

A Prayer for the King

Psalms 72

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Sports teams are obviously concerned with winning games, but coaches often challenge their players to set goals far higher than merely winning, especially when playing teams they know won't provide much of a challenge. The goal is not just to have more points at the end of the game, but to show total dominance throughout the game.

I remember a couple of times when we had such goals when I played football. The one that stands out to me was that we didn't just want our defense to keep the other team from scoring, we wanted the other team to have negative yards at the end of the game. Our hope was to have complete and total dominance.

In many ways, I feel like that's what the prayer of Psalm 72 is like. It is a prayer for the King of Israel to be the ideal king, to do everything right, and as a result, bring absolute blessing to not only the people of Israel, but also the world.

Background

Psalm 72 is somewhat unique, because it sits at the end of book 2 of the psalter (another name for the book of Psalms). It ends with the statement "this concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse". Of course, not all the psalms that came before were written by David; we've looked at a few that were written by others, and some don't tell us the author. But generally speaking, these psalms were understood to have been written during David's reign, thus they are called the psalms of David.

Psalm 72 is also unique because it seems to introduce another author—Solomon. Solomon was David's son, and he became the king of Israel after David died. There is some debate on whether Solomon wrote this though. The reason is because the attribution at the beginning that says "Of Solomon" can also be translated "For Solomon". This has led some to conclude that this psalm was a prayer of David for his son, who would be the next king. While that certainly makes sense, every psalm that says "Of David" could also be translated "For David", and it would seem strange for the meaning of the word to suddenly change in Psalm 72.

So, most scholars conclude this was a prayer composed by Solomon in preparation for his reign as king. But this prayer was not only about Solomon, or even about the future kings of Israel. There are clear indications that this psalm is prophetic, looking forward to the ultimate King, who would bring peace and justice not only to Israel, but to the ends of the earth!

As we examine Solomon's prayer this morning, I hope we will see a picture of the ideal ruler, but also of the inability of any human being to live up to that ideal. While it is good for us to pray these things for our human rulers, we should remember that our hope

must always be anchored to Jesus, knowing He is the One who is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the ultimate Ruler.

Just and Gracious

In the opening lines of this psalm, we see the first characteristics Solomon desires for the king.

¹ Give your love of justice to the king, O God, and righteousness to the king's son. ² Help him judge your people in the right way; let the poor always be treated fairly. ³ May the mountains yield prosperity for all, and may the hills be fruitful. ⁴ Help him to defend the poor, to rescue the children of the needy, and to crush their oppressors. ⁵ May they fear you as long as the sun shines, as long as the moon remains in the sky. Yes, forever! ⁶ May the king's rule be refreshing like spring rain on freshly cut grass, like the showers that water the earth. ⁷ May all the godly flourish during his reign. May there be abundant prosperity until the moon is no more. (Psalm 72:1-7, NLT)

We might be surprised that Solomon would begin his prayer by asking that the Lord would cause him to love justice, and to cause his son to love righteousness. The idea Solomon is driving at is asking God to help the king and his family to have the same heart for justice and righteousness as the Lord.

That is certainly not the platform on which most political leaders run today. Many politicians may have started with that goal, but the nature of politics is that many in power are pulled away from what they know is right and just to what most benefits them, whether that is what will enrich them, what will gain them power, or just what will help them get reelected. Solomon's prayer is that the king's overarching concern would be to provide justice, and that this desire would supersede all others.

He explains how that should manifest itself—not only should the king judge rightly, but Solomon explains that even the poor should be treated fairly. In our society, those who have the most money tend to fare better in our legal system than those who don't. We often see large firms bullying smaller firms or individuals, knowing they can exhaust their resources long before justice can be served. Solomon's prayer is that the king would ensure justice, what is right and fair for everyone, regardless of their station in life and regardless of what they can offer the king or anyone else.

He similarly asks God to help him defend the poor and rescue the children of the needy, crushing those who oppress them. This is a reminder that God cares for those others overlook. Many today look at those who are destitute with disdain. They conclude that if those people just worked as hard as I do, then they wouldn't be in that position. And there is sometimes truth to this statement. Many today are unwilling to work to provide for themselves and just hope that someone else will pay their way.

But there are also many people who are victims of circumstances not of their making. Sometimes a tragedy puts people in dire financial straits. Sometimes it's an illness or an accident or a family emergency, and suddenly people's backs are against the wall. And

children raised in such environments have the deck stacked against them. Their parents may not be able to provide them the structure and stability they need to be successful in school and beyond. Sometimes this creates a cycle of poverty that is exceedingly difficult to escape.

