



Today we're in Psalm 2. Psalms 1 and 2 are like a twin introduction to the entire book of 150 psalms. They're what a wedding ceremony is to a marriage. A wedding ceremony gets you launched into a whole new way of living that isn't about just me; it's now about us. In the same way, Psalms 1 and 2 get us oriented and launched into a world that's not self-centered but God-centered.

While these two Psalms are very different, they also complement one another and are meant to be read together. Notice the word "blessed" frames these two Psalms. Psalm 1 begins, "**Blessed is the one...**" Now go to the very end of Psalm 2. It says, "**Blessed are all...**" This is what scholars call an *inclusio*. Think of a sandwich; those two *blessed's* are the two pieces of bread holding what's in between together.

Both of these Psalms describe a life that's blessed, but from different perspectives. Psalm 1 has an individual perspective. That's why it says, "**Blessed is the one...**" Psalm 2 has a corporate perspective. That's why it says, "**Blessed are all...**" Psalm 1 is a laser concentration on you as an individual. Psalm 2 is wide angle look at nations, rulers and governments. Psalm 1 asks each of us, Who is running your life? Psalm 2 asks, Who is running the world? Psalm 1 asks, Is your life governed by careful attention to God's word or by the world around you? Psalm 2 asks, Is this world ruled by God or by presidents, prime ministers and people in high places who have no room for God?

I think this is also the reason Psalm 1 is far more well known and well loved than Psalm 2. Most of us are way more interested in ourselves than the world around us. As long as my life is humming along without any major hiccups, everything is fine. Why worry about decisions made in high places when they might never affect me? Years ago Alex de Tocqueville visited America from France to learn about American life. When it was over he concluded, "Each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object, namely himself." Now it's not always bad to do that. Psalm 1 has its place, but so does Psalm 2, and we may have to work a bit harder to look up from our navels and contemplate what's happening in the world around us.

We were all shocked and saddened by the plane crash a week ago at SFO. Of course, we care about the individuals. We care about two Chinese girls on their way to church camp who were killed. We care about the heroic efforts of the crew and first responders. Those are compelling stories. But it was the decisions

made by those flying the plane that in the end determined what happened. In the same way, Psalm 2 shifts our focus from the individuals in the plane to the ones flying the plane and the plane as a whole.

This Psalm is classified as a Royal Psalm because it speaks of Israel's king and was used in the coronation of the king. It's presented to us as a drama with four parts. In each part a different group or character comes into focus and speaks. Part One focuses on rebellious rulers; Part Two on God's response. In Part Three God's anointed King speaks up. Finally, in Part Four the narrator offers a warning to world rulers.

The Rebellious Rulers Rage and Plot

Let's begin by reading Part One, which we'll spend most of our time on. Here we learn what the nations, rulers and peoples of the world are doing, who they're doing it against, and why they're doing it.

Why do the nations conspire

and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth rise up

and the rulers band together

against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,

"Let us break their chains

and throw off their shackles" (verses 1–3)

What are they doing? They're conspiring, which really means they're raging. The psalmist is painting an active, loud, threatening scene. This isn't just a closed door conspiracy with a few men whispering in a smoke filled room; there's riot in the streets. The nations are mad! But they're also plotting. He asks rhetorically, "**Why do the peoples plot in vain?**" That word "plot" is the same word he used in Psalm 1 to describe what the righteous do when they meditate (chew on) on God's law day and night. Here he says the nations, rulers and people of the earth meditate too, but they do so maliciously; they plot.

Who are they doing it against? It says in verse 2, "**...against the Lord and his anointed.**" That's talking about God and his anointed king. That's how a king formally became a king. Instead of getting inaugurated, he got anointed. So kings were called, "The Lord's anointed" or "the anointed one." At the time this psalm was written, that was Israel's king. But, as we'll see, no human king could do everything the anointed one in this psalm does, so this psalm looks forward and anticipates the king of

kings and that, of course, is Jesus Christ. The word *Messiah* even means “the anointed one.” So, in this psalm, ultimately it’s Jesus Christ against whom the world’s leaders are raging and plotting.

