

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The Messianic Psalms

Psalm 110

English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.

Introduction and reading

Today's talk is another in our series on the Messianic Psalms, so called because they are Psalms which are quoted in the New Testament and which are applied there to the Lord Jesus.

In the case of our subject for today, Psalm 110, the New Testament quotations are quite remarkable, because two key Christian truths, truths of far reaching significance about the Lord Jesus, emerge from them.

Let's begin by reading the Psalm right through.

"A Psalm of David"

The LORD says to my Lord:
'Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.'
The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty sceptre.
Rule in the midst of your enemies!
Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.
The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
'You are a priest for ever
after the order of Melchizedek.'
The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
He will execute judgement among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter chiefs
over the wide earth.
He will drink from the brook by the way;
therefore he will lift up his head.

An overview of this remarkable Psalm

For anyone approaching the Book of Psalms for the first time, there are things which require some getting used to. Indeed this is true in general when we start to look seriously at the language and

thought of the Old Testament, that is, the first 39 books of the Bible, the part written before the coming of Christ.

When, for example, they speak of war, the Psalms can come across as quite bloodthirsty. They are set in a day when battles were commonplace, when enemies were never far away, and when the sword was used in earnest and all too often.

To get an overall grasp of this specific Psalm, Psalm 110, we need to identify 3 “actors” (if I can use that word) who are what we might call the key players in it.

Like many of the Psalms, Psalm 110 has a title which is included in the original text. We meet the first of these key players in the title, which tells us that this is “a Psalm of David”. So we learn that it was David who composed this Psalm, as he did so many of the 150 songs which make up the biblical Book of Psalms. This was David the “sweet Psalmist of Israel”¹, David the humble shepherd boy from Bethlehem, David the national hero who, in God’s name, challenged the Philistine giant Goliath and defeated him and David the great warrior King who masterminded so many military conquests and established Israel as a force to be reckoned with in the ancient middle east.

The second of the three is the one whose words and actions are spoken of throughout the Psalm. In the translation of the Bible I read from, which is the English Standard Version, or ESV, He is referred to as “the Lord” in verses 1, 2, 4 and 5. In verses 1, 2 and 4, if you look in a copy of the ESV, you’ll see that the word “LORD” is printed in small capitals. By a long-established convention, this signifies that the word in the original Hebrew is Yahweh, sometimes rendered Jehovah.

It would be too much of a digression to go into this here, but there is an involved historical reason for this convention. For our purposes today, I’ll just say that this is one of several names by which God introduces Himself to us in the Old Testament. It is the Name which supremely conveys the essence of His eternal and unchanging existence, the equivalent of “I AM.”

The word used in verse 5, also translated “Lord”, is a Hebrew name which means “Sovereign LORD.” This is another of the names by which God is known in the Old Testament scriptures.

The second of the three participants in the Psalm is therefore God Himself. He is, for the most part, the one who is speaking, doing and taking the initiative.

But there is a third player. He appears in verse 1, referred to as “my Lord.” The content of the Psalm is centred around Him. Most of it is directly addressed to Him, and it consists mainly of promises and prophecies concerning Him, about things He will do or which will be done to Him. Who, then, is this third essential character in the plot?

By the way, the word translated “Lord” in the mention of “my Lord” which I’ve just referred to, is another Hebrew word which means Sovereign LORD. It is in fact the singular form of the word in verse 5 which, strangely enough, is a plural. It is a remarkable and wonderful fact that not only are two of the names used for God in the Old Testament plural names, but that also a plural in Hebrew conveys the idea, not of two or more, but of three or more. Going into more detail about that is, however, another digression which we don’t have time for today.

To arrive at the answer to the question I’ve just posed, that is, to identify this third person, the person the Psalm is essentially about, and to whom it is mostly addressed, it is necessary really to place it in the context of the whole of the Old Testament. And almost from its very beginning, the Old Testament contains references to a someone, a someone of great significance and importance, who is going to come at some point in the future.

One of the earliest of these is back in Genesis chapter 49. Here we find Jacob, who is also known as Israel, because at one point God had changed his name. He is at the end of his life, and has gathered his 12 sons around him to give them his parting instructions, his blessing and, by a God-given prophetic insight, a glimpse into the future of their descendants. When he comes to his fourth son, Judah, this is part of what he says, in verse 10 of Genesis 49:

“The sceptre will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
until he to whom it belongs shall come
and the obedience of the nations shall be his.”