Solomon's prayer is for a king who is wise enough to see how to genuinely help people out of these cycles. He does not intend for people to be lazy, but instead to look at people who are in genuine need and seek to help them. Helping people out of poverty is often not just about giving them money. It may be helping them get educated, getting them on solid footing, or providing them the skills they need to manage money well. A good ruler is willing to take the time to help the downtrodden get up.

Solomon also prays that the Lord would cause the king's rule to bring prosperity to the nation. This sounds much more like what American politics often has as its focus! But don't miss what Solomon says about this prosperity. He prays that the king's rule would be as refreshing as a spring rain on freshly cut grass. The idea is that the king will rule in such a way that he will benefit everyone, simply because of the wisdom of his rule.

Solomon does not merely have in mind a king who has shrewd financial policies. He is not talking about a tax plan or even a trade plan. Rather, he is talking about a king who rules justly and fairly, which ultimately benefits all people. When evil is restrained, people flourish. Righteousness leads to prosperity for all.

And that is part of Solomon's prayer as well—that the godly would flourish during the king's reign. Rather than those who are trying to obey the Lord finding themselves taken advantage of and oppressed, Solomon prays that those who are obedient would be blessed, because they fit in well with the rule of the king. Solomon envisions a kingdom where godly people find a climate that enables them to serve the Lord fully and freely, and in fact, rewards doing so!

Solomon's ideal king is just and gracious. He is not concerned with himself, but with what is right, and ensuring the wellbeing of his subjects. This is the goal to which every leader should strive. But we are also painfully aware of the fact that every human leader will also fall short of this standard. Only the King of Kings, Jesus, will provide this kind of rule and reign. Nonetheless, this is the kind of leader we should desire in our nation and the kind of leaders we should aspire to be.

A Universal Reign

The second major theme we see in Solomon's prayer is that this king would have power not only over his own land, but also over the entire world!

⁸ May he reign from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth. ⁹ Desert nomads will bow before him; his enemies will fall before him in the dust. ¹⁰ The western kings of Tarshish and other distant lands will bring him tribute. The eastern kings of Sheba and Seba will bring him gifts. ¹¹ All kings will bow before him, and all nations will serve him. (Psalm 72:8-11, NLT)

Solomon describes the area over which this leader will rule in a poetic fashion. He is not really asking to rule a specific area between geographical markers; he is painting a picture of a king's rule that extends far beyond the borders of his own kingdom and would yield worship and submission by all the kings of the surrounding areas. Notice, however, that there is no language of warfare here. Rather, he prays that the king would rule so well that every other nation would come and submit to him!

Now, you may conclude that can't happen. But Solomon's reign approached this ideal, at least at the beginning. Solomon did not engage in warfare. He had peace on every side. The leaders of surrounding nations came and met him and saw the wisdom with which he ruled (a wisdom given by God). Their response was to pay him tribute and bow before him. He did not have to force them into submission, because they recognized the wisdom with which he ruled.

While Solomon approached this ideal in his early years, he eventually began to be swayed by worldly "wisdom", which led to him watering down his faith and becoming less concerned with what was right, and more concerned with what would make him popular and famous. He soon began to oppress his people with heavy taxes. He began to turn away from the Lord because he made alliances with foreign nations by marrying women from their royal families. And these women ultimately led him away from the Lord. While Solomon started on this ideal path, he quickly strayed from it.

So, is this a realistic prayer to pray for our leaders? I think it is still a good prayer to pray for them, but we must recognize that there is only One who can truly live up to this standard, and that is the Lord. When Jesus Christ returns in power, all nations will indeed bow before Him. Jesus will need to fight a battle when He returns, because all who would oppose Him will immediately see their foolishness. Christ will punish sin, but all will submit to Him willingly. No one will question His rule.

It is only Christ who can set up a kingdom in which the whole world genuinely submits to His rule. But He will indeed do exactly that.

A Recap

Verses 12-17 basically reiterate the requests of verses 1-11 that we've already seen.

¹² He will rescue the poor when they cry to him; he will help the oppressed, who have no one to defend them. ¹³ He feels pity for the weak and the needy, and he will rescue them. ¹⁴ He will redeem them from oppression and violence, for their lives are precious to him. ¹⁵ Long live the king! May the gold of Sheba be given to him. May the people always pray for him and bless him all day long. ¹⁶ May there be abundant grain throughout the land, flourishing even on the hilltops. May the fruit trees flourish like the trees of Lebanon, and may the people thrive like grass in a field. ¹⁷ May the king's name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun shines. May all nations be blessed through him and bring him praise. (Psalm 72:12-17, NLT)

We see the same themes repeated in these verses: a leader who cares for the poor and needy, who does not overlook their cries, who values them simply because of who they are, not because of what they can give him. And then that he would be worshiped by all the people of the earth, not only those who reside within the borders of his kingdom. Solomon prays that all nations will be blessed through him and bring him praise.

