

How to Pray the Psalms: Sea to Shining Sea

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Dr. Tom Pace

Psalm 72:1-8

What we're going to be talking about today in this week of our Independence Day is how to pray for our nation. We're going to read responsively. It's number 795, printed in your hymnal.

We'll be reading the first part of this Psalm responsively.

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. Psalm 72:1-8 (NRSV)

The month of July is Casual Month if you haven't noticed that. I feel like I'm up here in my pajamas. You have never seen my neck actually. What do you think? But you can come all year long dressed however you want. This is just an effort during July to encourage you to be more casual.

Let's join together in prayer. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, open our ears that we might hear, open our hearts that we might feel. Then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

In May we all either enjoyed or endured another royal wedding. It was Prince Harry marrying Meghan Markle the American (gasp!). Anyway, I did a little research. This is a royal Psalm and though we don't have royals, the closest thing we have are the royals of Great Britain. I researched and found that now Prince Harry is to be referred to as His Royal Highness the Duke of Sussex, Earl of Dumbarton and Baron Kilkeel. So, if you ever see him be sure to address him in that way. And Meghan is to be called her Royal Highness the

Duchess of Sussex. She doesn't get as much good stuff, I guess that's because she's an American.

It isn't quite like Prince William. When he got married his title became His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge, Earl of Strathearn and Baron Carrickfergus. Poor guy!

He really was elevated a little higher because there is a possibility, even a probability, that one day he will king, if Queen Elizabeth ever dies, which I'm not sure she ever will, she just goes about the country and the world spreading good cheer with her smile when you see her.

I enjoyed this research and if any of you are lucky enough to host a dinner party in which the Queen comes, you should know that it's your responsibility to toast the Queen. You are to lift your glass and say very simply, "The Queen." You're not allowed to elaborate in any other way, just say, "The Queen." And everyone else is supposed to say, if it's a secular occasion, "Long live the Queen!" And if it's a religious occasion it's "God bless the Queen!" So, apparently "long live the Queen" has worked and she continues to do all that.

We don't have kings and queens; we made a clear decision not to have them. We had one when we as colonies separated and King George was the king and it didn't go so well. When the United States was founded it was decided that there would be no king.

It's so interesting because it's the same debate that the Children of Israel had. In fact, that debate about whether to have a king or not dominates much of the Old Testament.

I'm going to teach just a little bit so if you're not interested then look at your phones or something. This is a bit of Old Testament history. The Children of Israel came out of bondage in Egypt, led by Moses and Aaron. They got to the Promised Land; they're led across to conquer the land of Canaan by Joshua. During this time, they're not the nation of Israel yet, they're the people of Israel. They're organized by tribe and by bands. And at this time the leaders of Israel were called Judges and they would be responsible for their people. The Judges of Israel were not what we think of as judges, but they were military leaders. So, you have Gideon, and Sampson and Deborah. They had all of these leaders but at the end of that time Samuel was the prophet, and he was the spiritual center of Israel. The people began to realize that if they were going to get along with all their neighbors they had to not be just a people but they had to be a nation. So, they went to the prophet Samuel and said, "Hey, we want to have a king." It literally says, "We want a king like all the other nations have a king. We want a king, too."

So, Samuel goes to God and says, “Hey, they want a king.” And understand, that up till this time there’s no way they would have had a king because they believed and the prophets had told them that God is their king. They’re not to have another sovereign; God was to be their king.

Samuel goes to the Lord and says, “Hey, they want a king.” And the Lord says to Samuel: “Here’s what I want you to tell them,” and it’s printed in your bulletin because I think it’s so profound. In I Samuel 8 it says, “*And Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king and he said, ‘This is what the king who reigns over you will claim as his rights. He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses and they will run in front of his chariots.’*”

“In front” means they’re going to take the enemy’s arrows and spears. It goes on, “*He will assign some to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and others to plow the ground and reap his harvest. And still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants.*”

It’s as if he’s saying, “You don’t know what you’re asking for. You want a king? This is what’s going to happen.”

Even after that, the leaders of Israel said, “We want a king.” God says, “Give them a king.” And sometimes they were good kings and sometimes they weren’t such good kings.