It is this, somewhat cryptic, reference to “he to whom it belongs” which I’m drawing attention to. To be fair, I need to point out that I’ve taken this quotation from the New International Version and not from the ESV which I normally use, because, for reasons which the ESV translators explain in a footnote, they have rendered the expression differently. But in any translation of these verses, the general sense of everything Jacob says about Judah is clearly that it is from Judah’s descendants that Israel’s future rulers will come. This is a clear and unambiguous prophecy, but it only began to be fulfilled in David, who we’ve spoken about already, and who was from the tribe of Judah’s descendants.

Another reference, much further on in the Old Testament, but worded in a very similar way, is that in Ezekiel chapter 21, verses 25 to 27:

“And you, O profane wicked one, prince of Israel, whose day has come, the time of your final punishment, thus says the Lord GOD: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted. A ruin, ruin, ruin I will make it. This also shall not be, until he comes, the one to whom judgement belongs, and I will give it to him.”

Notice again here the reference to one who is coming, the one “to whom judgement belongs.”

But there are many and various such references throughout the Old Testament. Moses, for example, said that in a future day God would raise up one whom he called “a prophet like me.”² These promises coalesce with God’s specific promises that the future king of Israel would be from David’s descendants³, to give rise to the great Messianic hope that was generally held in Israel. By the “Messianic hope”, I mean the hope that the Messiah would one day come to deliver His people from their enemies and usher in an era of righteousness and peace. The word “Messiah” means “anointed one.” Translated into Greek, it becomes “the Christ.”

And so it is that when we come to read the gospels, we find people questioning concerning Jesus as to whether or not He was the Christ.⁴ The Samaritan woman, in the beautiful incident recorded by John in chapter 4 of his gospel, is clearly well aware of this generally held expectation. In verse 25 of that chapter, she says:

“I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.”

The answer, then, to the question as to the identity of the third player in the psalm, is that it is the Messiah whom David is writing about. It is He to whom God is speaking when He says, for instance, “Sit at my right hand”, and it is He whom David calls “my Lord.”

New Testament Quotations: 1 – Matthew 22 : 41 - 46

This brings us to one of the vital truths which I mentioned right at the start, and to one of the New Testament scriptures in which verses from Psalm 110 are quoted, and that is in Matthew's Gospel chapter 22. The incident is also recorded, in very similar words, in Mark chapter 12 and Luke chapter 20. The Lord Jesus has been answering various questions, put to Him by those keen to catch Him out in something He says, but now He poses a question of His own. Verses 41 to 46 of Matthew chapter 22 read:

“Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, ‘What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying,

“The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’”? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?’ And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”

Matthew's account says that no-one could answer this question, and it was indeed a tough one. The whole sum of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah was that he would come of David's descendants. As the hymn puts it,

“Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater son”

James Montgomery (1771-1854)

Yet the idea of anyone referring to one of their descendants as “my Lord” would seem unthinkable, certainly to anyone of that time, in which it was taken for granted that your descendants were somehow subject to you, and came in some sense under your control, rather than the other way round.

I said at the start that truths of far-reaching significance about the Lord Jesus emerge from the New Testament scriptures in which Psalm 110 is quoted, and this is just such a case. The riddle which the Lord posed, that is, “How can the Messiah possibly be both David's Lord and his son at the same time?” is solved only when we accept the amazing truth as to who the Lord Jesus really is.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, chapter 9 verse 5, says, speaking about the race of Israel:

“From their race according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all,
blessed for ever.”

This verse is teaching the vital truth which is known by the technical term of “the incarnation.” It is teaching that Jesus, whilst truly a man, arising from the race of Israel, is also truly God. He is “God over all, blessed for ever.”

Right at the end of the Bible, in Revelation chapter 22 verse 16, the Lord Jesus wraps up the solution to the riddle He had posed in Matthew chapter 22 with these words:

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

He is, at one and the same time, David's "root", in other words His Creator, and therefore his Lord, but also David's descendant, or son.

New Testament Quotations: 2 – Hebrews 5 : 6,10, 6 : 20, 7 : 17,21

At the start of this talk I said that the way that this Psalm is quoted in the New Testament brings out two key truths about the Lord Jesus. We've looked at one of these, the fact that He is both truly Man and truly God. Let's now look at the other. It is clear from the end of verse 1 of the Psalm and the verses which immediately follow it, that the Messiah is a great ruler – that's the significance of the sceptre - who will triumph over His enemies. But verse 4 teaches us that He is also a priest.

