

Psalm 20 – “God’s Law, Government, and Idolatry” – Aug. 4, 2024

1. In fall of 2007, I was 27 years old and had just bought our first farm, spent money renovating the barn, bought quota, and a herd of cows from Neepawa
 - a. I knew that getting into farming wasn’t going to be easy
 - b. It turned out to be far more difficult than I had even braced myself for, especially financially
 - c. After we bought our quota, the price dropped fairly sharply which put us in a position where we owed more than we owned
 - d. If we sold everything we owned to pay our debt, there would still be enough debt left that I would never really touch it if I went back to a regular job
 - e. This time of our life was memorable enough that it created in me a bad habit of running to a calculator when things aren’t going well
 - f. Perhaps you can relate
 - i. No doubt there are many crutches represented in this room that we cling to when life seems turbulent or scary or unsure
 - ii. Perhaps you’re trusting in your assets or your bank account or your contagious personality or your good looks or your smarts or your work ethic to get you through life without too much damage
 - g. Psalm 20 orients us in the right direction when it tells us to not put our trust in chariots and horses, but rather in the name of the Lord our God
2. Psalm 20 and 21 are hymns that were meant to be part of the corporate liturgy before and after Israel went to war

- a. Psalm 20 was sung as Israel prepared for battle, and Psalm 21 was sung as a song of thanksgiving after God had given victory to Israel
- b. In this Psalm, Israel is preparing for war, and David has penned a song which cries out to God ahead of time
- c. While it is true that the nation-state of Israel was unique in the old covenant economy, and so we cannot take every detail and plug it in 1:1 for the church, there is an organic harmony between the old covenant people of God and the new covenant people of God
 - i. Old covenant Israel was the acorn that germinated into the multi-ethnic people of God in the new covenant
 - ii. Because of this harmony and continuity, there are still abiding principles which remain, and so Psalms like this remain instructive for the church
 - 1. The church does not physically go to war as Israel did, but the nations in which the church exists continue to fight wars and experience upheaval and conflict
 - 2. Further, the church is always engaged in spiritual battles which frequently manifest themselves in very this-worldly ways

3. STRUCTURE

- a. It is not uncommon for Psalms to change voices as they go along
 - i. Last week we saw alternating perspectives between heaven and earth
 - ii. In this Psalm, David takes the voice of the people he rules, then he speaks of his own actions, and then we have a general chorus speaking of the goodness of God's ways

- b. VV.1-4 – the people are praying for King David
 - c. VV.5-6 – David responds in faith
 - d. VV.7-9 – there is a general and collective chorus about God’s goodness in the voice of both the people and King David
4. VV.1-4 – *“May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob protect you! 2 May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion! 3 May he remember all your offerings and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices! Selah 4 May he grant you your heart’s desire and fulfill all your plans!”*
- a. This is the voice of the people praying to the Lord, asking Him that He would answer David’s prayers
 - b. In Paul’s letter to Timothy, we are reminded to pray for those in authority, and you’ll hear prayers for those in government quite frequently at Trinity
 - c. God has ordered creation in such a way that there are legitimate governing authorities, and the men in these positions need our prayers to govern and rule wisely and in a God-honouring manner
 - d. In particular, the *“name of the God of Jacob”* is invoked to protect David
 - i. Why Jacob?
 1. We recall from Genesis how Jacob lived a turbulent life
 2. He was at war with his brother Esau from the womb
 3. He takes the blessing that God had providentially decreed for him, but he did it in a deceptive and corrupt manner
 4. Jacob wrestled with God and prevailed, but is given a limp when God touches his hip

