

A PRAYER FOR SUCCESS

Psalm 20

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Psalm 20. This is the third of what are called the “royal psalms.” That is, psalms that especially relate to the office of the king. There are a number of ways you can take the royal psalms. One way you can take them as referring to David and the people that succeeded him in Israel and the area of Judah and say that was belonging to the Israeli monarchy.

Or you can go one step beyond that and suggest that these royal psalms speak of the ministry of Jesus Christ and how we as His subjects fit into His kingdom.

There are a number of royal psalms, fourteen in all. But one of the advantages of going slowly through the psalms is you get a chance to sort of build up a repertoire as we go. Two previous psalms we considered prior to Psalm 20 are Psalm 2, which is a psalm of inauguration for the king. It begins with the phrase “Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain?...I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.”

You can realize how the New Testament can utilize this psalm. Psalm 2 is one of the most frequently quoted of all Old Testament passages in the New Testament. Because that’s exactly what the apostles say when preaching Jesus: “The nations of the world have gathered together and said we’re not going to have God’s King, the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah. But He who sits in the heavens laughs” (Psalm 2:2,4); the idea of puny man telling God that He can’t install who He wants in His kingdom. So it is a psalm of inauguration.

In the Old Testament times it was used to suggest that when there was a time of transition between kings that was a very dangerous time. Because it was a time when the king was vulnerable externally to foes. It was a time when he was internally vulnerable to plots and

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designs to snatch the kingdom. There was always the feeling of will the new king be as good as the old king or in some cases would be worse than the old king. A psalm of vulnerability. This was an important psalm perhaps chanted by the high priest at the inauguration ceremony of the king saying, “Nevertheless God has set His king on Zion.”

The second royal psalm that we’ve looked at is Psalm 18, which is a psalm of thanksgiving for victory. When we looked at it two weeks ago we noted how David talks about the faithfulness of the Lord in having delivered him from adversities. Really that’s kind of a life psalm for David. It’s a summary and review of his life, how God has helped him.

The psalm today, Psalm 20, the third royal psalm, is not a thanksgiving for a victory that’s already been accomplished. But it is a prayer for success as the king and his people go into a conflict. Therefore it differs much from Psalm 18 which is the wrap up of a victory. Here in Psalm 20 the situation that is being faced is an unknown situation. Therefore I’ll call this psalm for purposes of consideration, “A Prayer for Success.”

I would imagine the way that Psalm 20 was used in the Old Testament time was just prior to the nation being engaged in a warfare or a major battle. The entire citizenry available would present themselves in the temple courtyard and the king would bring sacrifices with him. The priests would ask God’s blessing upon the encounter that was to take place. It was therefore a psalm which launched the armies in the battle.

The psalm itself has three parts if you look at it closely. The first part, verses 1–5, is the prayer offered up for the king. It is really a prayer that perhaps the high priest being on an elevated place and the king is down below him and the priest is chanting the first five verses to the king as a prayer. Perhaps even all the people might be joining in the vast assembly around the king chanting these five verses as well. “May the LORD answer you when you are in distress; may the

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name of the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. *Selah* May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the LORD grant all your requests” (Psalm 20:1–5, NIV). That’s what the priest or the people chant to the king. Then verses 6–8, the second part of the psalm, would be the king’s response. And maybe there would be a musical interlude between verse 5 and 6. Maybe there would be pageantry of some kind. Perhaps there would be additional sacrifices performed. We don’t know for sure what happened. But it is a very dramatic kind of a psalm, which lends itself easily to pageantry accompanying it.

The king would then say, “Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed [The king is one who has had oil poured upon him. He is the anointed. That’s where we get our word “messiah.” It comes out of that word “anointed.”]; he answers him from his holy heaven with the saving power of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm” (verses 6–8, NIV).

Then there comes a third part of the psalm, which is the shout of benediction where perhaps everybody joins in. They say, “O LORD, save the king! Answer us when we call!” (verse 9, NIV). There are, by the way, some additional psalms, kingly psalms, beyond this which do some of the same functions as this psalm. And perhaps more than one was used in the occasion of the service in asking God’s blessing.

Remember in the New Testament God tells us that He has made every believer a king and a priest. So when we read the Old Testament stories about kings and priests we’re perfectly

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justified in applying them to ourselves. That's what I want to do this evening. I want to ask how can we use Psalm 20.

I used Psalm 20 one year as a New Year's prayer. Every time we go into a new year we face an unknown situation. It is a time perhaps of distress. We do not know what a whole year might hold. It's a great psalm that says, "Lord, in uncertain times we know that you give your people victory."

It is also a good job to pray when you are facing a new challenge or venture. Maybe you're taking on a new job or you're wanting to go for a promotion. Or you're maybe going into business for yourself or you're heading into the unknown waters of retirement or you're moving into a new house or you're taking on a strange situation and you wonder if your resources are strong enough to meet the challenges that lie before you and what you've chosen to do. So it's a great psalm for that purpose.

