

1. God Save the King

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[0 : 00] Tonight is the first of three Sunday evenings when I'm due to be here in this pulpit, and I thought that we would look together at two or three, I think three, of the less well-known of the Psalms of David.

Because to grasp something of the mind of David, his thinking and his praying, his understanding of the people of God, to grasp something of his mind is to grasp something of Jesus' mind.

Now I say that because I remember the words that Jesus himself spoke in Jerusalem, recorded in Luke chapter 24 on the first Easter Sunday evening. Remember the story how he meets two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he goes to Emmaus with them, he reveals himself to them, they go straight back to Jerusalem full of the news that Christ is risen, and then a bit later in the evening he joins them and the other disciples and he speaks to them.

And one of the things he says to them is this, these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

And the Psalms. Now we're familiar, aren't we, with the idea of Jesus fulfilling the law and the prophets, but he mentions the Psalms there as well to make the point that there is no corner of the Old Testament which is not fulfilled in Jesus.

[1 : 26] So if we were to read the Psalms or to sing the Psalms as no more than the songs and the prayers of Old Testament Israel, we would miss what is of central importance in them.

Now they are indeed expressive of the prayer life of Old Testament Israel, but at the most important level they are about Jesus. And the figure of King David is particularly important here because his identity as the Lord's anointed is expressed again in a bigger and greater way a thousand years later in the person of Jesus.

Now David, of course, is not a perfect expression of the Lord's anointed. He's not the real McCoy, the real Glenfiddich or whatever it is. He's a flawed human being, isn't he, who sins.

And as you know, in various Psalms he has to confess his sin. So David's life and thought doesn't overlap at every point with Jesus' life and thought, but at many other points David's life is a true representation of the character of the Lord's anointed.

And David's words, therefore, open a window for our minds onto the thinking and the role of Jesus himself. So the Psalms of David are one of the Bible's great resources for teaching us about the Lord Jesus.

[2 : 43] Now with that in mind, let's turn together to Psalm 20. If your Bible's closed and you've got one of the big ones, it's page 456. Now there's an initial difficulty in understanding this psalm because it's not easy to see just who is speaking to whom.

Look, for example, at verse 1. Now if David is the writer, who is the you of verse 1? May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble.

Who is that you? Well let me suggest what I think is the right way to understand this. I think we can assume that the Psalms author is indeed King David. Look at that heading which I included in my reading.

To the choir master, a Psalm of David. Now these titles, which you find at the top of many of the Psalms, are part of the Hebrew text. And as you probably know, over 70, about 70 or 75 of the Psalms are actually ascribed to King David.

And when it says a Psalm of David, or simply of David, the natural meaning is that the Psalm is written by David. Not written about him by somebody else. So what seems to be going on here is that David has written a Psalm, which is not a private prayer made to God by him, as some of his Psalms are, but a public prayer, almost a national anthem, intended to be used by the people of

Israel as a prayer for him, for their king.

[4 : 10] So David has penned these words, picturing the people gathering around him as he prepares to lead his army into battle. And so they say, may the Lord answer you, that is you David, in the day of trouble.

May the name of the God of Jacob protect you. Do you see? Now you need to picture David as being physically present with the people as they pray for him. Otherwise the you's don't make sense.

But if David is there, perhaps ready armed for battle, with his sword and shield and so on, then the you's make a lot of sense. Now it's very possible that David, who was musical to his fingertips, wrote this prayer to be sung in his presence by the national choir, and thus the words to the choir master.

But whether it was to be sung or said, the point is that David has written this prayer to teach his people how to pray for him as he prepares to go into battle. Now such a thing is not unique in the Bible.

We find Paul the Apostle, several times in his letters, asking different churches to pray for him, and sometimes instructing them in the very words that they're to use as they pray for him.

[5 : 22] So for example, he writes this to the Colossians. Pray for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak. So there's the Apostle Paul, in his weakness, asking his Christian friends to pray for him.

