



WHO RUNS THE WORLD?

Catalog No. 7163

Psalm 2

Steve De Pangher

April 16th, 2000

Introduction

Psalm 2 is about politics and God's sovereignty. It addresses the most fundamental questions we can ask about the role of politics in society: What dynamics govern the political process? What is the role of a believer in politics? Psalm 2, however, can only address these and other political questions because it has revealed so clearly the answer to the most basic political question of all: Who runs world?

Looked at canonically (i.e. why Psalm 2 is placed where it is in the Book of Psalms), Psalm 2 follows immediately upon issues raised by Psalm 1. Psalm 1 had explained in picturesque detail how a man becomes blessed – by constant and lifelong meditation on God's word. The man who is not blessed, however, is described as worn-out and worthless, chaff blown away on the wind. God's word is not seen by the wicked as the way to return to the ideal state of communion with God like Adam had in the Garden of Eden, and so the unblessed man's world becomes self-focused and man-driven. But this raises a question: What is the relationship between those who are blessed and those who are not? Psalm 2 approaches the question raised by Psalm 1 from a "macro-perspective" – i.e. from the point of view of whole groups and categories of peoples. This makes it different from many of the psalms, which take a more "micro-perspective" – i.e. from the point of view of the individual and his or her soul.

Interestingly, there is at least one manuscript tradition that makes one Psalm out of Psalms 1 and 2. There are important verbal echoes between the two and their meaning are complementary, so they were often put together. But ultimately, the New Testament authors came to treat them separately, and it behooves us to follow in their path.¹

The Drama of Psalm 2

Let's begin by looking carefully at the different voices in Psalm 2, for Psalm 2 is presented to us as a drama. Shakespeare is credited with saying, "All the world's a stage." This is also the spirit of Psalm 2, because the Psalmist presents the truths of human politics and God's sovereignty in a short drama.

Who are the players in the drama of Psalm 2? In order of appearance, they are:

The Narrator, or the Psalmist - the person who introduces and explains the action and applies the lesson of the drama to the audience.

The Kings of the Earth – in the time of David, this would have been the political leaders of the gentile nations around Israel. These leaders are clearly presented to us as representatives of all of the people in these various nations.

God – Although he needs no introduction, he is presented to us in Psalm 2 in surprisingly emotional terms. To understand him fully, the audience will need to come to grips with the intensity of emotion with which God acts in this short play.

God's Anointed One – the play's hero. But who is he? It would be easy to try to say that this is David himself, but the description of God's anointed one in Psalm 2 doesn't quite fit David, nor is it precise enough to say this person represents all of the kings of Israel after David. God's anointed one is his Son. Be-

yond this, the New Testament understands this to include, mysteriously, the Son's body and bride: the Church itself. In a sense, then, God's anointed one is you and me.

Those who hear Psalm 2, however, have two roles. For every play, an audience is assumed. You and I are that audience. It is our responsibility to listen carefully to the truths in the Psalm and then behave accordingly.

Act 1 – The Plotting of the Kings of the Earth (Psalm 2:1-3)

In the first 3 verses of Psalm 2, the dramatic problem is introduced. First, the narrator sets the stage by asking a rhetorical question, and then by telling us what the Kings of the Earth are saying and doing.

**Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take
counsel together,
against the Lord and his anointed, saying
"Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from
us."**

Notice that the Psalm begins with turmoil. I am quoting from the RSV, which is a little weak here. The word "conspire" could also be translated as "riot" or "rage." The Psalmist is trying to paint an active, loud, threatening scene here. This is not just a closed-door conspiracy carried out in a smoke-filled, darkened room. This is a riot in the streets. The pot is boiling over. The nations are mad! Interestingly, though, they are also meditating. When the Psalmist says that the peoples "plot," he uses the same word that tells what the blessed man does with the law of God day and night – he meditates upon it. As constantly as the cow chews its cud, the blessed man chews on the law of the Lord, and the nations plot against the Lord and his anointed. So the nations riot and the peoples meditate maliciously.

Then the Psalmist introduces the governors of the nations and peoples: the kings of the earth and the rulers. These also have risen up and plotted together. But the vocabulary is more formal, perhaps indicating the more elaborate movements of official political or courtly processes. In any event, the parallelism in this verse reinforces the idea that all levels of society are working vehemently in a single direction. Treason is on everyone's lips. Tension marks the conversations in the streets. Riots have broken out. The politicians have gathered together to take counsel.

