

God's Reign

Psalm 2

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The first verse of Psalm 1 starts with the word "blessed" or "happy." The last verse of Psalm 2 starts with the word "blessed" or "happy." These statements are beatitudes, affirmations of people who are really blessed, truly happy, and have genuine joy. Coming at the beginning and end of these two psalms, they enclose them and link them together.

Psalm 1 deals with the question of individuals faced with the problems of wickedness in society. Trusting the Lord, following God's way, relying on God's instruction is the way or the path to a fulfilled life. That's what real happiness is. Our word happy probably isn't strong enough to describe the blessedness we find here. Happiness relates to what happens. It's easily swayed by circumstances. Joy is a deep, abiding sense of being blessed, of confidence that rejoices in the Lord. All of that introduces the important themes in Psalms of blessing or loss, of the paths of righteousness or wickedness, of life or destruction.

Psalm 2 also introduces an important theme that runs through the Book of Psalms. The second psalm deals with the question of how the community faces the problems that arise when nations contend for power. It announces "the messiah into whose power God will deliver the nations" (James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation Commentary*).

This second psalm introduces the theme of God's kingdom, God's rule, *God's reign*. That's r-e-i-g-n, not r-a-i-n or r-e-i-n. It's a great word, but because it sounds like other words with totally different meanings, we need to be aware of what we're talking about.

God's reign, God's kingdom, is a reality all through Scripture, all over the Bible. Talking about God's kingdom is almost another way of talking about salvation.

Now, as Americans, we don't have experience of living under the rule of kings or queens. The British royal family may give us a faint idea of what it means. But our understanding of kingdom, of someone reigning, is limited. Dallas Willard explains "kingdom" in a way that helps us see better

what God's kingdom is. Willard says that every one of us has a "kingdom" or a "queendom"—a "government." It's a realm that's uniquely our own, where our choice determines what happens. Our "kingdom" is *the range of our effective will*. Whatever we have a say over is in our kingdom. This is an important part of what it means to be human. God made us to "have dominion" within an appropriate domain of reality. God intended that we exercise our "rule" in union with God, as he acts with us. "He intended to be our constant companion or co-worker in the creative enterprise of life on earth. That is what his love for us means in practical terms" (*The Divine Conspiracy* 21, 22).

God's kingdom is the range of God's effective will. It's where what he wants done is done. The organizing principles of God's kingdom are God himself, God's character and action. Everything that obeys those principles is within God's kingdom (Willard 25).

The story of God's kingdom is the story of everything from original Creation to New Creation. Let's explore Psalm 2 and also see it as a "thumbnail" or an icon of the whole story. It's God's story and God intends it to include us. We have a choice whether to enter in, find our place in this story and live by it, or to try to keep writing our own story by ourselves and miss the purpose we're made for.

God's kingdom is where God's will is done, where what God wants to happen happens. In creating humans, God gave us some ability to "reign" in that way, a realm where our will can be done. Sadly, we choose not to exercise that ability in partnership with God and for the good of each other, but on our own. God has allowed his kingdom or effective will to be absent from some places, including human hearts that choose not to cooperate with God (Willard 25).

Psalm 2 starts with the nations of the earth in a conspiracy rebelling against the Lord. Kings and rulers rise up against the Jewish king in Jerusalem—called the Lord's anointed here. And that amounts to rising up against the Lord who made him king.

What powers do we see in rebellion against God? What evidence do we see of their work? In human hearts, in relationships, in whole cultures we

can find examples of rejecting God's reign and rebelling against him. It can make us wonder who really rules. Who's in charge?

Verses 1-2 are as timely as today's headlines—nations conspiring, peoples plotting, world leaders posturing to be as powerful as possible. Conditions in our cities—not to mention our schools and homes and churches—seem out of control. (J. Clinton McCann, *The Book of Psalms, The New Interpreter's Bible*)

It can seem like God doesn't rule the world.

But this challenge shows us the strange way God does reign. "The power of God is not the absolute power of a dictator but the power of committed love" (McCann). *The Book of Common Prayer* includes this line: "O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity" (The Collects, Proper 21).

Israel's earthly king faces rebellion, but the true King, the heavenly King, isn't threatened. "The One enthroned in heaven laughs." God isn't intimidated by the puny raging of these earthly rulers and powers. God laughs off their threats. The powers are threatened, they're terrified because God has installed his king on Zion.

Zion is the hill in Jerusalem where King David built his palace and bought the land where his son Solomon would build the Lord's temple. David's descendants were kings of Judah. When each one came into power, and possibly each year at some kind of renewal ceremony, this psalm and other "royal" psalms announced to the world that Judah's king was set there by God. The psalms also reminded the kings of their responsibility to represent God. Judah's king portrays God's reign. David and each of his descendants represented the Lord. The king was even called "son of God." They often failed in their responsibility. But God had made a covenant with David and promised always to keep one of his descendants on the throne. God would punish them, but he wouldn't remove them the way he had King Saul.

So the king represents the reign of God. The king is also the people's representative. Stephen Lawhead wrote a series of novels about the

legends of King Arthur. When we hear of King Arthur we may think about Disney's "The Sword in the Stone" or some other popular movie version. But Lawhead tells the story in a serious and realistic way. Some of it reminds me of the biblical stories of David. In one book, Britain has been invaded by barbarians. As the war drags on, it's decided that Arthur will meet the barbarian chief in one-to-one combat to decide the end of the war and the fate of their people. As he prepares for the battle, Queen Gwenhwyvar regrets that she can't join him in this fight.

