

August 23, 2020

A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND HOPE

Psalm 21

(5 of 8 in a series of selected Psalms)

As I was mowing the other day, I decided I would listen to Andrew Peterson's album, *Behold the Lamb of God*. I pulled it up on my phone, pushed play, and set off. And it didn't take me too long to realize that something was wrong. The problem is that it was on shuffle mode, where it plays each of the songs in the album in a random order. And though you might be fine doing that with other albums, you can't do that with this one. The reason, of course, is because the songs are arranged in a certain order to tell a story—a story that takes you from the OT to the birth of Christ. Sure, each individual song can be enjoyed on its own, but the fullness of each song's intent is only seen when you understand its place within the arrangement of the others songs on the album.

I've mentioned this numerous times, but I think the same is true with the Psalter—the book of Psalms that we find positioned roughly in the middle of our Bibles. Like the songs on Andrew Peterson's album, each psalm can be enjoyed on its own, but I think their edifying nature is even greater when we understand that this book of psalms has a particular arrangement so that the placement of each psalm provides greater clarity for why each of the psalms was not only written but placed where they are. And though I've mentioned that I don't know why each psalm is placed where it is, I do think we can understand the placement of some of them, and I think that Psalm 21 is one such psalm. And that's where I want to start this morning as we look at this psalm—by looking at its placement within the Psalter itself.

We're familiar with Psalms 1-2 as those psalms which introduce the Psalter. And they introduce it with two themes—God's Word and God's king. And I think there's a glorious reason for this that I'll mention in a second, but let me first move on to Psalm 21 because we're going to see the same themes all around this psalm.

First, though we're only looking at Psalm 21 this morning, a number of commentators argue that Psalms 20-21 should be seen as a united pair of psalms.¹ We see the people expressing prayer for God to save David as he goes into battle in Psalm 20 and the people rejoicing because God has answered prayer and spared David in Psalm 21. Therefore, Psalms 20-21 are a united pair.

Second, Psalms 15-24 are arranged within the Psalter to form a chiasmic structure. Now, just by way of reminder, a chiasm is a structure of arranging something where the starting point and the

¹ See, for example, Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Psalms 1-41*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011), 509; Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 193; Jamie Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 104-19.

ending point line up, and so does the second point and next to last point, and so on and so forth. And it's called a chiasm—the Greek letter that resembles an “X”—because if you diagram the structure of this arrangement, it looks like one side of an “X.” Let me show you what I mean as we outline the structure of Psalm 15-24. I think you can diagram these grouping of psalms as follows:

- 15 – An entrance psalm
 - 16 – A psalm of comfort
 - 17 – A psalm of lament
 - 18 – A royal psalm (about the king)
 - 19 – A psalm on the Word of God
 - 20-21 – A royal psalm (about the king)
 - 22 – A psalm of lament
 - 23 – A psalm of comfort
- 24 – An entrance psalm

Now, when you find a chiasm, it's often the case that the author is pointing you toward the middle of the structure as the emphasis in his design. We often build up toward the conclusion as an emphasis in our writing, but in this Hebrew poetic structure it builds toward the middle. And at the very middle is the glory of the Word of God—the very text that we read to open our service last week—where the Lord tells us that his Word is more desirable than God and sweeter than honey. And just next to that you see these psalms about the king trusting in the Lord.

In other words, right in the middle of this arrangement of psalms, we're brought right back to the themes that were given to us in the introduction to the Psalter, with Psalms 1-2—God's Word and God's king. Now, why would the book of psalms not only bring us into the book with these themes but then focus on them again with Psalms 18-21? I think the reason has to do with the promise of God and the setting in which the psalms were put together.

The promise I have in mind is found in 2 Samuel 7 when God made a covenant with David that he would always have a son reigning on the throne. Now, this either meant that David's son would be replaced by David's grandson and so on and so forth, world without end, or it meant that one of David's sons would live forever. And option one was eventually eliminated because many of David's descendants lived as wicked kings.

You see, according to Deuteronomy 17:14-20, as each of David's sons took the throne, he should've written out a copy of the law in a book, read it all the days of his life, and carefully obeyed every commandment. But none of them were utterly righteous and many of them terribly wicked so that God eventually judged the nation, conquering them at the hands of the Babylonians and exiling them from their home. And even when they were eventually allowed to come back home, nothing was the same, and there wasn't a powerful descendant of David, reigning on the throne. In other words, the only option to fulfill the promise of God was for God to raise up one of David's descendants who would reign forever because he would live forever.

And it's in that time—after the exile and the disappointing return to Jerusalem—that the psalms are put together, arranged in the particular way that we find them.

So, why introduce the book of Psalms with Psalms 1-2 (about God's Word and God's king) and then bring us back to focus on these themes again in Psalms 15-24 (especially 18-21)? I think it's because God is giving the reader of the Psalms two messages: 1) I will fulfill my promise, and the King that I am bringing to live forever will not be like the kings you've seen but will obey my Word perfectly, and 2) as the design was for my people to imitate their righteous king, so my people should do as the promised king will do—obey my Word.²

Therefore, when we come to Psalm 21, we're reminded of the glory of Jesus Christ—God's promised King who is perfectly righteous—and what he has done for us, and we're also urged to imitate the righteous behavior of the king that is pictured for us here. We're to imitate the godly behavior of the king in this psalm. So what then do we see in Psalm 21? We see David giving the Israelites words to thank God for answered prayers as he's preserved their king in battle. We see them, then, both giving thanks and walking in confident hope that God is faithful. And those are the notes that I want us to imitate as well. Let's take them one at a time.