And this brings us to the second of the New Testament quotations, which is really more a series of quotations. The statement in verse 4 of the Psalm, that He, that is the Messiah, is "a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek", is quoted no less than 5 times in the letter to the Hebrews, in chapter 5 verses 6 and 10, chapter 6 verse 20 and chapter 7 verses 17 and 21.

The one and only historical occasion on which Melchizedek briefly appears is in Genesis chapter 14, where he is described as "priest of God Most High", and he's not mentioned again, apart from the reference to him in this Psalm, in the rest of the Bible, until we come to the letter to the Hebrews. In these chapters of Hebrews, the writer points out to us forcefully both how remarkable was that original incident, and also what the real significance is of the reference in Psalm 110 which we are looking at today.

I'm now going to read Hebrews chapter 7 verses 1 to 6:

"For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest for ever.

See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises."

If we only had the reference to Melchizedek in Genesis 14, then what the Bible says about him would still be remarkable. For a start, his name combined with the seat of his kingdom make up a remarkable combination. His name means "king of righteousness" but his official position was that he was the King of Salem, which means peace. So he is both king of righteousness and king of peace.

"What's remarkable about that combination?", you may ask. What is remarkable is that, if you take these names as intended to convey a symbolic significance, then a king who merited the name "king of righteousness", yet who was living and reigning in this world (which is unrighteous) would not be a king of peace. He would be at war with everyone. Yet here, symbolically, is one who has somehow squared the circle, so as to be king both of righteousness and of peace.

In fact this is another conundrum rather like that as to the Lord Jesus being both David's Lord and his son. The solution to the first of these puzzles is found in the Person of the Lord Jesus – Who He really is. The solution to the second is found in the great work which He came to earth to do, to

die on the cross in order to save us from our sins. The historical Melchizedek was really a clue, a kind of pointer looking forward to Jesus. The Old Testament, by the way, is full of this kind of thing. The true Melchizedek is really the Lord Jesus, because by His death on the cross He has made it possible for sinners like us to be at peace with God, yet without compromising God's righteousness. This is precisely what Romans chapter 5 verse 1 teaches us:

“Therefore, since we have been justified [that is, declared to be righteous] by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

But the second remarkable thing said about Melchizedek is that he was “priest of God Most High.” I believe this shows that in ancient times, after the human race had started down the path of worshipping false gods (invented gods essentially), a distant memory remained of the one True God, the Creator, the God whom everyone had known immediately after the flood. Outside the circle of those to whom God had specifically made Himself known, there were still to be found, in Abraham's day, those like Melchizedek who acknowledged Him.

But the writer to the Hebrews is pointing out to us, in verse 3 of chapter 7, quoted previously, how the biblical record of Melchizedek demonstrates that he is a type or picture of the Lord Jesus. We know nothing of either his birth or his death. We're told nothing of his genealogy. He just pops up with no introduction, blesses Abraham and receives a tithe (that is a tenth) of the spoils of the battle, and that's it. Symbolically, says the writer to the Hebrews, this shows that he resembles the Son of God.

The people of Israel were used to the idea of a priesthood. God had picked out Aaron, the brother of Moses, and appointed him, and his descendants after him, to be priests.⁵ Moses and Aaron were descended from Levi, Jacob's third son, and in a wider sense the entire tribe of the Levites (those descended from Levi) were chosen by God to serve Him in connection with the worship of God.

Under that system of worship, the people had no direct access to God. All had to be done through the priests, all involved the repeated bringing of sacrifices, and the priests themselves came and went, because none of them lived for ever. But now, there is a priest of a different order, one who holds the office permanently.⁶ Neither does this priest need to keep offering sacrifices. His death on the cross was one all-sufficient sacrifice for sin, covering, once and for all, every sin.

Because of His finished work of salvation, I can leave you today with this invitation, which is taken from verses 19 to 21 of Hebrews chapter 10:

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.”

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Psalm 110, in our series on the Messianic Psalms - talk number 1300. Scriptures were quoted from the English Standard Version, except where otherwise stated at the time.

¹ 2 Sam. 23:1 ² Deut. 18:15 ³ 1 Kings 9:5, Jer. 33:17 ⁴ John 10:24 ⁵ Ex. 28:1 ⁶ Heb. 7:24

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