These are the same themes we have already seen, but Solomon restates them a second time, so no one can miss the point.

The Source of Hope

The concluding verses of the prayer are key to understanding the essence of it.

¹⁸ Praise the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does such wonderful things.

¹⁹ Praise his glorious name forever! Let the whole earth be filled with his glory.

Amen and amen! (Psalm 72:18-19, NLT)

Solomon recognized that it is only the Lord who can accomplish such things. A human ruler who attempts to accomplish this vision through his own strength will fail miserably. They will resort to human means to accomplish their vision, and that cannot ultimately succeed. While they may get people to submit to them, or enrich their citizens, or provide for some of those in need, those victories will be short-lived. Psalm 72 stands as a clear reminder that “Even the best of men are only men at best.”

Our only hope to accomplish these things is the Jesus! We must ensure that our focus is not on human leaders, and our hope is not anchored to a particular individual or a particular party or movement; it must be anchored to the Lord.

Conclusion

So this leaves us with some real and pressing questions. What should we be looking for in our leaders, and what should we desire as a society? And if no human leader can provide these things, how should we approach this goal practically? Let’s address these questions as we conclude.

There are a few things Solomon says a good nation will do. These are things we ought to prioritize in our nation and in our leaders. **First, they are concerned with what is right.** This seems to be the overarching theme. A good government and good leaders prioritize what is right above all else. Increasingly, people are no longer concerned with what is right, they are concerned with what will appease the masses. We tend to cave to whoever shouts the loudest, or has the most money, or can most negatively affect our lives. That is not how government should work. Our nation’s stated desire is to ensure liberty and justice for all. This is an admirable goal, but we must define it properly. God is the One who determines what is right and wrong. Justice means doing what God says is right. If we attempt to define it by any other means, we will make a terrible mess of things. Good leaders know what is right and seek to do them, no matter the cost.

Second, they value those they serve. It is very easy for any leader (whether in government or anywhere else) to lose sight of the fact that their job is to serve the

interests of those they lead. It is very easy to become concerned about self-interest, rather than care for those they are tasked to serve. We should look for this attitude in our leaders, and strive to cultivate it within ourselves. We tend to evaluate people transactionally, paying more attention to those we think have something to offer us rather than seeing that each person has inherent and intrinsic value. Christians should be (and often have been) at the forefront of meeting the needs of those who cannot help themselves. We should strive to help those who are poor, those stuck in cycles of poverty and violence, those who cannot help themselves, and those whom the world overlooks. This usually means more than just throwing money at problems—it involves investing time and energy in people to help them go in a different direction. This is what we should desire from our leaders and our government, but ultimately, if we want to see that happen in our nation, we need to embody that attitude ourselves.

Third, they should garner respect. The modern conception of a leader is one who demands respect by forcing people to submit to them. But the kind of leader held up in Psalm 72 does not need to resort to force, because people recognize their character. Rather than valuing those who talk the loudest, shout the most aggressive insults, or seem to score the most “points” by talking about their opponents, we should value those who engage with their opponents, who speak clearly about things that matter, and who can defend their positions. This is harder and harder to find in politics, and I would venture to say it is harder to find in the world at large too. We should strive to be people who gain the respect of others not by force, but by demonstrating character.

Finally, we must remember that none of this is possible without the Lord. No human leader can accomplish these things fully. Only the Lord can do that. So this should lead us to do two things. First, to pray for our leaders. No human being is equal to this task; they must have supernatural help. So we should be praying for our leaders at every level, asking the Lord to give them these kinds of traits, and to help them govern the way He would want. We should spend more time praying for our leaders than we do complaining about them. God alone can change the direction of a nation, so we should pray for Him to lead and strengthen our leaders to lead well! Second, is to remember what’s coming. No earthly kingdom will ever manage the kind of universal good Solomon describes here. In the times when we become discouraged by what we see in our nation and our world, we should remember the story isn’t over yet. There will be a King who rules in this way, and we will spend all eternity in His kingdom! We must strive to live our lives with Christ on the throne now, knowing that the more we do so, the better off we’ll be, but we should also find comfort in the truth that there is coming a day when all people and nations will bow before Him—not because they have been defeated in battle, but because they see Him for who He is.

Solomon’s prayer is one we should continue to pray today, because we know that it is only through our Lord that this kind of kingdom can arise. May we be people who spend less time listening to political strategists, and more time praying. May God raise up for us leaders who can stand for what is right and care for those they lead. And may we strive to live up to the same ideals, remembering that one day soon, every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

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