

Psalm 20, along with Psalms 21, 22 and 23, form a meaningful sequence of kingship psalms on prayer. These four psalms are grounded in Psalm 18, a messianic/royal psalm, and in Psalm 19, a torah psalm. The pattern found here in Jesus' prayer book is not unlike the pattern of true spirituality modeled in the Sermon on the Mount. Prayer in the Psalms and in the Sermon is based on knowing God and depending upon his mercy. Prayer is the communion that comes from trusting and obeying his word. It is both relational and ethical; filial and faithful. These patterns are deeply rooted in the mind of God and reflected in the psalms. Beatitude-based belief corresponds to the royal messianic psalm (Ps 18). The salt and light impact of true heart-righteousness parallels the torah psalm (Ps 19). Prayer – answered prayers (Ps 20, 21) and deliverance prayers – (Ps 22, 23) are rooted in the abiding intervention and absolute revelation of the Anointed One. These kingship psalms reflect the life of Christ and guide us in what it means to follow the Lord Jesus today.

Psalm 20 offers a liturgy to be prayed by the people on behalf of the king when the Lord's anointed one is in distress. Psalm 21 is a thanksgiving psalm in gratitude to Yahweh for answered prayer, for granting the king victorious deliverance and for defeating the wicked. Psalm 22 is a dire lament on behalf of the Lord's anointed who is on the verge of annihilation before being rescued and restored to his rightful dominion. Psalm 23 is a messianic psalm celebrating Yahweh's kingship over the coming king for the sake of God's blessing over all.

In these four psalms the individual in the foreground is the Israel's anointed one, the king. Each psalm highlights king David's special relationship with Yahweh. These "royal psalms are often typological of the greater king, Jesus the Messiah."¹ They envision David's Lord, the Shepherd King, the Lord's anointed, whose "voluntary immolation on the Cross is the point of reference in the line that reads: 'All your sacrifice may He remember and accept your whole burnt offering.'² Two horizons are often in view: the immediate distress facing David and the long-range horizon of God's ultimate and everlasting salvation through Yahweh's Son of David. "Prayed in this way, our psalm is the 'Amen' of the Church to the pouring out of the redemptive blood, when 'Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many' (Heb 9:28)."³

In Distress

*May the Lord answer you when you are in distress;
may the 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.
May he give you the desire of your heart*

¹ Ross, Psalms, 491.

² Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 37.

³ Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 37.

*and make all your plans succeed.
May we shout for joy over your victory
and lift up our banners in the name of our God.
May the Lord grant all your requests.*

Psalm 20:1-5

“These prayers for David,” wrote Matthew Henry, “are prophecies concerning Christ the Son of David, and in him they were abundantly answered; he undertook the work of our redemption, and made war upon the powers of darkness. In the day of trouble, when his soul was exceedingly sorrowful, the Lord heard him, heard him in that he feared (Heb 5:7), sent him help out of his sanctuary, sent an angel from heaven to strengthen him, took cognizance of his offering when he made his soul an offering for sin, and accepted his burnt-sacrifice, turned it to ashes, the fire that should have fastened upon the sinner fastening upon his sacrifice, with which God was well pleased. And he granted him according to his own heart, made him to see the travail of his soul, to his satisfaction, prospered his good pleasure in his hand, fulfilled his petitions for himself and us; for him the Father heareth always and his intercession is every prevailing.”⁴

The redemptive trajectory inspired by Psalms 18 and 19 sets up Psalm 20 in our praying imagination as a messianic psalm. This singular focus on the Lord’s Anointed renders either a primitive reconstruction of a battle scene or a modern existential quest for fulfillment as relatively unimportant compared to the psalm’s eschatological horizon. When once we see Jesus in this prayer it is difficult to see anyone else, but until then, it is easy for the existential self to be distracted by the name it and claim it promise that the Lord will give us the desires of our heart and make all our plans succeed.

