

Praying for our rulers

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[0 : 00] Oh, it's so good to be with you again. I was trying to remember the last time I was here. Perhaps you recall, perhaps you don't. I think it's been a couple of years at least since I've been here. It is a joy to be with you.

I'm looking at Psalm 72 with you this morning. If you'd like to have your Bible open there, that'd be great. This is a prayer, this psalm actually. A lot of the psalms are prayers.

This is a prayer that God would bless our King and that God would bring our King life and prosperity.

May he live long. May gold from Sheba be given to him. May people ever pray for him and bless him all the day long.

And it occurred to me earlier this week as I was thinking about this psalm and reflecting on it in the dark because ESCOM had turned out the lights. It occurred to me that if I came along today and said, Hey, why don't we pray this for our rulers?

[1 : 04] Your heart might not be in it. I suspect that's true whether you're South African or not. Long may he live. May gold from Sheba be given to him.

And may people ever pray for him and bless him all day long. In fact, I think it doesn't matter where you're from these days, does it?

I'm going off script a little bit already. That's not a good start, is it? I tend to do that, but I'm thinking maybe I won't just for today. Anyway, the fact that this is a prayer might surprise you.

In fact, the whole book of Psalms really is and has been treated by the Christian church down throughout the ages as a collection of prayers, a collection of words that God's people can say back to him and can give back to him.

And this has really been something that's marked the Christian church's use of the Psalms for as long as the Christian church has been around. For about 2,000 years, one of the very few things that Christians of all times and all places and all cultures have agreed on is that we should pray the Psalm.

[2 : 24] And really, my generation, I think, our generation, is really the first group of people, the Western, my generation in the West, is really the first group of people in the history of the church going back since the time that the church began that hasn't really prayed the Psalms.

And that surprises me. And that causes me a little bit of discomfort. I don't know about you. The Psalter, Martin Luther once wrote. Do you know who Martin Luther was?

Yeah, Martin Luther once wrote. This is in kind of old English, so you'll excuse it. The Psalter does minister such instruction and comfort in the act of supplication, that is, as you're praying, and the Lord's Prayer does so run through it and it through the Lord's Prayer that the one helps us finally to understand the other and the two together make a pleasant harmony.

In my opinion, said Martin Luther, any man who will but make a trial in earnest of praying the Psalter and the Lord's Prayer will very soon bid all the other pious prayers adieu and say, oh, they don't have the sap, the strength, the heart, and the fire that I find in the Psalter.

They're too good, too hard for my taste. So I'd like to think with you about praying Psalm 72 and what that might look like and what that might mean for us.

[3 : 53] Have you got your Bible open there? All right. Psalm 72. Of Solomon. Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.

May he will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills, the fruit of righteousness.

He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy. He will crush the oppressor. He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon through all generations.

He will be like rain falling on a mown field like showers watering the earth. In his days the righteous will flourish. Prosperity will abound until the moon is no more.

If I was to pray these words, if you were to pray these words, then we'd be thinking about the order that God put into the world.

[4 : 55] That's what we'll be thinking about. When God made the world, he didn't just make stuff. He didn't just put all of the bits of the world here.

He also created the way that the world functions, the way that it works. The sun and the moon, the day always follows night inexorably every time.

Night always follows day. There's a succession of seasons. It always goes from spring to summer, from winter to spring, from autumn to winter.

It never gets jumbled up and stops doing that, have you noticed? Day always follows night.

Elephants have baby elephants. Elephants don't have baby kangaroos.

There's an order to the world. And speaking of kangaroos, later on this year the wallabies will probably beat the springboks. Don't worry, New Zealand will beat us both, it's okay.

[5 : 56] The world works according to a pattern. Because it's God's world and God designed the world to work that way.

There's an order to the political world as well. It's just that we don't see it. There's a pattern of relationships that God designed the world to work with.

Our relationships to each other and the way we relate to each other and to the people around us and to other nations, that's not something that we should invent for ourselves.

There's an order. And the world works better if we do it God's way. It's something that's stitched into the way that God created the world.

God made this world to be a world of righteousness and justice. That's the order God put into the world.

[6 : 58] This is a world where kings use their power for the benefit of the humble and the downcast. This is a world where the rich better the lives of the poor.

Where the needy are delivered. Where the oppressors get crushed and ground to the dust from which they came. May he justly judge for the poor of the people, says verse 4.

Deliver the sons of the needy and crush to dust the oppressors. This is a world of peace. Now maybe that didn't sound very peaceful to you, crushing the oppressors. And that kind of thing.

Actually when the Old Testament, or when the whole Bible, but particularly the Old Testament, when it talks about peace, it's not talking about the absence of fighting.