And in Psalm 20, we see David in his weakness, with his sense of vulnerability and human mortality and so on, asking God's people, his friends, to pray to God to protect him and support him.

Now, that way of understanding this psalm is all very well and good for the first five verses. But when we get to verse 6, it's no longer, may the Lord do this, or may the Lord do that to you, David. We have a sharp change. And we read, now I know that the Lord saves his anointed, and so on. So perhaps the best way to understand verses 6, 7 and 8 is that David himself is now speaking. You see, the people have been praying for him in the first five verses, and in the strength of their prayers for him, he now speaks up boldly in verses 6, 7 and 8, expressing his confidence in the Lord's power to save and rescue him.

[6 : 36] And then in verse 9, the final verse, we go back to the people speaking as they utter the short prayer which reminds us of the British national anthem, God Save the King.

Now, friends, if you haven't eaten too many crumpets and butter for tea, and therefore you're still awake and thoughtful, an uncomfortable little question may be forming itself in your mind.

You may be looking at this psalm and saying to yourself, this psalm at heart is clearly a prayer for David. In this psalm, the people of Israel are praying to God that he will protect and deliver his anointed king.

Now, if Jesus is the fulfilment of David, if Jesus is the Lord's anointed in a greater and more perfect way than David ever could be, is this psalm somehow teaching us to pray for Jesus?

Because if it is, it's a very odd psalm. I've never prayed for Jesus in my life. I don't want to start doing so now. Well, of course the psalm is not teaching us to pray for Jesus.

[7 : 39] Such an idea would be nonsense. He has no need that we should pray to the Father for his happiness or his health or any such need. He's perfect in himself. He doesn't need to be propped up, as it were, by our prayers.

So, of course, it would make no sense for us to pray for him. But this psalm does teach us to pray for the things which concern him. The Lord's anointed, King David, has to fight many battles. David, by definition, was a warrior king. He had to lead out his troops against the Philistines and the Ammonites and various others. He had to subdue hostile nations.

And any monarch is, by definition, a leader in war if the situation requires it. You think of our own Queen. Sometimes she will parade in uniform.

She's the colonel-in-chief of this regiment and that. I think there's a regiment called the Queen's Own Highlanders. And think of the Navy and the Air Force. Not just the British Navy or the British Air Force, but the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force for good reason.

[8 : 45] Unavoidably, monarchy presupposes the need for warfare. And in David's case, there were many battles and wars that had to be fought. And David himself was sometimes in grave danger.

And his army sometimes had reversals and setbacks. It wasn't victory every step of the way. And David wrote this psalm, Psalm 20, because he knew of his vulnerability.

He knew that his cause didn't always prosper. So we don't need to pray for Jesus. But this psalm does teach us to pray for the prospering of the cause of the Lord's anointed.

To pray for God's protection on those who are his foot soldiers, which is you and me, if we're Christians. Now let me just digress for a moment and ask this question.

Are you aware that to be a Christian means to be a fighting soldier? We're never going to understand a psalm like this until we grasp that to belong to Christ and to serve him will involve fighting his battles and, if necessary, getting wounded, being scarred.

[9 : 54] Some Christians today speak of the Christian life as if it's all exquisite pleasure, from dawn till dusk. A little bit like getting into a warm bubble bath. You lie back there in the pink bubbles with a glass of Chardonnay in one hand and a plate of strawberries and cream in the other.

No, no, no. We're in the army of a warrior king and we're engaged in fighting for the success of his cause. Look at this building.

This building is the centre of the operation of St George's Tron Church. And this building is more like a barracks than a hospital. Now I realise, of course, that the Gospel brings wonderful healing to our hearts and our souls.

I'd be the first to say that because I would confess how wonderfully the Gospel has turned my own life upside down. But the strange thing is that when the wounds caused by sin and alienation from God have been healed by the Gospel, we are then stood up on our feet and sent out to risk receiving more wounds which come from Satan's fiery darts.

