

The Psalms are fully of God and fully human, revealing both the will of God and the human soul. They express our glory, laud and honor words, as well as our disturbing, violent, “go-to-hell” words. It is all there in the Psalms: love and hate, praise and pain, doxology and despair, revelation and repentance, heaven and hell. “No other book of the Bible takes hold of the heart of the believer like the Book of Psalms. . . . This book speaks to the heart and is the heart of the believer speaking, and to give the Psalms any kind of serious attention means that you are drawn into the prayers and praises as if they were yours, and that, of course, is what was divinely intended.”¹

Psalm 1 is familiar; Psalm 2 is unfamiliar. We love Psalm 1 and tend to ignore Psalm 2, even though it is cited in the New Testament more than any other psalm.² Calling it a royal psalm dedicated to the coronation of Israel’s king doesn’t help democracy loving Americans identify with the psalm. What do ancient monarchies have to do with Americans living in the post-Christian West? We reject the divine right of kings and the imperial justification for crushing rebellions and extending the empire.

Psalm 2 poses a two-fold interpretative danger. We either ignore this psalm because we fear it can be slanted to justify crusades, inquisitions and political oppression, or we use this psalm with nationalistic fervor to claim God is on our side. Those who insist that America enjoys God’s special favor and has exceptional status among the nations of the world end up misreading Psalm 2 because America is “plotting in vain” just like the other nations. The rebellious nations described in Psalm 2 are rebelling against *Israel’s* God and the Lord’s Anointed One. If the foreign powers are against *America’s* god then Psalm 2 is reduced to political propaganda.

Jesus prayed Psalm 2 at a time when the glory days of Israel’s monarchy were in the distant past; when Herod was a puppet king under Roman rule, and when the cross loomed large as the fateful climax to his earthly ministry. By the time Jesus prayed Psalm 2 the original purpose of the psalm had been transposed into a higher key. The meaning of the “anointed one” was no longer attached to an earthly monarch but to the coming messiah. The royal psalm had become a prophetic psalm reflecting an eschatological expectation. The promise of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and a new kingship (Daniel 9:25) transformed the use of this royal psalm into a messianic psalm.

Echoes of Psalm 2 are heard throughout the Gospels. Mark opens, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. . .” (Mark 1:1). We often quote Psalm 2 at Christmas because it lines up so well with the gospel birth narratives. “Jesus [is] the Messiah the son of David” (Matt 1:1), and the subject of the angelic announcement to Mary. “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will

¹ Allen Ross, *Living with the Psalms: Introduction to the Psalms* (Beeson Divinity School Chapel Sermon, September 7, 2006).

² Eugene Peterson, *Earth & Altar*, 19. Franz Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, vol 1:90.

reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:31-33). At Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, the Father's commendation echoes the psalm, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"(Matthew 3:17; 17:5).

The apostles quoted Psalm 2 explicitly to make sense of the Jewish and Gentile opposition to Jesus the Messiah. After Peter and John were released from the Jewish ruling council they returned "to their own people" to explain what they had said to the chief priests and elders. Their understanding and their prayer was shaped by Psalm 2. They prayed, "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one'" (Acts 4:25-26). But they didn't stop there they named names. "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed" (Acts 4:27). They were aware of living into the fulfillment of Psalm 2.

The apostle Paul used Psalm 2 to explain the gospel. "We tell you the good news," he preached in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. "What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my son; today I have become your father'" (Acts 13:32). Paul linked the psalmist's "today" with Jesus' bodily resurrection (Acts 13:34; Romans 1:4).