It also is an excellent psalm when you are entering into a time of adversity in your life where you've got known struggles and battles you're going to be facing, whether they are emotional or physical or spiritual or whatever the struggles may be. It's a great psalm with which to approach a day of trouble.

With that in mind and maybe there are other uses for this psalm but certainly anytime we are consciously thinking about facing uncharted waters in the future this is a great psalm. But we want to now look at the three parts of this psalm and break them down for ourselves.

I. First of all we have our prayer to God for the future.

When we think of the future do we have a sense of adventure as well as the realization that there is danger and peril also? David very clearly has both the sense of adventure and yet the sense of danger.

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A. This prayer for the future is broken down verse by verse into a number of subcategories.

There is in verse 1 a general request for God's protection. "May the LORD answer you when you are in distress. May the name of the God of Jacob protect you." Therefore David is opening this prayer with a realistic view of the situation. He is heading into a day of trouble. He does not say, "May the LORD answer you *if* you are in distress." But he says "*when* you are in distress."

Indicating the times of distress are pretty much universal to God's people. It's not an iffy situation. Someone has said, "You are going to have a major crisis in your life sometime in the next five years, so you might as well be prepared. Something of major proportions is going to happen, so you're not surprised if it happens."

I suspect 80 percent of us will have major crisis and for some of us it won't take five years. It's not easy to fight battles. Only God is adequate for the situation. Therefore David, when he faces the time of distress, and later kings when they face that time of distress, are saying, "Lord, You're certain in the midst of the distress."

God is specifically addressed in this general request. Interestingly, he's addressed as the God of Jacob. That's surprising. When I pray I don't address my prayers to the God of Jacob. I say the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Of course David didn't have that advantage but he had a lot of terms he could have called God. Interestingly he calls upon Him in this context, as the God of Jacob. A phrase that is used fourteen times in the Old Testament and it is perhaps used here to remind the one who is praying in the time of adversity who Jacob was and who God made him to be. Jacob was a manipulator, which is exactly what I try to do when I'm in a jam. Figure my own way out of it. Jacob did that perpetually in his life. It started with his birth when he grabbed the heel of his brother and got that wonderful name which meant, "Heel grabber." He was always grasping in his life, forcing his way. Even though God had promised his mother that

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the older would serve the younger, yet Jacob set to work bringing this to pass in his own life. He maneuvered Esau's blessing out of his life. He outmaneuvered his father-in-law Laban. After he had gotten all Laban's wealth and Laban's two daughters when he finally has that reckoning day with Esau he has not even at that moment quit maneuvering. He's afraid that Esau is going to kill him after all these years of separation. So the night before he's to meet Esau he sends his children and his wives and his flocks ahead of him and a special gift of his flocks. He was maneuvering with his gifts.

Anyone you know that maneuvered with their gifts, put you in their debt by giving you something? It's how life operates. Jacob the maneuverer. Alone that night after he'd turned all that over to Esau, God meets him and wrestles with him and struggles with him. At the end of that evening Jacob won't let him go and the angel of the Lord, perhaps a pre-incarnate manifestation of Jesus himself, says to Jacob, "Your name will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you've struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:28, NIV). Therefore the name "Israel" comes to describe him—he who struggles with God.

Jacob learned that in the ultimate facedown of life it would be God who would win the conflict for him. There were some things, no matter how hard he tried, he could not gain a victory in by his own intelligence or will or trickery.

So David is saying, may this God, the God of Jacob, the God who makes himself real even to the person who tries to manipulate his way, may you recognize that it's God's hand upon you that makes you survive. If God's not with your cause, if God's not with your person no matter what you do ultimately it will not prevail.

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“Protect” here in the psalm—“May the name of the God of Jacob protect you” (Psalm 20:1).

“Protect” literally means “to set thee up on high.” That is, to make you safe on an assailable height. May He locate you in a place where nobody and nothing can get to you.

So there’s first a general request for help.

B. Then in verse 2 there is a specific request designating the source of God’s help. “May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion.” In the Old Testament of course Zion represented the holy hill, the temple mount. The temple had not yet been built on that mountain in David’s lifetime. But David anticipated the temple would be built here since he had gathered all the materials for it. He prays that the Lord would meet him in that place. He is saying that it is the character of God to help His people.

For us the sanctuary of the Lord in Zion is located in the eternal temple in heaven. We look to the Lord who is interceding for us at the right hand of God to give us assistance. I might also say that a real practical sanctuary for us in a day of trouble is we expect God to answer us out of His Word and to answer us in prayer. Our time with God in prayer and in the Bible is so important when we are facing an adversity or a challenge of any kind. I go to the Scripture and ask, “Does God’s Word have any help for me? Is this a sanctuary for me in my day of need?”

I’m amazed at how richly the Scripture speaks to us in so many ways. Any time we go into conflict or challenge of any kind this is a great psalm. Our help does come from the Lord. A specific request designating the source of God’s help.

