

RESPONDING TO GOD

WEEK 8: PSALM 20

In the Lord's prayer, we ask God: "your kingdom come ...". We know that "the kingdom of God is near", but we also identify with Jesus' words that "In this world you will have trouble." The kingdom of God has been inaugurated, (ie launched and unveiled) but the reign and rule of God is not yet fully realised on this earth.

As Jesus prepared to leave the disciples, he told them of his imminent departure, but also promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit and that they would one day see him again. He told them "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. ... Take heart! I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:5-33) We are to be a people who "overflow with hope". (Rom 15:13) Just as the Israelites put their hope in God for victory, we declare "God (is) our Saviour and Christ Jesus (is) our hope." (1 Tim 1:1)

Psalm 20 is the first '**Psalm of the Future World**'. David Firth suggests this is a Psalm of '**Hope beyond Order**', in that the 'order' that we hope for, may or may not be realised in our lifetime. The Psalm reflects military images of nations in the Ancient Near East. It is a Royal Psalm: it is a prayer for blessing on the king facing "the day of distress"/ trouble – which is most likely a battle or conflict.

PRAY: Turn to Matt 6:5-15 and, together, pray the Lord's Prayer.

Writing about Psalm 20, Rolf Jacobson makes the following observation:

*"One of the strange poetic features of this psalm is that the poem moves "forward" from petition to trust, but then moves "backward" from trust to renewed petition. The poem ends with a petition, even though the psalmist has just voiced soaring words of confident trust in v6-8. Is this change a prayerful form of spiritual backsliding? No. Is this renewed petition a sign that the confident trust of v6-8 is a sham? Again, no. Rather, the renewed petition is a hint of what it means to live a life of faith."*¹

- Can you think of a situation where your prayers have swung between 'hope' that God would answer your prayer, then to some sort of 'solid trust' in God and then back to a place of needing to commit the situation to God again? Are there any situations that possibly won't be righted until eternity?

READ: Psalm 20

In Ps 20:1-5, there are a number of 'May the LORD ...' / 'May he ...' statements.

- What things is the person specifically praying for? There are 8 or 9 possible answers.

The narrator of this psalm, prays and petitions God, on behalf of the king. The king is the "you" or the object of the prayer.

- How is the king referred to in v6? Why?

READ 1 Sam 7:5-11. Ps 20:3 refers to burnt offerings and sacrifices having been offered. While there are rules of battle set out in Deut 20-21, there don't seem to be any prescribed requirements for sacrifices to be offered before battle. There is, though, evidence in Ancient Near East cultures, that people sought to gain the favour of their deities, by cultic practices. In 1 Sam 7, we read of the prophet Samuel interceding for the Lord on behalf of the people and offering a burnt offering to God, which God accepted. As a result, God worked a military victory against the Philistines. By comparison, when Saul tried to make an offering in his capacity as king (1 Sam 13:9-12), God rejected it, as he had intentionally by-passed Samuel in the process.

¹ Jacobson, R. A., & Tanner, B. (2014). Book One of the Psalter: Psalms 1–41. In E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, & R. L. Hubbard Jr. (Eds.), *The Book of Psalms* (pp. 219–220). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

- When you read Ps 20:3, how do you respond to the idea that the king was seeking God's favour, by offering sacrifices before going into battle? What do you think about the idea that the king was consecrating himself for God's service and wanting to please God?
- READ Prov 3:5-6. When we commit our way to the Lord, how is that an act of trust and acknowledgement that our strength is not adequate to a task?

In Psalm 20:5, the Psalm moves from a tentative 'may' to a confident "we will ...".

- How will victory be celebrated?
- In Psalm 20:6-8, what is the basis for this confidence? Do you think this confidence was rational and well-founded?

READ Deut 28:1-10 and Deut 20:1-4. In the Old Testament, blessing (including military success), was tied to obedience and covenant faithfulness. The army could be confident of victory and put aside their fear because God was with them. By contrast, in Judges 2:11-15, we see the consequences of the people turning away from God, to worship foreign gods. They were subject to raids, failed military operations and/ or were defeated. Naturally, they were distressed, because God was "against them to defeat them". The story of Achan (recorded in Josh 7) highlights that individual sin, not just corporate sin, was also significant.

- In Ps 20:4, the Psalmist recognised that the success of the king was not a 'given' or certainty, despite doing what ritually seemed appropriate. Do you think there is any particular link – for us – between success or failure in an undertaking vs where we are 'at' in our relationship with God?

READ Is 31:1-3. Compared to contemporary super-powers, Israel was a micro-nation. It was severely disadvantaged when it came to military hardware and man-power. In Deut 20:1, the command was given, that "When you go to war against your enemies and (when you see) see horses and chariots and (when you see) an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them ...". They had the 'God of Jacob' with them and fighting for them. (In Ps 84:8 – this name for God is paralleled with 'Lord God of Hosts' or Lord God Almighty).

- Both the king of Israel and his army faced formidable foes. Similarly, we sometimes face challenges that seem insurmountable. How can we keep reminding each other that God will act on our behalf?

READ Neh 4:14-21. In the face of attacks on the city, as the city wall was being rebuilt, the men alternated between building work and acting as security guards for each other. Nehemiah reminded the people, "Remember the Lord who is great and awesome ... Our God will fight for us." Their job was massive and the people were spread out (which made them vulnerable). They used a trumpet to communicate, so they would amass when they were attacked.

- We can sometimes feel like we're 'battling on' alone, isolated and vulnerable. How do you feel about calling out to others – to come alongside you and intercede for you?

READ & REFLECT for a few minutes on the following verses. Rom 8:18-27, 35-39.

"We hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. ... We are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

In Romans 15:12-13, we read that the prophet Isaiah said (possibly 700+ years before Jesus came), that "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him." Isaiah voiced the hope and expectation that a king in the line of David would make visible, the reign and rule of God – not only for Israel, but for all the nations. In light of this, Paul prayed for the Romans:

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

PRAY for each other, using these words from Rom 15:13, especially into tough life situations different people are facing in your group.