

A Prayer for 2019

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[0 : 00] which probably is the earliest of Paul's letters. 1 Thessalonians, and we'll read from chapter 4, verse 13, down to the end of verse 11 in chapter 5.

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

[1 : 04] Therefore, encourage each other with these words. Now, brothers, about time and dates, we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come, like a thief in the night.

While people are saying peace and safety, destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness, so that this day should surprise you like a thief.

You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.

So then let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.

For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

[2 : 15] Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as, in fact, you are doing. Amen. And may God add his own blessing to this reading of his word.

Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let's join our hearts together in prayer.

To the book of Psalms and to chapter 72. And we will look particularly at the first verse, where we read, Endow the King with your justice, O God, the Royal Son with your righteousness.

Now, on this, the first Lord's Day of the New Year, I want to suggest to you that Psalm 72, this particular psalm, presents us with a prayer for this year, as it does indeed present us with a prayer for every New Year.

You might wonder why a psalm like this, which was written approximately 3,000 years ago, has something to say to us today. This ancient psalm is very modern and very relevant.

The unique value of the psalms is that they have served the people of God as prayers and as songs of praise over millennia. We continue in our worship.

[3 : 37] The tradition of praise and prayer extending centuries into the past. Walter Brueggemann, an American scholar, has said that the book of Psalms is the prayer book of humanity.

And that's why psalms feature in our worship as we meet together week by week and Sunday by Sunday. So this particular psalm offers us an anchor at a time of considerable uncertainty in public life.

And that's one of the reasons why I think it is very relevant for us at this particular point of time.

Because as we look out in the culture in which we live, we are indeed facing a great deal of uncertainty.

In this year, we enter 12 months in which some very important decisions are due to be taken, which will likely influence our country and the United Kingdom for decades to come.

And that's why the Psalms are so important as we seek to be oriented as we look forward.

[4 : 51] We think of some of the events that are to come, like Brexit, which is due on the 29th of March, which will take Britain out of the European Union. And then, of course, there is the uncertainty which arises as a result of leaving the European Union about our relationships with other countries, particularly with the United States.

The question that many people ask is, will the special relationship survive? Also, we've been aware of the fact that concerns about plastics polluting the physical environment and entering the human food chain are considered to be important today.

And, of course, in our own domestic politics here in Scotland, there is the possibility of another referendum on independence, which may not be far over the horizon, which creates hope in some and fear in others.

And so it is not my task or the task of any preacher of the gospel to give a personal opinion from the pulpit on the pros and cons of these issues which I have mentioned.

It is our task, those of us who preach the gospel, to make clear that these issues and other issues which concern us, while important, are not the most important. And this psalm reminds us of that.

[6 : 15] This psalm tells us that the two most important issues facing our generation and indeed every generation are justice and righteousness. Look again at the first verse of this psalm.

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son, with your righteousness. And this psalm focuses particularly upon the justice and the righteousness of the king.

The superscription of this psalm is of Solomon. However, these words might equally well be translated for Solomon or to Solomon. And the inclusion in the concluding verse or in verse 20 of the psalm that it is among the prayers of David suggests that this psalm may have been first offered as a prayer by David for his son Solomon who would succeed him.

And this inclusion in the Psalter suggests that this psalm may well have been prayed and sung at the coronation of the successive kings of the line of David in ancient Judah.

The Bible, of course, underlines the importance of civic rulers reflecting in their governance the key features of God's rule over creation.

[7 : 35] And these key features are God's justice and God's righteousness. And so this psalm gives us a frame, a framework through which a lens, through which we might look forward into this new year, into the year in which we have just entered.

So I want to suggest to you that this psalm is first of all a prayer for today. It is not a prayer for yesterday, it comes from yesterday, but it is a prayer for today.

And it is a prayer, first of all, for the personal justice and righteousness of those who govern us. This psalm encourages us to pray that those who govern us might recognize and acknowledge that they need the justice and the righteousness of God.

