

Songs for a King

Why Do the Nations Rage?

Psalm 2

Mark Vroegop

“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 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.” Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps 2).

The Christmas season can be a paradox.

It is a time of year where seemingly contrasting realities and events tend to merge – or even collide. Let me give you a few examples. Christmas can be a season of family reunions that are filled with awkward moments or relational drama. Christmas can be a season of generosity and gift giving along with fist-fights on Black Friday. Christmas can be a season for vacation where you feel more exhausted at the end of the holiday. Christmas can be a season when you dream of receiving a special gift only to be disappointed when the “thrill” wears off. It can be a time when you celebrate a great meal only to feel sad because there’s an empty seat at the table this year.

Christmas can be a time with challenging and head-scratching tensions.

From a biblical perspective, the story of Jesus’s birth is equally paradoxical.

The Savior of the world is born as a helpless baby in a stable. The King of Kings is celebrated by royal guests from the East while being hunted down by the King of Jews. The angels announce the entrance of the Christ-child to a group of shepherds who are considered outcasts in their culture. The contrast in the narrative of Jesus’s birth is stunning.

This is the time of year we celebrate the first coming of Jesus. We celebrate Jesus’s birth while looking and longing for his return. This time of year is traditionally called advent. It is a season of reflection and preparation. If you follow the church calendar, advent is the start of the church year.

One of the main paradoxes in advent is the arrival and rejection of the King of the Jews. Most people missed the Messiah. Jesus was their King, and yet they eventually killed him. But that's not the end of the story because the King rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and one day he will return.

Advent invites us to consider what we believe about the King of Kings.

Royal Psalms

During the month of December, we are going to take a break from our study of the Gospel of John. We will examine five royal psalms. You may not be familiar with this category in the book of Psalms. The Psalms were the official songbook for the people of God, and there are a number of other genres or types of psalms. Over a third of the Psalms are laments—prayers of pain that lead to trust. Lament has become a personal passion of mine. We've studied a number of laments together, and these studies became a book that will be released in the spring.

Beyond lament, there are psalms of Thanksgiving, historical psalms, songs of ascent (as people walked up to the temple), and psalms of wisdom. The Psalms reflected the range of emotions and events that marked lives of God's people.

Royal psalms are unique in the way that they are connected to both the reign of an earthly king and the reign of the heavenly king. Royal psalms are written with an immediate context in mind. But there is a bigger picture in play as well. They affirm theological truths in the present while connecting the singer to a bigger, heavenly reality. Life on earth reflects something other-worldly. You'll see this in our text today.

But royal psalms are also a place where we seed the development of the Old Testament idea of the Messiah, the Christ, or the anointed one. Psalm 2 uses words and phrases that are clearly intended for something beyond the nation of Israel and any earthly king. There are lessons and implications from the royal psalms far beyond what is happening in Jerusalem.

Therefore, when we read royal psalms, we should be looking for connections to Jesus. We can't read him into every word, every phrase, or every verse. But the royal psalms point toward the King of Kings.

Psalm 2

This first royal psalm identifies a great paradox woven into the fabric of our humanity. While God reigns over all, the nations rebel. While human beings plot their rebellion, God shakes his head. While divine judgment looms, God offers refuge.

The psalmist wants us to understand this paradox and learn from it. Here are three admonitions based upon the second psalm.

1. See the World

The psalm begins with a blunt question: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?” The psalmist is considering the landscape of humanity, and he wonders out loud why there is such widespread rebellion.

We are not sure what prompted the writing of this psalm. Some suggest it was written at the coronation of King David or Solomon. Other scholars believe it was written reflectively after a king had established his reign. Most believe that the psalm is connected to the reign of King David since the psalm echoes the promises made to him in 2 Samuel 7:12-16.

God’s covenant with David assured him that someone from his lineage would rule over Israel and the entire world. In other words, this king would reign over the people of Israel and all the other nations as well. David understood that, and this psalm celebrates the connection between the Davidic dynasty and that future promise. There is a straight-line between David’s reign and God’s sovereignty.

Verse one wonders aloud as to why the nations rebel against this divine plan. However, the language here is more loaded than just curiosity. The psalmist is shocked—even outraged. The word “rage” means to be restless and full of commotion. The idea is the constant testing of boundaries. And “to plot” would indicate that there is an intentionality and a scheming quality to this rebellion.

The psalmist gasps at the constant, never-ending rebellion he observes in the world. Like the waves of the sea, the sinfulness of mankind relentlessly crashes upon the shores of life. It is unending. It’s destructive.

Apparently, the psalmist saw this as other nations resisted the rule of the Davidic king. In verse two, there is language suggesting that political alliances are forming. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? But the uniqueness here is the plotting against “the Lord and his anointed.”

The word “anointed” is how we get our concept of Messiah. In fact, “Messiah” is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew word for anointed (מָשִׁיחַ - *māšîaḥ*). The word refers to the one whom God has appointed to be king. The anointing of oil over the head was the symbolic rite of passage as in what happened to David in 1 Samuel 16:13.

