

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message In Confidence and Trust Is Our Victory

Scripture Psalm 20

Today and next week we will focus on Psalms 20 and 21. According to some commentators, these two Psalms belong together. Both Psalms are attributed to David. Psalm 20 is a prayer in which the people of Israel beseech the LORD's favor during a time of national distress. Psalm 21 celebrates the subsequent victory.

Psalm 20 is sometimes categorized as a "royal" Psalm because the prayer is for the king of Israel and his leadership of the military forces. The name of the king is not given in the Psalm, but we can assume that David was writing about himself and his fellow countrymen. The specific occasion for the prayer is unknown, but it is assumed that an enemy army was threatening to attack Israel.

During the middle years of his life, David led the armies of Israel into battle against the military forces of several surrounding nations. Edom, Ammon, and Moab were among those nations he defeated. The borders of Israel were extended to their furthestmost limits during David's reign. He was successful in all his endeavors because he and the people he led sought the help of God as this Psalm indicates.

Read Psalm 20

The Psalm begins and ends with appeals for help. In verse 1 the people wanted the LORD to answer the king when he called out for help, and in verse 9 they appealed to the LORD to give a direct answer to their requests.

In verse 9 the people specifically asked the LORD to "save the king." The people of Israel understood that their fortunes were closely linked to the success of their king, especially in battle situations. The people recognized that they were dependent on the human leader who had been selected to reign over them. He was their representative to make strategy, mobilize the troops, and defend their cities. Notice in verse 6 the acknowledgment that the king was the LORD's anointed one.

The people also recognized that they were dependent on the LORD's help. The king was under the authority of and was guided by the LORD, and the people were under the authority of both the LORD and His earthly representative. Hence, the people and the king were united in their earnest desire for the LORD's help. The enemy threat caused everyone to pray fervently.

In the first five verses the people made specific requests for the king. The requests are in the form of benediction blessings. Each request is introduced by the word "may," which has the meaning, "may the LORD grant our request." There are, in all, nine requests in the first five verses.

In verse one the people implored the LORD to respond to the king when he called for help. It was David's habit to seek the LORD's help and guidance whenever he was in a difficult situation. Let me give a few examples. "When David was told, "Look, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are looting the threshing floors, he inquired of the LORD, saying 'Shall I go and attack these Philistines?' The LORD answered him, 'Go, attack and save Keilah'" (*I Samuel 23:1-2*).

On another occasion, after the Amalakites had raided the city of Ziklag and taken many hostages, "David inquired of the LORD, 'Shall I pursue this raiding party? Will I overtake them?' 'Pursue them,' the LORD answered, 'You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue'" (*I Samuel 30:1-2, 7-8*).

And again, "When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, they went up in full force to search for him. ... so David inquired of the LORD, 'Shall I go and attack the Philistines? Will you hand them over to me?'" On that occasion "The LORD answered him, 'Go, for I will surely hand the Philistines over to you'" (*II Samuel 5:17-19*). The soldiers who were with David on these occasions were aware of David's reoccurring efforts to seek guidance from the LORD. This is why the people wanted the LORD to respond to David.

The phrase, "the name of the God of Jacob," is a little confusing. The words "Jacob" and "Israel" were used interchangeably in the Old Testament. The emphasis in this phrase is on "the name of the God of Jacob." That name was "Yahweh." Yahweh was the covenant God of the Hebrew people. Yahweh revealed Himself by this name to Moses at the burning bush, and gave assurance that He would fulfill all the covenant promises originally made to Abraham, and subsequently repeated to Isaac, and Jacob. One of those promises concerned the protection of His people.

The words “protect you” in verse 1 is literally, “raise you to a high place.” In the Old Testament, to be “lifted up to a high place” was to be placed in the “refuge” or “stronghold” of God,” where there was security and safety. The second petition concerning the king was for Yahweh to give the king this kind of protection.

In verse 2 the people implored the LORD to provide resources from the “sanctuary” and from “Zion.” The “sanctuary” and “Zion” were the places where God said He would dwell among His people. The word “sanctuary” refers to the Tabernacle that was built for Yahweh after the escape of the Hebrew people from Egypt. The original tabernacle was a special kind of tent which could be taken apart, transported, and then set up again as the people moved from place to place. This tabernacle was eventually replaced by the magnificent temple which was planned by David and constructed during the reign of Solomon.

The temple was built on “Zion,” which is sometimes identified as “Mount Zion,” or “the Holy Hill” of Yahweh. The name “Zion” was also sometimes a reference to Jerusalem, the city of David, because it was the capital of the nation of Israel, the center of the life of Israel.

Yahweh was identified with the temple and with Jerusalem because He wanted to be as close to His covenant people as possible, and He wanted the people to orient their lives around Him. He wanted His people to understand that He was near, watching over them with an intense, jealous, and infinite love, and concerned about their welfare. The people acknowledged this, especially in times of distress, and so they called on the LORD to be present by giving support to their earthly leader, to provide all the needs of the king as he went out to battle.