It's not talking about the absence of conflict. As in many Middle Eastern countries today, if you talk about peace, peace is also an ordering kind of word. It means that the world is in the order that it should be in.

That's what peace is. The world is at peace when it reflects the order that it was created for. When the rain comes in its season, that's peace. When the crops grow, that's peace.

[8 : 10] When the sons of the needy are delivered, that's peace. When a righteous king reigns with justice, that's peace. And when the oppressor is crushed, well that's actually peace too, even though you have to fight to do it.

Because that's really what should happen to oppressors, isn't it? There's no room for oppressors in a peaceful world. So that's part of God's very good created order.

Let the mountains bear peace for the people. Let peace blossom until the moon is no more. It won't have escaped your notice that this isn't our world.

This isn't our world. It's the kind of world that this psalm wants us to pray for. But you don't need to be sitting in a dark room wondering what happened to your electricity before you realize that this is the kind of psalm many people might pray, but very few people would actually hope for.

Several of the students at George Whitefield were quite late getting back this year because they were coming from Zimbabwe.

[9 : 24] Do you know what's been going on in Zimbabwe? If you don't know, it's pretty terrible. There's all kinds of societal breakdown going on there at the moment.

The government is being quite heavy-handed with their people. There's troops on the street. People are getting beaten and arrested. There's this talk that some people have been killed.

Our students got caught up in all of this kind of mess, couldn't get visas back into the country. When they finally did get visas back into South Africa to come and study here, they got stopped at the

border because the South African government didn't believe that they were valid visas. They thought they were just running away. And they got held up, and their transport left without them. And they sat there at the border for about eight hours while they tried to sort out all of that mess.

And when they finally got let through, the South African government decided, yes, actually these people were coming to study in South Africa. They let them through the border, but then their bus had gone about eight hours before.

[10:26] So they're stranded somewhere between Harare and Johannesburg and decided to hitch a ride down to Johannesburg on the back of a truck, which they did, and finally arrived at GWC several days later, very tired, quite exhausted.

A trip that should have taken less than 24 hours took them well over three days. And they arrived three weeks late to college. Are they sitting, though? My question is, are they sitting in their rooms thinking or praying, long may my king live?

May people ever pray for him and bless him all the day long. This world is broken in so many ways. Think about the border between the United States and Mexico. Did you hear that Donald Trump declared a national state of emergency so that he could build his wall?

May gold from Sheba be given to him. Do you want to pray that? Or I think about Brexit. The world's broken in so many ways.

[11:37] And this is a very bold prayer to pray. And no matter how many times people have prayed this prayer throughout history, lasting peace of the kind that this prayer hopes for has never actually come.

It's never come. But notice something else. This isn't just a prayer for a peaceful world. Plenty of prayers for a peaceful world have been offered, and we all want peace.

But if we prayed this prayer, and if we asked God to give us a peaceful world and justice and righteousness, then what are we actually praying for? Have a look again at verse 1.

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

The first thing we need to notice in this prayer is this isn't a prayer actually for a peaceful world. This is a prayer for someone, not something.

[12:52] This is a prayer for a king. And this is part of God's good order also. If there is going to be justice and righteousness in our world, then someone is going to have to make that happen.

Remember, our social relationships, we shouldn't make them up as we go along.

God created the world to work in a certain way. And the king stands at the very center of God's purposes for his world.

Just as you look to God to bring rain onto the hills and to make the crops grow, just as you look to God for the sun to go around the earth and day to follow night and night to follow day, so also you look to God's king to bring justice and righteousness for God's people.

Oh God, give us a king like that. Put our world into order. Bring us peace.

[14:14] Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Verse 8. He will rule from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.

The desert tribes must bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him. The kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts.

All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. So we've stopped looking here at what the king does. To thinking about where the king should do it.

From the river to the desert tribes. The river is north. The desert, if you're standing in ancient Israel, the river is north.

The desert is to your east. The coastlands are to your west. And Sheba is in Africa, which is to your south.

[15:20] And so may he rule to the north from the river, to the east, to the desert, to the sea to sea, to the west and to Sheba to the south.

May this king's rule extend everywhere. Let all nations serve him. May he rule from sea to sea. What a thing to pray for.

Because this really doesn't sound like any king I know. And I'm not sure that I want to be praying that prayer for any of the kings I do know.

Actually, it does sound like a king I know. From the Bible. So let's just have a think together. Cast your mind back through the Old Testament, through the kings of Israel and Judah, ruling from the river to the desert.

Throw in Sheba there. Perhaps think of a queen. Does this remind you of any of the kings? Solomon, right. Actually, I think this should remind you of Solomon.

[16:22] So well done. Maybe this poem was written for Solomon in the first place. In fact, the title kind of suggests that. Did you notice they're up the top? Just after it says Psalm 72, it says, Of Solomon.