What is all of this social and political tension about? It comes down to one thing: it is "against the Lord and his anointed." The obvious question is: Why? I want to offer two answers to this question. First, it intrigues me that the social and political tension in the world against the Lord is simply assumed by the Psalmist. It is the rule rather than the exception, and realizing this can have significant impact in our lives. Second, we will see that the tension centers on rebellion against torah, against the personal and social implications of being governed by the Lord and his anointed.

Turmoil is Normal

Psalm 2 has a bit of the feel of a slap in the face. In the first three verses we instantly descend into riot and treachery. The serenity of vision in Psalm 1 is quickly replaced by the chaotic

worldliness of Psalm 2. It is breathtaking. I get the feeling that the psalmist's view (and certainly God's view) of all this turmoil is that it is utterly and monotonously normal. At the very end of the first verse, the Psalmist gives away the whole dramatic scheme by telling us quite plainly that all the rioting and scheming is "in vain." This attitude is important when we consider the political stance taken in Psalm 2. I find myself often expecting godly behavior from ungodly people. Do you do that too? The Psalmist doesn't. He notes immediately the riotous actions and evil attitude, but he doesn't condemn or get upset. He simply asks the rhetorical questions, "Why are they doing this? Why are they wasting their energy on these worthless, ultimately vain activities?"

Martin Luther's comments on these verses encouraged me. The popular view of Luther is very simple – so simple that it is inaccurate. He was indeed a brave man who in the face of deadly danger stood against the theological abuses of his day. He did indeed elevate the gospel and the importance of Scripture. But he was a complex man, bedeviled by depression, and constantly at odds with not just Catholic authorities, but also other leaders of the Protestant Movement. He had been very optimistic about what his open proclamation of the gospel might mean. He expected that thousands would hear and understand and come flocking to the new standard that he had raised. But it didn't happen that way. The progress of his movement was slow and divisive. It didn't take long for the wave of reform to fracture into smaller movements that fought as much with one another as against the Roman Catholics. This caused Luther great personal pain. All of his enemies, and seemingly many of his friends, were accusing his teachings of causing unrest, violence, and strife throughout all of Europe. He was, he says, "tormented to death on this account."²

But Luther found comfort in Psalm 2. When he realized that hurtful disappointments, bitter arguments, and divisive strife were simply the result of the unleashing of the kingdom of God on earth, he could relax a bit. He said,

But finally through God's kindness I saw that these very thoughts, cares, sadnesses, and sorrows of the heart were born of a genuine ignorance of the kingdom of Christ and a harmful stupidity. Therefore I took heart again and I said: "I know the nature of this kingdom is such that Satan cannot bear it. He labors with hands and feet with all his might that he may disturb the churches and oppose the Word."³

Let us not be so blind as to think that this kind of thinking means that all turmoil and disagreement is good or right. The point to remember is that strife and pain are normal in this life. As simple a point as this is, I find that I seldom make it a permanent part of my thinking. I constantly expect things to get better. I keep thinking that if only this or that would happen, then things would calm down or brighten up. What the Psalmist is telling us, though, and what Luther learned, is that this is not how God has arranged things for those who would follow him. Psalm 2 loudly proclaims the precise opposite of any "prosperity gospel." Things aren't going to get better, they are going to get worse. The more faithful you are to the Lord and his anointed, the worse you should expect things to be. Now that is not the whole story, but, out of respect for the dramatic presentation of Psalm 2 we need to let the plot thicken a bit first. We haven't reached the place in Psalm 2 where enough of the veil is lifted for us to understand this truth more fully.

The Rebels and Their Cause

There is an important contrast in Psalm 2:1-3 in what the rebels on this earth are up to. While they rebel against a person, they say they are rebelling against the law. While we know that the nations and kings are plotting "against the Lord and his anointed," the Psalm goes on to quote the kings as saying, "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us." What are the bonds and cords that they are being threatened with? I be-

lieve that the kings and nations of this world are plotting to free themselves from the restraints of Torah, to which they think they will be forced to submit if the Lord and his anointed one rule them. In the terminology we would use in the church, the world rebels against the Lord of the Church because people do not want to have to submit to the church's morality and ethics.