We can see that if we fast forward several hundred years to Acts 4. Peter and John had been arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for preaching Jesus. Upon their release, they went back to their church and told them what happened. Then it says, *“they raised their voices together and prayed: ‘Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.” Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.”* That’s Psalm 2 they’re praying. They’re taking that psalm and applying it not only to what Herod and Pilate did to Jesus but what the Sanhedrin was doing to them. And we can carry that right forward to today. Fundamentally, the issue in this psalm is what we do with the person and the authority of God’s anointed one who is none other than Jesus Christ. You might be a very “spiritual” person, but this psalm says if you don’t submit to the authority of Jesus Christ you’re part of an international conspiracy against God.

Why are they doing it? Their motive is expressed in their own words in verse 3, *“Let us break off their chains and throw off their shackles.”* What are the chains and shackles they’re trying to throw off? Of course, it’s God’s word (his law). Again, in Psalm 1 the righteous person meditates and delights in God’s word, but here these rebellious leaders want to be free from it. That’s their cry: “Freedom! We want to do whatever we want to do. If something makes me happy, then I want to be free to do it. Who are you or anyone else to tell me how to live my life? I know what’s best for me.”

After the 2011 London riots, which included days of uncontrollable looting and violence, Great Britain’s chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks described where this kind of thinking leads. He said, “The rioters are the victims of the tsunami of wishful thinking that washed across the West saying that you can have sex without the responsibility of marriage, children without the responsibility of parenthood, social order without the responsibility of citizenship, liberty without the responsibility of morality, and self-esteem without the responsibility of work and earned achievement. What’s happened morally in the West is what has happened financially as well. Good and otherwise sensible people were persuaded that you could spend more than you earn, incur debt at unprecedented levels and consume the world’s resources without thinking about who will pay the bill... There are large parts of Britain, Europe, and even the U.S. where religion is a thing of the past, and there is no counter-voice to the culture of

buy it, spend it, wear it, flaunt it, because you’re worth it. The message is that morality is passé, conscience is for wimps, and the single overriding command is ‘Thou shalt not be found out.’”

Our nation’s leaders are now in the process of redefining marriage. What’s that all about? To begin with, we should ask the question, is marriage something you can legitimately redefine? We believe God created marriage, and if God created marriage, we don’t really have the option to redefine it. If I were to paint a portrait of my wife, how is it that someone could come along and say, “That’s not your wife you painted; that’s someone else.” They could say that until they were blue in the face, but it wouldn’t be true just because they redefine it. So this latest attempt to redefine marriage is a human attempt to redefine something that is not ours to redefine, and it’s nothing more than the cry of freedom we see in this Psalm: “I know how I feel. I know what’s right for me. How can anyone dare deny me love? How can anyone even think of saying that what I feel will make me happy is wrong?”

Having said that, it’s important we keep in mind that this rebellion can come out in obvious ways or in much less obvious, even religious ways. You can be an upstanding, heterosexual, church-going, family-oriented person with a good job and a tidy house and still be in rebellion against God. When push comes to shove, you’ll do it **your** way, and you’ll even make your way appear to be the right way. Jesus was never fooled by surface issues. That’s what allowed him to befriend prostitutes, tax collectors and scoundrels. He’d do the same thing today with gay people. He knew how broken they were, and he certainly called them out of their sinful lifestyle, but he could also see the ugliness of the sickness of the upstanding scribes and Pharisees. These were the people who masked their own self absorption with religion, and Jesus called it what it was. We can keep a thin veneer of religion; we can stand up and sing *God Bless America* at the ball game and get the warm fuzzy’s, but still maintain the basic attitude of self rule in this psalm.

The Sovereign God Responds

This leads us to Part Two in which the sovereign God responds. How do you think God would respond to this rebellion?