In the context of Old Testament Israel, to rebel against the rule of the anointed king was to rebel against God’s authority. The king, after all, was enthroned because of a divinely given covenant. Those who resist the rule of a faithful, God-honoring king resist the will of God.

Verse three puts words to their rebellion: “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” The other nations attempt to find ways to escape the reign of the king.

However, notice God’s response in verse four. He sees the actions of these kings and he laughs. God is not amused or entertained. Rather, the laughter of God shows the vanity and pointlessness of those who would attempt to thwart his rule. Further, God holds them in derision or scoffs at them. God sees the actions of these earthly kings in light of his power and might.

These words show us the laughable contrast between the sovereignty of God and the plans of rebellious kings. They scheme against God's plan with no understanding of who they are dealing with. While the nations rage, plot, and rebel, God sees them for what they really are.

The first four verses capture the ironic contrast between earthly rebellion and God's control. And they are used in other places in the Bible when human beings attempt to thwart God's plans. For example, when Peter and John faced their first real test of persecution, the church gathered to pray. In Acts 4:25-26, the believers cited Psalm 2 as part of their prayer. They saw their world through the lens of God's sovereignty. They connected the opposition of the religious leaders to the words of Psalm 2.

Can I encourage you to make the same connection? See the world through the lens of nations raging against the rule of Jesus. Let this season open your eyes to relentless brokenness observed watching the news, visiting with family, or going to the mall.

You don't have to look very hard to see this. You see it on the roads. You'll find it during the hunt for the prized parking space. The next time you are people watching at the mall, just observe the raging tumult of our collective brokenness. You'll see it in the interactions between people. The world is filled with creative and relentless brokenness. You'll see it everywhere.

Granted, there are moments of joy and celebration. I'm not declaring "Bah humbug" over your Christmas gatherings. But if you look closely, you'll find a painful paradox. There is an internal churning of brokenness that sometimes cannot be contained. It sneaks out or explodes from within us. The nations rage because people rage. See the world through this lens, understand the cause, and be led toward compassion.

But I also want you to feel comforted. You may find yourself in situations where the painful difference in belief between you and your family makes the celebration quite awkward. Or you may feel discouraged by the waywardness of a son, daughter, or family member. This text reminds us that God reigns over every element of waywardness. His plan is not thwarted. While the nations or the children or the relatives rage, you can trust God.

2. Hear his Voice

The second admonition emerges in verses 5-9. God speaks as a warning to those who would rebel against his rule – either in heaven or on earth through the anointed one. The laughter and scoffing of the previous verses yield to God's verbal instructions.

As in other places in the Bible, the speech of God creates fear. The Creator calls out the rebellion of the created order. God speaks out of divine wrath and fury.

Before we examine what exactly God says in this verse, I wonder if it strikes you as odd that the Bible refers to God's wrath and his fury. If you asked most people, "What is God like?" they would probably say that God is love. And they would be correct, but not complete. God is love, but he's also holy. He is compassionate, but he's also righteous. Rebellion against him is dangerous. He should not be trifled with. If someone resists his "anointed one," he or she does so at great risk.

Verse six explicitly connects the divine authority behind the appointment of the king. But there is more in view here than the ruling King in Jerusalem. The reference to Zion is talking about Jesus's inaugurated reign in heaven even now—a reign that will be completed when he returns.

The people rebel, but God has established his anointed one. While they resist, God affirms his plan. There is a king appointed by God. Attempting to thwart his plan is eternally unwise. His words should be heard.

Do you know that God still speaks today through his written word? While the world contorts itself under the rule of God, we hear the following in Hebrews four:

“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:11–13).

One of the chief differences between those who are in rebellion against God and those who are not, is what a person believes about the Bible—the Word of God. In fact, when it comes to church discipline, “not listening” marks the person as someone who should not be considered a believer (Matt.18:15-17). Oh, pray that you would listen! Children, listen to your parents. Christians, listen to those who teach the Word of God to you.

In verses 7-9, the voice shifts from the voice of God to the voice of the king. He reiterates the biblical truth and the importance of his reign. The king talks about the decree. He communicates the promise of God and the covenantal promises made to him through the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7. The covenant involved both a special relationship and a sovereign rule.

The king possesses a unique intimacy with the Father. The verse describes him as “my son” and “begotten.” The title of son establishes the closeness of the relationship and begotten refers to the honor of the position. That’s why you see the connection to “today,” a likely reference to the king’s coronation.

Verses 8-9 capture the conversation between God and his anointed. God invites the king to ask or request his inheritance which is the subjugation of the nations. If you know a little bit about the life of Christ, this should sound familiar. During his temptation, Satan offers the fulfillment of this exact promise to Jesus when he says “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:8–9). Isn’t it just like the devil to take the good promises of God and offer a shortcut?

The promise continues in verse nine with a future reign of this Davidic dynasty that crushes any remaining rebellion. Take note of the vivid language: “You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash

them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps 2:9). Don't be alarmed at this. Rather, imagine it to be the kind of celebration at the overthrow of a ruthless dictator.