There's a war on. And if we belong to Christ, we are engaged in that war. We're soldiers, as it were, with bayonets at the ready, with bayonets fixed.

[11 : 13] Take that, Satan! Okay? Now, we can't fight Satan in our own puny strength. That's impossible. But we fight him with prayer and with the weapon of the Gospel itself.

Indeed, with the whole armour of God, as described in Ephesians chapter 6. Ultimately, the victory in this war is assured because Jesus has dealt Satan, the great enemy, his death wound at the cross.

But until the final victory comes, there are very tough battles to be fought and there will be setbacks and temporary defeats. For example, the Church of Scotland has had a very severe setback in recent months and it remains to be seen whether it can recover from it.

The great Church of Christ, the universal Church, can never be defeated. Christ is building his Church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. But individual parts of the Church may be setback and may even disappear.

So, even if you are the most gentle and peaceable soul that ever hugged a tree or avoided washing a spider down the sink, if you're a Christian, you're enlisted.

[12 : 30] The war is on. It's a war for the souls of men and women. It's a war for the mind and heart of our nation as well. And this psalm will help us. Written by the warrior king, the Lord's anointed.

It will teach us to pray for the success of his cause. So let's turn now to the psalm. I'd like to take it in three sections. The first two sections are instructions about how to pray.

And then the final section is a strong reminder as to where our trust is to be placed. So first, the psalm teaches us to pray for the Lord's protection on the cause of Christ.

Let's look here at the first three verses, which I'll read again. May the Lord answer you, David, in the day of trouble. May the name of the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion.

May he remember all your offerings and regard with favour your burnt sacrifices. When I was a prep school boy in short pants living in Hertfordshire, aged about 10 or 11, my parents kindly used to take me and my sister to church at the local church every Sunday morning.

[13 : 45] And I got the impression in those early days that church was a haven of peace and tranquility. I would walk into the back of the church, a typical old Anglican parish church down in England, and I would smell that delicious, musty smell of damp books and rotting kneelers.

And the people in our church, they were all so very, very smiley. Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Lobb, how very, very delightful to see you. This must be little Edward.

What a lovely, chubby boy he is. I did have a fine pair of cheeks in those days. They'd catch hold of them. And the vicars in our church, they were such smiley people. They seemed to radiate serenity

and peace and goodness.

Anyway, a few years passed and I grew up. And I was truly converted by the grace of God. And I began to realise that the Lord's Church was not popular in every quarter.

That there were people about who would take pot shots at the cause of the gospel. In fact, there were snipers at every street corner who would gladly gun down somebody who wanted to honour the name of Christ.

[14:52] And that was a painful revelation to me as a youngster. But if I had read my Psalm 20, verse 1, I might have realised that the Lord's anointed will have to endure days of trouble, that his cause needs to be protected.

And if I'd read verse 2 in the Psalm, I might have realised that his cause needs help from the sanctuary and support from Zion. In other words, the help and support that only God himself can give.

So the Lord is teaching us through these verses to pray for his protection on the work of the gospel because we have an active enemy who will seek to disrupt the work at every corner.

Now just glance around here for a moment and look at the people sitting opposite or close to you. This gathering here tonight is something of a miracle. Every new birth by the power of God, by the power of the Spirit, every conversion is a miracle of God's power and Satan hates it.

And we can be sure that Satan hates to see a gathering of Christian people who come together to build each other up and to strengthen each other to live the Christian life. Satan's desire is always to destroy and disrupt the work of the gospel.

[16:07] And Satan presses hard upon each one of us. So for example, when we feel we don't want to come to church, just think back to 5.30 this afternoon.

Anybody here who felt I don't want to come to church? Well that was Satan, wasn't it? If Satan presses us not to want to come or if we don't want to come to the prayer meeting or we don't want to join in some sort of evangelistic activity of the church or we do want to be disagreeable to other Christians or we do want to cut moral corners in regard to sex and money and alcohol or something else.

