

The answers sought in Psalm 20 are gratefully received and celebrated in Psalm 21. The two psalms “are paired as petition and answer.”¹ In the light of Christ, Christians today echo the voice of the congregation and transpose this psalm of thanksgiving into a messianic psalm of praise. The psalm is not only about David and his victories, but about Jesus and his victory over sin and death. According to Matthew Henry, the British nonconformist Presbyterian, there is more here about the Messiah than about David.²

The typological meaning of the psalm anticipates the strength and victory that is greater than military might and royal victory. First horizon hyperbole becomes second horizon reality. For only in Jesus Christ is the ultimate strength of the Lord revealed. Only in Jesus is the truest of heart’s desires satisfied, the richest of blessings bestowed, and the promise of everlasting life received. Salvation and judgment divide this psalm in half. Psalm 21:1-7 recounts the Lord’s royal blessings and Psalm 21:8-12 describes the Lord’s definitive judgment of all the king’s enemies and foes.

The Answer

*The king rejoices in your strength, Lord.
How great is his joy in the victories you give!
You have granted him his heart’s desire
and have not withheld the request of his lips.
You came to greet him with rich blessings
and placed a crown of pure gold on his head.
He asked you for life, and you gave it to him –
length of days, for ever and ever.
Through the victories you gave, his glory is great;
you have bestowed on him splendor and majesty.
Surely you have granted him unending blessings
and made him glad with the joy of your presence.*

*For the king trusts in the Lord;
through the unfailing love of the Most High
he will not be shaken*

Psalm 21:1-7

The Lord God makes good on his promise to help and grants David’s heart desires as only Yahweh can do. The blessings exceed the requests and satisfy the longings beyond expectation. David asked for help and the Lord gave him great joy. He asked for support from Zion and the Lord gave him rich blessings and a crown of pure gold. The king asked for the success of his plans and the Lord gave him the desires of his heart. Every request from his lips was answered better than he hoped. His prayers for victory in battle were met with victory over death itself and

¹ Kidner, Psalms, vol.1:103.

² Henry, Psalms, 89.

the gift of everlasting life. The request for the defeat of his enemies is answered with God's gracious bestowal of splendor and majesty and the very joy of Yahweh's presence.

Psalms 21 is a reminder that the Lord answers our prayers for health and success in a greater way than we ever imagined. We pray for healing and the Lord gives us new life - everlasting life. We pray for success at work and the Lord gives us the joy of his presence. Our personal "battle prayers" are met and exceeded by the all-loving and holy God. We pray for help in school or at work and the Lord gives us redemption, reconciliation and resurrection. Our survival prayers are turned into salvation praise. The world cannot understand how prayers for a dying loved one can be answered by God in the profound hope of resurrection life, but neither can the secular mind fathom the meaning of life and love nor the origin of conscience and morality. The Lord God takes our maintenance prayers - prayers for making it through the day - and answers them in the light of his eternal glory and redeeming grace. The psalm anticipates Jesus' promise, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Picture yourself praising Christ in a worshipping congregation and you can find no better words than in this psalm to articulate your praise of Christ. It is as if the Church rises in celebration to bear witness to the fulfillment of all Christ's blessings. "The voice of the Church herself is the voice of this psalm," writes Patrick Reardon, "glorifying the Father for the Son's paschal victory over sin, death, and hell." Reardon parallels Psalm 21 with Ephesians 1:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. . . . In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment - to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (Eph 1:3,7-9).³

The gift of strength celebrated in the opening line of the psalm is interpreted by Augustine *Christologically*. The great patristic theologian deftly equates this particular gift of strength with the power of God to transcend his transcendence in the Incarnation. "O Lord, in Thy strength, whereby the Word was made flesh, the Man Christ Jesus shall rejoice."⁴ The strength of the Lord is manifest in two ways. When Paul writes, "He is before all things and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17), the apostle bears witness to God's cosmic power. But when he speaks of Jesus "being in very nature God" yet "making himself nothing" and "becoming obedient to death" (Phil 2:6-8) he is talking about a phenomenal strength that can only be attributed to the Lord. This is the hidden strength that made salvation possible, inspiring Augustine to "exult exceedingly" in the strength of God that led to the weakness of God.⁵ "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you

³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 39.

⁴ Augustine, *Psalms*, 57.

⁵ Augustine, *Psalms*, 57.

through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Augustine carries this further. He equates the psalmist’s “heart’s desire” with the Lord Jesus’ desire to eat the Passover (Luke 22:15) and to lay down his life (John 10:18). He links the “the request of his lips” with Jesus’ promise to his disciples in the upper room, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). Even the “crown of pure gold” (Ps 21:3) points to fulfillment in Christ: “His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns” (Rev 19:12). For Augustine Psalm 21 is all about Christ, his incarnation, his teaching, his sacrifice, his resurrection, and his exaltation. Who else but Christ is bestowed with “splendor and majesty” and granted “unending blessings”? When Jesus prayed, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5), Augustine hears echoes of Psalm 21, “Surely you have granted him unending blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence” (Ps 21:6).