In my lifetime, I think the sexual revolution is the most vivid example of our society's open rebellion against Christian morality. In the 60's and 70's, when experimentation with open forms of sexual freedom was still somewhat novel, there were many social commentators, doctors, psychologists, and others who explicitly blamed many of society's problems on repressed sexuality. It was, for them, simply a matter of throwing off the "bonds and cords" of Christian sexual ethics that would allow for personal fulfillment, happiness, and peace. Rampant abortion and easy divorce are just two of the current problems we face today that are a result of society successfully throwing off the "bonds and cords" of the church in a previous generation.

If I am interpreting Psalm 2 correctly, however, the real rebellion in our society is not against biblical sexual ethics, or whatever the cause of the day might be. Rather it is against God himself. Can there be any real doubt about this? When evil has run its course, and its disgusting results are obvious everywhere, do rebels give up their cause? No. New justifications are found, and more extreme disobedience is recommended. The rebel seldom faces his or her own choice so starkly. The slide into self-deception becomes psychological necessity.

One of the keys to Jesus' love for those he ministered among was his ability to see this deep rebellion against himself and his Father as being the real cause of the problem. He was never fooled by surface impressions. He didn't confuse the rebel with his cause. The prostitute and tax collector, the scoundrel and low-life, needed him, and yet everyone around them could only see how awful and messed up they were. Jesus saw *them*, their glory and magnificence as human beings. He was completely aware of how sick and broken they were. His awareness stemmed from the clarity of his vision and the depth of his love. He knew what people were meant to be and was broken-hearted that each person had fallen so far below the glorious image of God in them.

The so-called righteous of the Jewish world, the scribes and Pharisees, could only see the ugliness of the sickness and the uncleanness of being broken in men. They saw the rebel's rebellion and were repelled by the rebel's cause. When they expressed moral outrage against this, Jesus was completely unsympathetic, because he knew that their approach, an approach with an incomplete vision and a lack of love, to the problem was wrong. And it wasn't just wrong, but wrong-headed. It kept the religious leaders of the day from seeing their own sickness and sin.

Jesus, the apostles, and the fathers of the early church all saw, however, that there are more ways than one to understand the desire to cast away the bonds and cords of torah, and the messiah who would impose them. Not only do those outside of the covenant community hate the idea of being under the burden of torah. As believers we sometimes balk against this yoke. Cyprian, one of the Church Fathers from Third Century North Africa, understood from the sayings of Jesus and the life and writings of Jeremiah (see especially Jeremiah 27⁴), that the idea of bonds and cords was linked to the idea of bearing a yoke or burden. Both restrained, punished, held one back, and represented unwonted submission to some other power. But, Cyprian says, this is not what submission to Jesus is all about. He contrasted Psalm 2:3 with the words of Jesus who said,

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt 11:28-30).⁵

So, there is a fundamental confusion in the unbelieving mind,

and many Christians share it. We fear the restraints, the bonds and cords, that submission to God implies. So we rebel against that yoke. We plot and plan in vain. But the truth is that Jesus is gentle and his burden light – if he is embraced and submitted to. The ultimate irony is that that which we most greatly fear will only come to pass if we rebel against it.

There is a profound lesson in this for me on an inter-personal level. When I get self-righteous, judgmental, and angry at the world for its sin and rebellion, I move out of relationship with those around me. I start dealing with surface issues, impressions, and outward pain. I remember being in the middle of a very difficult meeting with some brothers here in our body. There were plenty of broken relationships and pain around the table, and we had met together to see what could be done to mend and heal the damage – or to at least understand it. At one point, one of the men turned to me and said, “You’re only listening with your head. Listen with your heart!” It was a fair statement, one I needed to hear then and need to be constantly reminded of. In dealing with people every day, I need to remember to see each person, in all of his or her potential glory, and not look like the scribes and Pharisees did on only the outward condition.

There is also a profound lesson in this at the level of society and politics. The struggles in our society in these arenas are important but deceptive. The real issues are never political. Can you accept that? Psalm 2 clearly tells us that the rebellion against the Lord is personal but that it gets expressed in political and social terms. So while we must respond in love and wisdom to the political injustice and social oppression in our world, we must never forget that these are surface issues. Beneath it is the sinful rebelliousness of fallen men and women who are in need of redemption.

Act 2 – The Revelation of God’s Anointed One (Psalm 2:4-9)

What is God’s response to the plotting of the nations? In dramatic term, Act 2 begins with verse 4. The Psalmist turns to the audience – to you – and explains God’s reaction:

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision.