It's the enemy who is pressing us to renege on our loyalty to Christ. Or when we see gospel initiatives fall to the ground and come to nothing. Or when we see gospel work hampered and hindered by red tape and officialdom.

Or when we hear of or read of Christianity being reviled and mocked in the public arena. We know whose evil hand lies behind it. This is why Psalm 20 teaches us to pray for answers in the day of trouble and for protection.

Now it's interesting that Jesus too prays for God's protection to be given to his apostles, his friends. Do you remember in John chapter 17 he says this to God the Father I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

[17:34] Now why should Jesus pray like that? because he is all too aware of the malevolent hostility of the devil towards the Christian church. I wish I'd learned this lesson earlier in my life but I think I am learning at last that when I'm praying for other Christians one of the main things I need to pray for is for their protection from the evil one.

That his temptations should not drag them down into sin and unbelief and backsliding. We so often pray for other Christians in terms of their health and their happiness and the success of their work and so on.

That's fine and that's good but their enemy prowls around like a roaring lion seeking to gobble them up in Simon Peter's words. So we need to pray for their protection from his cunning and stratagems. Any one of us could besmirch the good name of the gospel tomorrow if we were not protected from the devil's crafty malice. So look again at the first two verses of our psalm.

Look at the verbs that David uses there. Answer protect send help give support from Zion. The cause of the Lord's anointed needs all that help from heaven.

[18:52] And verse 3 shows us that David knows the basis on which he can cry for that help and that is the offerings and the burnt sacrifices. And to use the words of verse 3 we know that the Lord regards with favour the greatest sacrifice of all which is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for us.

His death was not just a murder. It was not just an act of violence or a miscarriage of Roman justice. It was a divinely ordained sacrifice.

And we know that God regards it with eternal favour because he raised Jesus up and exalted him to his right hand in heaven. So let's allow David to teach us to pray for God's protection on the cause of Jesus which is the cause of the gospel the work of the gospel and all who are involved in it.

If we were strong by nature if we were like Popeye just after a can of spinach we wouldn't need to pray for the Lord's protection but look at us we're not like Popeye are we?

Spiritually speaking I'm certainly speaking for myself and I guess for all of us spiritually speaking we're knock-kneed lily-livered sag-bellied and bird-brained. We're not very brainy we're not very bright and we're not very courageous and that's why we need to pray for the Lord's protection on the cause that is closest to the heart of his anointed.

[20 : 22] Now second the psalm teaches us to pray for the fulfilment of Jesus' heart's desires for the fulfilment of Jesus' heart's desires look at verse 4 may he that is God the Father grant you that is the Lord's anointed your heart's desire and fulfil all your plans.

Now you wouldn't want to pray a prayer like that for a bad man would you? Think back 70 years to the start of the Second World War you wouldn't have wanted to pray like that for Adolf Hitler would you?

Because if his plans had been fulfilled and his heart's desires had been granted it would have been a very bad thing for a very large number of people but it was a fine thing to pray for David because although there were flaws in his character and a particular sin or double sin that displeased God the overwhelming desire of David's heart was in line with what God desired the king of Israel to be.

Remember how David is described as a man after God's own heart and that means that he wanted to obey the law of Moses and to help the people of Israel to do the same. He wanted to honour the Lord God of Israel.

He wanted to see the people of Israel happily settled in the promised land the land that God had given them secure from their enemies. David was a man who prayed to the Lord.

[21 : 51] And recorded many of his prayers in the book of Psalms. And those prayers have brought incalculable help to generations of believers. And David also, think of his plans.

He was a man who wanted very much to build the temple at Jerusalem. To establish Jerusalem as God's own special city with the temple right at the centre of it. The temple which contained the altar of sacrifice, thus establishing atonement and reconciliation between God and man, man, and the ark with the ten commandments in it, thus speaking of God's word.

