

December 25, 2022

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

Psalm 72

*(8 of 12 in a series of selected Psalms)*

This morning we sang the song, “What child is this?” as we reflected on the glorious reality that God the Son took on flesh and came into the world as a baby. And we rightly answered in that song, saying, “This is Christ the King.” He is the one that was promised by God and prophesied about in the Old Testament who would come and reign. But one thing we can miss at times is how clearly the Old Testament writers spoke of these things.

For example, we know that David saw quite clearly that God would establish one of his descendants to live and reign forever. Peter tells us on the day of Pentecost that when David wrote about God not letting his Holy One see corruption in Psalm 16, he wrote that as a prophet, “knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne” and he “spoke about the resurrection of the Christ” (Acts 2:30-31). But it’s not just in Psalm 16 that David spoke prophetically nor only then that he let us see that he knew an eternal and universal king would come from his line. We see it right after God made the promise to him in 2 Samuel 7.

In that chapter, the Lord had said to David, “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (vv. 12-13). So, God was promising David that the family reign wouldn’t stop with him. He’d raise up a son to be king of Israel after him, and then one after him, and so on and so forth. But David knew that the Lord was saying something more to him than, “I’ll replace one son with another and on and on.” We know that because David offered a prayer of gratitude for this promise from God, and he said in that prayer, “You have spoken also of your servant’s house for a great while to come, and this is instruction for mankind, O Lord GOD!” (2 Sam 7:19).

Now, we can easily miss the weight of those words, but it is with those words that David is showing us that he understands what the Lord had just promised. You see, David was the king of Israel, and so if God was simply promising to give him continual descendants who would reign over Israel, then David could say, “This is instruction for Israel.” That is to say, “Listen up, Israel, my sons will be your kings.” It would be like if the Pharaoh were promised that his sons would continue to be Pharaoh over Egypt, then he could say, “This is instruction for all of Egypt.” But David doesn’t do that. He doesn’t say, “This is instruction for all of Israel.” He says, “This is instruction for *all mankind*.” Why?

It’s because David knows that the one God promised to raise up from his line to reign as king wasn’t simply going to reign over Israel. He was going to reign over the whole world. That’s why this was something not simply that all Israelites needed to take note of, but all of mankind. And as a prophet, David (and others) kept sounding this note that a king would come from his line

who would reign forever over the whole world. It's why we read in Psalm 2 that the ends of the earth would be the king's possession and the nations his heritage. And it's why we have Psalm 72 written as it is, which we're going to look at this morning.

Psalm 72 is known as a royal psalm in that it is clearly a psalm about the king. Much of it is a prayer for the king, as you can see in verse 1: "Give the king your justice, O God." But what's odd about the psalm is that many of the prayers or statements about the king go way beyond what any king in Israel's history would have experienced. For example, in verse 8 we read, "May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!" This is a reference to a worldwide reign, and not even David or Solomon experienced anything close to that. If we were to pray that for our local mayor, for example, someone would probably stop us and remind us of the restricted jurisdiction our mayor has. So why does Psalm 72 pray for things that go way beyond what the kings in Israel's history experienced or even hoped for?

Well, here's where we have to remember how David understood God's promises and so often wrote prophetically. After all, we've already seen that David knew that the king that God promised to raise up from his line would reign over the whole world (as we've noted from 2 Sam 7:19 and Psalm 2:8). And we know that other Old Testament texts that sound just like this were prophetic. In other words, many texts speak of what a king would do, but those realities would only be fulfilled in Jesus. Remember, for example, when Jesus came into Jerusalem on a donkey and Matthew said, "This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, 'Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden"' (Matt 21:4-5). Well, that's a quote from Zechariah 9:9. Matthew is telling us that when the prophet prophesied in Zechariah 9:9, saying, "Behold, your king is coming to you," he was prophesying about Jesus. That text was speaking not about what any of David's immediate sons would do but what his distant and promised son, Jesus, would do.

Well, if we recognize that reality about Zechariah 9:9, then listen to the very next verse in that chapter. Zechariah continues, "His rule shall be from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth." Again, that makes sense. Jesus' reign is universal. But did you notice that this is almost a verbatim quote of Psalm 72:8, where the psalmist writes, "May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth"? So if Zechariah 9:10 is a prophecy of Jesus and what his reign would be like, then it seems pretty clear that the same thing is going on in Psalm 72.

