

Notes on Psalm 18—26

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Psalm 18

Joachim Neander wrote in the seventeenth century that we should

'Ponder anew

What the Almighty can do,

He who with love doth befriend thee.'

David was summoned to lead Israel so that they could receive and proclaim the goodness of God in the world. In so doing he was exposed to many rival powers and bitter enemies. This was the scene for a remarkable testimony of a man trusting God for his whole life and vocation (the same psalm appears in his story in II Sam. 22:1-51). This man was King, but God would also be a shield for whoever trusted in him (v. 30). So it was appropriate for all Israel to sing this song. In the welfare of the King, God had visited them all, and then, they too were called to live by depending on God just as their King had done.

This Psalm has its power because it is Christ our King who first prays it. God sent him to establish for us all the blessings of his covenant and so that we may proclaim his glory in the world. But in doing so, he was exposed to all the bitter enemies of God. The cords of death encompassed him. His humanity was fully expended and he could only call on God to deliver him. So he discovered, and received, on behalf of us all, the marvellous help of God which comes to those who put their trust in him.

Then, with Christ, let us love the Lord, call on him for our help, see the victory of the cross and resurrection which is now ours.

David described his victories in terms of the Israel's exodus in vv. 7-19. In Christ, God has given us more than a Moses and David put together, and we could not want any greater victory than the working out of what God has already given him. Those who want a personal triumph may, in fact, be doubting the sufficiency of Christ's victory and be nervously waiting still for 'something' to happen.

Let us keep our integrity as believing people, not claiming a righteousness of our own but living in and pursuing the righteousness which is God's gift. Let us trust that any victory necessary to making known the goodness of God in Christ shall be given to us. Let us be strong in the power of God's might and be prepared to walk in the broad places he is opening up for us. But above all, let us be amazed that such help has come to us, and not just for us but for all who will hear him in our testimony.

Prayer

O Father, my life is in you and in your Son Jesus Christ. You have visited me with your salvation. By coming to me with your blessing, I have been exposed to all the rigours of wily powers, and I have not been strong. But you, Lord, have been strong on my account. You have loved me, and protected me to this day. You have made me well able both to live in your presence and to bear witness to you in the world. Christ, your Son, leads me in battle, giving me a blessing for those who curse me and a gospel for those who will listen. In Jesus name I say, 'I love you, O Lord my Strength'. Amen.

Psalm 19

These are the thoughts of one who desired to be acceptable to the Lord (v. 14) and who knew the Lord, not just from his outshining in creation but from the light God had lit in his heart by the giving of the law. It was a view from within the covenant. For him, there was not two revelations but one God who proclaimed the one message in his world and by his word.

Day and night sing together to give praise to God and knowledge to man (not proof according to modern expectation) about the greatness of God. Only a bridegroom, in the peak of health, striding clean across the world, could convey the joy this man felt as he thought on the sun giving warmth to the whole world. In such a manner, God conveys his kindness to the whole world.

Paul had such a view of God's goodness revealed in his own preaching and he used these verses to say that God's word had gone everywhere and no-one had excuse for not knowing God (Rom. 10:18).

But it is God's word to those made in his image, his word to those covenanted to him that revives and rejoices their hearts and makes them wise. For the writer, it was the law spoken to Israel at Sinai but mediated to them in the context of their covenant life with God. For us, it is all the teaching of Christ and his apostles but coming to us in the holy love of God revealed in the cross and resurrection. By this message, the law is fulfilled and we have found a place in God's favour. God himself has shone in our hearts.

This writer could think of nothing sweeter to taste than God's word. But this word was not just pleasure. It was warning, and incentive. It made him ask for cleansing and to be kept from proud people who may dominate or lead him astray.

Psalm 20

In the contest between the true God and worldly power, and in those times when it seemed that they must fail, Israel had learned that their welfare depended on the victories and prayers and purposes of their king.

In this, God has taught us all to rely not on our own purposes, prayers and victories but on Christ's intercession in heaven, his victory declared on the day of his resurrection, and his steady purpose to fulfil all his Father's will. God will hear his own Son whom he has anointed as our King. When we are surrounded by the powers of this age 'may we shout for joy over your victory!' No power will be overcome in the present which was not first bankrupted and sacked at the resurrection.

Psalm 21

What of this human king who stood as the source of so much blessing for all his people? What did he think of his God? In what relation did he stand to God? What could he expect from God? One can understand the love of Israel for King David. He trusted in the Lord and so the sureness of his reign was underpinned by nothing less than the steadfast love of God. So Israel was sure of his victories over all their enemies. Together with their king, they relied on the Lord their strength.

Jesus Christ is the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). We are saved by the faith of the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us (Gal. 2:20). Within this human and sinful world, our Lord and King has trusted in God, on our behalf, and in him, taken with him through cross and resurrection, we trust God too. He asked for life, and God gave it to him; life to share with us all.

Prayer

Father, by the word you have brought to you people, the whole world is alive with your speaking. We thank you for the word of the gospel by which our eyes have been enlightened. You have been pleased to give us Christ as our Lord and King. By his faithful life and praying, by his death and rising, you have given us one in whom we may all rise to you and behold your face. Forgive us our unwanted sins, especially those which occur because we feel ourselves defenceless and then take matters into our own hands. Give to us the sturdy faith which trust in the trusting of your Son. In his name we pray. Amen.