So the temple symbolised God's dwelling with his people, God's willingness to forgive their sins, and God's instruction to them in the law of Moses. And it was David's heart's desire to do all these things.

And he very nearly did all of them. You'll remember the actual building of the temple had to be done by his son Solomon after David's death. But even David in his old age had managed to get together all the materials, the wood and the stone and the metal and so on, to construct the temple.

So for David's people to pray for David in the words of verse 4 was to pray for God's plans to be fulfilled, because David's plans were God's plans.

[23 : 09] Now just think of this in terms of Jesus. Let me reread verse 4 with Jesus in mind. May God the Father grant you, Jesus, your heart's desire and fulfil all your plans.

Now what was the plan, the plan in Jesus' mind that he so much wanted to have fulfilled? Well let's hear it in his own words, because he said this several times to his disciples.

This is the plan. The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

That was his plan and how he wanted it to be fulfilled. He said elsewhere, I have a baptism to be baptised with and how great is my distress until it is accomplished. Now thank God that part of Jesus' great plan and desire is all in the past.

It happened nearly 2,000 years ago. It won't happen again and it need not, can't. And we thank God for it, because without his dying and his rising we could not be saved.

[24 : 22] But much of what Jesus desires and longs for is still in the future. Now friends, do a lovely thing with me.

Put one finger in Psalm 20 and turn over if you will to John's Gospel chapter 17 verse 24. You'll find that on page 903 in the Big Bibles.

John's Gospel chapter 17 verse 24. Because if there is any verse in the four Gospels which shows us what Jesus' heart's desire is, this is it.

Okay, John 17, 24. He's speaking here to God the Father just before Good Friday. Father, I desire. That's how he starts the verse.

We're about to hear of his heart's desire. Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

[25 : 27] Now if you ask me to name my three favourite Bible verses, I don't know what the other two would be, but I'm sure that would be one of them. Now friends, just bring your capacity for astonishment to the forefront of your mind for a moment.

Here is this astonishing desire of our Saviour. Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

What Jesus wants, his heart's desire, is that those who have been gifted to him by God, the Father, and that is all Christians of all generations should be with him where he is, that is in heaven.

Now that's the final goal of the Gospel, that all who belong to Jesus should be with him. Now we're only with him now by anticipation and by faith.

We're not actually with him as it were bodily, physically, face to face. At this moment we're the folk of Pollock Shields and Deniston and Strathbongo. But the time is coming when we shall no longer leave church on a Sunday evening to go back to Pollock Shields or Calkadans.

[26 : 47] We shall open our eyes and we shall look at him. And as he says in verse 24 of John 17, we shall see his glory. We shall see him as he is, not as the rough carpenter seen back in 30 AD, but as the shining glorious son of God, once a man and still and always a man, the head of the new humanity.

That's why he came to earth. That's why he went through these horrors of rejection and crucifixion, so that in the end he might be reunited with us in a union that can never be broken, so that we should see him in his glory as he is and be satisfied.

That's where the gospel leads to. The gospel is about so much more than the forgiveness of our sins. Now it's always about that, but it's about so much more, because the gospel in the end brings us to Christ's very dwelling place so that we should share his home with him.

And when we are sharing his glorious home with our glorious Lord, we shan't be missing Pollock Shields. We'll be in a better place. So look back to Psalm 20, verse 4.

May God grant you, Lord Jesus, your heart's desire, doesn't that teach us how to pray? Let's notice the times in the four gospels when Jesus expresses the things that he really wants, and let's make his desires the substance of our prayers.

[28 : 21] We're now third and last. We have a strong reminder about where our trust is to be placed in verses 6, 7 and 8. Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed.

He will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright. Now verse 6, you'll see, begins with a strong note of assurance. Now I know, says David.

The people who have been praying for him in the first five verses, and because he knows that they've been praying and that God answers prayer, he knows that their prayers for his protection have not gone unnoticed.

Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed and he will answer him. And then David says this thing in verse 7, which shows up a great chasm between men of the world and the people of God.

