

## **Psalm Twenty**

The LORD answer you in the day of trouble!  
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!  
May he send you help from the sanctuary,  
and give you support from Zion.  
May he remember all your offerings,  
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices.

*Selah*

May he grant you your heart's desire,  
and fulfill all your plans.  
May we shout for joy over your victory,  
and in the name of our God set up our banners.  
May the LORD fulfill all your petitions.

Now I know that the LORD will help his anointed;  
he will answer him from his holy heaven  
with mighty victories by his right hand.  
Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,  
but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God.  
They will collapse and fall,  
but we shall rise and stand upright.

Give victory to the king, O LORD;  
answer us when we call.

Psalm Twenty bears the language of a blessing. It is a distinct form of speech, and as such it stands out from all of the psalms we've encountered leading up to it. Unlike those, which might alternate between in their address of God, self, and others, this poem begins by addressing both God and others at once. Both God and the people of God are in sight, as the author presents these words. Both God and the people of God are being spoken to. Something is sought for and from both of them, simultaneously. *May God do this for you. May you do this for God.*

When I think of the language of blessing, I think of my host family, during the first of my stays in Guatemala. In particular, its matriarch. This woman was a single mother, a saint and a Seventh Day Adventist. She was hardworking, hospitable and generous. She talked slowly as I learned Spanish, and listened carefully and waited patiently as I talked to her in return. She was sincere and prone to tears. She spoke the language of blessing. Every other phrase that came out of her mouth, it seemed some days, was *Dios te bendiga. May God bless you.*

There are, of course, many ways of speaking. Open up a newspaper, turn on the news, click around on your internet browser, or pay attention while you are grocery shopping, and you'll see it and hear it. There are reports and requests, complaints and questions. There are expressions of humor, debates and arguments, words of thanks and terms of affection. But you don't hear the language of blessing all that often. At least I don't. At least not in day-to-day writing and speech. Aside a more-or-less automatic reply following a sneeze, maybe, or the tender words of seasoned saints, like those of my Guatemalan host mother.

Us pastors, of course, seek to speak blessing week in and out. We speak blessing at weddings and dedications, on visits and over the phone, besides deathbeds and at funerals. We close off our services with blessing. One eye on our people, the other on our God, as best we can. Growing up, it was the same benediction each Sunday: *May God bless you and keep you. May God's face shine upon you.* Those are beautiful words to hear booming down at you from the pulpit. Beautiful words to say over someone, and for the sake of someone.

There is debate about how the blessings contained in Psalm Twenty might have been used within the ritual life of ancient Israel. Some argue that they were spoken over the king who was in power, or those who were about to head into battle – intended to affect a sort of divine stamp of approval on the conflict, as it were. This view is tempered by verse seven, which dismisses reliance on military stockpiles and means of force: “some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God.” Because of this, others are convinced that it was used in other ways. Which is all interesting, and important, but what intrigues me the most is how I find myself responding to that language of blessing, when I read it. How I found myself responding when I heard *God bless you* said to me in earnest Spanish. How I found myself responding, when as a child I heard those words of that great Aaronic blessing - *may God be gracious to you, and grant you peace.* We don't hear words of blessing all that often, and so when we do, we might find that something inside of us awakens. A desire is unearthed, shaken loose in us.

Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who worked for some time in Bolivia and then later among gang members in Las Angeles, writes at length about his experience serving among those communities in California. At some point, he says, a pattern of requests emerged in his work. Gang members, past and present, began to ask him to pray blessings over them, or their families. “Hey G – give me a bless, yeah?” Of all of the forms of speech that you might imagine people being drawn to in a context like that, blessing probably wouldn't have been your first guess. We could look upon it skeptically, like some of those scholars, and say that they are only seeking a divine stamp of approval, a means of protection or an assurance of victory, as they continue to go about crime and conflict. Boyle sees it differently. Like all of us they ache for it at a fundamental, spiritual level, and so they ask for it, again and again.

There is a deep desire to be looked upon with love by another, while being reminded that you are all the while also being looked upon in love by God. And so in this world, where words of blessing might seem so scarce, amidst all of our other ways of speaking to one another, may you receive these as words spoken to you, today. And may you find opportunities to speak blessing over others in these days as well: *May the LORD answer you when you are in the day of trouble. May the name of God protect you. May he send help from the sanctuary and grant you support. May he remember your sacrifices, what you have offered him. May God give you your heart's desires, and fulfill your plans. May God provide when you bring forth your petition.* (vv. 1-5) – NS

\* For this meditation I relied on James H. Waltner's commentary, and Greg Boyle's *Barking to the Choir*.