

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson One

PSALM 2

God's Anointed King

A young king is standing on Zion with the anointing oil still shining in his hair. Inside the walls it is a day of trumpets. Outside the walls it is something else. In Moab and Edom and Ammon and Damascus, men who paid tribute to his father are sitting down together and doing arithmetic. A new king is an untested king, and an untested king can be pushed off a throne. Somewhere in that week, while the couriers ride and the borders go quiet in the wrong way, Israel sings Psalm 2.

Psalm 2 is a coronation song, and it is the right door into this study. For the next twelve weeks we are going to watch the apostles preach Jesus out of Israel's songbook. That is worth saying plainly at the outset, because a great many people carry around a quiet assumption that the Bible was going one direction, and then Jesus arrived and started something else. The New Testament will not let us think that way. Jesus is not an interruption in Israel's story; He is its point. The hopes Israel sang about, the promises God swore to David, the patterns God built into kings and priests and sacrifices and temples, and even the words Israel used in worship, all of it was reaching toward Him. The apostles did not have to force the psalms to talk about Christ. They read them out loud and pointed.

Read Psalm 2 several times this week before you read anything else, and read it aloud at least once. Then read Acts 4:23 to 31, Acts 13:32 to 33, Hebrews 1:5, and Hebrews 5:5. Watch for who is speaking, because the speaker changes three times in twelve verses. And watch two phrases in particular, "today I have begotten you" and "kiss the Son." The rest of the lesson turns on them.

First impressions

Psalm 2 carries no superscription in the Hebrew text, but we are not left guessing about its author. When the church in Jerusalem prayed this psalm out loud, they said God had spoken it "through the mouth of our father David" (Acts 4:25). It belongs to a group called the royal psalms, songs used when a son of David came to the throne. It also stands in a place of honor. Psalms 1 and 2 together form the porch of the whole Psalter. Psalm 1 sets the righteous man over against the wicked; Psalm 2 sets God's King over against the raging nations; and the pair is wrapped in a blessing, one at the very start of Psalm 1 and one at the very end of Psalm 2. Notice as well how this psalm is built. Four short speeches of three verses each. The nations speak, then God speaks, then the King speaks, then the poet turns and speaks to the kings of the earth.

1. a. Read Psalm 2 through three times, once quickly, once slowly, and once out loud. Who are the four speakers, and where does each one begin and end?

- b. What surprises you most about this psalm?

The nations rage (2:1–3)

The picture in the first three verses is a conspiracy of vassal states. "Bonds" and "cords" are the vocabulary of treaty and harness, the straps by which a great king held a smaller king in place, and the rebels want them snapped. Two Hebrew words are worth knowing here. The word behind "rage" describes the churning of a crowd in an uproar. The word behind "plot" is the same word Psalm 1:2 uses for the blessed man who *meditates* on the law of the LORD day and night, and it means to mutter under the breath. Set the two psalms side by side and you have the whole human race in one image. One man mutters over the word of God. The nations mutter over emptiness.

2. Read 2:1 to 3. What are the nations and their rulers doing, and who are they finally taking their stand against (verse 2)? In their own words in verse 3, what is it they want?

Study Skill, Reading a Psalm in Its Original Setting: Before you ask what a psalm means for you, ask what it meant for Israel. Who wrote it? On what occasion? What would the first singers have understood by it? Psalm 2 was not a coded message that lay meaningless for a thousand years until Jesus came. It was sung by real people about a real king on a real hill, and God was preparing something in it that neither the poet nor the singers could yet see whole. Do this work first, every week, in every lesson of this study. A psalm that never meant anything to Israel cannot mean the right thing to us.

Laughter in heaven (2:4–6)

Scripture rarely says that God laughs. When it does, it is always this laugh (Psalm 37:13; Psalm 59:8), and it is not the laugh of a man who finds something funny. It is the ease of a King who is not worried. All the plotting of verses 1 to 3 is answered in verse 4 by a God who does not even stand up. Then the tone hardens and He speaks in wrath. But notice what His answer actually is. He does not send an army in verse 6. He announces a coronation: "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." God's response to the rebellion of the world is to install His King. That is still His response.

3. Read 2:4 to 6. How does God first respond to the conspiracy? What does He then do, and what is the one action He names in verse 6? Why do you think that is His answer to rebellion?

For Thought and Discussion: The nations of verse 1 have never stopped raging, and God has never stopped laughing. What would change about the way you read the news, or the way you argue about politics, if verse 4 were as real to you as the headlines are?