[29 : 22] Look at verse 7 with me. Some, that's the men of the world, whose eyes have never been opened to the power of God. Some trust in chariots and horses. Now he's not talking here about the local riding school or the pony club that your 14-year-old daughter belongs to.

Not that sort of horses. He's talking here about the force of arms and armies. These are war horses. These are the ancient equivalent of tanks and fighter jets. The sort of things that the North Koreans today are developing.

Nuclear weapons. The Iranians perhaps too, although they're saying they're not. The British, of course, have plenty of them up their sleeves, don't they, and make sure that even if our arsenal is scaled down, it is still potent.

There was apparently a great arms fair down in London only a week or two ago. However, these words are not part of an argument for pacifism. Remember that David is writing as the king of Israel

in the 10th century BC and part of his responsibility is to secure the borders of his country so that the inheritors of the promised land can live there in peace and safety.

So the Old Testament expects the king of Israel to have an army and to use it when necessary. It was not wrong for David to subdue the Philistines and Israel's other enemies by military force.

[30 : 43] The point of verse 7 is that David knows where the real power lies. Yes, he will use his army to defeat Israel's enemies, but he knows perfectly well that unless the Lord makes his army victorious, there will be no victory for Israel.

And David of course knew his Old Testament history. He knew about the power of God. He knew for example about Gideon and his 300 men who defeated the great army of the Midianites.

David knew about Samson. He knew that Samson had killed, was it a thousand Philistines with a donkey's jawbone? Now why did he do that? Not because he was muscular, but because the spirit of God came upon him in power.

Samson, for all we know, was five foot two and weighed eight stone. Judges doesn't tell us that he stood six foot six and weighed eighteen stone. The whole point is it was God's power, not Samson's muscles, that defeated the Philistines.

Now friends, there's a great principle for us as well. We are engaged in the Lord's warfare. We're battling for the souls and minds and destinies of men and women.

[31 : 54] We're battling prayerfully that their destiny should be heaven and not hell. But the gospel will never triumph through human power. It's not the force of argument, it's not the persuasiveness of a powerful personality that will bring people to Christ or to salvation.

If you've been born again, you know that it was God's power that worked that miracle in you. Yes, the Lord may have used human agency to turn your life around.

Maybe there was a book that you read or a Christian friend who told you the gospel or a sermon which brought you light and understanding. But only the power of God can defeat the devil and force the devil to release a person from his grip.

And it's a great comfort for us to know this. How could we bear it if it was all up to us for the gospel to be successful? If it was all up to our persuasiveness or clever talk to bring people to Christ.

But it's not. As verse 7 puts it, we trust in the name of the Lord our God. The power is there as we pray and put our trust in him.

[33 : 02] So the power is there at the prayer meeting. The power is there in our own homes as we sit in our armchairs and pray or kneel at our bedsides. Lord, I don't rely on chariots or horses or any kind of human power or weapon.

I trust in your name to bring about the doing of your will. It makes a mockery of all our pride and self-reliance, doesn't it?

Some trust in chariots and some in horses. Well, let them, says David. The more fool they. But we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

let's bow our heads and we'll pray to him. It is to us, dear Heavenly Father, a glorious thought that your kingdom and your message and your truth finally will prevail.

And we thank you for it. we ask you, dear Father, because we're weak people and naturally our hearts turn to human resources, we pray that you'll write this lesson in our hearts and teach us, each of us, whether we're younger or older, whatever our situation, that the real power for the gospel to go forward comes from trusting in your name.

[34 : 32] The power lies with you and not with us and how glad we are and grateful that it's like that. So please, dear Father, take us, each of us this week, and use us to your glory.

Help us by the quality of our lives and words to demonstrate something of the transforming power of the good news. Whether we're at work or retired, whether we're at college or university or at school, wherever we are, we pray that your power and truth may rest upon us and may go forward and bring others to salvation and joy.

we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.