In the Old Testament religious system, “sacrifices” and “burnt offerings” were the visible ways for people to declare their love for and loyalty to God. Animal sacrifices were primarily to atone for sin, but they were also the method whereby people sought the favor and blessing of God. “Burnt offerings” represented submission and consecration to the LORD. Such offerings were regularly made before engagement in battle.

Verse 3 refers to the sacrifices and burnt offerings of the king. Apparently, David's devotion to the LORD was well known. The people wanted Yahweh to remember and accept all the king's offerings. Acceptance of the sacrifices would be a guarantee of Yahweh's favor, which would be demonstrated by success in battle.

In verse 4 the people prayed that Yahweh would give to the king "the desire of his heart and make all his plans succeed." This request is repeated in verse 5, "May the LORD grant all your requests." Obviously, the desire of everyone was victory over the enemy army. The leader would be especially concerned about the strength of his forces and having adequate resources, and the potential loss of life. And as the godly leader of the nation of Israel, David was concerned about one more very important thing: he wanted honor and glory to go to Yahweh.

One of the aspects of expectant prayer is the faith to thank God in advance for the answers He will provide. That's what verse 5 is. Many of the prayers in the Psalter include such advance statements of praise and thanksgiving. In anticipation of the battle, the people were promising to "shout for joy" over the victory and to "lift up banners of honor in the name of their God." The people had enough confidence in their covenant God and His promises, and their anointed leader, that they planned their victory celebration even before the first arrow was launched in battle. That's faith. That's the kind of faith and confidence all of us should have when we pray.

The Apostle John commented on this in his New Testament letter, when he wrote, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have what we asked of him" (*1 John 5:14-15*). The Israelites knew that Yahweh was their God, and that He had made covenant promises to them, including promises of protection. On that basis they could thank God in advance for His victory over the enemy.

The second part of this Psalm is a reflection on the actions of Yahweh and the confidence of the people. Verses 6 through 8 are the thoughts of a single individual. Many commentators suggest that these verses were articulated by a Levite in the temple, but it is better to consider these verses as David's own thoughts.

It is difficult to get the meaning of the first three words of verse 6. The emphasis can make a difference. Should we read: “Now I know,” suggesting that previously the speaker did not know? Or should we read: “Now I know,” implying that the speaker knew something that other people did not yet know?

The first option does not fit the context very well. The second option is possible if someone, like a Levite priest, was speaking about David and was familiar with David’s history as a military leader. The second option is also possible if David was the speaker since he, as the LORD’s anointed, had experienced the protection of God many times in his life. It is my opinion that David was giving his testimony in these verses.

I also think that the translation of the beginning of verse 6 could be different, so that the verse has the meaning, “I understand how the LORD saves his anointed,” or, “I have experienced how the LORD saves his anointed,” or even, “I have come to the conclusion.” David could speak from personal experience. As the LORD’s anointed king, he had been protected and saved from danger many times. He understood how the LORD had heard and answered his urgent appeals “from his holy heaven” and delivered him from danger with the “power of his right hand.”

Verse 7 explains the kind of attitude which is required of those who call upon the LORD for help. If the LORD is to answer from his holy heaven with His saving power, then there must be “trust in the name of the LORD God.” David understood the dynamics of successful warfare. The nation of Israel was not to place confidence in chariots and horses. The Israelites were to wage war differently than the surrounding nations.

Let me give an example. In the early years as a nation, the Israelites were at a distinct disadvantage in regard to weapons of war. When Saul began his military campaign against the Philistines, the Philistines assembled for battle with three thousand chariots and six thousand charioteers. Scripture states that on the day of battle not a soldier with Saul had a sword or spear in his hand. Only Saul and his son Jonathan (*I Samuel 13:5, 22*) had weapons. Yet Israel routed the Philistines, but only because the LORD caused panic conditions among the Philistines and rescued Israel (*I Samuel 14:15, 20, 23*).

In another Psalm we read these words: “A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine” (*Psalm 33:17-19*).

David had experienced the “saving power of the LORD’s right hand” in his battles because he had maintained “trust in the name of the LORD God.” He knew that the enemies of Israel would be “brought to their knees and fall” and that “the Israelites would rise up and stand firm.” David had confidence in Yahweh for two reasons: Because Yahweh had promised to protect Israel and because of his personal experiences after looking to Yahweh for guidance and help.

The last verse is a summary of the entreaties of the people. The Israelites understood that both they and the king were dependent on the LORD’s actions.

This Psalm is has important teaching for us. It tells us what we must do when we are confronted with spiritual enemies, that is, the powers of evil. First and foremost, we must appeal to God. This Psalm illustrates for us the three essentials for victory: 1) we must be a praying people; 2) we must be identified with God’s anointed leader, who for us is Jesus Christ; and 3) we must have complete confidence in the LORD our God. If we follow these guidelines, the forces of evil will fall but “we will be able to rise up and stand firm.”