You are my Son (2:7-9)

Now the new king speaks, and he reads out the document. "I will tell of the decree." What follows is the wording of an enthronement. God had said to David, concerning the son who would follow him, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son" (2 Samuel 7:14). On the day that son was crowned, God's word over him was, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." The "today" is the day of the coronation. The word "begotten" here is not telling us where this son came from; it is God publicly owning him and seating him. Then come the two gifts of a king, an inheritance and a weapon. The inheritance is nothing less than the nations, "the ends of the earth." The weapon is a rod of iron, a shepherd's club sheathed in metal, and the thing it strikes is compared to a fired clay jar. A cracked pot can be glued. A shattered one cannot be put back together at all.

4. a. Read 2:7 to 9. What exactly did the LORD say to the king, and on what day was it said?
- b. In verses 8 and 9, what is the king invited to ask for, and what is he promised? How far does his rule reach?

For Further Study: Read 2 Samuel 7:8 to 16 and Psalm 89:19 to 37. What did God swear to David about his son and about his throne? Then read Psalm 89:38 to 45, where the same psalm says the crown has been defiled in the dust. Israel sang both of those. Holding the two halves together is what makes the announcement in Acts 13:32 to 33 such astonishing news.

Kiss the Son (2:10-12)

The last three verses are spoken neither by God nor by the King. They are spoken to the rebels, and they are surprisingly kind. The kiss of verse 12 is not affection; it is homage. Samuel kissed Saul after pouring the oil on his head (1 Samuel 10:1), and the idolatry of Israel in Elijah's day is described as mouths that had kissed Baal (1 Kings 19:18; compare Hosea 13:2). To kiss the Son is to come over to his side and be his man. One honest note about the wording: the word for "Son" in verse 12 is *bar*, the Aramaic word, rather than the Hebrew *ben* used in verse 7, and for that reason a few translations render the line differently. The sense of the psalm is not in doubt. It has already told us plainly who the Son is. What is remarkable is that a psalm which opened with rebellion and moved through wrath ends with an open door: "Blessed are all who take refuge in him."

5. a. Read 2:10 to 12. What are the kings of the earth told to do? Count the commands.

b. Verse 11 says, "Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling." How do fear and rejoicing belong in the same sentence?

c. How does the psalm end? Who is called blessed, and what have they done?

Optional Application: Read 1 Timothy 2:1 to 4. Pick one public official whose decisions genuinely trouble you, learn that person's name, and pray for him or her by name every day this week. Not against them; for them. Psalm 2 says God has something to say to kings, and verse 10 says it begins with a warning and an invitation rather than with our outrage.

The church prays Psalm 2 (Acts 4:23–31)

Peter and John had healed a man lame from birth, preached Jesus in Solomon's portico, spent a night in custody, and been ordered by the Sanhedrin never to speak that name again. Released, they went back to their own people and prayed. Listen to what came out of them. They addressed God as the Maker of heaven and earth and sea, and then, before they asked Him for anything at all, they quoted Psalm 2:1 to 2. And then they did something even more striking. They read the psalm off the events of the crucifixion, line by line. The raging Gentiles are Rome. The peoples are Israel. The kings are Herod. The rulers are Pontius Pilate. And "his Anointed" is "your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed."

6. a. Read Acts 4:23 to 28. Line up the four groups named in Psalm 2:1 to 2 with the four named in Acts 4:27. Who is who?

b. The Hebrew word behind "Anointed" in Psalm 2:2 is *mashiach*, Messiah, and the Greek word for it is *christos*, Christ. With that in front of you, read Acts 4:26 to 27 again. Who did the church believe this psalm was finally about?

7. a. Read Acts 4:29 to 31. Knowing the psalm they had just prayed, what might you have expected them to ask God to do to their enemies? What do they actually ask for?

b. What does that request tell you about how the first Christians understood the reign of Christ over hostile rulers?

For Thought and Discussion: Acts 4:28 says Herod and Pilate did "whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." Read Acts 2:23 beside it, where the same event is

both God's "definite plan" and the work of "lawless men," and then read Acts 3:17 to 19, where Peter calls those very men to repent and be forgiven. God determined that His Christ would suffer. He did not force one man in that courtroom to sin, and Scripture still holds each of them responsible and still offers each of them mercy. How do you hold those two things together?

Today I have begotten you (Acts 13:32–33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5)

Twice in the Gospels the Father's own voice speaks from heaven over Jesus in words that carry the ring of Psalm 2:7 joined to Isaiah 42:1, at the Jordan and on the mountain. Then, in a synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia, Paul says something more definite. He tells the congregation that the promise made to the fathers has been fulfilled, and he tells them exactly when: "by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'" (Acts 13:33). The "today" of the coronation lands on the morning the tomb opened. Hebrews then reaches for the same verse twice, once to show that the Son stands above every angel (1:5), and once to show that Christ did not seize the office of high priest for Himself but received it from the Father (5:5).