Giving thanks for answered prayers

As I've noted, Psalm 21 is basically the second half of Psalm 20. And Psalm 20 is filled with petitions to the Lord for the king. The people ask the Lord to answer the king, protect him, send him help, show him favor, and grant him his heart's desire. Psalm 21 then begins with a declaration about the king rejoicing and giving thanks because God has answered his prayers. We see this in the first six verses as we read, "O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices, and in your salvation how greatly he exults! You have given him his heart's desire and have not withheld the request of his lips. For you meet him with rich blessings; you set a crown of fine gold upon his head. He asked life of you; you gave it to him, length of days forever and ever. His glory is great through your salvation; splendor and majesty you bestow on him. For you make him most blessed forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence" (vv. 1-6).

Now, one thing you see through this is that the people have a biblical worldview where they understand that every good and perfect gift comes from above (James 1:17). Therefore, when David goes into a battle and then comes out on the other side alive, they acknowledge that God had done this. God gave him life. God blessed him. God bestowed on his glory and salvation. God is the one due praise. I'll come back to a phrase at the end of verse 4 ultimately, but the first six verses are straightforward—requests were made, answers to those requests have been given, and now praise to God is due.

But I think we can all acknowledge that as clear and straightforward as this progression from request to answer to thanksgiving and praise is, it's not easily imitated in our lives, is it? The

²This point is made by Jamie Grant, *The King as Exemplar*, 289.

temptation not to give thanks when it is due to God is actually quite great. Now, by that I don't mean that we find ourselves in a position of thinking, "I refuse to thank God for what we has done." That's surely not the temptation. The temptation not to give thanks, rather, is due to two things. First, we can feel a lack of urgency in giving thanks. When we make petitions, they are often accompanied with a sense of urgency. Our child is sick, and so we pray for healing. We've lost our job, and so we plead for another. We desperately feel a need, and with urgency and tears we make our requests known to God. There isn't a need for someone standing over our shoulder telling us to pray. We are desperate. The need is urgent, and we feel it.

But when the prayer is answered the urgency to give thanks isn't quite so great, is it? This isn't to say that we may not recognize the need to give thanks, but we don't feel it as urgently. Once the crisis is averted, it's hard to feel as desperate to give thanks as you were to plead with God to get you out of the crisis. But that lack of urgency isn't all there is working against us. There's also the creeping nature of other needs that find their way into your field of vision. In other words, you pray for God's provision, having no idea how your child will go to college, only to get word that there's a scholarship. But then instead of giving thanks, you instantly think, "Well, I'm glad that need is met, but I'm going to have other kids that want to go to college as well and there are simply the needs of living, and how will I pay for . . ." and on and on it goes. Thus, our attention is diverted from giving thanks back to the need at hand.

So because we don't feel the need to give thanks as urgently and because other needs can press themselves into our minds the very second the Lord provides for us, we must discipline ourselves to give thanks, ensuring that thankfulness is not only part of our lives but that it gets the full weight that it is due.

Do you see what Psalm 21 represents? David takes the time to write out this psalm of thanksgiving so that the people might be given words to give thanks to the Lord. He knows it's important. He knows the people need to be instructed and trained in giving thanks. And so he doesn't simply take time to write out a psalm of petition—Psalm 20—but a psalm of thanksgiving—Psalm 21.

Let us be a people who discipline ourselves to give thanks to God just as we make our requests to God. Maybe we want to start taking up a practice of having members of our family share what they are thankful, as they recognize the Lord's grace, as we sit around the dinner table. Let's be a people who pray that God would work into our hearts such a deep sense of thankfulness to our God that we find ourselves as desperate to give him thanks as we do to make our petitions.

A number of years ago we started celebrating communion every week as a church. I was honestly a bit hesitant. I didn't want our eating of the bread and drinking of the juice to become monotonous or something I didn't treasure. But we began weekly communion around 2002. Then, in 2007 I went to Louisville for two years while on sabbatical, and Lili and I attended a church we really treasured there. Then I found something surprising the first Sunday we were there. After a great sermon, we simply sang and left. We didn't come to the table. Now what

was surprising wasn't that we didn't have communion. I realize our practice isn't common. It was that I felt lacking in my heart without it. In other words, my taking of this meal every Sunday for five years had created an appetite in me to remember the Lord, give thanks to him, and proclaim his death as my hope each Sunday to such an extent that I felt empty and out of sorts without it. That's my prayer for us with regard to thanksgiving. May we develop such a continual practice of giving thanks in our lives that we develop an appetite so that if we find ourselves empty and out of sorts if it's not a regular feature in our lives.

And it is when we pray and then thank God that it develops another needed practice in our lives—trusting the Lord and living in hope.

