

The Key to Victory in 2023

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[0 : 00] Thanks Harry, how about a quick pray for us? Dear Heavenly Father, please gather our scattered thoughts and direct them to your word and to your son.

Please use this talk and your word to prepare us for the year ahead. In Jesus' name, Amen. Well, just like that, Christmas has come and gone and it's a new year.

How is 2023? What are you looking for? What are you looking for? Have you made your resolutions? Have you set your goals? What things are you looking forward to?

What things are you hoping to achieve? And have you thought about what you'll do when it all goes wrong? Because if there's one thing we've learned over the last five years, it's that our plans can be undone in the blink of an eye.

holidays, employment, health, savings, everything is uncertain, isn't it? When we think we've come to terms with the pandemic, there's a war.

[1 : 11] If the war settles down a bit, there are floods or maybe fires. The world has all manner of things to disrupt our plans.

We live in uncertain times and in an uncertain world. So what do we do about it? The worldly answer, of course, is to plan harder.

Diversify your investments. Stockpile dry goods and toilet paper. Wear a better mask. Get more insurance. And no doubt there's a bit of wisdom in that approach.

If God has given us brains and resources to anticipate trouble, surely we should use those things. And yet even the most carefully laid plans can be disrupted.

Even the smartest planners can be taken by surprise. Jesus gives us the supreme example of that in his parable of the rich man who builds bigger and bigger storehouses for his grain, expecting to have many good things stored up for years to come and then drops dead overnight unexpectedly.

[2 : 19] The worldly answer on its own leaves us unprepared for the most important and inevitable crisis. So what's the godly answer?

Well, part of the answer is to pray, isn't it? Psalm 27 says, Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Or Proverbs 3, verse 6, Submit to God and he will make your paths straight. So we pray about our plans and we hope that God will bless them. We pray that he would make things work out and keep us out of trouble. And the blessings of Psalm 20 seem to look a bit like this.

May God give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. May we shout for joy over your victory and lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant all your requests.

Says verses 4 and 5. And these are great verses, aren't they? They are a great prayer. They're the kind of thing that looks really good on a birthday card or a wedding card.

[3 : 28] And yet we also know that God doesn't always give us the desire of our hearts. Not all our plans succeed. We don't have to be alive very long to realise that Christians are just as subject to pandemics and economic downturns and floods and disasters and accidents as their non-Christian neighbours.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't pray, of course. God hears our prayers. And if you've ever been through a difficult time and had God's people praying for you, then I'm sure you know that their prayers make a difference.

And yet that's still not the most important answer to the problem of life's uncertainty. And it's not what Psalm 20 is about either, or at least not directly.

To get to the core meaning of the psalm, we need first to notice that Psalm 20 isn't a blessing just for anyone. First, it's a blessing for people who have a relationship with God on the basis of his own

covenants.

Look again at verse 1. May the Lord answer you when you are in distress. May the name of the God of Jacob protect you.

[4 : 44] Straight away, the God we are appealing to here is the God who has made promises to the people of Israel. The word Lord there in the first line means Yahweh, or I am, the name God uses for himself when he reveals himself to Moses at the start of Exodus.

This is the name God calls himself as he takes the initiative to save his people. The expression God of Jacob takes us further back into time, back to God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that he would make them into a great nation and give them a place to live and bless them and bless the world through them.

Psalm 20, in other words, isn't just a hopeful blessing, a prayer to God that he might help if we pray enough. It's an appeal to a God who has already committed himself to blessing his people.

It's cashing checks that God has already signed. Second, Psalm 20 is a blessing for people who have access to God. Look at verses 2 and 3.

May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. The God of Jacob lives among his people so they can draw close to him.

[6 : 11] Although he transcends time and space and is outside of creation, he's given them a meeting place, a temple and a city where he will listen to humans and bless them.

And although God is too holy for anyone to approach, although sinners can never draw close to him, he's given his people a system of sacrifices to cover their sins and make them able to draw near to him without being judged or destroyed.

Now both of these things are very significant. So much religion is about trying to find a way to get God to notice us or look on us favourably. Pray harder. Sacrifice more.

Be a better person. Follow these particular rituals or traditions. But that is as dangerous as it is unnecessary. God himself has laid out paths for his people to approach him.

He's the one who gets to pick the place. He's the one who prescribes the sacrifice. So again, Psalm 20 isn't just a hopeful prayer that God might notice us and turn a blind eye to our shortcomings.

[7 : 23] It's a bold appeal to God on the basis of his commands and his provisions. It's coming to God in the way that he has provided.

The third thing to notice is that Psalm 20 is for people who know that God has a plan to defeat evil and set his king over the world.

Look at verse 6. Now this I know, the Lord gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand.

And look again at the final verse. Lord, give victory to the king. Answer us when we call. So God has decided to rule the world through a king, a man anointed to represent him and establish his kingdom on earth.

When this king fights, it's God fighting. When this king wins, it's God's victory. And in this context, verse 5 reads a bit differently. May we shout for joy over your victory and lift up our banners in the name of our God.

[8 : 33] May the Lord grant all your requests. Verse 5, and this psalm in general, isn't just for anyone. It isn't even for every Israelite. It's first and foremost, a blessing on God's man.

The man God is going to use to make his covenants come true and to defend his sanctuary and city. Sometimes people read the Bible as if it were all about them, as if it was a book of personal spirituality.

They read about God's call to Abraham and they think, God might call me like that. They read about David defeating Goliath and they wonder, what are the giants God wants me to kill this year?