Normally, the titles in the Psalms aren't part of the actual Bible. I think probably you know that. So as you're reading one of Paul's letters, every now and again you get a little heading. And that little heading there that says, Oh, this bit's about justification through faith or whatever. That's not actually what Paul wrote, right? You know that, I think. But that's not true in the Psalms. In the Psalms, the titles are actually there in the ancient Hebrew text. And so the titles are also part of God's word. And that means when you get up to read a psalm in church, you should read the title.

That's actually there. That's part of the Bible. So that of Solomon, that's not the editor of your Bible saying, Hey, this should remind you of Solomon. Solomon, that's actually the person who wrote this psalm, saying, maybe this should remind you of Solomon.

[17:31] Let me remind you of Solomon. 1 Kings chapter 4. Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt.

They brought tribute and they served Solomon all the days of his life. Or 1 Kings 10. Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon and came to Jerusalem, she said to the king, They might have prayed this prayer, for Solomon.

That might be when this prayer was written. But I'll tell you, if they did, if that's true, it must have made him nervous, I think.

Just putting myself into Solomon's shoes here for a minute. Will you allow me the spectacle of that? So if I'm Solomon and listening to someone pray this prayer for me, then I've got a lot of things running through my head.

But I'm not sure, actually, that I'm up to this. This prayer is asking that I will be something that I'm going to find pretty hard to deliver on.

[19:09] For a start, this prayer tells me why I should reign. Have a look there at verse 12. Notice that 4 there.

This is why I should rule from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. Could I do that if I'm Solomon?

Would I deliver the needy? Would I be concerned with the powerless? Am I king to save? Am I king to rescue? Am I enthroned as a redeemer of their blood?

In fact, if I'm Solomon, I'm not sure I want this prayer at all. In fact, the more I read this prayer, the less it sounds like Solomon. Let me remind you of something else about Solomon 1 Kings 5.

King Solomon drafted forced labor out of all of Israel. The draft numbered 30,000 men, and he sent them to Lebanon to work. Solomon also had 70,000 burden bearers and 80,000 stone cutters in the hill country.

[20:27] And besides Solomon, 3,300 chief officers who carried the whip were over the work. At the king's command, they quarried out great and costly stones.

If the story of Solomon shows us anything, actually it's that big, impressive, powerful, golden empires always come at a price because somebody has to dig all the gold out of the hills.

And we know that really well in our world today. Your father made our burden heavy, they complained to Rehoboam, who was Solomon's son.

Psalm 72 actually isn't a prayer, I don't think, to give us a king like Solomon. This is a prayer for what Solomon might have been, perhaps what Solomon could have been, but wasn't ever really. Solomon, in all his glory, perhaps because of all his glory, was actually oppressive. And glorious people and glorious kings always are.

[21:40] They always are. Glorious kingdoms always come at a cost. And we're going to need something greater than Solomon to be here, if this prayer is going to be answered.

Give us, O God, a deliverer. Give us a savior. Give us a redeemer. Give us someone who thinks our blood is precious in his sight.

And may that king rule from sea to sea. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Well, verse 15. May he live long. May gold from Sheba be given to him. May people ever pray for him and bless him all the day long.

Let the corn abound throughout the land on the tops of the hills. May it sway. Let its fruit flourish like Lebanon. Let it thrive like the grass of the field. May his name endure forever and ever.

[22 : 51] May it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him. May it be blessed. May it be blessed. Now this final part of the psalm brings together the two ideas that we've been discussing so far.

First, that God's king is a part of the order that God stitches into the world. And the world will flourish when a just and righteous king sits on David's throne.

And second, that this king will establish this order over the nations and that they will bless him and that they will be blessed in him.

This king will be prosperous with gold from Sheba. Once again, there's echoes here of Solomon, but this isn't Solomon. This is a king who's loved by the lowliest of his people.

They pray for him without ceasing. And because the whole world is working the way that God designed it to, his kingdom prospers. There's excess grain. The cities blossom.

[23 : 55] And the nations find blessing in his rule. What kind of a king should this be? What kind of a king would be a suitable ruler given the order that God has put into the world?

What kind of a king could actually bring our world to peace? What kind of king could do this? It's not about Solomon.

It's even less, actually, if you stop and think about it, about any of the other kings that came along after Solomon. Imagine, if you will, somebody in ancient Israel, after Solomon's time, praying this prayer.

Perhaps when Ahaz, do you remember the story of Ahaz and Jezebel? Perhaps when Ahaz met Jezebel and married her and brought Baal worship throughout all Israel and started killing God's prophets.