We are tempted to read God’s promise as a blank check ready to be exchanged in the currency of our personal desires. When I was young in the faith I latched onto this psalm and claimed its promise for my own. We were newly married and I had applied for a scholarship to study theology in England. When I became a finalist, one of four candidates to reach the last stage, I thought for sure God was about to give us the desire of my heart. I was certain that God had given us the promise of Psalm 20:4. My interview with the scholarship committee went well and the committee assured me that I would hear from them within the next forty-eight hours. I was so confident in success that I was ready to claim the prize: “Thank you. I already know your answer and I’m grateful. God has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes!” Of course when I received my rejection letter, disappointment could not begin to describe how I felt. I was crushed, bewildered. How could God do this to me? Why was this verse in the Bible anyway? It only led to false hope and dashed dreams. Eventually I came around to seeing that I had made the psalm about me and my desires rather than about the Lord and his anointed. I had lifted a line out of the psalm the way we break open a Chinese fortune cookie. I had used the psalm to fantasize about my hopes and dreams instead of learning from the psalm how to pray for Christ and his kingdom.

This ancient worship liturgy instructs today’s believer in how to pray for Christ and his mission. In so far as the distress in question is caused by resistance to God’s kingdom work and the heart’s

⁴ Henry, Psalms, 87.

desires are inspired by God's redemptive mission we have our template for answered prayer. There are seven submissions that depend upon the name of the Lord. Everything prayed for centers on and flows from Yahweh's identity and action. The people of God pray for Yahweh's responsiveness, protection, and help. They depend upon his remembrance, acknowledgment, and acceptance. Everything depends on the God of Jacob, who answers "in the day of distress" (Gen 35:3). Only Yahweh's victorious action leads to shouts of joy. Only in his name do we unfurl the banners of celebration. The psalmist's bottom line sums it all up: "May the Lord grant all your requests" (Ps 20:5c).

In Confidence

Now this I know:

The Lord gives victory to his anointed.

*He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary
with the victorious 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.*

Lord, give victory to the king!

Answer us when we call!

Psalm 20:6-9

David asserts his confidence boldly: "Now this I know. . . ." This "proclamation of faith" grows out of the description of faith found in the first five verses. Here was a person "who admitted his need of God and in faith petitioned [Yahweh] for help, who understood God's stipulations for true worship and faithfully observed them, and who recognized the inadequacy of his own strategy and by faith submitted it to God."⁵

As a template for intercessory prayer, Psalm 20 corresponds to our Lord's encouragement in the Sermon on the Mount, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). This is how we are to pray for Christ's kingdom work. We acknowledge our dependence upon the Lord. Psalm 20 invites us to leave the world of our making and to enter into the world of God's making. We are "in conspicuous need of unselfing."⁶ The Lord's anointed is on the throne, not the imperial self, and the psalm begins with our need for deliverance, not our need for success.

David's confidence in Yahweh is set in contrast to the world's resources – the resources that belong to the imperial self. "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God" (Ps 20:7). Chariots and horses stand for the nearly endless variety of inadequate objects of faith. Writer David Goetz calls these "chariots and horses" in our modern suburban context "immortality symbols." We are tempted to create an idol out of something from our "flat, mysteryless, empirical world" that stands for something that gives us a sense of glory

⁵ Ross, Psalms, 500.

⁶ Peterson, Earth & Altar, 13.

and self-worth. It may be our bank balance or our home or our SUV or our child or our job, etc.⁷ Whatever it is, it becomes our immortality symbol, the cultural equivalent to “chariots and horses.” But David confesses, “We trust in the name of the Lord our God.”