They read about the miracles of Jesus and they think, maybe I should be doing miracles too. But of course, this is to miss the main point.

The most important thing about Abraham and David and Jesus isn't that they are examples to be followed. They're special people God uses to save the rest of us.

[9 : 38] The first message isn't be like them, it's look to them, see what God is doing through them and get on board with it. There's only one Abraham and one David and one Jesus.

And in the case of this psalm, that means that the blessing and prayer is for one man too. Lord, give victory to the king, answer us when we call. It's not about us, it's about him.

And yet, once we have realised that fundamental point, we can see that this psalm also promises good things for the people who belong to that king and serve him.

God's people get to participate in his glory by praying for him and celebrating his victory. Returning to verse 5, May we shout for joy over your victory and lift up our banners in the name of our God.

God's people get to prove that they are really his people by trusting that God will vindicate his king, even when the odds seem against it.

[10:43] Verses 7 and 8, Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They are brought to our knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.

So although Psalm 20 is about one man and written for one man, it's also about his people. And this is the pattern throughout the Bible, isn't it? God saves through an individual, blesses through an individual.

God destroys the world for its violence, but saves the species through Noah. All of humanity turns away, but God calls Abraham to be a blessing to the world. The people of Israel turn away, but God raises up Joseph and Moses and Samuel and the judges, and now a king to save them.

The pattern is consistent. God saves and blesses the many through the one. But that pattern, of course, as we look at the Old Testament, is also disappointing because it keeps happening.

The saviors always turn out to be temporary and their victories always turn out to be limited. They're not permanent solutions. The rescues never last. God's people keep turning away and getting pushed away from God's presence, even as they're called close.

[11:59] God's kings and saviors turn out to be people who need, to be moral failures who need saving too. And so as the Old Testament ends, it ends pregnant with expectation.

When will God provide an ultimate victory? Where is the king who will save God's people and make that salvation stick? Where is the king who can make God's covenants come true?

Where is the king who can bring people into God's presence forever? Well, with Christmas fresh in our memories, I'm sure we know who that king is, don't we?

We know who it was who established a new and better covenant by his blood, a covenant that's available to every person in the whole world that takes away every sin and promises a new heart.

we know who it was who came into the world as the very presence of God and who offered himself as the final sacrifice to allow us to draw near in perfect confidence.

[13:05] We know who it was who has conquered God's enemy, the devil, triumphing over him by the cross and stealing back his captives. Psalm 20 seems to have been written in the wake of some great deliverance or vindication given to the king of Israel.

Verse 6, Now this I know. The Lord gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand. Although the psalm doesn't tell us what it is, something has happened to give the psalmist assurance that all the other things he longs for will come true.

God's enemies will fail. God's king and his people will rise up. They are brought to their knees and fall but we rise up and stand firm. But we read it in the wake of a greater victory.

Jesus has come into the world and conquered sin and death. His reign has begun. Every power that wants to destroy God's world and resist God's rule must come to nothing.

We also read it in the light of 2,000 years of history that have proven that victory. The church has grown from a ragtag bunch of Judean fishermen to an empire conquering and world changing phenomenon.

[14:31] Non-Christian historian Tom Holland recently said that the coming of Christianity was the single most transformative development in Western history. And Jesus is still transforming the world.

We live in a propaganda bubble in Australia. Our press and intellectual class and those who create our culture keep telling us that the Lord's anointed is finished. This is a post-Christian world.

Jesus has nothing to offer. Don't waste your time on the church. Worry about looking after yourself. Focus on your own desires. Build a life around your career and money and possessions and experiences and identity and human relationships.

That's the way to win. That's all there is. And yet around the world the gospel is advancing. The church is growing.

Lives are being changed. Cultures are being reformed. Even in our own country there are signs that things are shifting. Those who work among students tell me that there are signs that the old hostility

is giving way to curiosity.

[15 : 43] The Lord is still giving victory to his anointed. So the real question for us at the start of another year is whether we will live like that's true.

Will we ally ourselves with God's King and cheer on his victories? Will we devote ourselves to praying for his cause and encourage each other to trust in his great triumph?

We don't know, do we, what 2023 holds in store for us all? What great and terrible events might shape our world? What personal struggles or difficulties or victories might come our way?

We can be sure, I think, that our culture will keep lying to us about what matters. It will try to convince us that it has the keys to happiness and security. It will tell us that the things that really matter are politics and our opinions and what people think of us.

It will mock us for trusting in anything else. And I'm sure our own hearts will often join in that chorus.

Our personal goals and projects and worries and busyness will all keep pushing themselves to the front of our minds and presenting themselves as the most important things to think about.

[17 : 04] But the plans of Jesus will succeed, nonetheless, despite all those distractions and nonsense. God has told us what he's about.

He's told us about his plans for his king and he will continue to make them happen. And if we keep turning our eyes back to him, all those lesser struggles and lesser difficulties and side issues will fade into the background as we share in that victory.

Then we'll know what it is to share in the glory of our king. We'll get to shout over Jesus triumph.

We'll get to lift our banners in the name of our God. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm. Lord, give victory to the king. Answer us when we call.

Lord God, thank you that you are a God who makes promises and comes close and achieves your purposes. Thank you for sending Jesus into our world to be our king and to change everything.

[18 : 20] Please help us to fix our eyes on him this year. Help us to see through lesser things.

Please give us a sense of Jesus' glory and the magnitude of his victory and make us new in that knowledge.

Help us to bless the work of our king and share in his victory. Amen.