Trusting the Lord and living in confident hope

One thing we note as we continue in the psalm is that this pattern of prayer followed by praise and thanksgiving to God for answered prayers has developed a knowledge of God in David's heart that has led the king to trust the Lord. He says in verse 7, "For the king trusts in the LORD, and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved."

Note the development here. First, we have prayer and thanksgiving. Then, David trusts in the Lord because he is aware of God's steadfast love. And finally, that trust in God's steadfast love leads him to walk forward in hope, knowing that God will hold him and not let him go. In other words, one of the reasons for prayer and thanksgiving is so that we might not miss the heart and character of our God.

In the second century, Polycarp—a personal friend and pupil of the apostle, John—was about to be burned at the stake for his allegiance to Christ. But he was eighty-six years old, and so the one threatening him was pleading with him to forsake Christ so that his life may be spared. But Polycarp responded, "'Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'"³ That's what David is reflecting here. He has known and seen the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness, and he trusts him. This, in turn, leads him to live with certain hope in God's promises. That's why, I believe, verse 4 says, "He asked life of you; you gave it to him, length of days forever and ever." David knows that God has promised him that one of his descendants would reign forever, so he's not simply thanking God for preserving his life through the battle but is trusting him to fulfill every promise he has made. He knows God's faithful heart.

This then leads David—knowing God's faithfulness and love and trustworthiness—to reason that God will sustain him in future battles as well so that he will not be cut off from the throne. That's what we're reading in verses 8-13. The psalm reflects David's trust that God will "find out those who hate [him] . . . swallow them up in his wrath and . . . consume them . . . destroy their descendants from the earth . . . put them to flight . . . [and] aim at their faces with [his] bows."

³ Shulz, Klaus and Robert Clause, et al., eds. *The Church from Age to Age*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 93.

Admittedly, it is a violent and furious picture, but we must understand a few things. First, David was Israel's king, leading them into battle against their enemies. Preserving David required destroying his enemies, and saving God's people meant destroying God's enemies. This is what we see in the exodus from Egypt and throughout the Old Testament. Second, it is an expression of the Lord's compassion for his people that we see as he leads them in conquest over their enemies. We're going to see this more when we get to the book of Judges, but when God raised up a leader in Israel to conquer their enemies, we're told "For the LORD was moved to pity" (Judges 2:18) for his people. God judging the enemies of his people is a demonstration of his compassion and love for his people.

And, brothers and sisters, the same is true for us. We live in world where we see the effects of Satan, sin, and death like crazy. Every day is filled with stories of violence carried out in the midst of this world where Ephesians 2 tells us that those outside of Christ are following the course of this world and the prince of the power of the air. But one day the Lord will put an end to all of this. One day the Lord will return, and every enemy will be put down. Satan, sin, and death will be judged and will be no more. There'll be no more horrendous acts committed against children, or the unjust taking of life, or sex-trafficking, or any other form of wickedness. And that judgment of God's enemies will be both a reflection of his furious wrath against his enemies and of his warm and compassionate love for his people. Do you see how the latter demands the former?⁴

We see this most clearly in the cross. The cross was the crushing of Satan's head. It was a violent act against God's enemy. The author of Hebrews tells us that through death he destroyed the one who holds the power of death. His resurrection was an act of conquest over sin and death. And yet his death and resurrection is also the clearest act of God's love for us. If you doubt his love, look no further than the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul says that Christ "loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20), and Jesus is introduced in the book of Revelation as the one "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev 1:5).

Therefore, don't shrink back from this language of God's violence against his enemies—as we see in Psalm 21 or will see with the destruction of death itself—but rather recognize in it our Father's compassionate love for his people. And, as Aaron reminded us last week, live in light of

⁴ B. B. Warfield pictures this well, commenting on Jesus groaning at the tomb of Lazarus, prior to raising him. He writes, "Inextinguishable fury seizes upon him. . . . It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he has come into the world to destroy. . . . The raising of Lazarus thus becomes, not an isolated marvel, but . . . a decisive instance and open symbol of Jesus' conquest of death and hell. What John does for us . . . is to uncover for us the heart of Jesus as he wins for us our salvation. Not in cold unconcern, but in flaming wrath against the foe, Jesus smites in our behalf. He has not only saved us from the evils which oppress us; he has felt for and with us in our oppression, and under the impulse of these feelings has wrought out our redemption," *The Person and Work of Christ*, 117, quoted by Dane Ortlund in *Gentle and Lowly*, 111.

that hope. If Christ is returning to judge his enemies and bring final salvation to his people, then why would we hesitate to trust him through a life of obedience now?

And that's what this psalm teaches us. Jesus is the King who came and perfectly obeyed God's Word. He is the Christ. And we, as his people, are to live in a way that reflects his righteousness. Psalm 21 gives us one portrait of what that looks like. We live a life of thanksgiving for his answered prayers and of confident hope because we know that we can trust God's promises. And because of his faithfulness, we can say with David, "Be exalted, O LORD, in your strength! We will sing and praise your power" (v. 13). May we do so now as we come to the table. Amen.