Therefore, as we come to this psalm, we know it's about Christ, but its authorship is a little more tricky. Psalm 72 is either a psalm written by David, speaking as a prophet as he prays for his son but ultimately pictures the reign of Christ or a psalm written by Solomon, echoing what he heard from his father, David. Let's consider each of those possibilities. If David is the author, then we should recognize that the superscript "of Solomon" could be translated "for Solomon," and so David wrote it as one of his prayers in book two of the psalter (as verse 20 notes that this is the last of them in this book). Or, it could be written by Solomon, who was taught by his father David that about this promised king to come and he writes accordingly (as the superscript tells us, while verse 20 simply means that this is the end of book two of the psalter—a book which

contains a number of prayers by David). But either way, it's not as important as recognizing this psalm is ultimately about Jesus and about what he will be like as our king.

So, this morning, as we sing about and celebrate that God brought his king into the world, recognizing that the child in the manger was Christ the King, let's look at Psalm 72 and celebrate what our king is like. As we see the prayers for what an ideal king would be, let's recognize that this ideal king has come. He is our king. He is Jesus. And this is what he is like. First, we see that he is a righteous king.

### **Jesus is the righteous king**

As the psalm begins, the prayer concerns the righteousness of the king. We read in verses 1-4, "Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice! . . . May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and to crush the oppressor!"

One of the great tragedies in the reign of any king is when he acts in unrighteousness and rules with injustice. Oftentimes the king will favor those who can help him, so those who suffer injustice are the poor and needy and the despised of society (like children) because they have nothing to offer in return for the king's favor. And a vile king will let abuse take place, simply watching the oppressor oppress others unhindered.

Therefore, the psalmist prays for God's king to be nothing like that but to be just and righteous, which is a reminder to us that this is precisely what Jesus is like. He always judges justly. He reaches out and cares for those who have nothing to offer and lavishes his care on them. And one day he'll crush every enemy of his people—including Satan, sin, and death itself.

As we live in this world that feels like it is filled with so much injustice—some that some of you have known very personally—just know that Jesus is reigning at God's right hand, and one day we'll see the complete effects of his reign as we see justice perfectly fulfilled.

Our Christmas celebration shouldn't stop with recognizing God the Son took on flesh and was born of the virgin. We sang earlier, "Glory to the newborn king," and so at Christmas we need to consider and celebrate what it means for us that Christ is king—that he is reigning and will one day fully manifest his reign. It means for us that he is the righteous king who will one day come and destroy Satan, sin, and death and save his people. For many, the holidays bring up painful memories of loss we've suffered, but this is why we mourn in hope. Christ is our righteous king, and he is coming to make all things right. Second, we see that he is the eternal king.

### **Jesus is the eternal king**

As the psalm continues, note how the prayer is for the king's reign to know no end. We read, "May they fear you while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!"

May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth! In his days may the righteous flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more!" (vv. 5-7).

By using the imagery of being like rain that falls on mown grass and showers that water the earth, we see the idea that the king brings nourishment and refreshment to his people, but the theme that rings throughout these verses is that the king's reign lasts forever. We see phrases like, "while the sun endures," "as long as the moon," "throughout all generations," and "till the moon be no more." Obviously if a king reigns "while the sun endures" and "throughout all generations," the idea is that he reigns forever.

And obviously there is no king in Israel's history that reigned forever—nor that you would want them to reign forever, for that matter. But David knew (and would have taught Solomon) that the covenant promise God made to him required that one of his sons would live forever and reign forever. That's why he was able to write in Psalm 16 that the Lord would not allow his holy one to see corruption. He was prophesying about Jesus being raised from the dead. So, the one that came into the world and was born of the virgin is reigning now at God's right hand, and he'll reign forever. As we hope in him, we don't have to worry about another overtaking him or him not being able to fulfill his promises. He will reign forever. He is the eternal king. Third, Jesus is the king of all.

### **Jesus is the king of all**

In verses 8-11 the expansive nature of the king's reign becomes the focus. We read, "May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! May desert tribes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!"