I found this a little unsettling. I understand that God has nothing to fear from the kings of the earth. But is it fitting behavior for God to laugh at them in mockery? The emotional intensity increases, though, in the very next verse:

Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury

Divine Emotions

What kind of a God is this? He laughs and mocks, he is wrathful and terrifies men while in the midst of fury. I found that I had to work my way through the emotions in these verses before I could understand the real impact of God’s response to a rebellious mankind.

It is all too easy for us today to simply say, “Oh, these are figurative expressions. God isn’t really one who mocks and loses his temper.” We seem to insist that God become reasonable, so that, well tamed, God may enter our livingrooms and church buildings and not upset things too much. I get nervous, however, whenever I try to get God to look and act too much like I want him to. To rid God of his emotions is tempting, but unwarranted. I must reject this because to do so denies the profound truths of the Incarnation. God the Son, God’s anointed one, has felt all of my fears, wept, become angry, was disappointed, etc. Whatever conception of God I have, it cannot contradict the truth of the Incarnation, upon which my salvation depends.

But Psalm 2 presents me with a greater challenge, and it is one that has been felt down through the ages of the church. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin all took time in their commentaries on Psalm 2 to discuss what these expressions of emo-

tion might mean when applied to God. Mostly they shied away from saying that these words were accurate descriptions of God’s experience. Augustine resolved the issue with a kind of legalistic trick: God permits his saints to have emotions of anger, derision, and so on when confronting rebellion against God’s holy standards. But God himself remains immovable, unchangeable, and imperturbable. Calvin understood that God responds to human wickedness by letting it run its full course, which includes letting those who are wicked ultimately being held up to derision when their evil becomes manifest. This is all part of God’s wrath. But for Augustine and Calvin, God is allowing these emotions in others, not experiencing them himself.

With so great a cloud of witnesses, who am I to contradict? But I feel that it is necessary. Certainly, I do not believe in a petty God, one who lashes out in anger or who mocks the pain of others. But my years as a father have taught me that there are emotions proper to a being father that, when experienced to the full, are not signs of immaturity but of compassion. The great truth of Larry Crabb’s book, *The Silence of Adam*, is that most fathers deny, remain cold, distant, unengaged, and, ultimately, silent, when what they need to do to bring about healing is to move in, especially at times of doubt, and speak a word of loving truth. I understand perfectly well that this insight can be perverted, and that men can become capricious and bullying. But what I think is needed more often than not is for men to step out and express their emotion, to state clearly when they are angry or feel challenged or insecure. To have an image of God that includes the compassionate, deeply moving, even fearful expression of emotion is a fabulous guide. Let us take it!

One last point on this difficult question: There is a sense here in which mockery and derision can be understood in a very normal way when viewed through the eyes of a parent, especially a father. Who hasn’t seen a father with a child that has become so angry that the child says all kinds of irrational things: “I hate you! I’ll never talk to you again!” Sometimes the child may even be trying to strike the father in this outburst of temper. But if the father were to laugh at a time like this, probably just inwardly, wouldn’t it be appropriate? What are the threats and plotting and plans of this angry little child to a mature father? They are nothing but vanity. And a loving father can smile at them, and all the while continue loving the child. I think that this is precisely the picture that the Psalmist wants us to have from Psalm 2:4-5. The vain rebellion of the kings of the earth is ludicrous when viewed from the context of the awesome power of God, our loving Father.

Martin Luther thought that having the ability to laugh along with God at God’s enemies – which for Luther very much included his own sinful behavior – was very important. Failure to laugh, for Luther, was a sign of a failure of faith, a failure to see things from God’s perspective.

We feel the force and power of the kings and rulers, the wisdom of the world, the malice of Satan, even the burden of sin and our conscience. For that reason we do not laugh, but whine, grow disheartened, despair, and in this way make our whole life bitter. But wrongly. For what do we accomplish if we worry ourselves to death? For the world will never be cured, Satan will never become milder. We should, therefore, learn to rouse our spirits in such perils and laugh with our God, who it is certain, will not laugh forever, but will at length be inflamed against godless men and will confound them, as follows immediately. It will be easier for us to laugh, moreover, if we do not forget what it said before about the Lord and His Anointed. For we must hold this to be certain, that all these trials, all these ragings and ravings of the world, are stirred up against us on account of Christ.⁶

Ultimately, with Luther, I found it most helpful to remember that God laughs at me, that he holds me in derision and scoffs at me. Isn’t that what my stubborn sinfulness deserves? When I am finally face to face with him, when I no longer see through the

clouded vision of my sinfulness, then I think one of the things I will get to do is laugh along with my Father at my many foibles.

