The True King
Psalm 2

In case you don't know, the Book of Psalms is *the* Old Testament book most quoted in the New. So, over the summer, we're going to look at the eight most quoted psalms - all of which have been called *messianic* psalms; psalms the writers of the New Testament read and realised, 'oh, wow, all along, this was talking about Jesus.'

And if that was true for any of the psalms, it was true of Psalm 2. I mean, imagine a little 6 year old girl putting on her mum's high heel shoes and trying to walk in them, or a 5-year old boy putting on his dad's jacket. And you look and go, 'aww cute! But way too big. You're going to need to grow a whole lot to fill that out.'

But it's the same with Psalm 2, because what you get is a description of a king whose rule is so wide and whose power is so great that you look at the kings of Israel who it's supposed to be about and think 'you'd need to grow a whole load to fill this out.' And you begin to realise it's got to be pointing to a king far greater than any of them ever were. A king who really will rule the nations.

But, of course, that's where it starts getting close to home. Because most commentators agree that alongside Psalm 1. Psalm 2 serves as an introduction to all the rest of the psalms.

Psalm 1 opens the whole book by saying, v1, 'Blessed is the man… who delights in the law of the Lord'. While Psalm 2 ends with 'Blessed are *all* who take refuge in him.' So Psalm 1 is personal, and Psalm 2 is corporate. Psalm 1 is individual, while Psalm 2 is national, even international.

But both are telling you, this is the way to live the blessed life. This is the way to live the life you were always meant to live. In which case, we should pay attention to its message.

Now, if that sounds dramatic, Psalm 2 is dramatic! - with the person speaking constantly shifting as different actors taking the stage. But it's also deeply counter-cultural. Because it tells us the path to the truly blessed life, the path to happiness, is not what our current culture tells us it is. It's not you being you, or you getting your own way, or you being at the centre of life. It's in realising, no.1 there is a king and he's not you; no. 2 That that king must be kissed; and no 3. That king offers you refuge.

There is a King and He is Not You.
Look at v1: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?' Now, when you were a kid and your mum and dad asked you '*Why?!*' You knew you were in trouble, didn't you. '*Why* did you do that? *Why* did you say that?'

And Psalm 2 opens with that same sense of disbelief. Except not at kids but kings. Verse 2, 'The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed.'

And the Lord's Anointed was the king of Israel - anointed to rule and reign. Which is why commentators think it was probably written by David for his son Solomon's coronation. But if that's the case, who are the kings and rulers in rebellion against him? Because this idea of *subject* kings rising up against *the* king doesn't seem to fit any period in Israel's history that we know of. So who are these kings?

Well, think of Britain's National Anthem, which I'm sure you do on a daily basis. Because you might know the first verse, 'God save our gracious king…' But virtually no-body knows the verse that follows: 'O Lord our God arise, Scatter his enemies, And make them fall; *Confound their politics, Frustrate their knavish tricks*, On thee our hopes we fix, God save us all.'

And if you're British, when it talks about the king's enemies, and confounding their politics and frustrating their knavish tricks, we all know who it's singing about. The French. And you don't need to name them, it's obvious.

And Derek Kidner, the Old Testament theologian, argues exactly the same for Psalm 2. We don't need to identify these enemies, because each generation who sang it would have known, and applied it to whichever enemy they were facing at the time. The point is, whoever the enemy os and whatever the world scene looks like, there is only one true king, and he's God's king.

And yet, none of Israel's kings fitted those shoes. Because by v8 this king is given the nations as his heritage and the ends of the earth as his possession, and which king could claim that?

So look again at v2 and that word 'Anointed'. It's the word *Messiah* in Hebrew, or Christ in Greek. It's why, when the apostles, Peter and John, were preaching about Jesus after his death and resurrection and the authorities threatened them to stop, they gathered the church, and read this psalm back to God: Acts 4:25-26, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain… against the Lord and against his Anointed?' And then prayed, v27-28, "For truly in this city were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, *whom you anointed*, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

In other words, the church realised that whatever this psalm was referring to in the past, all along it was pointing to Jesus - *the* anointed one, *the* messiah, - *the* true king of Israel. And any previous king was just a shadow of *that* king. And the rulers in rebellion, ultimately, were the Jewish leaders and Roman governor, Jews and Gentiles combined together to reject *the* King.

Great, we might say, that's that psalm done and dusted, everything fulfilled. Except, look what it has these earthly powers saying, v3: "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." In other words, we don't want God, or his King, telling us how to live. And ask yourself, has anything much changed?

I mean, think of the political or cultural, or intellectual or commercial powers today - how much do they want to bend the knee to God and his king? Alastair Campbell, the advisor to previous UK prime Minister, Tony Blair, once famously said, 'we don't do God.'

Now you might be able to come up with a list of secular powers who *do* do God, but are they *really* bending the knee to him, or using him?

