

By the grace of God David did everything in his power to pave the way for his son Solomon to become king. He secured Israel's borders, acquired plans and materials to build the temple, brought meaningful closure to his own rule (2 Sam 23:1-7), and he wrote this prayer for Solomon.¹ Psalm 72 completes the three psalm sequence that concludes Book II. The third panel in this worship triptych is a royal psalm. The people of God are led to pray for the king, specifically that the king will be endowed with God's justice and God's righteousness. They pray that the king will champion the cause of the poor and needy, that his reign will endure like the sun and moon, and that he will be honored among the nations and known for his compassion. The king who is blessed by God values the lives of the weak and needy and will deliver them from death. He will rescue the oppressed and afflicted. Honor and prosperity are built on God's justice and righteousness. The king who is a blessing to the nations honors the Lord God, the God of Israel, "who alone does marvelous deeds" (Ps 72:18).

David's prayer for Solomon points beyond his son to the one who is greater than Solomon. T. S. Eliot called this connection, the *objective correlative*, that is to say, the person and work of Jesus is the ultimate focus of the Psalms.² Christians are not dismissive of the first horizon of meaning, but a truly Jewish praying of the psalm is bound to see the Messiah in its petitions. Jesus, the Son of David, is essentially who and what the Psalms are about. Jesus said as much to disciples, when he said, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Jesus is the true connection and correlation between petition and prophecy, promise and fulfillment. The idealism of Psalm 72 points beyond "the experience of any king in Israel's history but harmonizes with the prophecies of the anticipated glorious reign of the Messiah."³

Even the ambiguity of the tenses supports both petition and prophecy. In Hebrew the imperfect verb tense which is used throughout Psalm 72 can be translated either as a future action or a wished for action.⁴ The psalm can be both, a royal coronation psalm and/or a royal messianic psalm. The opening imperative, "O God, give the king your justice," is followed by a series of imperfects "which can be translated into English either as future tenses (predictions, 'he will') or as jussives [petitions] (prayers, 'may he')."⁵ David's prayer for his son Solomon and the Spirit's prophecy of the coming King of kings and Lord of lords are one in the same – a fitting testimony to the Incarnate One.

Once when debating the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus said that "the Queen of the

¹ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 95. Greidanus writes, "The superscription 'Of Solomon' or 'For Solomon' signals the editor's hint to read the psalm against the background of Solomon's reign (1 Kings 1-10)." Ross, *Psalms*, 532. Ross writes, "The superscription attributes it to Solomon, although the translation of the superscription in Greek and Syriac versions interpret it as a prayer for Solomon, or a prayer where Solomon is the object."

² James W. Sire, *Praying the Psalms of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 31.

³ Ross, *Psalms*, 533.

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 131. Alter writes, "The prayer of the first two lines that God grant the king a sound sense of justice quickly glides, after a brief glance at nature, into a series of optatives attached to the king. The optatives, however become almost at once a predictive portrait of the utopian monarch. . ."

⁵ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 96.

South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42). This gives us a good idea as to how Jesus prayed Psalm 72. He prayed it in line with how the prophets prayed the Psalm (Isaiah 11:4-5; 61:1-3; Zechariah 9:10).

God’s Justice

*Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.
May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.
May the mountains bring prosperity to the people,
the hills the fruit of righteousness.
May he defend the afflicted among the people
and save the children of the needy;
may he crush the oppressor.
May he endure as long as the son,
as long as the moon, through all generations.
May he be like rain falling on a mown field,
like showers watering the earth.
In his days may the righteous flourish
and prosperity abound till the moon is no more.*

Psalm 72:1-7

God is addressed at the beginning and at the end of this God-centered psalm yet the focus of the psalm is on the king. In Hebrew the psalm literally begins, “O God” (elohim) and finishes with, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who does marvelous deeds.” The relationship between God and king parallels the relationship between “the One enthroned in heaven” and “my son” in Psalm 2. These two royal-messianic psalms form an inclusio for Book I and Book II. Everything that is related to the king is of God; God’s justice, God’s righteousness, God’s people, God’s afflicted ones. Without God the king has nothing, is nothing. He has no purpose, no means, no people. Even the many references to nature and to the nations assume the superintending sovereign will of God. Psalm 72 is a prayer “that through God’s righteous king, God’s peaceable kingdom may spread to the ends of the earth.”⁶

The opening petition prays for the king to be endowed with justice and righteousness, but not just any brand of social justice, the prayer is for the king to execute God’s justice and God’s righteousness. The petition recalls Solomon’s prayer for wisdom, when he humbled himself before the Lord and asked for a “discerning heart” so that he might distinguish between right and wrong and govern the people of God with justice (1 Kings 3:7-9). “If the king is God’s representative, he must think like God.”⁷ His moral authority depends upon implementing God’s justice and God’s righteousness. National security, political stability, economic prosperity, and

⁶ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 107.

⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, 536.

human flourishing all depend upon the wisdom and justice of God. It is not difficult for Christians to see the correlation between David's petition and the apostle's exhortation in Romans 13. Paul appealed to believers to submit to the governing authorities because they were "God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4). The biblical focus on social justice runs through the Law and the Prophets with a special emphasis on the vulnerable who are often denied justice by the powerful. The measure of a king and the validity of a government is determined by how well the poor and needy, the oppressed and afflicted, are defended and championed.

The call to justice is rooted in the Bible and came long before a king ruled over Israel. According to the word of the Lord the blessing of God's provision for the people of God was sufficient so that "there need be no poor people among you" (Deut 15:4). However, "if anyone is poor among you," the responsibility is clear, "do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need" (Deut 15:7). The people were responsible for one another. The needy were to be cared for generously, "without a grudging heart" and the Lord promised to bless the generosity of the people "in everything you put your hand to" (Deut 15:10). In God's economy there was sufficient supply to meet the need, but such were the troubles and trials of the human condition that the Lord concluded, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land" (Deut 15:11).

In keeping with Psalm 72 the prophets emphasized social justice on behalf of the poor and needy. Jeremiah declared the word of the Lord, "Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor." Instead of defending the cause of the poor and needy, Jeremiah accused the wealthy and powerful of oppression and extortion (Jeremiah 22:13-17). David's prayer for Solomon sets the precedent for our prayers. Judging from Psalm 72 free enterprise capitalism and national security should not be a nation's number one priority. Unless the poor and needy are cared for we are no better than Israel's wicked kings. The prophet Amos railed against the complacent in Israel who loved their religious festivals and oppressed the poor. "Away with the noise of your songs!" shouted Amos. "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:23-24).

The psalmist's "beautiful picture of the barren mountains waving with an abundance of grain" depends on the king pursuing justice and righteousness.⁸ Economic prosperity, social stability, and human flourishing are the fruit of seeking justice and not the other way around. Saving the children of the needy and crushing the oppressor are not endeavors undertaken after prosperity has been achieved. Wisdom, not wealth, empowers a just society. If social justice is perceived as an optional luxury made affordable by a prosperous economy, it will never happen.

Psalm 73 suggests that in spite of Solomon's prayer for wisdom, his administration was not known for justice and righteousness. David's prayer finds its fulfillment in the coming of Immanuel ("God with us") and Mary sang about Jesus, the Anointed One. The Son of the Most

⁸ Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Psalms, 111.

High will scatter the proud, bring down rulers, lift up the humble, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty (Luke 1:51-53). Jesus commenced his public ministry in Nazareth in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. He began by reading the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1,2). Typological fulfillment and messianic prophecy converged in the one who was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).⁹

Calvin warned against interpreting Psalm 72 “simply as a prophecy of the kingdom of Christ,” but he goes on to defend a typological interpretation of the psalm. Calvin argued that David the author of the psalm knew that the ultimate successor of the kingdom’s power and dominion was Christ. David and his posterity were “only a type or shadow” of the coming kingdom that was “far superior” to his rule and reign. The “everlasting dominion” of this coming kingdom would realize its “complete accomplishment in Christ.”¹⁰

God’s Kingdom

*May he rule from sea to sea
and from the River [the Euphrates] to the ends of the earth.
May the desert tribes bow before him
and his enemies lick the dust.
May the kings of Sheba and Seba
present him gifts.
May all kings bow down to him
and all nations serve him.
For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.
He will take pity on the weak and the needy
and save the needy from death.
He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight.*

Psalm 72:8-14

The impact of the Anointed One’s just and righteous rule is described in three ways. Nature’s amazing productivity is evidence of God’s blessing. Even the mountains reap an abundant harvest because of the king’s just rule (Ps 72:3, 6,7, 16). Secondly, the king’s righteous reign

⁹ Calvin, Psalms, 100. Calvin’s insistence on the historical-grammatical method dissuaded him from a messianic interpretation of Psalm 72. Calvin writes, “Those who would interpret it simply as a prophecy of the kingdom of Christ, seem to put a construction upon the words which does violence to them; and then we must always beware of giving the Jews occasion of making an outcry, as if it were our purpose, sophistically, to apply to Christ those things which do not directly refer to him.” Two aspects of Calvin’s warning stand out: first, his criticism of those who interpret Psalm 72 “simply as prophecy” is something of a straw man argument against the redemptive-historical method; second, his concern over the Jewish outcry against a messianic interpretation may evidence his commendable sensitivity but his typological interpretation may prove equally distasteful to Jewish sensibilities.