The dashed dreams of a full-ride scholarship caused me to re-examine the meaning of Psalm 20. I had co-opted this psalm for my selfish ends rather than for God’s kingdom purposes. I had eagerly equated my desires with God’s will. Instead of humbly trusting in the sovereign will of God I had fixated on my plan for success. I needed God’s help, not a scholarship and I needed to learn the difference between my selfish desires and my desire for God. In the providence of God and because of answered prayer we went to the University of Toronto without a scholarship and God provided. My wife Virginia and I worked hard and God opened doors of opportunity. We wanted to have children, but we couldn’t. Once again we thought and prayed through the dialectical tension of our desires and God’s will. As it turned out, the blessing of landed immigrant status and Canadian adoption laws proved to be a wonderful blessing. If we had not gone to Toronto we would not have been able to adopt our sons. We could never have planned it better. The answers to prayer were extraordinary. God had saved us from our wish dreams and blessed us better than we ever could have imagined. What we needed was help from “the sanctuary and support from Zion” (Ps 20:2) and that is exactly what we received.

When Brenda fell in love with David Mensah, her parents Gene and Laura Paisley definitely did not think God was giving them the desire of their heart. David, an African believer from Ghana who came to study Bible in Toronto, became good friends with Brenda’s father, Gene. Gene was a Stouville, Ontario, dairy farmer, who loved Christ. The two men met over Bible study and realized that they had a lot in common. Both loved the land and farming and both were devoted to Christ. Gene was impressed with David’s devotion to Christ and his gifts for relating to people. He invited David to spend his semester break working on his dairy farm. Over the summer David and Brenda became friends and eventually fall in love. Gene and Laura did not know at the time how God was answering their prayers and fulfilling their hearts desire. They found it easy to accept David as a friend and brother in Christ, but they weren’t prepared to accept him as Brenda’s husband.

It took a lot of prayer and no little anguish for Laura and Gene to come around and see David as the Lord’s wonderful answer to prayer. Years later I remember sitting in the Paisley’s living room looking at a video of David and Brenda’s ministry in northern Ghana, when Laura turned to me and said, “We will never forget how you helped David during our time of foolishness. Weren’t we foolish.” Laura, especially, had resisted the idea of Brenda marrying David, but when she finally grasped the will of God she embraced David fully. Gene was so convicted by his slowness to see what God was doing that he traveled to northern Ghana to meet David’s father and personally express his honor and gratitude in receiving David into his family.

On the eve of the crucifixion Jesus said to his disciples, “Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name” (John 16:23). In the context of Jesus’ discipleship seminar in the upper room we learn that prayer’s promised efficaciousness, “whatever you ask,”

⁷ Goetz, *Death by Suburb*, 42.

is locked in to our relationship with the triune God. The Father is the source of every good and perfect gift. The Son, in whose name we pray, gives the purpose and the passion for “whatever” we ask. And our Advocate, the Holy Spirit, guides us into all truth. The answer to our prayers is not controlled by anything other than the will of the Father, the glory of the Son, and the wisdom of the Spirit. Any thought that Jesus writes a blank check to be filled in by our hopes and dreams misses the point not only of prayer but of our intimacy with God.

We tend to read “whatever you ask” without hearing Jesus frame our prayer in the will of the Father and in the name of the Son. “Whatever” seems broadly inclusive of anything we want it to be. But we don't want to forget the strategic transition in the life of the disciple from self-rule to Christ's rule. Our *asking* undergoes a remarkable change, because our requests are vetted by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Psalm 20 says a lot about the person who is being prayed for. Such a person looks for answers from the Lord, longs for protection from the God of Jacob, and lives to please God. This person seeks God, depends upon God, and worships God. To pray for the Lord's anointed, the King, was to pray for the people of God and to desire God's blessing on the King was to be blessed. “We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God” (Ps 20:5). The congregation's benediction for the king underscored the solidarity of the people of God and respected the true order of blessing. The individual was blessed in community. The king represents the people of God and foreshadows the Messiah, the anointed one. Today we can't read this psalm without thinking of Christ. Israel's hope in the Lord's anointed, the King, is superseded by the Anointed One the Messiah. May Jesus Christ be praised.