This is the place to be careful. "Today I have begotten you" does not tell us when the Son began, because Scripture is plain that He did not begin. He was with God in the beginning, and all things were made through Him (John 1:1 to 3; Colossians 1:16 to 17; Hebrews 1:2). Coronation language declares a thing publicly; it does not create it. That is just how Paul says it in Romans 1:4, where Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God in power" by His resurrection from the dead. What had always been true was announced to the world on the day God raised Him and seated Him.

8. Read Matthew 3:17 and Matthew 17:5. What does the Father say about Jesus each time? On the mountain, what does He add, and who is He saying it to?
9. Read Acts 13:32 to 33. What does Paul say God has fulfilled, and by what act? Which psalm does he name, and what event does he attach the word "today" to?
10.
 - a. Read Hebrews 1:1 to 5. What is the writer setting out to prove about the Son in this chapter, and how does Psalm 2:7 help him prove it?
 - b. Read Hebrews 5:4 to 6. The same verse is now doing a different job. What is the writer proving here, and what other psalm is quoted beside it?

11. Read John 1:1 to 3, Colossians 1:16 to 17, and Hebrews 1:2. What do these say about the Son before Bethlehem? Now read Romans 1:4. What did the resurrection declare about Him?

Study Skill, What the New Testament Means by Fulfilled: When we hear that Jesus "fulfilled" an Old Testament passage, most of us picture a prediction coming true, and sometimes that is exactly right. Micah 5:2 named the town. But the New Testament uses the idea more broadly than that. To fulfill often means to fill up, to bring a pattern to completion. God shaped Israel's history so that certain figures kept recurring: an anointed king, a righteous man who suffers, a lamb, a temple, a son. Jesus does not merely match a sentence somebody wrote; He fills the whole shape. So there are two kinds of connection to watch for in this study. One is direct prophecy, a statement that could only ever have found its target in the Christ. The other is a type, a real person or event that God made into a pattern which Jesus completes. Get in the habit of asking which one you are looking at, and be willing to answer "both." Psalm 2 works both ways at once, which is how it can describe a coronation in Jerusalem and the resurrection of Jesus without being untrue to either.

The rod of iron

Revelation picks up Psalm 2:9 three separate times, and the wording repays a second look. Where our Old Testament reads "you shall break them with a rod of iron," John writes "he will rule them with a rod of iron." The Hebrew verb for "break" and the Hebrew verb for "shepherd" are spelled with the same three consonants, and the Greek Old Testament that the early church read chose "shepherd." John follows it. The two readings are not at odds. A shepherd's rod defends the flock and breaks the wolf, and which end of it you meet depends on what you are.

12. Read Revelation 12:5 and Revelation 19:15. Who holds the rod of iron in each place? Now read Revelation 2:26 to 27. Who else is promised a share in that authority, and on what condition?

The King who reigns now

Everything in Psalm 2 is present tense for us. Peter said at Pentecost that God kept His oath to seat a descendant on David's throne when He raised Jesus and exalted Him to His own right hand, and that God has made Him "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:29 to 36). Paul says the Father has already delivered us "from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). Christ is not waiting on a throne to be built for Him. He is on one, and He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet, the last of them being death itself (1 Corinthians 15:24 to 26). The nations still rage. The King still reigns. And the invitation of verse 12 is still open.

13. Read Acts 2:29 to 36, Colossians 1:13, and 1 Corinthians 15:24 to 26. When did the reign of Christ begin? Where is His throne? How long will He reign, and what is the last enemy to go?

Your response

14. Psalm 2:3 puts the world's real objection into words: "Let us burst their bonds apart." Where in your own life do you feel that pull? Name one area where God's authority still feels to you like a cord you would rather cut.
15. The psalm ends with a command and a blessing: kiss the Son, and take refuge in Him. In the New Testament, taking refuge in Christ is not a private feeling; it has a shape (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3 to 4; Galatians 3:26 to 27). If you have not yet been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life, what is keeping you from talking with the teacher or one of the elders this week?
16. Write one specific step you will take because of what God has shown you in this psalm, and one prayer you would like the class to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask each person to describe a time when they watched human authority behave as though God were not watching. Keep it short, and steer it away from current partisan politics; you want the room warm, not divided. Then read Psalm 2:1 to 4 aloud and stop there.

Discussion. The heart of this hour is questions 6 and 7, where the church in Jerusalem prays Psalm 2 over the crucifixion and then asks for boldness instead of revenge. Give those the most time. Question 10 takes some work, so read Hebrews 1:1 to 5 aloud in class rather than assuming everyone read it at home. Question 13 is the doctrinal anchor of the entire series; do not leave it out, even if you have to shorten something else to keep it.

Wrap-up. Read Psalm 2:10 to 12 aloud, slowly, and let the last line hang in the air: "Blessed are all who take refuge in him." Pray for anyone in the class who lives or works under someone who does not fear God, and thank God that His King is already on the throne.