¹⁰ Calvin, Psalms, 100.

endures forever. His name is as permanent as the sun and moon (Ps 72:5, 17). Thirdly, all the nations of the world will bow down and serve him. The global reach of the king's glorious judgment stretches from sea to sea. Universal homage is given to him from far flung nomadic tribes and desert tribes as well as western coastal nations and nations from the east. Finally, God's covenant promise to Abraham made long ago will be fulfilled through the reign of this righteous king and "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3; Ps 72:17).

Once again the psalmist emphasizes that the hallmark of the king's rule is compassion for the needy and social justice. The king's power is used on behalf of the powerless (Ps 72:12-14). He delivers the needy, helps the afflicted, shows compassion to the weak, saves the needy from death, and rescues the oppressed. The lives of the poor and afflicted are precious in his sight.

Jesus fulfills this primary description of the righteous king. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3), he drew on the Old Testament understanding of the poor and needy, as those who turn to God in prayer, acknowledge their great need and seek his help. The Psalms shape the meaning of Jesus' Beatitude: "I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me....The poor will see and be glad—you who seek God, may your hearts live! The Lord hears the needy and does not despise his captive people" (Psalm 69:29,32). The poor acknowledge their desperate need for God and their inability to merit salvation.

God's Glory

*Long may he live!
May gold from Sheba be given him,
May people ever pray for him
and bless him all day long.
May grain abound throughout the land;
on the tops of the hills may it sway.
May the crops flourish like Lebanon
and thrive like the grass of the field.
May his name endure forever;
may it continue as long as the sun.
Then all the nations will be blessed through him,
and they will call him blessed.*

*Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel,
who alone does marvelous deeds.
Praise be to his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and Amen*

*This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.
Psalm 72:15-20*

The psalmist's description of global peace, human flourishing, and international reverence for the God of Israel is extraordinary and offers an eschatological climax to the deliverance psalms of Book II. We can hardly imagine the end of evil and the blessing of enduring shalom, but the New Testament takes the psalmist's images and metaphors and translates them into the redemptive-historical fulfillment accomplished in Jesus Christ. We hear echoes of Psalm 72 in Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:54-55; Ps 72:11), and in Zechariah's song (Luke 1:72-72; Ps 72:17), and in the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-2; Ps 72:11). Psalm 72 anticipates the dawning age of the Gentiles (John 12:20-23) and on Palm Sunday Jesus foreshadowed the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy quoted from Psalm 72, "He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Zech 9:10; Ps 72:8). Psalm 72 celebrates the "living hope" in "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade . . . that is ready to be revealed at the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5), when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).

Psalm 72 inspires and instructs the people of God to pray earnestly for the coming of Christ. Our prayer should be "Come, Lord Jesus, Come!" And in the meantime we pray for our rulers. We pray for the administration of God's social justice, that the priorities celebrated in this psalm would shape out political agenda. May we rescue the poor, help the children of the needy, and crush cruel tyrants (Ps 72:4, The Message). As God's "chosen people" we are not meant to divide along ethnic, cultural, racial, social, gender, and generational lines. We are founded solely on Jesus Christ. This solidarity transcends sociological and psychological compatibility. It is the house of the Spirit, built by the Father on the cornerstone of the Son. This is not only a spiritual identity, but a political identity. The people of God are drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9). Christ's redemption destroys ethnic privilege and pride of race. No person, group, race, tribe, nation or nations has the right to feel morally superior to others. The identity, calling, solidarity, and significance of the people of God is not based on ethnicity, family, heritage, or merit, but on Christ's atoning once-and-for-all sacrifice.

Book II ends in doxology, a closing blessing to "the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds." The psalmist's "Amen and Amen," expresses a resounding "Yes and Yes and Yes" (Ps 72:19, The Message). Inspired by Psalm 72, Isaac Watts wrote,

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does its successive journeys run;
His kingdom spread from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

People and realms of every tongue
Dwell on His love with sweetest song,
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on His name.