

Psalm 2: The King

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[0 : 0 0] So we'll start with a question. What does it mean to be blessed and where can blessing be found? If we take culture as a whole and if we consider the wide range of experiences, backgrounds, desires and hopes that people have, well we might struggle to come up with one single answer.

However, I suspect that there's probably a general trend if we took every individual's bespoke definition of blessing. I think you'd find that blessing tended to be focused on individual fulfillment. For some this might be focused on wealth and security. For some on feeling at one with yourself or at one with the world. For others maybe on health and a long life. And then for others again on achieving their dream career or perhaps their family aspirations. Being blessed is getting what we want out of life. Though God at times will bless us by giving us some of those things I've just mentioned, that's really just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding true blessing. This is what makes the Bible's understanding of blessing uniquely compelling. When it comes down to it, actually, God's blessing is found in a king. Psalm 1 and Psalm 2, they kind of act as this twofold introduction to the whole book of Psalms. There's five books in total in the Psalms. The first book's composed of 41 Psalms. And of those first 41, all those Psalms are described as being a Psalm of David, except for the first two. So this kind of links them together and marks them out as slightly different.

Psalm 1, and we looked at that a couple of weeks ago, it begins with a reference to blessing. And notice that Psalm 2 ends with a reference to blessing. Now it's exactly the same word.

Between them, these two Psalms introduced this book of songs by outlining where blessing is truly found. In contrast to the world of the day in which they were written, and indeed the world of our day.

Blessing is rooted, quite simply, in recognizing that Jesus is king. And what we have here in Psalm 2 is a theological reflection on God's king. And it presents us with two perspectives regarding the Messiah, and ends with a strong word of advice regarding which perspective we should listen to if we are going to be wise. And so our three points are three voices. Firstly, the voice of the world, which we should critically engage with and evaluate. Secondly, the voice of God, which we should listen to with humility and with awe. And thirdly, the voice of wisdom, whose advice we should heed and allow to shape our lives. So the voice of the world. Psalm begins with the question. And the tone of the question is incredulity. Why do the nations conspire and the people's plot in vain?

[3 : 1 5] The Psalmist, he's looking out at the world around him, and he notices certain trends. He notices that there is a worldwide struggle going on. There's a sense of turmoil riding on the wind, whispers of conspiracy, rumors of plots and stratagems. This is what he sees. The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed. Now let me pose a question. What do you think it would take to bring the whole world together as one? What would it take to bring global unity?

I suspect the answer is a common enemy. And what enemy does all the world have in common? God. This observation has its roots all the way back in the very beginning of the Bible, a narrative in the building of a city called Babel or Babylon. In the wake of the flood, all humanity was as one. And they gathered together in the area that would soon be home to the ancient Babylonian civilization. And they said, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves. Otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth. This is a crucial moment in the Bible narrative. Here we see a united humanity.

And what are they united around? Well, they're united around their desire to throw off God's authority and to be completely independent from his rule and his name. They wanted to build a city of their own.

And they wanted to make a name for themselves. That is, they didn't want God to be involved anymore. Even the tower at the heart of the city captures their aspirations. They wanted to reach the heavens. They wanted to take the place of God. And isn't this what we see in Psalm 2? The voice of the world cries out, let us break their chains and throw off their shackles. Let us be free from God and his king. Let us be free from the morality that Christ would impose on us. Let us be free from the restrictive definitions God would have us suffer under. Let us be free to live our lives in the way we want to.

Let us get the most out of life whilst we have it. This is humanity's Babel complex. A consistent and constant desire to build a city or civilization or movement that stands against God and resists his king. It's an inherent desire within all of humanity that stems ultimately from our sin.

[6 : 09] And the psalmist observes that though humanity is divided into multiple languages and cultures and nations, this thread, this Babel complex continues. It's like a virus that keeps perpetuating itself.

It's what Augustine of Hippo, the fourth century church leader, famously called the earthly city. He saw all of history as a conflict between the earthly city and the city of God. And I think that's quite a helpful lens for understanding the central conflict which we see here in this psalm.

The kings and rulers of the psalmist today, well they probably weren't literally rising up together. They likely would have been at each other's throats most of the time. But they were united in this one thing. They despised the true God and any claim he might make on them. So then, so today.

You take the assorted political leaders of Russia, China, and the United States. We've already thought a bit about them in our prayer. They may all have very, very different goals and they may all loathe one another. But what they all have in common is this Babel complex. And every nation and culture has its own way of expressing it. Every society has its own way of rejecting God and positioning itself against him. But that Babel complex never really fades. The world continues to preach a message of smashing the chains of God and breaking off the shackles of the Messiah.

And our culture, just like every culture that has gone before it, assumes that it is on the right side of history. To borrow what is frankly a ludicrous phrase. When you have such a belief that you are living in the era of enlightenment and that your sense of morality represents the gold standard against which all of history ought to be judged, you're in the same camp as those kings at the start of Psalm 2, listening to the voice of the world and manifesting a modern Babylon.