We don’t have kings, but there’s something about the kings that are in Great Britain that I find attractive. They’re not about politics, and policies, they’re about values. The royalty in England are to be an embodiment of the values of a nation.

We don’t have that and that’s okay, that’s good. But we still need to pray for our nation. Maybe we can’t pray for a king, but we can still pray for our nation.

How do you pray for a nation? It might be our nation or it might be any other nation. This isn’t a peculiarly American issue. How do you pray for the governing structure under which you work? Under which you live?

I think this passage can tell us a number of things. One other thing about Psalm 72 is that it begins with the words of Solomon, so, you’d think this was a Psalm written by Solomon. But the last verse says, “*This is the last of the Psalms of David, son of Jesse.*” So, which is it – a Psalm of Solomon or of David?

Here's what the scholars tell us which I think is really cool, personally. It's that this Psalm was written by David for Solomon. Written in David's name when he realized that – at Bathsheba's insistence by the way – Solomon would succeed him on the throne.

If you knew that your son was to be king, what would you pray for? What would you pray that your son would embody as a ruler?

I think this Psalm can give us four things that we should be praying for, for our nation or for any nation. Here's what's first and you can follow along in the hymnal or if you have your Bible you can turn to Psalm 72. It says, "*Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness...*"

First, he prays for righteousness and justice. These are principles. You know, we have a tendency when we pray for our country to pray for our policies. We tend to say, "Do what I think the right thing to do is." Or to pray for politics. We may say, "Get the right people elected – the people I agree with – who wear the same jersey I do."

But what would it be like to get your eyes up, to try to look beyond the politics of the day and pray for the principles? The principles of righteousness, of justice or all those things we strive for.

In my opinion, there's a difference between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is rooted in gratitude for those people who have worked so hard and sacrificed so much for the values we believe in, who still are doing it. Theodore Roosevelt said: "The credit belongs to the man in the arena, whose face is marred with dust and sweat and blood..." The one who has been willing to fight for those ideals, those principles we believe in. And that calls us to be willing to make those same kinds of sacrifices for those values. It's rooted in gratitude for that but nationalism is rooted in selfishness. It's rooted in a sense of saying, "Hey, I want what's best for me and mine."

Patriotism is about principles you're striving for, recognizing that the reality falls short of those. We're going to sing in a moment, "O beautiful for patriot dreams that sees beyond the years, the alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears." That's the dream and the vision. And that is what we pray for. Those are the principles we pray for.

Nationalism says, "I'm going to win at any cost regardless of whether I have to sacrifice my principles to do it."

Patriotism puts love of country in its proper place in our values, that says it is a derivative and lower value than love of God. I love my country but my primary allegiance is to God as sovereign. Whereas nationalism says “No, my country is an idol to be worshipped.” We have to get our eyes up and reach for the Biblical values that are given to us and pray for those to come to pass.

Here’s the second thing. The Scripture says in verse two: “*May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.*” So, second, we pray for prosperity.

Now that might seem a selfish thing, to pray for prosperity. Sounds like you’re praying, “I want to get rich! Lord, buy me a Mercedes-Benz.” But I think to pray for prosperity in this context is to remember that for the Jewish people at this time when you’re praying for prosperity you’re praying for rain. That’s literally what it is. “That the mountains bring forth prosperity, that there will be rain that flows down from the mountains and waters our fields.”

Water was the key resource.

A man came into my office and he had a lot on his mind, but one thing in particular. It was really simple. “Pastor,” he said, “I need a job. I am without a job and I can’t take care of my family.” Some of the problem was about issues of his own making and many of them were not. But to look across and see him and think to myself, “Prosperity is okay. It’s okay for us to be a prosperous nation, that there would be provision.”

Across the street at Christian Community Service Center and out at our Gethsemane campus, there the people come and there are all different kinds. Some of them are unemployed and others are employed but they just don’t make enough to feed their families. Some of them are skilled, some of them are unskilled. Some of them are native born, some are immigrants. All of them have one thing in common, and that’s that prosperity for them would simply mean enough. To just have enough.

It’s okay to pray to be in a country where everyone has enough. That’s not selfish.