I find it fascinating that the book of Revelation uses this same language in three different places (Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15) when describing the conquering power of Christ. Listen to the text in Revelation 19. It's incredible!

"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:11–16).

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, you must wrestle with whether or not you will listen to what the Bible says about you. Will you agree with the Bible when it identifies your biggest problem as your own sin? Will you believe what the Bible says about God's holiness and a judgment to come? Will you believe in the offering of forgiveness through the person of Jesus? Will you listen? Will you listen today before it's too late?

If you are a Christian, then can I simply remind you that the Bible speaks to us. In the same way that David rehearsed the decree, so too the Bible tells us what we desperately need to hear over and over again. As we make our way through this Christmas season, can I challenge you to redouble your commitment to listen to God's Word?

Advent begins with God announcing "Good News" to the shepherds. And God has continued to speak through his word. Let's be sure that we are ready to listen.

3. Seek his Grace

The final admonition calls those in rebellion to bend the knee to the anointed King. In light of what the psalmist previously said, people need to choose a side. The previous verses require a response.

The word "therefore" in verse 10 clearly identifies this reality. Kings and rulers of the earth receive a warning. The psalmist connects their rebellion to the broader danger they will soon discover. Kings should be careful what they decide. Rulers should be warned.

Kings and rulers should submit to the rule of God's anointed. The psalmist calls them to "serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling" (2:11). They should respond appropriately to the reign and authority of God.

Part of the problem with humanity, especially those in power, is a failure to see oneself in light of divine authority. Jesus said as much to Pilate in John 19:11: "You would have no authority over me at all unless

it had been given to you from above.” There’s a paradox of power. Pilate has authority, but not nearly as much authority as he thinks.

In verse 12, we reach the conclusion of the psalm. It calls for submission to the Lord’s anointed by taking refuge in him. The phrase “kiss the Son” refers to an action denoting obedience and fealty (see 1 Kings 19:18; Hos. 13:2). Think of a scene in a movie where loyal subjects kiss the King’s ring as a symbol of their devotion. That’s the idea. And while thinking about that, don’t forget the symbol Judas chose to betray the Savior.

Failure to do so places people in danger. Therefore, the psalm ends with the appeal to “take refuge in him.” Humanity only finds safety by placing oneself under the rule of the anointed one. In David’s time, this meant embracing the Davidic rule. But the Psalms points beyond David to Christ.

Jesus requires and deserves obedience as King of kings and Lord of lords. Spiritual and eternal safety is only found by running to him and taking refuge in him. What does this mean? Taking refuge in Christ places our hope for forgiveness and eternal life in a relationship with the King of kings and Lord of lords. Taking refuge in Christ means believing his sacrifice is sufficient for us. It means living under his rule and reign. Running to him sounds like this: “God is holy. I am not. Jesus saves. Christ is my life.”

Friend, have you run to Jesus for refuge? Do you see the world in chaos? Do you wonder where to find the solution? Do you feel the churning battle within your own soul? Where do you turn? The Bible calls you to embrace the paradox of Christianity: you are saved by trusting in Jesus.

We must run to the Messiah for refuge. We must seek his grace not only because we need it, but also because he is Lord.

Applications

Psalm 2 points from the reign of David on earth to the reign of Jesus in eternity. This psalm reminds us what we celebrate this time of year. And there are some helpful lessons from this text.

1. Resisting God always turns out badly. The Bible is filled with examples of people who attempted to thwart God’s plan or resist his rule. This psalm reminds us that it always results in disaster. Satan is cast out of heaven. Adam and Eve are banished. Pharaoh is drowned in the Red Sea. Nebuchadnezzar goes crazy. Judas regrets his betrayal. And I could give you more. But can I tell you the worst is yet to come? Hell awaits those who resist God’s rule.

2. Resisting God involves not listening. While there are many ways that human beings rebel against God, the primary act of resistance is simply not listening to what he says. Prophets are rejected. The law is disobeyed. Jesus was killed. The Word of God lands on hardened hearts. Does that describe you? The book of Hebrews warns us about a hardness of heart that comes from hearing and not listening (Heb. 3:12-19). Isaiah warns about a people who hear but don’t understand because their hearts are dull (Isa. 6:9-10). Would you pray that God would give you a heart to listen to him?

3. Resisting God ends as we take refuge in Christ. The incarnation provided the means of ending our resistance and rebellion. The Christ-child came in order to deliver us from the bondage of wayward hearts. The nations rage, but the main battleground is in your heart.

If you are a Christian, consider the miracle of God's deliverance in your life. God rescued you from your dangerous resistance by pointing you to Christ. While this season can be filled with painful and ironic paradoxes, there is great reason to rejoice. Jesus saves people from their resistance.

The victory over that resistance gives us hope not only for our future but also for the present challenges we face. The foundation of our lives and the hope for our future is built on the sure foundation that we have run to Jesus for refuge.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

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