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## The Nations Conspire in Vain

a sermon on Psalm 2

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

They taught me to do it when I was just a boy, as I in my turn have taught others. I did not know then what I was doing or how radical my action was. Do I know even now? Can I imagine the sweeping consequences of what I have done ... of what you have done? The world turned upside down – nothing less than this. The powers-that-be, broken. All the things we took for granted and never thought to question, changed.

It looks so innocent. Nothing less harmful in the world than children at prayer. That's the way to keep people in line – rulers have thought so for ages – give them religion, let them pray. But if they knew, they would surely try to stop us. What happens when our prayer is answered? What happens then *the* prayer is answered? If we knew, would we have the courage to pray it any longer? If we knew, would we ever stop praying it?

I am talking about the Lord's Prayer. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name ...* We call God "our Father" because Jesus told us we could. Jesus is the eternal Son of God, and he told us that his Father could be our Father too. He gave us this prayer. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done ...* You see how quickly we come to the most dangerous part! We are asking God to assert his sovereign rule over all of creation. To take things in hand, and mend what needs to be mended, and break what needs to be broken, until there is no more injustice, no more evil. We are asking for changes to everything. We are calling down upon ourselves and our world the mercy and the wrath of God. Somehow I suspect they are the same thing. When God makes the first last and the last first, and he establishes his kingdom – fully, finally – in heaven and on earth, some will receive it with joy and others with horror. Freedom and mercy for those who always loved God more than the world; wrath and sorrow for those who loved the world more.

We pray it all the time. *Thy kingdom come.* When God answers that prayer – and he will – nothing will ever be the same again.

God rules the world! We need to remind ourselves of that from time to time, because just bobbing along through life day to day, we might get other ideas. Other people, forces, powers, structures, and things seem so powerful. If life happens to be beating you up right now, you might feel helpless, like a small little boat on a violent sea of big waves. Don't forget: God rules the world. Happy are those who trust in him. Today is

Christ the King Sunday. Every year on this day we celebrate what Jesus told his disciples after his resurrection, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." And we dream of the day he will establish God's kingdom in all its glory. We are not helpless victims battered about by hostile forces beyond our control. We are God's people. He will give us peace.

Today our reminder comes from Psalm 2. This is an odd Psalm with an exciting story. Psalm 2 began life in the days of the Old Testament kings. Long before Christ, back when the descendants of David ruled God's people from Jerusalem, and smoke went up from the Temple sacrifices, and the Psalms were sung to the music of harps, flutes, and drums, this Psalm was written for a special purpose. It was a coronation psalm.

Imagine the scene as best you can. The old king has died. A new king is about to be crowned. This is not just a political event; it's a religious event too. For this king is a descendant of King David, with whom God made a special covenant. God promised David a descendant to sit upon his throne forever. God promised him a house, a dynasty to last for all times. This new king embodies that promise. He is God's king. When God wanted to give his people peace and prosperity, how would he do this? The king. God put his king on Mount Zion, in Jerusalem, in order to see that God's will is done and that God's people have peace.

At the coronation, the oil was more important than the crown. The priests would pour oil over the king's head, just as the prophet Samuel had poured oil over little David's head when God named him heir to the throne. This is why the king was called "the anointed" or "God's anointed." *Anointed* in Hebrew is "messiah."

The king represented God to the people and the people to God. Of course, the priests did this too, in a different way. The king embodied God's rule. So close was the relationship between king and God that at the coronation God essentially adopted the king as a son: "He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'"

So the oil was poured and the psalm was sung, and its words rang out a warning to the nations: The God of Israel, the One True God, rules the world! If you set yourself against him, you foolishly court your own destruction. The same goes for his king, whom he establishes. These were proud words, boastful words. They grew out of the conviction that God rules supreme over all nations, and yet Judah always was a small nation. The threats may have sounded hollow even in the ears of the faithful, who took the words to be the typical sort of bravado one hears at a coronation. One thing the Psalm got right: The nations and kings of the earth occasionally did set themselves against the Lord's anointed king in Jerusalem. Were their plots really in vain? In the psalm God tells the king, "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." Was that exaggeration, or did the king never bother to ask?

If you can imagine the scene once, you can imagine it over and over again as generations rise and pass away. One king follows another, sometimes a short reign, sometimes long, a good end, a bad end, good kings, bad kings, really wicked kings. Until one day, a rider is seen in the distance. He is a Babylonian, an advanced scout for a large army bound for Jerusalem. Fast forward to the aftermath of the battle: the king is taken into captivity and transported to Babylon. His name is Zedekiah, the last descendant of King David to sit upon the throne of his father's kingdom. So much for the promise ... so much for the boastful psalm.

Or was it? During the years of exile, and particularly after God's people were allowed to return to Jerusalem seventy years later, Psalm 2 took on new importance. The prophets had been promising a new covenant. God's people were excited. They looked to God for fresh, new things. They saw how Psalm 2 had not been fulfilled in the past. Instead of leading the people to honor God and blessing them with peace, the kings had more often led the people astray into the worship of idols. Most kings had abused their power and done terrible things. No wonder, then, that God had not given them the ends of the earth. But there was that matter of God's promise to King David. God is always faithful to his promises. So God's people began to read Psalm 2 in a new way, not as a coronation psalm that symbolized a lost dream of the past, but as a promise for a new future. God would yet send his anointed ruler, his Messiah. And this Messiah would be a king like David, from David's line. And he would rule the nations. He would bring God's rule to earth. God's kingdom would come. His will would be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

Psalm 2 should have died. It should have been forgotten as a relic of a bygone era that never lived up to its potential and that never would exist again. But Psalm 2 could not die, for it was the Word of God. Ever fresh, ever powerful! As God's Word of hope and promise to his people, it gained new life and greater force and sustained them through good and bad times. They sang this Psalm and pondered it as pagan nations ruled over them. Under the relatively benevolent rule of the Persians, when they were rebuilding their nation, they remembered this Psalm and longed for the kind of king it described. Later, under the hateful oppression of the Syrian Greeks, when Antiochus IV tried to turn all Jews into pagans, God's people remembered Psalm 2, and they dreamed of the day God would break the tyrant like a bit of pottery smashed with an iron rod. In the worst of times, in the best of times, whether their experience confirmed it or not, Psalm 2 kept telling God's people, "The Lord rules the world! Happy are those who put their trust in him!"

