



Psalm 20 - Prayer for Victory

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

Introduction

Psalms 20-21. These two Psalms form a pair of royal Psalms. Psalm 20 is a prayer that God will give success to the Davidic king, particularly in battle. Psalm 21 gives thanks to God for answering the request of Psalm 20.

Psalm 20:1-5 - Prayer for the King's Success.

In these verses the congregation addresses the Davidic king ('you') with a prayer that God will answer his prayers, protect him from enemies, send him help, and support him. To call all of this salvation or 'victory' (v.5) is to recognise that it comes from God as a gift and that it must further the ends for which God called his people to begin with. In other words, it is not a blank cheque for greed and land-grabbing, it is about support for truly righteous acts.

- ¹ The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!
- ² May he send you help from the sanctuary,
and give you support from Zion.

Psalm 20:1-2

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! This was a prayer from a multitude or congregation, based on the use of we in v.5, that God would answer the prayers of one, who in context is the king readying for battle.

Answer you; protect you; send you help; give you support. After the pattern of Hebrew poetry, this idea is intensively expressed by the use of repetition with slight variation. David was about to lead Israel into battle and he needed the help

of God in each of these ways. David often cried out to God in this way, for example: <<*Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer*>> (Psalm 4:1).

The sanctuary in Zion is the place where God especially makes himself present among his people: <<*You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established*>> (Exodus 15:17). Because King David was about to lead Israel as a whole into battle, the language is full of references appealing to the Lord as the God of Israel. He writes:

- The Lord: Using Yahweh, the covenant name of God.
- The God of Jacob: Remembering Israel's patriarch.
- From the sanctuary: Calling to mind the tabernacle, the centre of Israel's worship.
- From Zion: Referring to the hills of Jerusalem.

³ May he remember all your offerings,
and regard with favour your burnt sacrifices. Selah

Psalm 20:3

May he remember with favour your burnt sacrifices. This understands that not all sacrifices are accepted before God: <<*Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt-offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me*>> (Jeremiah 6:20), and: <<*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings*>> (Hosea 6:6); instead: <<*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*>> (Micah 6:8), and: <<*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God*>> (Hebrews 13:16). If they were not offered with faith and in accordance with the Levitical system, they would not be remembered or accepted by God.

The offerings and burnt sacrifices were the means by which the worshipper received assurance of God's love and devoted himself to God. Sacrifice was commonly made at important moments, such as on the eve of battle. This is a prayer that the Lord would see and receive the sacrifices King David would make before war.

The place of faith was important in the OT sacrificial system. The one who brought the offering had to trust in the ultimate, perfect sacrifice that God would one day provide, the one that each animal sacrifice pointed towards: <<*Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my*

son.' *So the two of them walked on together*>> (Genesis 22:8), and: <<*So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided'*>> (Genesis 22:14).

Selah. The idea in the Hebrew for this word, which occurs 74 times in the OT, is for a pause. Most people think it speaks of a reflective pause, a pause to meditate on the words just spoken. It may also be a musical instruction, for a musical interlude of some kind. A Christian can take this Selah as an opportunity to consider Jesus, and see that this prayer was appropriate for him as he faced the Cross. The prayer was worthy to be prayed - that God would indeed remember and accept the offering Jesus made on the Cross, which could rightly be called a burnt sacrifice, as it was burned with the fire of God's righteous judgement, and how Jesus held nothing back in this sacrifice.

⁴ May he grant you your heart's desire,
and fulfil all your plans.

Psalm 20:4

In this moment, King David had one desire - to defend the people of God and the kingdom in covenant with God. Therefore it was good to pray: May he grant you your heart's desire, a theme repeated in the sister Psalm: <<*You have given him his heart's desire, and have not withheld the request of his lips*>> (Psalm 21:2). Others, too, speak of their heart's desire: <<*In the path of your judgements, O Lord, we wait for you; your name and your renown are the soul's desire*>> (Isaiah 26:8), and: <<*Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved*>> (Romans 10:1).

And fulfil all your plans. Since David's purpose was victory for the people of God, this was a good and necessary prayer to pray. Jesus knew this fulfilled desire and purpose, shown by his prayer in John Chapter 17: <<*I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do*>> (John 17:4). The Apostle Paul knew this fulfilled desire and purpose, shown by these words toward the end of his earthly life: <<*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*>> (2 Timothy 4:7)

⁵ May we shout for joy over your victory,
and in the name of our God set up our banners.
May the Lord fulfil all your petitions.