And that they can personally enter into that a new relationship with God which declares them to be righteous, to be justified by faith in Jesus.

Like Solomon and his successors, they and we all need to receive the gift of God's righteousness. But the particular focus of this psalm, I think, is on public justice and public righteousness, that justice and righteousness may be established in the public square.

[9 : 01] So this psalm is not only a prayer that the king might personally be in a right relationship with God, but that he might govern with God's justice and God's righteousness as his lodestars.

So this psalm provides us with a vehicle or a framework to pray for our first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, for the prime minister, Theresa May, for President Donald Trump, for President Xi Jinping of China, for Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, for President Moon Jae-dun in South Korea, and whatever other country may be represented in our fellowship this evening.

This psalm encourages us to pray that these who lead the nations that have been referred to might receive the righteousness of Christ and be brought into a personal relationship with God.

And second, this psalm encourages us to pray that they might promote and practice social justice in the society they govern. And this psalm has a great deal to say about just rule.

This psalm is concerned about those who are afflicted in verses 2 and 4, about those who are needy in verses 4, 12 and 13. It is concerned that whoever is king or whoever is governing will care for them and look after them.

[10 : 32] And this psalm anticipates in that sense the ministry of Jesus because the ministry of Jesus concerned and focused on those who were unjust, upon those who were needy, upon those who were afflicted.

Remember what John the Baptist, when John the Baptist heard in prison of Jesus' ministry, he sent his disciples to ask, are you the one who is to come or do we wait for another?

Jesus answered them with it Matthew tells us, go and tell John what you see and hear. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor of the good news brought to them.

So Jesus fulfilled the prayer of Psalm 72 verses 12 to 13 where the coming king will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help.

He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. Verses 12 and 13. And it's interesting that in this psalm which envisages a reign of justice that the natural environment also flourishes.

[11 : 46] Grain abounds and flourishes throughout the land and grows even on the top of the hills. And so we might ask ourselves the question, are we praying privately and publicly for those who govern us?

Do we pray for those who take the decisions, who make the laws in our land and for those who administer these laws in our localities?

Paul certainly urges us to do that. Remember what he said to Timothy giving him advice to the young pastor. I urged then, he said, that all requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and those in authority, that we may live peaceable and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

This is good and pleases God our Savior. And Paul reminds us that in his lecture to the Romans that the governing authorities are the servants of God and therefore they are accountable to him. John Calvin, the reformer in Geneva, contended that to be a magistrate or to be a politician as we would say today is to embark on one of the highest human callings.

[13 : 07] We are to respect and pray for those who govern us despite their failings. Let's remember that when Paul said that those who govern are the servants of God that a dictator was the emperor in Rome and Calvin spoke about the importance of the magistrates.

He had his own battles with the town council of Geneva yet both apostle and reformer recognized the God-given role of civil government and made a point of praying for those who governed them. Therefore, it's very important for us to pray in public and in private for the government of Scotland, of the United Kingdom and for the governments of every nation which is represented here indeed for all the governments of the world.

It's also important for us to pray for local government. We should pray for those governing authorities in other nations represented here especially when vitally important matters are being discussed and decided on.

So as we watch the news, as we read the newspapers, let's recognize that we are not powerless spectators. God has given us access into his presence and he is the one who ultimately rules the world and he is inviting us and indeed commanding us to be involved, to be participants, not spectators, in what is happening in the wider society and that's why it's so important that we bring before God those who lead us as the psalmist here brings the king before God and ask God to grant him his justice and his righteousness.

[14 : 58] And so we might particularly pray this week for the members of Parliament as they debate the future relationship of the United Kingdom with the European Union.

Are we praying for MSPs in the Scottish Parliament as they discuss the constitutional future of Scotland? Also we need to pray for those who govern in other countries are we praying that God may endow them with his justice and his righteousness that they may care for the least rather than grasp for the most.

And so I want to suggest first of all that this psalm is a prayer for today. It's a prayer that is relevant. It's a prayer for 2019.