[8 : 25] So we need to learn to be detectives of culture. Now, not all culture is bad. Much in society is a product of God's goodness and what we sometimes call his common grace. But at the same time, we must acknowledge that we live in a world and a culture dominated by the voice of the world as we have it here in this Psalm.

And the Babel complex which drives our culture to reject Jesus. In just the same way that a seasoned listener of classical music can pick out the different instruments in a symphony and can also tell you the period, maybe even the composer, just from the style of the music. Well, we ought to be able to do that with our culture. To watch a film and identify the voice of the world in its message. To have a conversation and recognize the cadences of the earthly city. To read a book and hear the cries of the modern Babylon. Because the kings and rulers that we see here in this Psalm, they're effectively reborn every generation. And their voices which say, let us throw off the shackles of God and his king.

Well, they provide the soundtrack to much of our lives. And so there's wisdom to learning to listen with a detective's ear because that's going to help us to recognize the lies of the world for what they are whenever they encroach upon us. And it's going to help us to root out the Babel complex in our own hearts as well. That is our sinful inclination to resist the sanctifying and transforming work of God's Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives.

But a good ear for the world is not quite enough. Because in every generation, there are a few brilliant minds who are actually able to recognize the deep-seated problems in the world for what they are, but never end up discovering the much better music of the gospel. And they end up being left without hope. What we need is not just a perceptive eye on the world that we live in, but also the voice of God, which is going to point us towards his king and show us where true blessing is found.

Listen to how God views the rebellious voice of the world. The one enthroned in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath.

[11 : 08] God laughs. But this isn't a laugh of amusement or pleasure. This is a laugh of incredulity, and it's a laugh of frustration. Its tone matches, I think, the tone of the question with which the psalm began. As the psalmist asked why the nations would bother putting all their effort into these empty schemes against God, so God laughs in despair that the world keeps on rejecting him.

God's laugh is rooted in his righteous and appropriate anger. Rejecting God is not something to be done lightly or with a cheeky glint in your eye. It's a position that produces a response of wrath. God made us, ergo, he's angry when we hate him, despise him, and rebel against his king.

And it's at this point, then, that the psalmist introduces for us the central figure of the psalm, the king, the messiah, the anointed one, God's chosen king.

I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain, says the Lord. So who is this king? He's God's son. And the psalm continues, I will proclaim the Lord's decree. He said to me, you are my son. Today I have become your father. In the Old Testament, the king of Israel was described as God's son. So whilst David, the king whom the psalms focused on the most, was not literally the son of God, he was proclaimed to be the son of God in his role as God's king. Through this, we can see just how important then the role of the king in Israel was. The king was to be a man after God's own heart who brought God's rule and goodness to the nation and beyond. He was God's royal envoy and his adopted son.

But as we go through the psalms, so many of which reflect on the kingship and on David himself, actually, well, we realize that the king of Israel is flawed and sinful. He's weak. He fails. He sins.

[13 : 29] He doesn't live up to the kind of expectation that we see here in Psalm 2. And then when we take a clear, the kings of Israel and Judah were deeply, deeply flawed. Eventually, they led the whole nation into unrepentant rebellion and sin, and then from there into exile. And so a better king was needed, King David's greater son. And the entire Old Testament is driving towards this better king, a better king who would be not just the son of God in role, but the son of God in nature, the perfect son of God and the perfect king.

When Jesus began his ministry on earth, he was baptized in the Jordan, and Mark's gospel tells us, just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came down from heaven, you are my son, whom I love with you, I am well pleased. This is a moment that marks Jesus out as the son of God, the king Israel were expecting, but also hints towards the fact that he's also more than a mere man, more than David.

And as Jesus teaches, and as he heals, it becomes clear that he is the promised king, and it becomes clear from what he does and says, that he is also more. He is the eternal son of God.

John tells us the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son who came from the father full of grace and truth.

And when Jesus died, even the centurion recognized with awe that this man was different. Surely, said the centurion, this man was the son of God.

[15 : 42] This psalm is anticipating the day when the true king would arrive, because it's only that king who would have the power and the authority to respond to a world grimly holding on to its Babel complex.

Ask me, says the Lord God to his Messiah, that I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron. You will dash them to pieces like pottery. It's powerful imagery, isn't it? It's visceral. As I read it, I imagine an iron crowbar on the one hand and a nice set of denby plates on the other. There's no prizes for guessing who's going to come out on top. It's going to be the crowbar. The whole world belongs to Jesus, every nation and every culture. He is the king, even if people don't accept it. He is the crowbar.

The world is a set of denby that's forgotten quite how fragile it really is. For example, you can be against the monarchy in principle. It doesn't change the fact that the monarchy exists. Just so with Jesus. The world is against him, but he is the king no matter what, and he reigns with a scepter of iron. It's very worth noting that Jesus, as we see him in the gospels, doesn't always look like the image we have here of this conquering and victorious king who will crush the nations. So it's worth spending a few moments considering why. Indeed, part of why Jesus' contemporaries struggled to see him as the promised Messiah is because he came in weakness.