Oh God, may he rule from sea to sea? I don't think so. What about Manasseh? Do you remember the story of Manasseh? Manasseh institutes child sacrifice in Jerusalem, in the temple in Jerusalem.

[25 : 08] And the book of Kings tells us he fills Jerusalem from one end to the other with blood. Oh God, oh God, he redeems the life of the powerless from oppression and violence, and their blood is precious in his eyes?

I don't think so. These words must have seemed so empty in the years that followed Solomon.

Throughout Israel's very long and very troubled history, as they prayed this prayer, it must have never seemed to have gotten answered.

May his name be forever remembered. One day, God's people sat weeping by the rivers, not of the Jordan, but of Babylon, and remembered Zion.

They remembered that they didn't have a king anymore. They didn't have a son of a king. Their king had had his eyes put out, his children killed, and he'd been taken away.

And as they sat there and wept, did they really say, Oh God, give to the king your justice and to the king's son your righteousness? That's not just hollow.

[26 : 26] That's a twist of the knife, right? That must have hurt so much. But do you know the strangest thing? The strangest thing is throughout all those years, throughout all that time, through all the hundreds of years and just bad king after bad king after bad king, through the exile, where they lost their king altogether.

The strangest thing about this psalm is that they kept it. I know they kept it, because here it is in your book of Psalms.

That didn't just happen by itself. That happened because throughout all those hundreds of years, somebody copied it. Somebody prayed it.

Somebody passed it on. And in spite of the mockery that this prayer must have become, here it is in your Bible, still telling us to pray, Oh God, give us a king like this.

Even from our weeping in Babylon, from the wilderness of this world, hear us. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[27 : 53] You'll be aware, won't you, that many years passed before God answered this prayer with exactly this kind of king. I don't think I'm spoiling the ending for you. It's a prayer that fits Solomon a little bit.

It's a prayer that fits Jesus a lot. But still, still, not quite yet, is it? Not quite yet. May he justly judge for the poor of the people and deliver the sons of the needy and crush to dust the oppressor.

We don't live in a world where that happens at the moment. We don't yet see everything made subject to Jesus. He hasn't delivered the needy just yet.

And this is a world that's still full of oppressors and oppression for now. And righteousness doesn't flow down the hills like wheat just now. And the king of our world was enthroned on a cross.

And so we keep praying this prayer, don't we? Just like the ancient Israelites, who it must have seemed so empty for, kept praying it. We keep praying it. Give us this kingdom.

[28 : 56] Give us this king. Why did they do it? And why should we do it? Why did they keep praying this prayer anyway?

Well, I think it's because it reminds us. This prayer, firstly, reminds us that we are kingdom of God people.

It reminds us what that means. It reminds us what we should expect, what we should hope for, what we should want. We should want a world of justice and righteousness.

We should want a world without oppression. We should want a world where there's peace. And by praying for that, it helps to shape us into those kind of people.

It helps to make us people who will hunger and thirst for righteousness. And blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

[30 : 00] It won't let us forget that that's what God's kingdom is like. This continent, this world, has a lot of people crying out for a king to deliver them, someone who cares about the blood that they shed and who will see them as precious.

And this world has drastically few of those kind of kings around. It's right, isn't it, I think, that as kingdom of God kind of people, we would want to do something about that.

We would. Because God's world is ordered like that. And we claim to be a part of God's world. It reminds us of something else too, though.

It reminds us that in the end, we're going to have to wait. Righteousness and justice is always something we're going to have to wait for in the end, just like Israel waited, because this isn't something that we can accomplish all by ourselves.

That's not the order God put in the world. We're not powerful people that can solve all the world's problems all on our own if only we get our act together.

[31 : 23] We're not. This is a prayer for God's king to come. And when God's king comes, so will his kingdom.

kingdom. When God's king comes, so will his kingdom. So what should we do as we pray this prayer together?

Do justly, love mercy, preach Jesus, and cry out to God, give us a king like this.

Let's pray. Endow the king with your justice, O God, and the royal son with your righteousness. May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.

The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills, the fruit of righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy. He will crush the oppressor.

[32 : 26] He will endure as long as the sun and as long as the moon throughout all generations. He will be like rain, falling on a moan field like showers watering the earth. In his days the righteous will flourish, prosperity will abound until the moon is no more.

He will rule from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth. The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him.

The kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts and all kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. For he will deliver the needy who cry out and 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. Long may he live.

May gold from Sheba be given to him. May people ever pray for him and bless him all day long. Let corn abound throughout the land. On the tops of the hills may it sway.

[33 : 28] Let its fruit flourish like Lebanon. Let it thrive like the grass of the field. May his name endure forever. May it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him and they will call him blessed.

Gracious father your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen. Thank you Nathan.

Thank you Nathan. Thank you Nathan.