Psalm 2 shaped the perspective of the author of Hebrews, who describes the Son who is appointed heir of all things. Hebrews quotes from Psalm 2 twice: "For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'?" (Heb 1:5; 5:5). Psalm 2 inspired the apostles to articulate not only a high Christology but also the role of the Messiah in the coming judgment. The apostle John quoted Psalm 2 to describe the coming King of kings and Lord of lords: "He will rule them with an iron scepter" (Rev 19:15; see 2:7; 12:5).³

Rage Against The King (Psalm 2:1-3)

*Why do the nations conspire (rage)?
and the peoples plot (meditate) in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,
"Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles."*

This finely crafted four stanza poem with each stanza composed of three verses gives literary balance and symmetry to a theology of chaos. The psalmist offers a sane and sober analysis of the "crazy effort of the world to think it can fight against God."⁴ Thus even the beauty of the psalm

³ Peter C. Craigie, Psalm 1-50, 69. Craigie sees The Revelation anticipating "the ultimate rule and triumph of the man born to be King in the language and imagery of Psalm 2 (Rev 1:5; 2:27; 4:2; 6:17; 12:5; 19:5 and others)."

⁴ Waltke and Houston, The Psalms, 156.

with its Hebraic parallelisms and striking word pictures testify to the care with which the psalmist describes the madness of the world. In the Spirit, the poet captures the inexplicable and irrational war against God.

There is a significant emotional contrast between Psalm 1:2 and Psalm 2:1. Delight and disdain describe two radically different emotional states. The righteous person's delight in the law of the Lord is set in stark contrast to the nations' rage against Lord. The tension between these two states of being, love and hate, delight and disdain, persist alongside one another. Those who delight in the law of the Lord are not robbed of their delight by the outrageous upheaval of the peoples. Nor is the rebellious rage of the nations blamed on the righteous for not doing enough to change the world. The two psalms taken together capture a totality that will not change fundamentally until Christ comes again.

The psalmist used the exact same word to describe the righteous *meditating* and the peoples *plotting*. In the Old Testament, the word *hāgâ* connoted sighing or murmuring or muttering. It refers to the emotional response, positive or negative, we humans have to thinking deeply. For those who delight in the law of the Lord the sighs express pleasure and joy; for those who rage against the law of the Lord the sighs express anger and hate. Those who love the truth murmur sweetly and softly; those who rebel against God mutter angrily and loudly. Their goal is expressed in a slogan: "Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles." They despise the law, "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25); they reject the easy yoke that provides rest for our souls (Matt 11:30); they refuse to believe the truth that will truly set them free (John 8:31-32).

The psalmist paints a bleak all encompassing picture of the world, represented by the nations, the peoples, the kings of the earth, and the rulers. They have all banded together against the Lord and against his anointed. The Bible presents a consistently pessimistic picture of the world's response to will of God. Psalm 2 is consistent with the apostle Paul's description of the world in Romans 1: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom 1:21). He reminds believers that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

On the eve of the crucifixion Jesus prepared his disciples for the world's reaction to the will of God. He said, "In this world you will have trouble." We know our hope is not in America or in any kind of political policy or economic system. Yet some Christians talk as if they had no other identity or loyalty other than to America. Their vitriolic rhetoric and slander is an indication not of strength and boldness, but of fear and hate. Frustrated Christians feel that their culture is slipping away from them in spite of their best efforts to "bring back America" and "change the world for Christ." We need to hear what Jesus said to Pilate over and over again to stay on mission: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36). The gospel is a unique counter-cultural movement, a voice crying in the wilderness of an evil and

broken culture. The people of God should never expect to be the controlling voice of culture, but they should aim to impress the world with Christ's love and goodness.

The apostles took Jesus at his word: "I have overcome the world." God is in control. The victory of Christ is assured. We entrust ourselves to the providence of God. Patient endurance and faithfulness rule out revenge and retaliation. The world should never have to fear a Christian. Those who persecute, insult, threaten, slander, swindle, and murder Christians are never in danger of receiving the same treatment they perpetrate and perpetuate. Christians defend others and themselves from violence, slander, deception and terrorism, but the disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ does not fight the way the world does. "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Cor 10:4). We don't fight fire with fire and render evil for evil because of the victory of the Cross and the power of the Resurrection. The question "Why?" is unanswerable. There is no rational reason for this rebellion. It is spiteful and self-destructive. Evil flips good and evil and works against everything that promotes human flourishing. The rage against the King is pathetic. It is laughable.