And that's not just a problem for others, is it? You see, this psalm tells us: There is a king and it's not you, or me. But we want to be that king, don't we? Whether you're on the left or the right politically, freedom matters to you. On the left, my body, my choice. On the right, my money, or my mouth, to do or say whatever I want. And none of us like being told what to do. We all want to be

kings over our own kingdom. And the bonds and cords of another king, are just that - chains limiting our freedom.

Now we could dismiss this idea of us wanting to be the king or queen as narcissism, if it wasn't for the fact that the Bible opens by telling us, we were made to reign. That you were created in the image of God to have authority and exercise dominion. But you were to be a king or a queen under the Great King. But now, we resent that king and chafe against his rule.

But why does it chafe? Well, we know where it comes from - from the very first temptation - as the serpent enters the garden and offers Adam and Eve the chance to… throw off God's yoke and break his cords, and decide for themselves what's right and wrong. As John Milton, the puritan poet, has Satan say in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*: "It's better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

But that sentiment - that it's better to reign than serve - is now in the air we breath, isn't it? Verse 1 again: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?' And that word *plot* is the same word translated in Psalm 1 as *meditates*: Blessed is the man who *meditates* day and night on the law of the Lord. Psalm 2, why do the peoples plot, *meditate*, in vain?

And everyday you and I soak, we marinade, we meditate in a culture and way of thinking that tells us, being blessed, being happy, living the truly fulfilled life, is you coming out on top, you having your way, you being free, and you doing you. It's you being the king.

But Psalm 2 says, no, you'll only ever be happy, you'll only ever be the king or queen you were made to be, you'll only ever reign in life and use your freedom rightly, if you humble yourself under the true King.

The King Who Must be Kissed

Recently I was reading a biography of Martin Luther, and it describes how he was always joking, about himself, or his friends, or Katie his wife, or as the author puts it, his ever growing number of opponents. And some of his stuff was so funny, if *I* said it it'd cost me my job.

But in explaining why humour mattered to Luther, the author quotes Psalm 2, v4, which Luther himself was always quoting, 'He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.' Because having discovered just how great and gracious God is, it's as if Luther saw all our pretensions, and all our attempts at autonomy and independence for what they are… which is laughable.

But if the Lord laughs, look at his posture. Because as some translations put it, these kings and rulers *have taken their stand*, and rebellion and revolution against God and his Anointed is afoot. And so does God leap into action, strapping on his armour, reading to stamp out this uprising? No. What's he doing? They're standing but he's sitting. They're raging but he's laughing. And all our attempts at independence are but a comic tragedy, a threat that doesn't even require God to get out of his chair.

But then, look at the locations. Verse 2: 'The kings *of the earth*' and v5, 'He who sits *in the heavens*.' And his book *Bulwarks of Unbelief*, Joseph Minich tries to explain why atheism increased alongside industrialisation. And among the reasons he gives is that as people moved into cities, they lost sight of the stars… and with that they also lost a sense of God's greatness and our smallness.

The heavens disappeared and with them so did a great and transcendent God. And immersed in an earthbound world of work and gadgets, the idea that *I'm* the king of my own kingdom became plausible. No, says Psalm 2, whether we see him or not, God sits enthroned over all.

Some years back, we took some friends to the thermal baths. Except, it was a bank holiday and they were shutting early. And as we drove into the car park the parking attendant said, 'Sorry, we're closed'. To which I said, 'but we've come for the baths'. 'I know, but we're closed.' 'But on your website it says you're open till 10pm.' 'Not on bank holidays.' 'Yes, but we want to come.' 'Well you can't' . 'But we've driven all this way. And these are our friends… and your website says… and… and… and…' Now, what was I doing? I was raging in vain. Because I could insist as much as I wanted but the deed was done.

Verses 5-6: '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."' In other words, we can say or believe whatever we want, we can insist on our freedom to be our own kings, '*but as for me'* God says*,* 'I have set *my* king on *my* hill.' And that is like a giant rock with which all our pretensions collide.

But then, the King himself speaks: v7, 'I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."' And in 2 Samuel 7, God promised David that one of his sons would rule after him and, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son" (2 Sam 7:14). And ever since, there was a sense in which *every* king of Israel was a son of God.

Until another Son came. Because do those words, 'You are my Son' ring any bells? How first at Jesus' baptism and then at his transfiguration, a voice came from heaven saying, '*this* is my Son.' This is *my* king.

Which is why Paul, when preaching in Antioch, takes them to this psalm and tells them, Jesus is the fulfilment of all the promises God made to his people, and he proved it by raising him from the dead, Acts 13:33, 'As also it is written in the second Psalm, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you."

It's why when the Writer to the Hebrews argues how much greater Jesus is than anyone else, he says, Hebrews 1:5, 'To which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." Because however great even an angel is, they're nothing compared to Jesus.

Because this king, the psalm says, will rule the world. Verses 8-9: '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.'