5. Jacob is renamed Israel after this wrestling match, and so the one man is seen as very literally the father of the nation over which David now rules
6. Jacob vows to make Bethel a house of God if God takes care of him
7. So remembering the God of Jacob brings to mind the origin of the people that David is responsible to govern, and the turbulence of Jacob's life, as God weaves in promise and blessing despite the sin, also means that David can to a large measure identify with the man Jacob
 - a. This highlights the covenant keeping nature of God
 - b. The people are not praying to God in the hopes that they'll catch Him on a good day and He might do them a favour
 - c. NO! They are praying to a God who keeps covenant
 - d. They are praying to a God who has a name
 - i. Notice v.1 closely – the *name* of God protects David!
 - e. And this covenant keeping God of Jacob acts from a particular sanctuary in a particular location (v.2)
 - f. The people are not praying to an anonymous God or a generic deity
 - i. This is not a prayer to a higher power, but to the personal God who spent all night wrestling with Jacob

- ii. This is the covenant keeping sovereign who renamed Jacob and made him the father of a nation
- g. In v.3 the people desire that God will remember David's sacrifices and offerings
 - i. This may be too easy to miss, but it shows that the congregation of Israel are not blind partisans or unthinking patriots
 - ii. A true patriot is one who wants blessing for his nation, because he knows that his nation is not ultimate but is under the sovereign hand of God
 - iii. In 1816, an American naval officer by the name of Stephen Decatur offered a toast to America in which he said "*Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but right or wrong, our country!*"
 - 1. This is the kind of blind partisanship which puts nation above God
 - 2. This is the kind of prejudice which says I'm willing to tolerate evil because I'm loyal to my nation above all else
 - iv. When David pens this Psalm and he takes the voice of his people, he clearly does not want them to pray as blind partisans
 - v. They're not saying "God, bless David no matter what he does"!
 - 1. When David takes the voice of his people at prayer, he wants them to presuppose that their king is acting righteously
 - 2. They're asking God to remember David's offerings and his burnt sacrifices
 - 3. The offerings are a reference to the ascension offerings which pictured corporate worship

- a. These offerings were fat and were burnt so that their smoke reached heaven, as the prayers of God's people when they join the great cloud of witnesses in corporate worship
 - 4. The prayer for David is not a prayer regardless of David's plans, but are made on the assumption that David is governing in a righteous manner
- h. V.4 gets us deeper into the same concept – they want God to grant David his heart's desire and to fulfill all of David's plans
 - i. This presupposes that David is a man after God's own heart
 - ii. If David's heart is right with the Lord, his affections will be ordered properly, and so it would be right of God to give David the desire of his heart
 - iii. By setting this in its proper frame, we also avoid the mistake of spiritualizing real-world concerns away
 - 1. *"I don't care about the moral state of my people or my nation because I have a home in heaven"*
 - a. This is true of course, but we should be concerned about the people and situations in front of us
 - iv. The prayer here isn't that David is right with God, so his plans are meaningless
 - 1. Jesus doesn't say that food and clothing are unimportant because we're part of God's kingdom

2. He says “*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*” (Matt. 6:33)
 - i. The real-world concerns of God’s people matter to God, but the root issue here is not that God is automatically on the side of certain people, but that He acts on behalf of those who are on the side
 - i. Remember, this is the living God of Scripture, and not some generic higher power
 - ii. In terms of application in our own time, “*thoughts and prayers*” are actually still quite popular
 1. Prayer is thought of as a comfort in itself
 - a. Muslims can pray to Allah
 - b. Christians can pray to their God
 - c. Mystics can centre themselves with the earth
 - iii. This is what many of our civic prayers have been reduced to, in the places where we still have civic prayers
 1. In Manitoba, Premier Wab Kinew has floated the idea that the prayers which open the legislature should be more broad, and move away from prayers to the Triune God, as they have historically been
 2. In this mindset, the god you’re praying to doesn’t matter, because the power is therapeutic, it’s not focused on the actual god being appealed to

a. *The power is not in the prayer but in the God to whom the prayer is sent*

3. So a prayer to the Triune God of Scripture may be included “just in case”

a. “What harm can it do?!”