The One Enthroned in Heaven Laughs (Psalm 2:4-6)

*The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
[Then] He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
"I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."*

The second stanza sets a stark contrast to the first three verses. The rebellious rage of the kings of the earth is nothing but a big joke with tragic consequences. The psalmist contrasts the wicked who "sit in the company of mockers" (Ps 1:1) with the One who sits enthroned in heaven laughing and mocking at the vain attempt of kings and rulers to overthrow the Lord of all. The transition from Yahweh's "inward disdain for the pagan confederacy" to his "outward intervention in history" is expressed here as an immediate response climaxing in the coronation of the king.⁵ *Say what you like, but as for me, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."*

The great unfolding story of God's intervention in human affairs is compressed in these few poetic lines. We are still in the middle of the story. Not everything is subject to King Jesus, even though he is "crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9). The apostle John pictures the saints "who have been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" calling out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev 6:9-10).

The long-suffering prayers of the martyrs are heard by the One who sits enthroned in heaven. The

⁵ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 167.

seemingly interminable delay is not a sign of indifference or impotence, but of mercy. “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare” (2 Peter 3:9-10). Yahweh mocks the world’s vain attempt to throw off the shackles and chains of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving Creator and Redeemer.

In our country politics is fodder for late night comedians. Political discourse has sunk so low and mean that laughter has become a coping strategy for dealing today’s political reality. Psalm 2 describes a different kind of laughter. My father was a varsity wrestler in college, and years after his passing my father-in-law described watching my dad wrestle. He remembers that just before my father pinned his opponent he let out a little chuckle. The One who sits enthroned in heaven has the match in hand and he is chuckling.

The King’s Speech (Psalm 2:7-9)

*I will proclaim the Lord’s decree:
He said to me,
“You are my son; today I have become your father.
Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”*

We have heard from the psalmist who narrates history’s turmoil. We have heard from the rebels, “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.” And we have heard from Yahweh, “I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.” The next voice we hear is that of the king. The King speaks with the authority bestowed on him by Yahweh. He has no other speech to proclaim that the Lord’s decree. This is consistent with the picture of Jesus in the Gospels who said, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing” (John 5:19). “For I did not speak on my own,” Jesus said, “but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken” (John 12:49). Jesus prayed, “For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me” (John 17:8).

The King’s speech is autobiographical. His proclamation is personal. He discloses the relationship between Yahweh and himself: “He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have become your father.’” As we said earlier the apostles used these prophetic words to define his messianic identity at his baptism (Matt 3:17), at his Transfiguration (Matt 17:5), and in light of his Resurrection (Acts 13:33; Rom 1:4; Heb 1:5; 5:5). There was no doubt in the early church that Psalm 2 was all about King Jesus and the new kingdom made possible through his life, death, and resurrection. Nor was there any doubt as to “the ultimate rule and triumph of the man

born to be King in the language and imagery of Psalm 2.”⁶

Augustine was convinced that the only way to understand this psalm was to see it in the light of Christ. The coronation of the king on Zion meant one thing only, that Christ is the head of the Church. Yahweh’s “today” as in “You are my Son, today I have become your father,” is an eternal today: “there is nothing past as if it had ceased to be, nor future as if it were not yet, but present only, since what is eternal, always is; yet as ‘today’ intimates presentiality, a divine interpretation is given to that expression, ‘Today have begotten You,’ whereby the uncorrupt and Catholic faith proclaims the eternal generation of the Power and Wisdom of God who is the Only-begotten Son.”⁷

Given the explicit interpretation of the apostles and the trajectory of salvation history it appears mistaken to conclude that “Psalm 2 belongs in particular to the State of Israel as a focal embodiment of the Jewish people.” It would also be misguided to imply that “Christian nations” have been “in a position to implement its [Psalm 2] program and have sought to do so.”⁸ Any hint of interpreting Psalm 2 nationalistically, as either politically relevant to either the Jewish state or the United States of America, is ill conceived if for the only reason that the scope of the inheritance promised to the Son, King Jesus, includes all the nations even to the ends of the earth. The promise of Psalm 2 is anticipated in the great commission given by Jesus: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20). The Son’s promised inheritance includes salvation and judgment, both of which will be realized exclusively by Yahweh in concert with the Son. The rod of iron belongs to King Jesus and his Church and not to any particular nation (Rev 2:27; 12:5; 19:15).