“You are my son.”

Now we come to the heart and center (both poetically and theologically) of Psalm 2. God is not content with merely holding up to mockery the vanity and utter stupidity of the nations and kings of the earth. Nor is he content to remain at a distance when it comes to protecting and guiding his people along the path of blessedness. No, he moves and acts. In fact, it would be fair to the text to say that the true expression of God’s derision and wrathful fury is to consistently present his son, his anointed one, our saviour. He gives us his holy anointed one, who in Psalm 2:6-8 is clearly depicted as God’s son: First, God himself speaks, and then his anointed one speaks. The words are electric.

**“I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.”
I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me,
“You are my son, today I have begotten you.**

This passage is rich in history and tradition. In its immediate context, many believe that this psalm was a coronation psalm, that is, each king of Israel after David spoke these words during the coronation ceremony. The words undoubtedly fit such a context. But, as we will see in a moment, they mean much more than this. Some of you will remember these words from the story of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan by John, when God’s voice was heard from heaven announcing that Jesus was his son. God spoke in similar terms when Jesus was transfigured. This text was pivotal in church history in discussions about the relationship between the divine and human in the person of Jesus.

Before filling out the context and fuller meaning of this magnificent decree, let’s not forget the logical, dramatic flow of the Psalm up to this point. In vanity, the gentile kings and peoples of the earth had gathered together and plotted to “free themselves” from the rule and discipline of the Lord’s anointed one. God’s response to this ridiculous idea was not just to laugh, pointing out the vanity of such a childish effort, but to promise terror to all who oppose him. But God opposes the rebellious with his son. He establishes his Son, his King, his Anointed One upon his holy mountain, Zion.

I feel inadequate to comment on Psalm 2:7. It records the beginning of a conversation between God and his son. In the context of Jewish kingship, we can sense the holy intensity of the moment as the newly crowned king stated these words and in so doing entered into a new relationship with God and the Jewish people. In this new relationship, the king took his first step into the messianic stream, which flowed on and on until, in the Jordan River, God himself spoke these words to Jesus, his beloved son. What unspeakable tenderness and holiness! How each of us longs to have God speak these words to each of us:

**You are my beloved son. Today I have begotten you.
You are my beloved daughter. Today I have begotten you.**

And the incredible thing is that God does speak these words to us. By faith in Christ’s death we join him in submersion in the Jordan. We become utterly united with him in his death and so become sons and daughters. What elegant mystery! Each time we die to self, God speaks these words to us.

The nations rage, and the kings plot evil together. God answers with his son. He answers with loving dialog, the son tenderly recalling eternal words of promise and love. In answer to the riotous activity of the world comes the quiet but overwhelming statement of God’s word. This is a picture to marvel, and one that I cannot even attempt to explain.

The Rule of the Son

God’s Son is not just going to sit upon Zion, he will engage actively with the world. Psalm 2:8-9 continues the speech of the God’s Son:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and

the ends of the earth your possession.

You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

Although *the Psalmist* speaks to the kings of the earth, *God* does not address them directly. But he does directly address his son, and then the son lovingly quotes the promise of his father that he has been granted ultimate rule over the entire world; over all of the kings and peoples of the world, not just these vain ones who happen to be raging against him at the moment. Then the nature of the son’s reign is described: He will rule with a rod of iron, and will break into pieces all opposition.

What are we to make of this imagery? Psalm 2:8-9 promises the ultimate conquest of the Lord’s anointed over the entire earth. But the process of this conquest is interesting. Immediately we see that the agent or doer of the action is the Lord’s anointed one – his son who has been established on Zion.