C. The third aspect of this prayer for the future is a basis for our confidence. Verse 3: “May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings” (NIV). The sacrifices and offerings were a means of setting things straight between the worshipper and God. We all have a problem with sin and we all have a problem with inferior motives; we all have a problem with Romans 7,

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“For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (verse 19, NIV). And we wonder as we go into a day of crisis or challenge, “I’m not worthy that You should do anything for me and I’ve failed You so many times. Why would You ever look with favor upon me?” The basis of our confidence in coming to God with a request is that there has been a sacrifice offered for us; Jesus Christ has interposed himself between us and God. It’s a great support in time of stress to know that we have come to the Lord and cleaned things up and He has cleaned up the things in us that we could not clean up on our own. It gives us confidence.

When we’re in a time of adversity it’s really important that we have a clean conscience, a conscience that does not condemn us before God nor a heart that condemns us before God. But that we’ve come to Him for cleansing and forgiveness.

D. Another subtheme for this prayer for success is a specific request in verse 4: “May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed” (NIV). The assumption being if we have lived in verses 2 and 3, sought help from the sanctuary and kept our hearts pure and have them cleansed by the sacrifice of Christ, if we’ve done that then our desires will be the right ones. We don’t have a selfish desire. The king as he goes out to battle is not on some ego trip. His desires match what is good for all the people. The Lord is concerned that we have right desires. But the desires must also have plans. So David says “May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed.” Our plans are the day-by-day choices that determine the extent to which our desires are being fulfilled.

I think that’s a good pattern for us as well. Make practical day-by-day plans. When you make a decision in a moment of crisis that is just a beginning. When your character begins to be built is the next morning when you wake up and you don’t feel like you did when you made that big

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decision. You feel differently. But when you remember your decision—that you’re going to commit yourself anew to the Lord—so you do. That is fulfilling your plans to achieve your heart’s desire.

E. The fifth subtheme for this prayer for success is a promise of celebration. Verse 5: “We will shout for joy when you are victorious” (NIV). Not when *we* are victorious. God is victorious when things come out on top for us. “And will lift up our banners in the name of our God” (NIV). “Banners” evidently refer to the ensign, the flag on a pole that celebrates victory.

Ninety-five percent of handling a conflict or challenge or adversity is having our mental and spiritual attitude right. This is why the positive-confession people have on the surface so much to offer, because they say you need this kind of attitude: “I’m always going to come out victorious all the time.” I agree with that. I just think that sometimes God gives the victory in a different means than what we would choose. That’s maybe where I would differ from the positive-confession people. But God is always going to give us victory; we just don’t know how He’s going to do it.

II. Verses 6–8, the second part of the psalm, our assurance about the future.

“Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed” (NIV). He hasn’t even gone into the battle and he’s saying, “I know the Lord has already done it and He’s saved me.” David did not trust in chariots, he did not trust in horses, he did not ask God to give him something someone else had. He said, “I trust in You.”

When we get into a day of adversity what do we lean on for support? Whom do we lean on? “We trust in the name of the LORD our God” (verse 7, NIV). I believe that verse 7 should be linked with the prayer of Jesus in the Lord’s prayer, “Hallowed be Thy name.” There’s a real way the Scriptures use that term—“the name of God.” When we trust in the name of the Lord, we’re

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doing more than pronouncing His name. It is not a magic talisman, a rabbit's foot, that just because you say the name it guarantees you success. But to trust in the name of God meant from the Hebrew point of view that when you think of a person's name you think of the character and the reputation that stands behind the name and call to mind whose side you're really on, the fact that God always vindicates His people and will always come through for His people. It is to trust in a God that's for us and not against us. Therefore we're called upon in this psalm to say when we bring our petitions before the Lord we have this confidence—that He hears us when we ask Him.

III. Our shout of response is the third part of this psalm.

Verse 9: "O LORD, save the king! Answer us when we call!" (NIV). The king is saved. Jesus has risen up and stood firm. In the light of what God does for our King we all have salvation. As Paul says "As God did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all will he not also along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). God has raised up His Son, will He not also raise us up? Will not indeed everything turn out well for those who love Him? I think it will. Whatever challenges in life that face you, God is with us. God has not called us to fail. God has called us to a life of victory in Him. If the external circumstances that I'm involved in seem to be ones that breed failure and are marked by failure, just because an external circumstance seems like a failure doesn't mean that I've failed. Maybe something I wanted I didn't get but I need not have failed in that situation. If I have succeeded in overcoming bitterness, I have succeeded in overcoming attaching blame to someone else; if I have succeed in keeping a sweet spirit and a gentle nature that's where the real victory is. The battle is really not on the outside of us. The battles are always on the inside. Sure I want the external to go great but in the end I want to be the kind of person God wants me to be and I want you to be that as well.

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Take on big challenges. Don't be afraid of them. Go for them. But hold them just loose enough in your grasp that if God doesn't let you quite get what you were looking for externally you have grown on the inside while you've been going for the brass ring.