i. Story of burying statue of Joseph to help sell a house

b. Idolatrous prayers can actually do much harm

c. Invoking the name of the Triune God of Scripture, the living God who is actually there, by idolators who are opposed to Him can do great harm

i. This is one form of using the Lord’s name in vain

d. We saw this after 9/11 when a religious prayer service was held in the National Cathedral

i. What a great opportunity for a nation that has the blood of millions of little babies on its hands to fall on their face before God and beg for His mercy and be pardoned and blessed

ii. Instead, a rogue’s gallery of false religion and pagan prayers to idols and false gods was offered

1. Alongside the prayers to the God of Scripture, there were the idolatrous prayers of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism

2. What could have been a wonderful opportunity for repentance and blessing turned into an idol factory
4. Spurgeon on ministers who catered to this approach *“If the kings had been devils themselves, these preachers would praise their horns and hooves”*
5. While the church today is multi-ethnic, it is not multicultural in the sense of tolerating the cultural expressions of the religions of the world
 - a. What we call multiculturalism is really polytheism
 - b. The people of God seek His face and call others to do the same
 - i. They don’t try to appease personal ambition or false religion
 - ii. Rather, they pray for their leaders, that their affections would be rightly ordered so that it would be good for God to fulfill their plans and bless their nation
5. VV.5-6 – *“May we shout for joy over your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners! May the Lord fulfill all your petitions! 6 Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand.”*
 - a. In v.5 we have a picture of the people delighting in the salvation of their king

- i. This can of course be the temporal salvation of winning a battle
 - ii. But if we are praying for our rulers as Scripture commands, then we should also be praying for their eternal salvation
- b. The banners of v.5 are likewise set up in the name of our God
 - i. We're likely familiar with the banners that armies historically carried out into war which identified which side was which
 - ii. But we likewise raise banners in our own day which show which side we are on
 - 1. Our logos, our brands our pins, emblems, and our flags are all in the business of communicating which side we are on
 - a. It is not a coincidence that Lutheran missionaries went to evangelize Scandinavia, and today the flags of Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark are all various colour patterns focused on a Christian cross
 - b. It is not a mistake that the Union Jack, which united the kingdoms of Ireland, Scotland, and England, is a combination of three different crosses which represented each of those nations (St. Patrick, St. Andrew, & St. George)
 - c. What's in the heart of a people finds expression in its banners, as the Psalmist points out
 - iii. You have heard me quote Henry Van Til's comment that "*culture is religion externalized*" and this is exactly correct

1. When religious ideas capture the heart of a people, their cultural expressions will reflect that
 2. Andrew Fletcher – *“Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who writes its laws”*
- iv. When the banners of the people are set up in the name of the particular God of Scripture, v.5 repeats again that it would be good for the Lord to answer all the king’s petitions
6. VV.7-9 – *“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. 8 They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright. 9 O Lord, save the king! May he answer us when we call.”*
- a. This familiar portion of Scripture reminds us that idolatry gravitates towards what can be seen with the eye
 - b. We trust in our money, life insurance, guns, social network, military, cars, electricity, computing power, etc.
 - c. This isn’t saying that chariots and horses are bad; for Israel had those too
 - d. But these things are called secondary means
 - e. Many things in life have more than one cause
 - i. Primary cause (God)
 - ii. Secondary causes (various)
 - f. God usually works through the normal means of secondary causes
 - i. We earn money to live through working
 - ii. We raise godly children through intentional discipleship
 - iii. *“Don’t lean on a shovel while praying for a ditch”*

- g. These secondary causes can be fine in themselves
 - i. They may be used, but they are not to be trusted in
 - ii. Only God can be trusted in
 - 1. Yes, our paycheque comes because we worked, but who gave us the hands and ability to work?
 - 2. God and God alone is worthy of our trust
- h. This is a lesson that David had to learn the hard way more than once
 - i. Eg. – measuring his strength through a census that God commanded him not to take
 - i. When we put our trust in secondary means and not in the living God, we can be sure that they will let us down
- j. The idolatrous nations around Israel collapse and fall because they're trusting in opinion polls and censuses and a deep military buildup
 - i. God's people are able to rise and stand upright as they put their trust in the name of the Lord their God
 - ii. Here again the name of the Lord is invoked as a reminder that we are not trusting in theism, or a higher power, or a generic god who is said to be the same in all religions
 - 1. There are hundreds of idols, but only one true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Yahweh, the Triune God of the Bible
- k. Then this Psalm closes with a verse that served as the inspiration for our own modern "God Save the King" anthem