The son of God, the Lord’s anointed, is the active one. His followers are not even mentioned. It is beyond doubt that God’s anointed one will one day rule over all of the earth. The image of his rule is one of power and unconquerable authority. But how and when will all of this come about? This is the essential, the fundamental question of human politics. Christians today have the same questions posed to them by this psalm that the Jews of the Davidic monarchy had posed to them: Should they become political activists? Does confidence in the ultimate victory of God mean that I need to get behind the human machinery that God might use to bring that victory about? The answer, according to Psalm 2, is that when we approach questions of politics and social ethics this way, we are missing the point. No human being is being given the right in Psalm 2 to rule the nations of the world; only God’s anointed one has that responsibility. To engage in politics from a Christian perspective, then, is to become a part of what God’s anointed one is doing today.

I am not guessing or philosophizing or allegorizing or manipulating the text to come up with this concept. It is the underlying assumption of Psalm 2, and more importantly, it is verified in the lives of the apostles in New Testament Scripture, in Acts 4:25-26. Turn there for a moment and look at this intriguing passage. The context is the following: At the beginning of Acts 3, Peter and John healed, with the name of Jesus, a man who had been lame from birth as he lay begging near the temple. The man’s rejoicing caused a sensation among the people nearby and Peter used the opportunity to deliver an evangelistic “sermonette” (Acts 3:12-26) to the bystanders. Apparently, the sermon lasted long enough for the religious authorities to arrive and these promptly arrested Peter and John (Acts 4:1-3). The next day the Jewish leaders gathered together to decide what to do. Luke explains that it is both the boldness of these two uneducated fishermen, and the undeniable fact of the lame man’s healing, that forces them to let Peter and John go free (Acts 4:13-22). Upon returning to the rest of the disciples, they all join together in prayer and, using Psalm 2 as the prayer text, Luke says:

...they raised their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the seas, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:

**“Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together,
Against the Lord and against his Messiah.’**

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are per-

formed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:24-31, NSRV)

What an amazing passage this is! It is not often that the New Testament treats so fully an Old Testament passage the way Acts 4 treats Psalm 2. There are so many things to observe. First, it is clear beyond any doubt that Jesus is understood to be God’s Anointed One. But just as profoundly, the apostles have seen that they are now participating in the life of their Risen Lord. By participating in his sufferings, and being persecuted for his name’s sake, they are now being waged against, and the crucifixion drama is being enacted all over again in their lives. In the midst of this they find comfort and energy in the words of Psalm 2. They ask God to stretch out his healing hand while they speak with boldness and compassion to their lost generation.

That is the Christian’s political mission. Discussions about what laws to pass, or what candidates to support, are all fine. But they are in danger of missing the point. The point is a person: God’s anointed one, the Lord Jesus. Now that we have become members of his body, and since he acts as our leader and head, we need to simply follow him. That might lead some of us into politics and government. It might not. It doesn’t matter. What matters is, in the closing words of Psalm 2, have we “kissed the son” and “taken refuge” in him?

Imagine the drama of Acts 3-4 being played out today. If a Christian today had been arrested and then let go by the authorities, they probably would sue the government. Wrongful arrest, physical and mental damages, prejudiced behavior, and religious intolerance would be claimed. That’s what our society has become. We have lost faith in our Lord, and so we seek political solutions to the thousands of human spiritual problems around us. America isn’t in crisis today because of having too many lawyers or too many laws. We are in crisis because of a lack of faith. Christians have stopped leading the way in society because we have failed to follow. We have not obeyed the ethical and spiritual disciplines commanded by the Lord of the Church and so we have a society with no good examples to follow. But look at Peter and John. The Jewish leaders were simply dumbfounded by them. It would have been unthinkable for Peter and John to sue anybody for their treatment at the hand of the Jews. They gloried in persecution: it gave evidence of their faithfulness to Jesus.

Act 3 – The Kings and Peoples of the Earth Admonished (Psalm 2:10-12)

And now we come to the end the drama. The Psalmist turns first to the kings and peoples of the earth and tells them what their best response would be to the divinely ordained, global authority and rule of God’s son. Then the Psalmist turns to all of us and gives a concluding exhortation, which harkens back to the “blessed man” motif of Psalm 1:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.

**Serve the Lord with fear,
with trembling kiss his feet,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way;
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.**

The Psalmist’s message to the unbelieving rulers and kings is simple: “If you can’t beat them, join them!” Don’t continue in your vain plots against the Lord and his anointed one. Rather, embrace him. This is stated literally. There is scholarly debate regarding the text and translation of that little phrase “kiss his feet.” The basic meaning, however, doesn’t seem to be in doubt. In pre-modern times, especially in non-democratic countries, it was normal for subjects to bow, face down, before a ruler. This often meant, even in the Roman Empire, a position of lying flat on the ground, face down, before a king or emperor.⁷ So the

meaning here in Psalm 2:11 is: bow before your true lord and master, worship him, obey him, admit and confess that this King, divinely predestined to rule the whole earth, is your king and ruler too.