Again, I need not say that no king in Israel's history saw anything near this, as this is clearly only fulfilled in Jesus. Let's take the elements. As prayer is made for him to have dominion from sea to sea and all nations serve him, that shows that his reign is boundless. Then, when we see his enemies bow before him, licking the dust, and others bringing him gifts of tribute, the idea is that everyone will honor him as the king of all. Those who might despise him will still acknowledge he rules over them as they bow before him. Those who cherish him will make that clear by bringing him gifts. This reminds you of the promise of Philippians 2:10-11 where we're told that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Some will do it gladly, as he is their cherished Lord, while others may do it begrudgingly as they are ready to face their judgment. But all will bow. All will recognize that he is Lord. And he is Lord over all, which Jesus made clear when he said in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." This is also why as we celebrate the incarnation at Christmas, we should also remember our mission as a church to make disciples of all nations. That's our mission because Christ is the king of all nations and deserves the devotion and trust of all peoples. He is the king over all. Fourth, he is the king who saves.

## **Jesus is the king who saves**

As if it's not enough that the psalmist prays for a king who is righteous, reigns forever, and reigns over all, he also prays that the king will save. In verses 12-14 he writes, "For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak, and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight."

I know that the U.S. is not a monarchy, so we're not accustomed to the rule of a king in our day-to-day lives. But can you imagine being ruled over by a king who responded to the needy when he called out for help, who looked for those who have no one representing their interests and cared for them, who pitied the weak, saved the lives of the needy, and rescued those who were being exposed to violence because his people meant so much to him? Brothers and sisters, this is a glimpse into who our Lord Jesus is as our king. What the psalmist is idealizing and praying for is in reality who our king is. He sees and knows, and one day he'll save—fully—because he cherishes us as his people who are precious to him. That's who was born in Bethlehem, and that's why Christmas is such a glorious moment. Finally, we see that he is the king who brings blessings to his people.

## **Jesus is the king who brings blessings to his people**

As the prayer continues in verses 15-17, you'll notice more of the themes we've seen before about the king reigning forever, etc. But you'll also note how the people and land prosper under his reign. The text reads, "Long may he live; may gold of Sheba be given to him! May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all the day! May there be abundance of grain in the land; on the tops of the mountains may it wave; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field! May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed!"

You can see it there. His glorious reign means grain in the land and people blossoming in the cities. People are blessed in him. Throughout the Bible you see a connection between the blessing of the people and their land under the king. We see it with Adam. He is set on the earth and all things are put under his dominion, as he is the king. Yet his sin ushers in a reign of death over everything. Because of Adam's sin all of us are born sinfully corrupt and condemned, we have the ground yielding thorns and thistles, and death is everywhere. Paul even tells us that the reason the world right now is going through earthquakes, famines, drought, and the like is because it's crying out for its king to reign over it. We also see this throughout Israel's history. The king would sin or lead the people to sin, and the people would fall under judgment and suffering and the land would suffer and not bring forth fruit.

But there's a positive side to this as well. What would happen if a perfectly righteous and good king came along? The earth would be renewed. The people would dwell in righteousness and blessing. That's what verses 15-17 are envisioning, and this is what happens in Jesus. Because he reigns right now we who have faith in him have already been credited with his righteousness,

but when he returns to manifest his reign fully, the earth itself will be made new and we will be glorified, given imperishable, incorruptible bodies. As the king goes, so goes the people and the land. And that is good news as we remind ourselves once more this time of year that the child in the manger is Christ the king. As we give “glory to the newborn king,” let’s remind ourselves that he comes to make all things new. All in him and even this creation itself will be blessed when he manifests his reign fully.

As David or Solomon wrote this psalm, they knew that only God could bring this about. It was going to take a miracle. None of Israel’s kings was picturing this ideal painted in Psalm 72. Really none were coming close. Yet, they knew it would indeed come. This is why the psalm ends with verses 18-19 saying, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen!”

The psalmist knew that God could bring about this king. And eventually he did. One night in Bethlehem, a virgin gave birth to a son, and they wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger. And a multitude of angels appeared in the sky saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14) because they knew who this child was. This was God’s promised king. This was the ideal king that the Old Testament keeps telling us we need and keeps telling us is coming. He has come. And so we rejoice and remember his coming and worship him as the one who lived, died, was raised, and is reigning for us.

I know this world feels like a very chaotic and sorrowful place. And indeed it is full of sorrows. After all, we do not yet see the effect of our king putting all things under his feet and manifesting his reign fully. But don’t be deceived. He is the king. He has come. And one day he’ll come again and we’ll experience eternal life under the glorious reign of our perfect king. Until then, let’s give thanks that he has come and that he’s redeemed us as we come to the table. Amen.