7. APPLICATION

- a. This may sound very removed and impractical for us
- b. After all, it is true that we are in the new covenant era, and this means that our national arrangements are different than the old covenant nation-state of Israel
 - i. God kept all His covenant promises to Israel in its task of giving birth to Christ and the new covenant era
 - ii. So it's true that Israel was unique and that certain features of the old covenant are no longer operating, particularly the ceremonial laws
- c. But despite the elements of discontinuity, there is actually a predominant theme of continuity in God's dealings with man (this should be the default)
 - i. In particular, God's moral law and His gospel have not been reversed, but have been further clarified in the new covenant
- d. The main summary of God's moral law is found in the 10 Commandments, which is divided into two tables
 - i. First Table – towards God
 - ii. Second Table towards man
 1. Jesus summarized the law in the two great commandments
 - a. Love the Lord your God with heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself
- e. In our day we lament when we see the second table being violated
 - i. Murder (especially abortion), theft, sexual chaos, lying, etc.
 - ii. And if we're the kind of people who trust in horses and chariots we think we can solve this with policy

1. This is a chief cause of making politics an idol
- f. But if we understand how the law works, and we understand the main concern of Psalm 20, we'll see that the reason we fail to love our neighbour is because we fail to love God first
 - i. How we treat each other is the fruit; how we treat God is the root
 - g. We will not make real progress in changing morals or customs until or unless we acknowledge the living God; the One who is actually there
 - i. We won't fix 2nd table violations if we're compromising on the 1st table
 - h. Our loyalty is to be like the loyalty that David desires for Israel
 - i. Loyalty which is directed first to God, and then towards the king to the degree that he is honouring the Lord
 - i. This means that while the life of the church can never be partisan in that sense, it is a mistake (albeit a popular one) to try to separate politics from true worship
 - i. Church and state operate in different spheres, so there is separation of church and state, but there can never be a separation between church and God
 - ii. It has always had deeply political implications to say that "Jesus is Lord" and mean it
 - iii. Our standing before the Lord is personal but it can never be private
 - iv. The lordship of Jesus has far-reaching consequences for kings and rulers and nations (Matthew 28)
 1. It is not just the OT, but the NT which clearly acknowledges this

2. The proclamation of the gospel is just as public as the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus was public
- v. This is one of those areas where sometimes those who are opposed to God know how potent His law is
 1. Think of the 5th Commandment
 - a. The commandment and the promise associated with it is repeated in Matthew 15:3; Mark 7:10; and Ephesians 6:2
 - b. When we are taught a view of history that causes us to be embarrassed by our Christian fathers and mothers, those opposed to God's ways know the outcome better than we do; they are trying to remake society and the surest way to make people easy prey is to destroy their sense of identity by making them ashamed of their fathers and mothers
 - j. So like many things, there is a trap on either side here
 - i. We can become blind political partisans, the kind who trust in horses and chariots, who think everything can be solved if we just get the right political outcomes. This is a kind of top-down authoritarianism which is unable to adequately convert the heart of sinful man.
 - ii. We can neglect the fact that God does work through secondary means, and that when we honour Him with our hearts, He frequently gives favourable outcomes in history. This means that we are loyal to Him in all areas of life, including the public areas like governance.