For good measure, the Psalmist adds a dire prophetic warning. He doesn’t just say, “You can’t beat him so you might as well join him.” He goes beyond that and says that death will result from failing to embrace God’s son. Here again there are echoes back to Psalm 1. In Psalm 1 the blessed and the wicked are set in contrast and are portrayed as traveling along two different ways or paths in life. Those who do not pursue blessedness, which is defined primarily in terms of meditation and growth in God’s law or word, will find that “the way of the wicked will perish” (Psalm 1:6). The blessed, on the other hand, are known by the Lord (Psalm 1:6). Here in Psalm 2, the wicked will perish if they resist the government of the Lord’s anointed and the imposition of his word upon all nations. The blessed, on the other hand, “take refuge in him.”

I must pause here for a moment, as the text of Psalm 2 does, and comment on the reason for the impending death of the wicked who resist the rule and authority of the Lord’s anointed. The Psalmist’s reasons for this are simple enough:

**Serve the Lord with fear,
with trembling kiss his feet,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way;
for his wrath is quickly kindled.**

Once again, we are confronted with a very passionate God. Not only is his anger kindled by those who resist and plot against his son, this divine anger is “quickly kindled.” How do we square these words with other portions of Scripture, which present God as being “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”? Rather than a contradiction, I think Psalm 2:11 presents a characteristic of God that we don’t like to think about very much:⁸ God’s sovereign wrath against those who oppose him. We would rather hear about God’s patience and lovingkindness.

Both truths, however, exist together in the glory of God’s character. He is jealous and generous; loving and exacting; merciful and terrible; vengeful and gracious. When we bow before our God, we bow before his whole character and being, not just those parts that we happen to like. I don’t think it would hurt us at all to hear more sermons on the wrath and anger of God. I am concerned by the de-emphasis in our culture on the hellish eternal destiny of the wicked. I think we de-emphasize it because we don’t believe in it! That eternal separation from God will be death indeed. To fail to warn our friends and neighbors of it means that we don’t love them very much.

So What about the Christian and Politics?

In the end, the Psalmist invites us to partake in the only solution there is to the political, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and spiritual turmoil of our lives:

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

As Derek Kidner says in his commentary on Psalm 2, “There is no refuge *from* Him, there is only refuge *in* Him.”⁹ That is the call and the encouragement of Psalm 2. This Psalm has lifted the curtain on the political turmoil of life. It has revealed that all of the plotting and scheming of the rulers and peoples of this earth are in vain, because God has foreordained that his beloved Son ultimately rules all things. We are then left with a choice – to bow before this King or to resist him. One way leads to blessing, the other to death.

How quickly the Psalmist moves from politics to spirituality! The surface issues of politics and society simply don’t distract him. Once you realize who is in charge, everything changes. It’s not that involvement in politics is wrong. It’s just that it is all vain. The same is true with all earthly pursuits. The great artists who paint or sculpt beautiful objects, the athletes who toil and

sweat to break records, the business people who create wealth, jobs, and prosperity – all of this is vain. It is not what life is about. Psalm 2 happens to focus on the political arena. The kings and nations of the earth are brought before us in a brief drama and their very souls are laid bare. We are given the gift of vision in Psalm 2. Let us not forget it. When you become frustrated or disheartened over the perversion of ethics and laws in our society, remember Psalm 2. When you are shown that our leaders are nothing but wretched sinners and immoral fools, remember Psalm 2. When you go to the polls and vote, remember Psalm 2.

Societies, cultures, and political institutions are ephemeral, temporary, and fleeting. Compared to the everlasting souls of the men, women, and children that you encounter every day, these artifacts of human society are vain trivialities. When you sign a petition or send money to a candidate or cause, remember that the people involved – the one holding the petition, the one asking for money, or the candidate him or herself – are of infinitely more value in God's sight than whatever is being discussed or debated.