Kiss Messiah! (Psalm 2:10-12)

*Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

The psalm concludes with “an invitation rather than an ultimatum; grace breaks through completely in the closing line.”⁹ Kidner continues, “The final beatitude (see Ps 1:1) leaves no doubt of the grace, that inspires the call of verses 10-12. What fear and pride interpret as bondage

⁶ Peter Craigie, Psalms 1-50, 69.

⁷ Augustine, On the Psalms: Psalm 2, sec. 5-6, vol. 8:3

⁸ John Goldingay, Psalms, vol 1, 105.

⁹ Derek Kidner, Psalms 1-72, 52.

(Ps 2:3) is in fact security and bliss. And there is no refuge from Him: only in him.”¹⁰

The apostles transposed this psalm from a royal psalm sung at the king’s coronation to a messianic psalm prayed on behalf of “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev 7:9). In the closing summons the phrase “you kings” represents the citizens of the world and “You rulers of the earth” applies to humanity as a whole (Ps 8:6). Psalm 2 is not only addressed to kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers but to everyone. Living as we do in the age of the imperial self the psalmist’s inspired call for wisdom, reverence, submission, and worship is as relevant to us as it is necessary. Earth-dwellers everywhere are put on notice by the King of kings and Lord of lords. The message is clear and straightforward, “Be wise; be warned. . . . Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling.” We need not debate the difference between reverential fear and debilitating dread. Deep devotion inspires awe, not terror, adoration, not intimidation.

“Kiss the Son” symbolizes love freely given and respect sincerely felt. A soldier salutes his commanding officer. A groom kisses his bride and a subject pays homage to the king. Some traditions take this imperative literally. Parishioners come forward, kneel and kiss the icon of Christ held in the hands of a priest. But what is meant here is not a liturgical or ceremonial act. It is a metaphor for true devotion and lived obedience. To do otherwise is to provoke the king’s wrath and to invite doom and destruction. The imperial self’s rebellious refusal to worship the Messiah has dire consequences: “His wrath can flare up in a moment.” The wrath of God is not an obsolete Old Testament concept but a dependable truth that is consistent with the teaching of the Bible, especially the New Testament, the nature of God, and the even the moral sensibilities of what it means to be human.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf imagines giving a lecture in a war zone to people “whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit.” The subject is “a Christian attitude toward violence” and the thesis is that “the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance.” Volf, himself a Croatian who lived and taught in Croatia during the war in former Yugoslavia, argues that non-retaliation and the possibility of reconciliation is grounded in the reality of God’s judgment. If there is no divine accountability for sin and evil, it is impossible to live out the gospel of Christ. To deny the wrath of God often means that one has not experienced the horrors of war and the tragedy of evil.¹¹ The wrath of God does not mean “the intemperate outburst of an uncontrolled character. It is rather the temperature of God’s love, the manifestation of his will and power to resist, to overcome, to burn away all that contradicts his counsels of love.”¹² The wrath of God is not an embarrassment but a blessing.

The psalm ends in the same way that Psalm 1 began, on a positive note, “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps 2:12). The King’s blessing is offered to every tribe, nation, people, and language. We can choose to receive Christ’s invitation or we can make excuses. We can kiss the

¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 53.

¹¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 304.

¹² M. Barth, *Ephesians*, 231-232.

Son or turn our backs on him. There is no middle way. The gospel is grandly inclusive of all people everywhere (“Go and make disciples of all nations”). But by God’s design we have the freedom to refuse the King’s overture and inexplicably and irrationally choose exclusion. We have the freedom to cut ourselves off from the King’s blessing.

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