1. Additionally, because the state exists to punish evil and reward good, it is entirely fitting for the state to have godly laws even for the unconverted
 - a. You want laws that protect your property even if the thief is unconverted
 - iii. This is seen in the life of the Psalmist and through all church history since
- k. The Lordship of Christ is not just a theological commitment that we affirm on Sunday morning in a friendly setting
 - i. It is a cosmic claim to all allegiance
 - ii. *Pietism inevitably leads to worldliness, because if we limit Christian concerns to the family and church, dominant anti-Christian ideas in the culture and the law will shape our thinking. Unless we claim all areas of life for Christ the King, those areas we refuse to contest will eventually rule over us. – P. Andrew Sandlin*
 - iii. Even princes and kings must kiss the Son if they are going to discharge their duties properly
 - iv. To say that the king can operate independently of the God of Jacob is to open ourselves up to the polytheism which has confused and tripped God's people up many times
- l. Gary North – *“There are three covenantal institutions: church, state, and family. To deny that God's covenant law applies to civil government in New Testament times is necessarily to abandon the ideal of Christendom. [Some modern theologians] have done this. So have all Christians who defend political*

pluralism. The problem is, God's covenantal enemies understand what modern Christian theologians fail to see, namely, that there are three legs supporting civilization's stool: church, state, and family. Modern humanism has identified its church and priesthood: the public school system. It has identified its state: centralized power. Finally, it has identified its family: two adults (frequently of the same gender) living together by law. The humanists see that these three institutions must be governed by a comprehensive, consistent legal order. They understand what the [modern theologians] have long chosen to ignore specifically and deny implicitly: civilization is a package deal. A civilization is not built on the basis of smorgasbord religion: 'a little of this, a little of that,' and all on the basis of personal taste. A civilization is a system of integrated covenants."

m. This may seem odd to us today, but it's really just standard Christian theology until very recently

i. The Peace Tower on Parliament Hill was completed hardly 100 years ago (1922) and it has three Bible verses engraved into it:

1. Psalm 72:1 *Give the king Thy judgements O God and Thy righteousness to the king's son.*
2. Psalm 72:8 *He shall have dominion also from sea to sea.*
3. Proverbs 29:18 *Where there is no vision the people perish.*
4. Further, when you walk in there is a sculpture of Moses facing the doors as a reminder to legislators that they must stay inside the bounds of God's law

- ii. The only reason that thinking this way seems controversial today is because we've been steered into thinking that God's Word doesn't have much to say about how the world outside the church ought to operate
- n. We shouldn't feel overwhelmed or discouraged – God's people have frequently been in impossible situations, and yet God remains pleased to reward faithfulness
- o. We are not charged with singlehandedly changing the world
 - i. We are to live faithfully, and trust God with history
 - ii. That said, part of living faithfully is to have a picture of God's design for His creation
- p. 1 Peter is addressed to a church that is also struggling under a government that is not living up to its mandate to honour God that "*judgement begins in the household of God*"
 - i. In other words, escapism, retreat, or resigning ourselves to the notion that government can't ever honour God is not the answer. Forcefully altering their circumstances likewise is not the answer. Living faithfully with a commitment to God's design most assuredly is. Our obedience ought to fit into a vision of creation in which all things exist by God and for God.
- q. Idolatry tells us that we can only trust what we can see. The only feasible outcomes are the ones which look like we can manage. Robust Christian faith lives obediently under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, knowing that His way of operating is anything but a straight line.
- r. *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright.*

8. CHARGE

- a. *We are reminded in Psalm 20 that while secondary means are good, lawful, and even the normal way in which God operates, it is God alone who is to be trusted. Any allegiance to authorities or nations is secondary, and must be regulated by how those authorities and nations are honouring the Lord. A biblical view of the king keeps us from the idolatry of blind partisanship as well as from the escapism that assumes God isn't so concerned with the world He created. We may be so familiar with phrases like "Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings" that we don't recognize that this means that Jesus is King over the kings of the earth. They must bend the knee and govern according to God's precepts; the only ultimate standard of goodness, truth, and beauty. And for those of us who are not rulers and kings, it is our duty to be diligent as we pray for their salvation and that their laws would honour the one and only living God.*

9. BENEDICTION

- a. *1 Timothy 6:15, 16 – "he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen."*