**The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
“I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain” (verses 4–6)**

There are several things God does in response to the raging and plotting of the nations against him. First, he laughs and scoffs. You might be thinking, “What kind of a God laughs and mocks?” The writer is using human imagery here to help us grapple with who God is. His laughter isn’t cruelty, but it symbolizes the

foolishness of puny creatures like us trying to take on God. It's like a flea challenging an elephant. I think of Mohammed Ali in his prime challenging anyone in the world to get into the ring with him. What if I came forward and put on my boxing trunks and gloves and climbed into the ring to fight him? What would he do? He'd laugh! He might be nice and not laugh out loud, but inside he'd be thinking how ridiculous this is. He's not laughing at the pain he might inflict on me, though it would be painless because it would be so quick! He's laughing at the arrogance of one like me who'd try to stand against him. This is the picture the Psalmist wants us to have here. The vain rebellion of the kings of the earth is ludicrous in view of the awesome power of God. It's like, "I made these guys! And now they're climbing in the ring with me? Come on!"

The second thing God does is he *"rebukes them in his anger and he terrifies them in his wrath."* God isn't impassive; he feels things deeply, even anger. We're not talking about a God who flies off the handle. N.T. Wright puts it well, "The biblical doctrine of God's wrath is rooted in the doctrine of God as the good, wise and loving creator, who hates—yes, hates, and hates implacably—anything that spoils, defaces, distorts, or damages his beautiful creation, and in particular anything that does that to his image-bearing creatures. If God does not hate racial prejudice, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not wrathful at child abuse, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not utterly determined to root out from his creation, in an act of proper wrath and judgment, the arrogance that allows people to exploit, bomb, bully and enslave one another, he is neither loving, nor good, nor wise." We should have an image of God that includes both love and wrath. They go together. What kind of God would not become angry at the world's rebellion and evil? God isn't wrathful in spite of his love. God is wrathful **because** his love.

This leads to the third thing God does in response to this rebellion, which is to establish his king. He says in verse 6, *"I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."* When the Jewish leaders got their way and Pilate agreed to have Jesus crucified, do you think God was threatened? "Oh no, what are we going to do now? I'd better think of something quick." No. God laughed and said, "You think you can deal with my appointed king by hanging him on a cross? I've got news for you, in three days, I'll raise him up. Not only that, I'm going to sit him down at my right hand and the day will come when he'll return. And when he returns, you'd better be ready. Every knee shall bow and tongue confess... You think he made a difference the first time round, but that was just a three year stint. This will be for eternity."

As I think about how God responds to the rebellion of the nations, I can't help but feel how foolish it is for us as followers of Christ to feel intimidated by the evil around us. This is so often how we feel, isn't it? And especially so because we know there's a spiritual element to this battle in that we're not just standing

against human beings but spiritual forces in the demonic world. We feel our values are being threatened at every turn. We see the seemingly unbreakable grip that Islam has over half the world. How can we possibly put a dent in that? Increasingly in our own nation for us to say Jesus isn't just one way but he's the only way is to invite people to look at us as intolerant bigots. Before long, we tend to cower before the world and even apologize for our narrow views! I'm not advocating arrogance here. We have far too many arrogant Christians out there. But I am advocating a humble confidence in God that's rooted in our faith that God is enthroned in heaven and he has installed his king! To have that kind of confidence, we can't possibly put our trust in any government or earthly ruler; our confidence is in God. And we know the end of the story, right? We know who wins.

The Anointed King Testifies

In Part Three the anointed king himself speaks up. Listen to his own testimony.

I will proclaim the Lord's decree:

He said to me, "You are my son;

today I have become your father.

Ask me,

**and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.**

You will break them with a rod of iron;

you will dash them to pieces like pottery"

(verses 7–9)

The king stands up and testifies of what God himself has decreed about his relationship to the king. It's a unique relationship of Son to Father. When God promised David that he'd always have a descendent on the throne of Israel, God said, *"I will be his father, and he will be my son"* (2 Sam. 7:14). But, again, this is fulfilled in Christ in a way that no earthly king does. Remember what the Father said to the Son at his baptism? *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"* (Mt. 3:17). And when Jesus stood with Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration, they heard the voice of God, *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"* (Mt. 17:5).