I’ll even go further than that. I’ve even suggested that it’s great to pray that some people have more than enough. Because when you take abundance – way more than enough – and you couple that with generosity then lots of people are given opportunities they wouldn’t have.

In addition to being at the church, I’m on two boards of non-profits and on both of those boards we’re glad to pray for prosperity. That’s because prosperity linked with generosity leads us to a place where we believe that the world can be made a better place.

But they prayed for prosperity regularly saying, “Lord just give us the rain.” We pray for prosperity too since God’s also present in our economic processes.

Here’s the third thing. Move down to verse 7: “*In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.*” To pray for peace.

The nation of ancient Israel was only an independent nation over all of its history – until modern Israel – for two 100-year periods. Actually, a little less than a hundred. The first was in the glory days of Saul, David and Solomon. Then later there was a period called the Maccabean period. That was between Greeks and Romans in which a group of Jewish kings called the Maccabees ruled Israel independently.

But the rest of the time in history Israel was ruled by others, it was the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, then it was the Greeks and then the Romans. At any given moment one of those emperors could wipe Israel off the face of the map.

To pray for peace is to say, “Give our leaders the wherewithal to keep us safe.” And sometimes it was done with alliances, and sometimes it was done by building relationships, and sometimes it was done through military strength.

I’ve been reading a book this summer. It’s by Ari Shavit, he’s an Israeli journalist who’s grown up and lived in Israel all of his life. His great-grandparents were some of those who emigrated to Israel in the 1800s and began to make villages, colonies for the European Jews who were being persecuted in Eastern Europe to come and live in Israel, this was way before there was a nation of Israel, it was just these villages that were there in the Holy land. His book is called *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* and he writes about growing up in Israel.

I want to read to you the first few sentences of his book: “For as long as I can remember I remember fear. Existential fear. The Israel I grew up in, the Israel of the mid 1960s was energetic, exuberant and hopeful. But I always felt that beyond the well- to-do houses and upper middle-class lawns of my home town lay a dark ocean. One day I dreaded that dark ocean would rise and drown us all. A mythological tsunami would strike our shores and sweep my Israel away.”

As I read that I couldn’t help but think how different that is than my life, and I look around the world and see how many people live in incredible fear.

You know what I’m afraid of as I go out the door? I’m afraid that I’m going to get a ticket on the way to church because I’m running late. That’s my fear.

Now there are places in our country and certainly around the world where people live in fear. We pray that they would have some sense of security and safety and peace.

Now peace doesn't just mean no war, the word here in Hebrew is *shalom* and that means far more than just not being at war. It means that things are put together right and that there is justice and righteousness.

One of the first quotes by Martin Luther King Jr. is, "True peace is not just the absence of tension and conflict but the presence of justice and brotherhood." Shalom – we pray for peace.

Here's the last thing. Let's look at verse four: "*May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.*"

We pray for the poor. It's funny, all through Scripture the success of a nation – sometimes it's Israel, sometimes other nations around – is tied to how the poor and powerless are treated in their society.

Just a few verses after the one that we read a moment ago – in verses 11 through 18 and it's talking about the king: "*May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. Long may he live!*"

We have five daughters and sometimes my wife is asked, "Which of them is your favorite?" And they're just messin' with her. But she has developed a really good answer. She says, "My favorite is the one who needs me most at that moment." Then she also says, "I'm only as happy as my unhappiest child."

What the Scripture says is that in God's eyes a nation will be judged by the life of the least of its people. By the poor among them. So, we pray for the poor.

I'm not talking specifically about all of these things, about politics or policies. I'm aware that in this room and in every room, there are people and also those in many other nations and each have their feelings. What I'm inviting you to do is to raise your eyes up above all that stuff, and ask God to guide us, to pull us along, that our lives will follow our prayers. And that we can live up to the principles of righteousness and justice. Of prosperity for all. Of security, safety, peace and that the poor would be lifted up. That's Biblical.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we don't have a king to pray for but we have a nation that we love. We pray, God, that you would show us the principles and that you would draw us in with gratitude to working for those principles. Those principles of righteousness and justice and peace, of prosperity and particularly for the poor. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*