice, and saved her friend \$5,000.

Jesus is King.
And so when we see injustice about to happen,
we intercede on behalf of the weak.

If you are going to sing “be exalted, O LORD, in your strength!
We will sing and praise your power,”
then you should be prepared to use that strength and power
to love and serve others.

Because if God has saved the King –
and raised him up to his right hand in glory –
then *his* strength and *his* power is at work in and through us,
to make known his mighty deeds among the nations –

even in the mundane matters of county offices and neighborhoods.

Don't be afraid.

Jesus is King!
He calls you to sing and praise *the power of the LORD!*
And God's power is made perfect in our weakness!