I can just hear some of you saying right now, "Thanks for nothing. I know all that. I know I am a sinner, but I am forgiven, and I am seeking refuge in God's son. But I have a life to live, and involvement in the political issues of our day is a part of that. Are you saying that I should just evangelize and ignore all of the social and political ills that surround us? I love people, and I want to help them – both materially and spiritually. Are you saying I shouldn't?" This is a good question, and it could just as well be a question about any profession; it's just that Psalm 2 raises the issue of politics for us. And this is not mere coincidence. For throughout human history, it is through politics that groups of men have very often sought to act in the place of God. Psalm 2 warns those of you who are interested in or involved in politics to be especially careful. Your interest and involvement is especially vulnerable to perversion, because politics are about human beings controlling one another, a responsibility that is ultimately God's. Both Old and New Testaments teach that God is sovereign over the entire political process. Therefore, any time we take that process into our own hands we take up the rod of God, which shatters the nations like pots of clay. Think through history. How many examples of good rulers come to mind? How much good has really come from the machinations of politics?

Psalm 2 presents us with an undeniable truth: the ultimate political question, indeed the ultimate question in life, concerns our relationship to God's anointed one: Are we resisting him or worshipping him? Have we denied him or embraced him? Have we plotted in vain against him or have we kissed his feet? Blessed are those who take refuge in him!

© 2000 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

1. The following are likely references to Psalm 2 in the NT: Acts 4:25 (apostles prayer after the deliverance of Peter and John); Acts 13:33 (Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch – section regarding Jesus' resurrection); Hebrews 1:5 (Jesus greater than the angels); Hebrews 5:5 (Jesus was called by God to be High Priest); Revelation 2:26 (Jesus' promise to faithful Thyatirans that they will "rule over the nations"); Revelation 12:5 (A child will be born to a woman who will "rule with a rod of iron"); and Revelation 19:15 (Jesus will rule the nations with a rod of iron). Other possible references (especially if Isaiah 42:1, I Samuel 7:14 are seen as stemming from the same root idea that is expressed in Psalm 2:7) are: Matthew 3:17 (Jesus' baptism and the words from heaven); Matthew 17:5 (The Mount of Transfiguration and the words from heaven); and 2 Peter 1:17 (A reference to Jesus' baptism or transfiguration or both?) See Walter Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 131, n 26.

2. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 12, Selections from the Psalms (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955) 16.

3. *ibid.*

4. In Jeremiah 27, God commands the prophet to get "thongs and yoke-bars" and wear them on his neck as a symbol of how Israel must serve King Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Frequently in the OT, the terms "bonds and cords" are joined with the notion of being yoked – i.e. repressed or restrained.

5. There was an important shift in understanding Psalm 2:3 in the early church. While the church was being persecuted (that is, in the pre-Constantine period), Psalm 2:3 was often understood as being a statement by the people of God against the kings and rulers of the nations. The transition to seeing this verse as most modern interpreters today would see it (i.e. as a statement made by the kings and rulers of the nations against the Lord and his anointed) occurred after the legalization of Christianity in 312. Ultimately, Augustine played a significant role in this transition. He recognized that there were varying interpretations in his day, but he thought it made more sense to see Psalm 2:3 as a statement by the kings and rulers of the nations. Since his commentary on the Psalms became so widely read in the Latin west, it was not long before Augustine's became the standard interpretation.

6. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 12, Selections from the Psalms, 24.

7. Interestingly, this is one of the two fundamental ideas that creates the Old Testament understanding of worship. The second fundamental idea is serving and obeying the one before whom you prostrate yourself. In Psalm 2, the two ideas are completely intertwined. The kings of the earth are warned to begin their worship by falling down before the Messiah and kissing his feet. Then they are to go on to a life of obedience to him. It is seemingly only in modern times that we have separated the idea of worship into its component parts and focus only on the "falling down" before the Lord. By failing to stress the inward and habitual obedience which comprises true worship, we wind up with "worship services" that are superficial and out of focus. They become focused primarily on the emotions while the will and the mind are ignored.

8. Each of the Psalms in the Psalter is not a complete theological treatise in and of itself. Each is meant, as are all the other parts of Scripture, to be read in the context of the whole of Scripture. Thus, each Psalm is true, but it may not necessarily be "theologically complete." Each Psalm is a prayer. Would we be so foolish as to expect that every prayer we utter encompasses the whole counsel of God? In the same way, we ought not to expect the same kind of theological comprehensiveness of each individual psalm.

9. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973) 53.