

In the Day of Trouble

Psalm 20

In Psalm 20 Israel needs help in the upcoming day of the trouble. We don't know which specific events provoked this psalm, but we know God gave it to us for all our days of trouble. Israel prays for their king and teaches us to pray for ours. And like all Scripture, this psalm points to Christ and was fulfilled by Him (Lk. 24:44).

Summary of the Text

Psalm 20 is an antiphonal conversation between the people and the king, praying obliquely to God in the form of a blessing (e.g. "May He send you help from the sanctuary" v. 2). It's helpful to understand the references of the pronouns: *you* (singular) occurs when the people address king David; *I* or *we* are used by the king to speak for himself or on behalf of the congregation/nation; *He* refers to the Lord and *him* to David. In the first section (vv.1-5), the congregation prays for David (vv.1-4) and then he responds by saying we will rejoice and raise our banners in God's name (v. 5a). The congregation begins the second section in verse 5b and David responds in verse 6. The third and final section in verses 7-9 is a chorus of faith that anticipates victory, concluding with a plea to God to save and answer.

Strength from Zion

In preparation for the days of trouble ahead, it's a great help to steep your mind in all the ways the Lord acts: He answers, defends, sends help from His sanctuary and strength from Zion; He remembers your gifts and receives your ascension offerings; He grants the desires of your heart and fulfills your purposes (vv. 1-4). Not a single verse of the Bible was written to you, but every verse was written for you. You are no earthly king or queen, but by God's adoption you are "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" (1 Pet. 2:9). The people pray for the name of the God of Jacob to defend the king. Why the name? The name was upon the people of Israel who were commanded not to *bear* His name in vain in the Third Commandment (Ex. 20:7). Taking God's name in vain verbally is part of this, but we bear His name in everything we do because we are identified as Christians by baptism and verbal profession of faith. God's people are the people of Jacob, those who wrestle with God and win. These prayers only work for David if he has been doing the things they cite: worshiping, giving, offering, putting his desires and plans before the Lord, praying to Him (vv. 3-5). So this is not a "rah-rah go our team because it's us" kind of prayer. They are asking God to be faithful to David as he has been and is being faithful, to show mercy to one who seeks God's mercy. The Lord has no obligation to do anything for us, but He delights to do everything. The prosperity gospel treats Him as a vending machine: in goes prayer or offering or good deeds, out comes stuff; name and claim, blab and grab. But faith knows the giver of all good gifts. He gave you the thing to offer in the first place, and He *remembers* that you gave back to Him. *Selah* means stop, consider, and meditate on what was just said. When we set our hearts on God and are directed by His word, we trust Him to fulfill all our desires. If this sounds like too much, take it from Jesus who told the Israelite multitudes: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). The default of the human heart is to trust in your stuff: money, possessions, position, ability. For nations it's economy, military, authority, human capital. David has all these things but doesn't *trust* in them. You can tell this by where he goes in the day of trouble and in the days before that day.

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Kings & All in Authority

We learn in this psalm to pray for the king, president, prime minister, governor or whoever the Lord has established above us. It's no different in the New Testament: "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *all men to be saved* and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4). What happens when God answers this prayer? Rulers bow the knee to Lord Jesus. Some Christians today are unaware that this has happened numerous times in history. But it should come as no surprise. God tells Abram he would be the father of a multitude of nations "and kings shall come from you" (Gen. 17:4, 6). Isaiah prophesies of the Gentiles who would come to Zion "and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Is. 60:3). We see this beginning to be fulfilled when wise men come from the east to honor the man born to be King (Matt. 2:1). After His death and resurrection, Jesus says all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Him, therefore go and disciple the nations (Matt. 28:18-20). So this psalm is not just for one king and one kingdom about 3000 years ago. Remember the gospel does not move forward top-down through political machinations, but through the power of the preached word. This is what Paul exemplified when he told king Agrippa "I would to God that not only you [become a Christian], but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains" (Acts 26:29). We have to adjust our prayer today because we don't have leaders like David, and to our shame, even Christians who want them. But we must pray.

King of kings

David learned that the LORD saves His anointed (*mashiach*), and as a prophet he spoke of the greater anointed one, the messiah to come (v. 3; Lk. 4:18). We should not forget the reason that we are saved is because Jesus was saved. His name means "Yahweh saves." He prayed three times to the Father if there was any way to make the cup pass from Him, to do it another way (Matt. 26:39-44). There was no other way to save us, so He went to the cross for the joy that was set before Him, the joy of obeying His Father and securing your salvation. The Father heard His prayer: "who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation" (Heb. 5:7-9). David's prayer was answered: Yahweh saved Jesus. He became sin on the cross, and He overcame it, rising on the third day and swallowing up death forever. This is the good news for troubled and every other day.