Psalm 20:5

May we shout for joy over your victory. This was the confidence the people had in King David's success. They had so much trust in God's deliverance that they had

already set up our banners of joyful celebration: <<*The Israelites are to set up their tents by divisions, each of them in their own camp under their standard*>> (Numbers 1:52 NIV), and of the Messiah it is written: <<*In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious. In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the Mediterranean. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth*>> (Isaiah 11:10-12 NIV). Victory in the NRSVA is frequently referred to as either salvation or saves in other translations.

May the Lord fulfil all your petitions. Once again, this statement is both the prayer and the confidence that God would hear and fulfil the prayers of his king. This was true both of David and the Son of David; of the King of Israel and the King of Kings. Jesus prayed for success in his work on the Cross: <<*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done*>> (Luke 22:42), and it was unthinkable that the Father would not answer the prayers of the Son.

Psalm 20:6-8 - Sound Confidence in the Lord Alone.

Now the worshippers shift from speaking to the king to speaking about the king. They place their confidence in God alone as the one who saves his anointed, and thus the chariots and horses that they must use are not the final cause of success, only the means that God may be pleased to prosper, as they hope for themselves, or thwart, as they hope for the enemy.

⁶ Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven
with mighty victories by his right hand.

Psalm 20:6

Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed. Here, King David expressed the great confidence that God would answer the prayers of his people: <<*You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof*>> (Habakkuk 3:13). God would save (help) the king (his anointed). In a sense, every king of Israel was God's anointed because they were all appointed to their office by a literal anointing of oil poured upon their head. This literal anointing with oil was a picture of the spiritual anointing with the Holy Spirit needed for their duty of leading the people of God as their king. In saying his anointed, David refers to

himself as king: <<***Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favourite of the Strong One of Israel***>> (2 Samuel 23:1). At the same time, it was also understood that there would come an ultimate Anointed One, the perfect King of Israel - the Meshiach, the Christ, the Messiah, as noted in Psalm 2 and others. It was true of David and Israel in his day that the Lord saves his anointed and his people; it is even more perfectly true of the ultimate and perfect Anointed One, Jesus Christ, of whom it can be said:

- The Father saved the Son from sin.
- The Father saved the Son from pride.
- The Father saved the Son from self-reliance.
- The Father saved the Son from doubt.
- The Father saved the Son from failure.
- The Father saved the Son from the clutches of death.

He will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories by his right hand. This confirms and strengthens the idea that the Lord saves his anointed.

- He is saved by an **answer**; God is not silent to his anointed.
- He is saved **from heaven**; God hears and sends help from his throne.
- He is saved with power, i.e. given **mighty victories** and salvation.
- He is saved with skill and favour, with the strength that comes from **his right hand**.

Each of these was true for King David, but even more perfectly true of the Son of David, the ultimate anointed of the Lord.

⁷ Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.

Psalm 20:7

Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses. David knew what kings and their people usually trusted in - human strength and the ways it is often expressed, i.e. in chariots and in horses for warfare in this case. If writing today, David might say something like, 'Some trust in nuclear weapons and some trust in tanks.' It is part of human nature to put their trust in such things. Part of the reason David refused to trust in chariots and horses was because God had commanded it so, commanding in the Law of Moses that the Kings of Israel would not multiply horses for themselves, either for use in cavalry or to pull war-chariots: <<***Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You must never return that way again'***>> (Deuteronomy 17:16).

But our pride is in the name of the Lord our God. David drew a strong contrast. 'They trust in those things, but our trust is in God.' David put his trust in the person, the character of God. He did not carry the name of the Lord as a magical incantation; rather the name speaks of the comprehensive character of God and is an expression of his faithfulness to his covenant with Israel: <<***With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles***>> (2 Chronicles 32:8a).

⁸ They will collapse and fall,
but we shall rise and stand upright.

Psalm 20:8

They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright. David's trust in God could be justified on many grounds, but one of those was simply pragmatic grounds - trusting in God works, and David saw it. Those who trusted in chariots and horses have bowed down and fallen: <<***The swift cannot flee away, nor can the warrior escape; in the north by the river Euphrates they have stumbled and fallen***>> (Jeremiah 46:6). Those who remembered the name of the Lord have risen and stand upright: <<***Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me***>> (Micah 7:8).

Psalm 20:9 - God Save the King!

The term victory, which also means save and salvation, are repeated in this Psalm.

⁹ Give victory to the king, O Lord;
answer us when we call.

Psalm 20:9

Give victory to the king, O Lord; answer us when we call. The rescue David confidently sang of had not completely come. He still needed to cry out Give victory or 'Save, Lord!' He still had his trust in the anticipated answer of the Lord: <<***I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words***>> (Psalm 17:6).