Psalm 22

It is hard to miss the sufferings of Christ in this Psalm. He quoted verse one from his cross and some of the descriptions apply to him literally. All the actual suffering that drew the writer to his writing and all the suffering of humanity since should be seen in the light of Christ's sufferings. He knew fully what abandonment was. In him, we can know that we have not been abandoned.

Though abandoned, Jesus still worshipped. He knew that God being holy was the sureness Israel had always had that they could rely on God. In the midst of taunts and evil company that could only be described by reference to animals, his cry still confidently ascended to God.

We do not know what happened to the psalmist that he was delivered, but his confidence that God hears the meek of the earth was vindicated. It was not just him but all who feared God who could rejoice with him. Christ now proclaims to us the victory the Father gave him in his resurrection. 'Come! Be in awe of my Father who raises the afflicted!' he says to us. 'This message shall go to the end of the earth because my Father rules over all things; even sin and death.' So the joy of Christ has become the joy of us all who trust in him in this world.

So Matt. 28:10; Heb. 2:11–12; 5:7–9

Psalm 23

God had led Israel as their Shepherd. He had called them from idolatry, delivered them from the power of this world, endured their ungratefulness, established them in their inheritance, and this constant intervention was not just for the nation but for the

soul of every member of the nation. The first task of Israel's king, David, was to know God as this shepherd in his own life, and here, he tells us what it meant to him.

He would not allow the thought that he would be left in want. God was always leading him, breathing new life into his very being and directing him into the paths which God established by his salvation and which God himself would approve. This would hold good even if deep shadows threatened. He had deep joy even though surrounded by enemies. The truth that had brought the nation into existence, God's steadfast love and faithfulness, would not forsake him in particular.

It is Christ who has fully known the Father in this way, and it is he proclaims to us the Father's goodness. He was full of the Father's steadfast love right here among us (John 1:14). He was the Good Shepherd himself who laid down his life for us (John 10:11) to shake from us the fear of death. With such a revelation of God's fatherly care, well may a deep contentment and certainty and boldness flow deeply through every part of my being.

Prayer

Father, I thank you for a Saviour who, on the cross, has felt the pain of abandonment I deserved. In my own pain and fear, I cry to you in the name of Jesus Christ and ask that you who lifted him up from the grave will also raise me up to newness of life. Grant now Father, that all my life may be lived in your care, and that when sorrows and anxieties threaten to overtake me, I may rest in this, that Christ remains the good Shepherd into whose care I have been entrusted. In his name I pray. Amen.

Psalm 24

Israel's pilgrims sang like this on their way to the temple at Jerusalem. They remembered that the God who delivered them from Egypt was Maker of all the earth. It was he who established order amidst chaos. It was he who was LORD, not other gods.

Their purity was not a qualification for coming to God; the rest of the Bible makes this clear. They trusted in God who had revealed himself to Jacob and had now fulfilled the promises made to him. But they knew that in coming to God they must turn from all evil, and in seeking the LORD that they would be led in paths of righteousness.

This psalm may picture Israel watching the covenant box—the sign of God's presence—entering Jerusalem after the defeat of their enemies (II Sam. 6:12-19; cf. Num. 10:35-36). Israel did not come to a God who had to be goaded into action but who had already owned and saved them.

Therefore, Israel's pilgrims called on the gates of the city (or perhaps the door keepers) to open to the King of glory. Who is he? the keepers ask. 'The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!' is the reply.

Christians come to worship God with the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the sign of God's victory over all his enemies. Well may we address ourselves and say (G. Bingham, New Creation Hymn Book 120):

The doors of my heart enlarge,
The gates of my soul grow wide:
The King of Calvary takes up His throne.
'My Monarch, forever abide!'

In knowing the God who has won a victory for his people, we know the God of all the earth and are persuaded that he establishes his earth in the midst of what the world sees as chaos. We are encouraged to put worthless idols and impurity behind us and to come to the God who makes all things new.

Psalm 25

This man needed to find a path to walk, was aware of his sins, and battling with enemies. How would he turn his mind from his troubles to be sure of the mercy of God? First, he confessed his faith in God and made his request to be saved from enemies. He asked God to lead him, and he asked for God's mercy on him as a sinner. It is because of the goodness of God and not because of our goodness that he leads sinners in the way. But given the abundant mercy of God, he expected to walk with God as friend and covenant partner. His mind was now turned from his fears and confusion and shame to God's goodness. He would continue to wait on God.

Psalm 26

A first reading of this psalm may suggest that the writer was full of himself, lacking the humility of the previous writer. It may also suggest that we could not aspire to such a confession. But what was in this person's eyes? It is the steadfast love of the Lord. It was this that had taught him not to indulge the fancies of the wicked. It was not his own goodness he proclaimed in his worship but the saving deeds and glory of God. The goodness he had he was confident to speak of before God because it was the goodness that came from this faith. Here indeed is level ground.

Prayer

Father, it is not the pressures of this day which deserve my first attention but your abundant goodness. Where sin has abounded, your grace in Christ has abounded all the more. Thought my sins could rise up to keep me from you forever, yet I can come with boldness in Christ's name and know that you will lead me, even me, in paths of righteousness. Thanks be to God. Amen.