Winston Churchill was once asked 'are you ready to meet your Maker?' To which he replied, 'I am. But whether my maker is ready to meet me is another matter.' Great line, but he's hardly taken Psalm 2 to heart, has he? Because whether as individuals, rulers, or governments, can live with delusions of our own greatness, or simply pretend we can live without him. But life and death have a way of shattering our delusions. And this is a king you don't want to cross, the psalm is saying. Instead, he's a king you need to kiss.

Verse 10-12, ‘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.’

Back at Easter, Su and I went to hear Bach’s *St John’s Passion* at the Lausanne Opera, and it was incredible - as Bach sets the ugly anger of Jesus’ accusers against the beauty of Christ himself.

But the whole thing ends with a prayer - sung by the choir, back to God. That in response to all that Jesus has done for us, in response to his death for us, we will trust him in our deaths, so that one day, as Bach puts it, we will wake and ‘my eyes may see you, in all joy, O Son of God, my saviour and throne of grace!’

And then that prayer and the whole performance ends with the line, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, hear me, *I will praise you eternally*.’ And as the last note faded, you could have heard a pin drop. And I was sat there stunned, at the beauty of the music, and at the wonder of Christ. And I was sat there thinking someone needs to stand up and preach the gospel. Someone needs to stand up and tell this audience just how wonderful Jesus is. Because that’s what Bach wrote this for. And someone did stand up. In fact, hundreds stood up, the whole theatre stood up, and began cheering and applauding, but not at Christ, at the choir and conductor and orchestra and soloists.

And don’t get me wrong, it was an incredible performance, but they’d just sung, ‘I will praise *you* eternally’ but now, for what felt like an eternity, one soloist after another came forward, and then the choir, and then conductor, and the orchestra, for one, two, even three bows. And I was thinking, what would Bach, the man who signed off every piece, SDG, *Soli Deo Gloria* - to God alone be the glory, what would he have thought of this? Because this wasn’t God getting the glory, it wasn’t his King being kissed, it was man.

But again, let’s be honest, we all want that kiss don’t we? In one form or another, we want the attention, the approval, the applause, the thanks, the praise, the deference, the glory - to come our way. And we may be happy to shake Christ’s hand as a life-coach, or consult him as a counsellor, but kiss his hand as our king? And yield to him in humble obedience - what could make us *want* do that?

The King Who Offers Refuge

The 18th Century British pastor, Augustus Toplady, was once walking through a place called Burrington Combe, in Somerset, when he was caught in a thunderstorm. And he managed to find shelter in a cleft in the rock face. And once he was home and dry, he reflected on that experience, and wrote the hymn, ‘Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.’

Well, look at the last line of the psalm: v12, ‘Blessed are all who take refuge in him.’

So Psalm 2 is telling us, God’s anger against rebels is like a storm you need sheltering from… and yet, he himself is the shelter from that storm. Christ the king *will* come in judgment - as Revelation tells us, quoting this psalm, ‘From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, *and he will rule them with a rod of iron’.* (Rev 19:15)… and yet he’s also the refuge from that judgment.

But how can those things *both* be true? How can he be both our judge and our defender? How can he be the storm against our sin *and* our refuge from the storm?

Look again at v6: "I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." And Zion is another name for Jerusalem. So ask yourself, when was Christ set as king upon a hill? When was he lifted up and enthroned in Jerusalem?

When he was lifted up upon a cross, and crowned with thorns, with *This is The King of the Jews* nailed above his head.

And it's there, on that hill, that *he* endured the storm of God's wrath that was ours to face. It was there that the rock of ages was cleft that we might find refuge.

And did he do it when we were his friends? No. This is the king who gives his life for his enemies, to make us his friends. And as you meditate on that, as you realise that the king high above all kings, stooped so low, and loves you so much that he would die for you, you'll want to take his hand and kiss it. And you'll begin to realise his cords that seem so chafing, are cords of love, drawing you to him. And his yoke that seemed so heavy is light, and leading you in the path to the truly blessed and happy life.

You see, in Revelation, it's not just Jesus who rules the nations, it's not just Jesus who Psalm 2 refers to… it's his people. As John reports Jesus saying, "The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, *and he will rule them with a rod of iron*." (Revelation 2:26)

In other words, it's as you humble yourselves under Christ's rule, and give up any pretension of your own, that you become the king or queen you were always meant to be. And you'll lead, and exercise influence, and handle authority, at home or at work, not as a tinpot king in your own little kingdom, desperate for the applause, but as his representative in his kingdom. Because it's in dying to self that we live, it's in humbling ourselves that we are lifted up, and it's in serving that we reign.

And then, just as he became a refuge for us, we'll be a refuge for those we lead, whether at home or at work. Because as you see him absorbing the cost of your sins and your failures, you'll absorb the cost of other's sins and other's failures. Now, you'll never be able to do that if you're hungry for the kiss, if you always need to be well thought of. But see him taking the hit for you, and you'll take the hit for others. Because that's what representatives of this King do. The King upon the kill, the one king worthy of the kiss.