By the time of Jesus, Jews had been reading Psalm 2 as a Messianic promise for a long time. Christians added a simple twist: They knew that Jesus is the Messiah. So if Psalm 2 is about the Messiah, and if Jesus is the Messiah, then it is all about him.

In Acts 4, Peter and John get arrested for preaching about Jesus. The high council itself sternly warns them not to do it again, or else. When the church hears about the incident, the Christians immediately pray. Notice how they use Psalm 2 in their prayer:

Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, 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 performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. [vv. 24-30]

Acts adds, “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.”

Psalm 2 is the Word of God. It spoke powerfully to them in their situation of weakness and powerlessness and fear. They saw that it was about Jesus. The rulers who plotted in vain were Herod and Pilate and the rest, who conspired to kill Jesus. That was vain, because God raised him from the dead. Herod and Pilate thought they were in charge, but they weren't. God is.

Yet now, rulers were once again plotting and conspiring, telling the Christians not to tell the Good News about Jesus. This time it was the high council, and they seemed to have all the power. But the Christians were not impressed. They knew, because Psalm 2 told them, God rules. Happy are those who trust in him. All the council's power would be like a wisp of smoke that vanishes in the wind if they tried to oppose God and his Messiah. The believers prayed for boldness, and God answered their prayer.

Fast forward, past nearly two thousand years of history, to this very moment, when God's Word rings out once again, powerfully, forcefully, to encourage us with the truth that God rules the world, and happy are those who trust in him.

It is not just Christians in places like North Korea who need to hear this, although they need to hear it and they need our prayers. It is not just Christians in Muslim countries, such as Iran – and yes, there are Christians in Iran – who need to take Psalm 2 to heart. We need it too. We live in a society that becomes more secular with each passing year.

Religion is pushed out of the public sphere into the private. You can believe whatever you want on Sunday, as long as it doesn't affect your life through the rest of the week.

Is a time coming when Christian doctors will be forced to perform medical procedures that their conscience will not allow – such as abortion or physician assisted suicide – or lose their license? It hasn't come yet, but there are frightening indications that it may. As marriage laws change around the country, will churches be forced to violate some of their most basic principles? You wouldn't think so, except the Catholic Church no longer arranges adoptions in Massachusetts. They were forced to either shut down or define a family the way the state told them to. A Methodist institution in New Jersey lost its tax-exempt status because it held to a traditional understanding of marriage and would not let its facilities be used for ceremonies not in keeping with that conviction.

Religious liberty is eroding in America. Not our right to gather here and pray. But precisely where the rubber of our faith meets the road of society, this is where religious freedom is at greatest risk. Just last month, a group of 148 Christian leaders issued a statement called The Manhattan Declaration. These are scholars and church leaders of the highest caliber – Protestants, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox. You can read their work at [www.manhattandeclaration.org](http://www.manhattandeclaration.org). Basically they say that human life, marriage, and religious liberty are “increasingly under assault from powerful forces in our culture,” so that they felt compelled to take a stand.

Meanwhile, our lives are not untouched by these powerful cultural forces. We are told to keep our faith in a little box and not to bother anyone else with it. We feel the pressure: Go along to get along. Keep it to yourself. There are many people in influential places who believe the world would be better off without religion, especially Christianity. All around us we find values being promoted that we cannot buy into, because we know better. Having seen the truth, we can spot falsehood.

Let me tell you what I think: These are not dark days for Christianity. These may just be the return of our glory days. Not since Nero threw Christians to the lions and burned them to light his palace have Christians in the Western world had such glorious opportunity to display our faith against adversity. For such a long time, we had it easy. Too easy. As our culture goes pagan, we will return to the situation of the church in the first few centuries. The church in the book of Acts. Those were hard times, but glorious times, the sort of times in which heroes are made. We can be like the church of Acts, if we are only willing to trust as they did and pray as they did. Notice that when they felt the fear and the pressure, they did not ask God to take away the threat. They prayed for boldness.

They knew from Psalm 2 that kings and nations will plot and conspire. They also knew the forces against them were plotting in vain. No lie can endure forever. Truth crushed to earth always rises again. God rules. He is in control. That's why we pray for

boldness. That's why we live with boldness. That's why we pay the price. Even when evil appears to triumph, as it often does, you can be sure God has not forgotten his promise. He has sent his Son. This time not an adopted son, but his eternal Son, and made him Lord and Messiah. The Father has given him all authority and made the nations his heritage and the ends of the earth his possession. There is not one little corner of creation that God ever forgets or does not claim as his own. Happy are all who take refuge in him.

If you take refuge in him, he will give you life. He will bring you at last into his long-awaited kingdom. When he makes all things new and abolishes death, suffering, sin, and evil, you will be there. His Word today calls you to believe ... to hope ... to sing his praises. He is God, and there is no other. Amen.

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com