Although it may be 3,000 years old it is more relevant than anything that you might read in the newspaper or hear in television. This psalm provides us with a prayer to bring before God those who govern us.

But secondly I want to suggest that this psalm is also a prayer for tomorrow. A close examination of the psalm reveals that the focus of the prayer of the psalm extends to someone greater than Solomon.

[16:24] Solomon greater than any of his successors on the throne of Judah. Solomon did not rule through all generations as long as the sun and the moon exist as the psalm envisages in verse 5.

All nations did not serve Solomon. He never attained a just rule, peace and dominion to the ends of the earth and the endless reign for which this psalm prays.

So this psalm is more than a prayer for the king of Israel. It is also by reference, also by inference for all civil rulers.

It is also a prophecy about the king of kings. What was prayed as a wish for Solomon is prayed as a promise concerning the king of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the greater and the greatest son of David.

He will reign through all generations. His dominion will extend from sea to sea to the ends of the earth. He will be acknowledged as the king of kings and lord of lords.

[17:30] All kings and all rulers will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. His name will endure forever. All nations will be blessed through him and will call him blessed.

So this psalm is both a prayer for the king and a prophecy of the first and second coming of the king of kings and lord of lords.

And it's important for us to recognize when we pray for those who rule over us in civic government that justice and righteousness will be perfectly established only when Jesus Christ returns.

after the last king of Israel died in Babylonian captivity this psalm was sung and prayed by the people of God with a focus on the coming Messiah.

And so this psalm anticipates not only the first coming of Christ as it does in Matthew's allusion in verse 11 to the in his account of the Magi bringing gifts including gold to the child Jesus.

[18:36] It is also a focus on the second coming when Christ will reign forever and ever and the whole earth will be filled with his glory.

So at the beginning of 2019 we may ask ourselves this very serious question Are we praying that Jesus might come in 2019? Are we saying as the early church said come Lord?

Are we anticipating that this may be the year in which the Lord Jesus Christ might return? Or would we prepare his coming to wait a little longer?

Might his coming be inconvenient to us and to our priorities and to our activities? This psalm is challenging us because in this psalm as we sing it as we pray it we are praying that the king of kings may come and that if we pray this psalm with faith we will expect him to come.

And so this psalm is a prayer for today and a prayer for tomorrow. It is a prayer for today in that it encourages us to pray that the king or the ruler the government may be given his justice and his righteousness.

[20:04] We see that in verse 1 Endow the king with your justice O God the royal son with your righteousness. It's also a prayer for tomorrow.

We read in verse 11 All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. The verb there is rendered as a future can equally be rendered as a wish and some of the translations thus render it and the prayer is that all kings might bow down to him and all nations might serve him.

And so this provides us with a focus not only for today but also for tomorrow. So let us go out go through this new year with this psalm in our lips and with the Lord it points to enthroned on our hearts.

Ruth Graham the wife of Billy Graham wrote a book some years ago entitled Fear Not the Future God is Already There.

And that title echoes what this psalm is saying. This psalm anticipates the future. It knows that God is there ahead of us.

[21:20] And as we go into a new year and as we face a new future let us be encouraged by what this psalm says that the Lord Jesus Christ the King of Kings is ahead of us and that he is there and he is inviting us to follow him into this unknown future.

He invites us as his followers to put our faith in him and to place our hand in his hand. He extends his hand to us on this the first Sunday of a new year and he invites us to go with him into it.

May God grant that each and all of us may put our hand in the hand of Christ tonight and that we may follow him into this year and that we may know that he goes before us that he is the forerunner

who goes into every new day into every new month into every new experience before us in order to make the way safe for his people to follow.

And so may we have the confidence that the psalmist had when the psalmist looked forward to that day when the King of Kings will rule the whole world when he will have dominion from sea to sea and when his kingdom will extend to the ends of the earth.

And so this prayer is a prayer for this year and a prayer for every year.