He came as a servant. We've already spent some of our summer working through the servant songs of Isaiah. The message there was clear that the Messiah was always going to come in weakness and in suffering. But to their great folly, the Jews of Jesus' day ignored and repressed those prophecies.

They wanted the king who would bring Israel national supremacy over all the nations and crush their enemies. Instead, what they got was a child in a manger, a carpenter from Nazareth, a teacher who rode on a donkey and a man who died on a cross. They jeered at him as he hung there because, well, surely this man couldn't be the Messiah who would rule with a scepter of iron. He couldn't even save himself, or so they thought. Jesus came in perfect humility. But when he rose from the dead, having defeated death and dealt with sin, at that point he was declared the conqueror and the victor. And this is what Paul says to the Philippians. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

[18 : 55] And every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. So whilst Christ came in humility, he will return in power and authority. And until that day, what he's doing is he's calling people all over the world and from every nation to repent of their sin and to believe the good news that Jesus died and rose again for them. And on this we must be clear. He is coming back.

And he is coming back to reign. And it's worth asking, perhaps, how do we actually feel about that? Are we able to pray with John at the end of the Bible and say truly, come Lord Jesus? Because there are these two voices, these two competing voices, the voice that comes from the earthly city and its Babel complex, and the voice that comes from heaven and the city of God. And when we listen to the voice of God, well, we'll start longing more and more for Jesus. But when we listen to the voice of the world without wisdom, well, we might find ourselves agreeing at certain points with the Babel cries to tear off the shackles and start asserting our freedom from Christ. So what we need is we need the voice of wisdom in our heads so that we don't lose our heads and join in with the madness of crowds. The psalmist says in verse 10, therefore, you kings, be wise, be warned, you rulers of the earth. Wisdom is listening to warnings and heeding them, isn't it? But foolishness is thinking that the warnings aren't for you. As we get closer every day to Jesus returning, those warning bells should sound a little louder. We don't know when he's coming back. It's through pursuing our sin and rejecting Jesus. Psalm 2 makes pretty much the same point. As we've said, they're very tightly linked and comprised together a twofold introduction to the whole book of Psalms. Where Psalm 2 develops the idea is in the notion that the two ways essentially come down to whether or not we recognize and accept that Jesus Christ is king.

We're free to reject Jesus and decide that we ourselves would be better off being the captains of our fate. That's the foundation of Babel and is the dominant voice in the world around us.

But though we're free to make that choice, there is a cost. We can reject the creator and despise his morals and disregard his king, but he will not ignore that rejection. Jesus' wrath, we're told, will flare up. Now, he hasn't returned yet. And Peter tells us that this is because he wants to extend the opportunity for mercy. But when he does, the window is going to be closed. The door is going to be locked. Much better to listen now to the voice of wisdom and serve the Lord with fear and trembling. That phrase perhaps gives the impression that Jesus is terrifying and unapproachable.

And actually, in a sense, he is. It's an aspect of his character which maybe we ought to rediscover. But at the same time, he is also the loving, kind, and humble, perfect man we see in the Gospels.

[22 : 50] The one who died for you and longs to know you. Our elder brother, as well as being our terrifying king. The key thing is these things aren't mutually exclusive. Christ is both the kind savior and the terrifying warrior. He is the soldier in the war zone, defending civilians against the onslaught of the enemy. He's like a father protecting his child from danger. A shepherd guarding the flock from the wolves in the night. He's the knight in shining armor, standing up to the dragon and his armies of evil who have believed his lies. And he does all he can to convince the dragon's minions to come over to his light. But eventually, the killing stroke must be struck in order to save those whom he has rescued and sworn to defend. The salvation that Jesus brings can only be enjoyed in all its fullness when evil is completely dealt with.

This psalm is at root, a call to renew our love for Jesus, to kiss his hand in homage and recognize him as our king, to serve him with fear and to serve him with love. It's in doing this, in doing this, that we enter into true blessing. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Our blessing is felt here and now in being united to Jesus the king and knowing him as our lord and savior. We have been justified and we've had our sins wiped clean. We've been adopted by God and we can call him our father. We've received the Holy Spirit who is always with us. We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing. But there are also even better blessings to come where sin and death and darkness pass away at the return of Jesus. Hope of a new creation and no more evil, sin or death. No more guilt, no more shame, no more anger and frustration, no more pain and suffering. Only perfect goodness rooted in the rule of a perfect king. I'll tell you what, I'm looking forward to it. I imagine you are too.

And if that's not your hope, well it's my hope that it would be. It sure beats the Babel complex that is really little more than a prison for our hearts. A complex that imagines blessing exists outside of Christ. But that is all it is. It's pure imagination, hollow, fictitious, at root, a lie.

It should be our hope that people across the world, across our nation and in our city, respond to Jesus by recognizing that he is their king. Not only should it be our hope, but it should be our mission. Because we want them to know the blessings of the king.

[26 : 19] So we close at the end of the Bible story. What we see in John's revelation, what he sees people from every nation entering the city of God. And that is our hope. That is our mission. To see Christ proclaimed and worshipped as king. To see his kingdom cross every border and every barrier and every culture. Bringing blessing and new life to all who bow before him.