Calvin’s pastoral application of this psalm is important. Since “the Spirit of prophecy” had “an eye on Christ, who does not reign for his own advantage, but for ours, and whose desire is directed only to our salvation . . . we need entertain no apprehension that God will reject our prayers on behalf of the church, since our heavenly King has gone before us in making intercession for her, so that in praying for her we are only endeavoring to follow his example.”⁶ We are empowered to trust in the Lord, rather than in the cultural equivalent of chariots and horses (Ps 20:7), only because Jesus trusted in the Father and in the unfailing love of the Most High” (Ps 21:7). Our confidence lies not in “human wealth and human strength” but in the salvation of the Lord. Only through his love - “the unfailing love of the Most High” - we “will not be shaken” (Ps 21:7).⁷

The unshakeable reign of king David foreshadows the reign of Christ, the King of kings. The verb “shall not be shaken” comes from a verb that means “totter, shake, move.”⁸ The verb pivots the psalm from salvation to judgment and shifts our attention from ever lasting security to the final destruction of the wicked. We have moved from the ancient military battlefield to God’s cosmic conflict with evil.

The author of Hebrews draws out the meaning of this unshakeable kingdom. He causes us to imagine what it would be like to live our lives convinced that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, ruled by the Son who “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 1:3). He exhorts himself along with all his hearers to live into this salvation-shaped reality. “Let us be thankful and let us worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. . .” (Heb 12:28-29).

Shake-down

*Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies;
your right hand will seize your foes.*

⁶ Calvin, Psalms, 345.

⁷ Calvin, Psalms, 348.

⁸ Ross, Psalms, 516

*When you appear for battle,
you will burn them up in a blazing furnace.
The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath,
and his fire will consume them.
You will destroy their descendants from the earth,
their posterity from mankind.
Though they plot evil against you and devise wicked schemes,
they cannot succeed.
You will make them turn their backs
when you aim at them with drawn bow.*

*Be exalted in your strength, Lord;
we will sing and praise your might.*

Psalm 21:8-13

The warning and the promise of God’s ultimate “shake-down” of the wicked runs through salvation history. The author of Hebrews recalls Israel’s post-exodus experience at Mount Sinai when the people were shaken to the core and Moses trembled with fear. If the Israelites were terrified at Mount Sinai, the terror will only be greater when God comes at the final judgment. “At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain” (Heb 12:26-27). He paraphrases the prophet Haggai to describe the final judgment as a violent shaking of heaven and earth. “To disobey the gospel incurs judgment more certain and terrible even than that incurred by disobedience to the law.”⁹

The violent shaking of the cosmos was not meant to shake the confidence of those who have come to Mount Zion, who belong to the church of the firstborn, and who are made righteous by Jesus the mediator of the new covenant. The pastor includes himself among the unshaken saints, who are destined for everlasting rest (Heb 4:3), in “the City with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

This final, ultimate judgment pictures the end of evil. And this end will be the cataclysmic end of everything that does not belong to the Kingdom of God. God’s hand will lay hold of his enemies. He will burn them up in a blazing fire. He will swallow them in his wrath and destroy their descendants. The psalmist grabs for graphic metaphors to describe the end of evil. This part of God’s character and this part of the story do not receive much attention these days in religious circles. Judgment gets poor reviews among those who admire Jesus and practice their religion. One wonders if the inability to believe in hell is not matched by the inability to believe in heaven.

Calvin believed that David has gone beyond describing a military victory. He “sets forth metaphorically the dreadful destruction which awaits all the adversaries of Christ. They may burn with rage against the Church, and set the world on fire by their cruelty, but when their

⁹ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 363.

wickedness shall have reached its highest pitch, there is this reward which God has in reserve for them, that he will cast them into his burning furnace to consume them.”¹⁰ Typologically, the extravagant language of the psalm “will be literally and historically fulfilled when the Messiah destroys all the wicked in the final judgment.”¹¹ The description of judgment in Psalm 21 fits the promise of Psalm 2: “You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them in pieces like pottery” (Ps 2:9).

No human power is capable of extinguishing evil in this manner and no one expected David to accomplish what is being described here. Only the Lord God can mount this kind of offensive against the wicked and David knew that. The psalm anticipates the greater Son of David coming to rule and reign, the one described in Psalm 2: “You are my son; today I have become your father” (Ps 2:7).

Echoes of Psalm 21 may be found in Paul’s letter to Thessalonica. He describes the Lord coming from heaven “in blazing fire” to “punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people . . .” (2 Thess 1:7b-10a). Until then, Calvin reasoned, “The great object which the Psalmist has in view is doubtless to teach us to exercise patience, until God, at the fit time, bring the ungodly to their end.”¹²

The final verse of Psalm 21 brings us full circle back to the strength of the Lord and singing songs of praise. Psalm 20 and 21 end on the same note of victory. The expectation and anticipation felt in Psalm 20, “Lord, give victory to the king! Answer us when we call!” has been boldly answered in Psalm 21, “Be exalted in your strength, Lord; we will sing and praise your might” (Ps 21:13).

¹⁰ Calvin, Psalms, 352.

¹¹ Ross, The Psalms, 517.

¹² Calvin, The Psalms, 355.