

## On Psalm 20

By Rev. Russell B. Smith

Covenant-First Presbyterian Church  
Cincinnati, OH

This week, we look at Psalm 20, a little regarded psalm that has a very simple two part structure: prayers offered and a statement of confidence. So let's dig in and take a close look.

At first glance, this seems like a very affirming prayer, beginning with the words "May the Lord answer you." It's a very "you" oriented psalm. So, our first inclination is to say, "Oh, it's all about me, how nice." And then we start thinking about all the things we want to pray for ourselves.

But then we come to the second half, which begins at verse 6: "I know that the Lord saves his anointed." And we suddenly realize that the first half isn't about us at all. It is what we, the common people, were supposed to pray on behalf of the king.

The picture here is this: the king is going out into battle against the enemy, and the people pray corporately for the king. They ask for God's protection over him (Ps. 20:1-2). They also ask that God remember the king's worship practices, his submission and humility before God (Ps. 20:3). And they ask that God grant the desire of the king's heart (Ps. 20:4-5). If God will do these things, they promise rejoicing and worship in response.

This isn't a psalm that deals with our personal, individual prayers, although there are many prayers and psalms that broach that subject. Rather, this psalm reminds us of something. It reminds us that we are but small parts of the greater body of Christ.

You see, we don't have to pray for God's anointed one anymore. Unlike David, Jesus Christ being fully God and fully man doesn't need us to pray for him. However, he does want us to pray for the body of Christ across the globe. One of the great errors into which we fall as Americans is the error of individualism. We take the good virtues of individual responsibility and individual accomplishment and individual dignity and we twist that to say that we have no corporate responsibility, corporate accomplishment or corporate dignity. And yet this psalm reminds us that we are not the apex of the universe. Rather, we are a people supporting the advancement of the king.

The concern of this psalm is not calling God to remember our sacrifices; the concern is calling us to remember Christ's sacrifices. The concern is not the

granting of the desires of our hearts, but rather the transformation of the desire of our hearts into the desire of the messiah's heart. Ultimately, our challenge is not to gaze upon our own agendas, but for us to gaze upon Christ and to let his agenda become our agenda.

A month or so ago, *Time Magazine* came out with an issue on “the science of happiness,” and it talked all about the human quest for happiness. Some treat the quest as though happiness were an end goal in and of itself. C.S. Lewis had a different idea. In his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he talks about finding joy in the losing of himself. He only approached that sense of joy when he was so engrossed that he forgot himself. It's like the magic eye prints: if you try to look at the print, you won't see the picture. But if you stop trying to look and let your eyes blur, suddenly a three dimensional figure swims into your perception. You quit looking, and suddenly you find.

Lewis discovered that experience of joy in the study of literature. Some find it in the pursuit of athletics. Shakespeare pictures this in the romantic pursuit – his romantic couples spend the better part of the comedies being intoxicated by the pursuit of one another, which finally culminates in a marriage.

Have you ever had that experience? That experience of doing something and becoming completely engrossed and the hours melt away and you become lost in the doing – and when you next check, it is 3:00 a.m. and you feel exhilarated and filled with delight? You want to keep going, but your body demands that you stop. But as you break, you feel so refreshed. It's like you have a little glow of glory about you. When you lose yourself to something larger than yourself, you forget yourself, and you discover joy. That's a bit of the view that we have to have with this psalm. We have to lose ourselves in the messiah.

Lewis believed that all the joy we experience in the pursuit of things in this world – virtue, accomplishment, etc. – all of it merely pointed to the pursuit of God. In fact, he staked his whole academic career on it. He wrote the definitive book about medieval literature, called *The Allegory of Love*. In his book he looks at all the courtly literature of the medieval period, all the knights pining away after ladies and devoting themselves to ladies who give them but a small token – a silk handkerchief or a bauble. All the passionate pursuits that are depicted in the medieval romances are but allegories of the heart's passionate pursuit of God. For Lewis, that is what it meant to be in relationship with a living God.

So, for us really to understand this psalm, we have to get out of ourselves and make ourselves part of the supporting cast. The king is the main character here.

Then comes the second half of the psalm, which dramatically asserts confidence in God's power. We see the confidence that God saves the king in verses 6 and 9. Then we have the most powerful verses in verses 7 and 8:

“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.”

The first part is the realization that trusting merely in human strength doesn't accomplish what we want it to accomplish. Psalm 127 puts it another way: “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.” The very real temptation of human organizations, especially when they are led by capable and strong leaders like King David, is to trust in human capacities. We are strong and we have lots of skill and smarts, and nothing can defeat us, or so the thinking goes. But as soon as you start thinking that, you set yourself up for comeuppance.

A practical example of this is the life of single people looking for relationships. This struggle is everywhere in the media it seems. The *New York Times Magazine* just did an article a few weeks ago about professional matchmakers. These people command six-figure fees to match up highly desirable women with their clients. These are not airhead bimbos either; they are Ph.D.s and women who have accomplished many great things.

The latest issue of *Time* has an article talking about *The Bachelorette*, the ABC reality TV show that introduces a single woman to twenty-five eligible men, and week by week she has to eliminate several of them until she arrives at the final one whom she finds most compatible. This season, the Bachelorette, named Jen Schefft, rejected all the suitors. And the article describes the cultural outrage. She is savagely criticized in the broader culture for not being satisfied enough with one of these men to settle down and marry. There's almost this neurosis in the culture that if you don't get married, you're a second-class citizen. And so a whole army of magazines, self-help books, and tricks and techniques are trotted out there for the weary to try to find a mate.

In contrast, consider the case of Jose, a man I met in Florida. Jose was a divorced man. His wife had left him and his two children for someone else — actually, for a lot of someone elses. And he was wrestling with what God wanted in his life. He talked with a friend who was happily married and asked how he met his wife. His friend suggested praying over it and being specific. So, Jose went home and drafted a page of paper of what he was longing for in a spouse — not just the superficial stuff, but the deep character stuff, and the interests and gifts and skills. He described her faith. And then he spent time in prayer about this, committing it to God. Then, several months later a friend at church introduced him to Alicia. They dated a couple of times and Jose quickly discovered that she met exactly what he had described in his letter. They soon married, and have been happily married for years now.

And then there are two other people I know here in Cincinnati, one a man and one a woman. Both are single and both express to me that after praying about it, God has given them peace with their singleness. They understand that

they are in the state that God has called them to right now, and they're not really stressing about romance. If God changes that calling in the future, they're open to it. But God has given them peace about their present singleness.

Do you see where this is going? They are putting their trust in the Lord, not in chariots and horses. They make faithfulness to the Lord their primary determinant of success, come what may. They abandon themselves to the direction of the king. And with this abandonment comes contentment:

"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:11-13).

Many spouses spend years trying to change their mate into the person they think their mate ought to be, and they keep praying, "God change him" or "God change her." But there are those who begin to get the overwhelming sense that God's not going to change that person, and they come to peace with that. Many people spend years trying to reach a certain level in their field of work, yet there comes a time when God gives them the peace to accept where they are.

This is not to say we don't keep striving; contentment is not complacency. Complacency is when you give up, when you let your situation be your master, when you let your situation define you. Contentment is not letting your present situation be your master, but letting Christ be your master. This is the ultimate end goal of this psalm: not complacency, but contentment under the shelter of our messiah's shelter. Amen.