

A Walk Through the Psalms: God Answers
Psalm 20; I Samuel 16:1-13
Salem United Methodist Church; June 17, 2018
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We are in the middle of a Worship Series called, A Walk Through the Psalms. Each Sunday we are lifting up one Psalm. There are 150 Psalms that are attributed to King David as written by him or about him. Both Jews and Christians still use Psalms for worship or meditation as prayers and songs of praise. These ancient poems offer solace, guidance, cleansing, renewal, and blessing. Within their verses there are expressions of anger, complaint, despair, weariness, acceptance, hope, comfort, joy, and faith. Today we are looking at Psalm 20.

With my first reading through Psalm 20, I was appalled by it. The verses that I didn't like were verses 4-6. "May God give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. May we shout for joy over your victory and lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant all your requests. Now this I know: The Lord gives victory to his anointed." I sensed a tone of arrogance, privilege, and self-centeredness. God, give me all that I want. Make me successful. Grant all my requests. Give me the victory. Me, me, me. Could there be a "me centered" Psalm in the Bible?

This Psalm is a royal Psalm meaning that it pertains to the spiritual role of kings, specifically King David. We know that God chose him to be the next king even though he was the youngest in his family. Samuel searched for him and anointed him to become Israel's next king. David and God had a close relationship which is reflected in the Psalms. But when one is king, power can inflate one's ego. And so it did for David. So I could envision David praying this Psalm for his own selfish gain. Yes, this Psalm could be read as a piece of ancient political propaganda. God is on my side. God will give the victory. God will sanction whatever our nation does and label our opponents as enemies. Hoo-rah! This kind of thinking is dangerous and frightening.

When we read scripture we bring ourselves to the text. Different readers will bring different realities to a scripture and perceive what is written differently. We read it through our individual lenses with our unique experiences, our unique thoughts, and our unique emotions. This is why we call scriptures the Living Word. God still speaks to us through them. Also, this is why it is important to study scripture in a group. We can share with each other what we hear and learn from the other. So when I read this Psalm initially, I was reading it through the lens of selfish political maneuvering at the expense of those who have no power.

So in my second reading and with some research on Psalm 20, I began to view it from a different perspective. I began to see God as the primary focus, not a king or any one person. God is the one who is in charge. We are to turn to God and ask for God to be with us. And God answers because we acknowledge our dependency on God. I read that in the Jewish tradition this Psalm is a prayer by fathers when their wives are in labor. So I reread it through this lens and it works. I think I may have found these words comforting in the throes of labor. "May the Lord answer you are in distress. May the Lord protect you, help you, support you, and give you the desires of your heart (a healthy baby.) God answers when we call." Through this lens, the reading becomes a blessing. May God bless you... For the fathers among us reread this Psalm. Is this a blessing you could pray for your children? "May the Lord answer you when you are in distress. May God protect you. May God give you your heart's desire and give you success. Don't trust in material things. Trust in the Lord and you will receive the victory. God will answer you." Through this lens, the Psalm becomes a blessing. It can be read as tender words, words of endearment as we pray for those we love.

I also read that in the Jewish tradition Psalm 20 is used as part of the liturgy for morning prayers. Reread this Psalm. Is this something that we could pray before we begin our day? “Lord, answer me when I am distressed. Protect me from evil and danger. Remember all I offer to you and others. Grant that I may be successful in my plans. Give me, your child, the victory. Help me not put my trust in anything but you. Answer me when I call.” Wow! When we look at the Psalm from God in the lead role and we in a secondary one, the words of this Psalm become powerful.

Here’s yet another interpretation. Some subscribe that the Psalm was not written by King David, but for him before he was going off to war. Military chaplains report that even non-believers ask for prayers before they go into battle. One can envision King David in the tabernacle offering prayers and sacrifices before heading into battle. A bystander sees his/her beloved king humbling himself before God, praying for this newly formed nation and for protection. Then offers this blessing for this beloved king. “May the Lord answer you when you are in distress. May the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. May we shout for joy over your victory and lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant all your requests. Now this I know: The Lord gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand. 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. Lord, give victory to the king! Answer us when we call!” Wow! What a blessing to receive before one goes out to fight on behalf of God! David was well loved by the people. He was able to bring together the twelve tribes of Israel to create one nation. He established the capital in Jerusalem, and centralized worship by bringing the Ark of the Covenant, the box that housed the Ten Commandments and where they believed God resided to Jerusalem. They believed David to be the anointed one of God. This Psalm would have been a prayer for their beloved king.

And still another interpretation is through a Christological lens or reading it through resurrection glasses. As Christians we believe that Jesus was the Anointed One of God. He was chosen to become human like us and was anointed in his baptism to become our Lord and Savior. He submitted himself to the will of God. Jesus didn’t pretend for one moment that his will was God’s will. He did not resort to violence, but trusted totally in God as he faced his execution. Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but yours be done.” He knew God would answer him when he called in his time of distress. And God did, but not in the way we expected.

After my first reading, I admit that I didn’t like this Psalm, but after reading it repeatedly through different lenses, I have a greater appreciation. Each verse in this Psalm has power. Each verse could be used as a prayer. Each verse is a blessing. There is one word that is used twice in relation to God in this Psalm. That word is “answer.” In first verse, “May the Lord answer you in times of distress,” and in the last verse, “God answers when we call.” The phrase “God (Lord) answers” are bookmarks in this Psalm. They are at the beginning and the end of the Psalm as to remind us that when we ask, God does hear us, does care about us, provides for us, helps us, delivers us, saves us, and gives to us. This is how God answers prayers. Each Sunday as we lift our concerns to God, we pray for God to answer our prayers. We say that we trust that God will answer all of our prayers in God’s time and in God’s way. The Psalmist agrees, God does answer, but it isn’t always the answer we want, but it is always the answer that is best for us.

“O Lord, hear our prayers. O Lord, hear our prayers. When we call, answer us. O Lord, hear our prayers. Come and listen to us.”

Resources: “Midrashic Interpretation of Psalms 6 and 20” by Arie Folger; *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IV*; “Study Guide for Psalm 20,” by David Guzik from Blue Letter Bible website.

