

## Psalm Twenty One

In your strength the king rejoices, O LORD,  
and in your help how greatly he exults!  
You have given him his heart's desire,  
and have not withheld the request of his lips. *Selah*  
For you meet him with rich blessings;  
you set a crown of fine gold on his head.  
He asked you for life; you gave it to him—  
length of days forever and ever.  
His glory is great through your help;  
splendor and majesty you bestow on him.  
You bestow on him blessings forever;  
you make him glad with the joy of your presence.  
For the king trusts in the LORD,  
and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.

Your hand will find out all your enemies;  
your right hand will find out those who hate you.  
You will make them like a fiery furnace  
when you appear.  
The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath,  
and fire will consume them.  
You will destroy their offspring from the earth,  
and their children from among humankind.  
If they plan evil against you,  
if they devise mischief, they will not succeed.  
For you will put them to flight;  
you will aim at their faces with your bows.

Be exalted, O LORD, in your strength!  
We will sing and praise your power.

Growing up, I participated in one of those church-sponsored, Scout-esque programs.

I am sure you know what I am talking about. I once heard someone refer to it, jokingly, as the paramilitary branch of that particular denomination. I wore a neckerchief dotted with blue and yellow badges, built fires, memorized all the compass points, manufactured and raced a fleet of small, wooden automobiles... and pledged my allegiance every Thursday night to the “flag of Canada and the country it represents.”

I remember, even then, finding that last practice strange, and somewhat uncomfortable. Because that was not at all a part of our culture, otherwise. We sang the anthem in school, sure, but not every day, and besides from that, I honestly can't recall doing anything else like that.

There were a good number of flag-based rituals that took place in the church sanctuary and fellowship hall each week, come to think of it. Flag-folding. Flag-raising. Lessons taught to our troop on how to properly dispose of a worn or damaged flag. I've looked it up, and the curriculum was written in the States. Maybe that is why. Still, strange and uncomfortable.

Psalm Twenty-One feels that way to me. Strange and uncomfortable. Reading it aloud feels as awkward as reciting unison-salutes to our homeland as children did. At least to me. And at least in a way. It has a certain “God save the King” air to it, which is totally foreign to me. Because, again, it was not part of my culture. We didn't have portraits of the presiding royal or prime minister in our classrooms.

I think that understanding that can help. It can help to recognize that, like the program material my leaders worked with, this Psalm was written in another context – in this case one in which “the destiny of the king and people are interwoven.”<sup>1</sup> For the writer, God is to be thanked, because in that ancient society, the welfare of the people was dependent on the success of the monarchy (especially in shielding the community from its enemies), and the king's success, in turn, was seen to be dependent on God's power and provision.

We see something like that in the First Letter to Timothy, in which the latter is instructed to pray “for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (NRSV, 2:2).

Still, it leaves us with a tension. Like the Israelites, and the Apostle Paul, we can recognize that our welfare and freedom as people of faith is connected to the way in which our country's leaders rule. And we believe that there are times when it is appropriate to intercede, and express gratitude to God on their behalf. But we also know that “the pitfalls of passionate patriotism persist.”<sup>2</sup> We understand that, as followers of Jesus, there will be limits to the praise and allegiance that are shown to lesser powers.

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<sup>1</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1* (Baker)

<sup>2</sup> Waltner, *Psalms* (Herald)

Palmer Becker, in *Anabaptist Essentials*, illustrates this well with a story:

“When I was a pastor of a Mennonite church in Minnesota, I experienced the tension between obedience to Jesus and obedience to the secular government. A number of our members had served in the military [...] There were also many who, as conscientious objects to war, had served their country in alternate ways. While both groups were willing to die for their country, the second group was not willing to kill for their country.

As would be expected, there was some conflict between the two groups. On Independence Day, the Fourth of July, which fell on a Sunday, the members of the church were surprised when I asked them to pledge their allegiance to the flag of the United States. Then I asked them to turn 180 degrees and pledge their supreme allegiance to Jesus Christ. On a large screen were the words “We pledge our supreme allegiance to Jesus Christ and the kingdom for which he stands; an eternal kingdom that offers love, justice and love for all.”<sup>3</sup>

Psalm Twenty-One does not resolve that tension for us. Instead, we are invited, like Becker, to enter into it, and creatively respond to it, seeking to be faithful to the highest Power all the while.

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<sup>3</sup> Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials* (Herald)