"I care nothing for myself," Arthur told her. "What I do this day, I do for Britain. In this battle, I *am* Britain. No one can take my place or share my portion, for this combat belongs to the king alone."

He stated the matter succinctly. If peace was to obtain to all Britain, it must be won by him who held all Britain in his hand. Thus, Arthur and no one else. The sacrifice would be his, or the glory. But whether sacrifice or glory, it was a sovereign act, and his alone to make. (*Pendragon* 385)

Judah's king, God's anointed, not only represents God, but gives a picture of humanity. God's original intention for humans was for us to represent God and have dominion or rule in creation. That's at least part of what being made in God's image means. Human beings were made to be like an angled mirror, reflecting God's wise and caring love into the world, bringing order and fruitfulness to the garden where humans were placed. That project was tragically twisted with human arrogance and sin. But God hasn't abandoned that project. It's still God's intention (N. T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms* 50).

Some of the other royal psalms remind the kings how they are supposed to act, to rule in ways that reflect God. For example, Psalm 72 includes this prayer and affirmation:

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. May the mountains bring prosperity to the

people, the hills the fruits of righteousness. May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor. ...

For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. (verses 1-4, 12-14)

The earthly ruler was to reflect the heavenly King in ways like that. What if earthly rulers, authorities, leaders are still supposed to reflect God's character in such ways? If you ever go into politics, you might want to re-read Psalm 72 and others. Whatever kind of leadership we're called to, we need to lead with the character God expected of Jerusalem's rulers, the character that Jesus revealed and fulfilled.

So the monarchy in ancient Judah was supposed to represent God's reign and provide a picture of true humanity. This is where it becomes an icon, a small picture of the big story. The story of the king captures the Bible's whole story.

At Creation, God makes humans who are God's children. They have the vocation of bearing God's image and ruling in God's name. Trying to grasp the power for themselves instead of exercising it under God's authority and in partnership with God, they lose it. Rebellious powers start to rule in the world.

God sets out to redeem and restore creation. God calls Abraham and Sarah, leads them and provides for them. He promises them land and descendants. Their family becomes the nation of Israel. After they fall into slavery and bondage, God rescues them and makes a covenant with them. God calls them to be his people and to be a kingdom of priests. God intends Israel to be the means through which God will rescue and redeem the world. Eventually, God gives the nation a king who embodies Israel's purpose. Sadly, the nation fails to fulfill their purpose. They fall into idolatry or they keep the light of the world to themselves instead of sharing it with the nations.

Then God himself comes among us. God becomes human in the nation of Abraham's family. Jesus is born as a descendant of King David. Mark's Gospel emphasizes that Jesus is God's King and Son. Psalm 2 calls the king of Judah the Lord's anointed. The word for anointed is the word that *Messiah* comes from. In Greek, the word is *Christ*. Psalm 2 also calls the king the son of God.

Mark introduces his Gospel as "the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1). When Jesus is baptized, as he comes up out of the water he sees heaven torn open and the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove. And a voice comes from heaven, God the Father speaks and says to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (1:9-11). There's an echo of Psalm 2 there, along with some other Old Testament passages.

Later, Jesus takes three of his disciples with him up a mountain. There he's transfigured. His glory shines out for them to see. A cloud appears and covers them. Clouds can represent God's presence. A voice comes from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mk 9:2-7). Here's another echo of Psalm 2.

Later still, rulers of the Romans and the Jews rise up against Jesus, the Lord's anointed. They condemn him and kill him by nailing him to a cross. But then God raises him from the dead.

Reflecting on this and announcing it, the apostles Paul and Barnabas declare:

We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "You are my son; today I have become your father." God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. (Acts 13:32-33)

Paul would later write about the gospel of God:

the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a

descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 1:2-4)

Jesus embodies God. Jesus represents us. He fights for us. He rules. Jesus lets us know that God's reign is near, is at hand, is available to us. We can allow God to reign in us when we repent and believe the good news.

Jesus fulfills Israel's purpose and he fulfills humanity's purpose. In Jesus we begin to be restored to what we're meant to be. We still face hostile rebellious powers in the world. After Jesus' death and resurrection and after Pentecost, the apostles were persecuted. As they prayed for more boldness, they interpreted what had happened to Jesus and what was happening to them as fulfilling Psalm 2 (Acts 4:23-26).

In Psalm 2, the Lord tells his anointed, "Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (v 8). That never happened for David or any of his descendants who ruled in Jerusalem. When the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he tried to get him to worship him in order to gain the nations. Jesus refused that offer. Then, after his death and resurrection, Jesus told his followers, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore *go and make disciples of all nations*" (Mt 28:18-19). Jesus is God's anointed One. In Jesus, we are God's anointed community sent to claim all the nations for him.

The failure of Judah's kings to realize and experience all that God promised caused the people to look to the future. Because of what God has done in Jesus, because of what God is doing now, because in the end God will be faithful, someday God's kingdom will fully come on earth as in heaven. There will be a new creation. And we'll join the song rejoicing that, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah (Anointed), and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

Psalm 2 concludes with a blessing that's an invitation: "Blessed are all who take refuge in him." To take refuge in the Lord and his anointed is to trust the Lord, to entrust ourselves to him, to rely on him, to believe that he reigns and to live in his kingdom now and forever.