Because he's the Son, he has certain privileges. The father invites the Son to ask of him and he'll make the nations his inheritance, the ends of the earth his possession. He'll rule them with a rod of iron and dash them to pieces like pottery. That sounds scary and it's meant to be. Pottery is fragile; so are we. Again, this imagery is picked up in the New Testament. The book of Revelation describes Jesus as the One who *"will rule all the nations with an iron scepter"* (Rev. 12:5). And, yes, for those who have chosen to reject him, this is frightening, but there's another side of this we shouldn't forget. He'll gather around him his own from every tribe and tongue and nation. Picture all the peoples of the earth, every tribe and language and ethnicity, all

gathered in one great throng in the New Jerusalem. We're there to give glory, honor and praise to God's Son. We've come with our offerings. What might those offerings be? Revelation 21:24 says, *"the kings of the earth will bring their (own) splendor into it."* This offering will have something to do with our own splendor as a people; French or Chinese, Masai or Persian, Indian or Mexican. I can see us bringing our own music and dance and food. I see us carrying trays of fried rice and tapas and tacos and spaghetti with meatballs; all with drums and flutes and bells and marambas to the sound of their own music. I see them wearing hats and headdresses; sarongs and saris, cowboy boots and Italian loafers. Somehow all of this is brought together into one song, the Song of the Lamb, where with one voice the nations give glory and honor and power to the One who was slain for us.

The Nations Receive a Warning

Finally we come to Part Four when the narrator of this psalm gathers up all that's been said and issues a warning.

**Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him
(verses 10–12)**

The kings and rulers of the earth are warned: *"be wise... serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling."* In light of all that's been said, isn't that the wisest thing to do? Notice we're to *"celebrate (rejoice) with trembling."* How do you do that? I don't normally put those two things together. Imagine you were exploring the Rocky Mountains in the fall. Just as you reach a sheer cliff with a spectacular view of miles of jagged mountains and meadows, a terrible storm breaks out. The wind is so strong you're afraid it might blow you over the cliff. But then you discover a little cave you can hide in. Here you're secure. But, still, the awesome might of the storm rages on, and you watch it with a kind of trembling pleasure. Not all fear leaves your heart, only

the life-threatening part. There remains the trembling, the awe, the wonder, the feeling you'd never want to tangle with such a powerful storm. So it is with God. The fear of God is what's left of the storm when you have a safe place to watch right in the middle of it. Raw fear turns into a trembling celebration.

Then he says, "Kiss the Son. If he's installed his king, that's a wise thing to do. Bow before them and kiss their feet as a symbol of submission. Kings and Queens, Presidents and Prime Ministers, be wise. I'm glad you go to church, especially when it will be shown on CNN. I'm glad to hear you say, 'May God bless America' after your speech before Congress. But what I really want to see you do is this: Kiss the Son. Bow before him and submit your life to his rule and reign. If you don't, be prepared to endure his wrath. It's not something to trifle with. He's patient and long suffering, but don't take that for granted."

In the last line of the psalm he issues a wonderful statement which I believe is a kind of invitation, *"Blessed are all those who take refuge in him."* Do you know what this is really saying? This is really the message of the entire Psalm: there is no refuge **from** him, there is only refuge **in** him. The only safe place from the wrath of God is in God. If you're afraid of him and try to run away and hide, you can't. But there's a refuge from the wrath of God in God. The safest place from the wrath of God—the only safe place—is God.

So I leave you with this today. Take refuge in His Son. Whatever it is you're going through, hide in the shadow of his wings. This is where we live and serve with joyful trembling. It's terrible and it's wonderful. It's like the eye of a hurricane—terror all around, and totally beautiful and calm. Here there's sweet fellowship. Here is quiet, loving communion. Here we speak to him as to a friend. Here he ministers to our deepest needs. There is no refuge from him, there is only refuge in him. I invite you to do that.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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