

The Psalms: In Honour of our King

Week 4 — Our faithful ruler



Introduction

Tonight we plan to look at two very different psalms:

- a wedding song (Psalm 45)
- a song about God's faithfulness (Psalm 89).

We will use the questions we have suggested for approaching the Psalms: asking about the genre, what it meant for Israel, what it means in the light of Jesus, and what it means for us.

Psalm 45

Genre and Structure

The title over Psalm 45 contains musical instructions, so it was a song. It is attributed to the Sons of Korah, the choir of Levites who assisted the priests. It is labelled as "a love song", which the NIV interprets as "a wedding song."

Verse 1 indicates that the poet was moved to write this song for the king, so it was probably for a royal wedding. Even in our democratic society, the pageantry of a royal wedding is an exciting moment.

Psalm 45 is therefore categorised as a **royal** psalm. It focuses on the royal groom and the stunning bride who is about to join him as queen. The poet begins with his own feelings, describes the prince and bride in turn, and then looks to the future of Judah under their leadership for generations to come.

Structure:

45:1 Announcement by the Master of Ceremonies

45:2-8 The magnificent prince

45:9-15 The beautiful bride

45:16-17 Their blessed future

Meaning for Israel

Israel was the representative kingdom of God among the nations. God is the heavenly ruler, so Israel's king represented the heavenly ruler on earth. That's why the groom is described in such glowing language.

Verse 2 describes him as the most *handsome* (ESV) or *excellent* (NIV) of men not because of some body-builder physique, but because of the majestic authority he bears. His *lips* are beautiful because of the words that pass through them—expressions of *grace*. God promised that a descendant of King David would rule forever. This prince was the current expression of that promise—the recipient of that blessing, and so the immediate hope of God's people.

The regal groom (45:2–8)

45:3-5. The kings literally led the armies out to battle to keep God’s people from being annihilated by their enemies. He’s not riding out to war on his wedding day, but the poet sees that their future rides on the shoulders of this king. He is dressed in regal *splendour*, with his *sword* by his side, so the poet portrays him as a great champion.

But the purpose of this warfare language is not offensive, as if he wants to ride out and conquer nations as Alexander the Great. This king fights for “the cause of **truth, humility, and justice**” (v.4).

- *Truth* is how things should be, as God has declared them to be. That includes this land belonging to Israel.
- *Humility* was most unusual attribute for a king in Ancient Near Eastern cultures. The emphasis is on the king submitting to YHWH as the ruler of all, and not seeking to overstretch himself or grasp any power beyond what YHWH has assigned to him. This king is the servant of King YHWH.
- Injustice occurs when Israelites oppress each other, or when others oppress them, so the king stands for *justice* by protecting his people (especially the vulnerable ones).

When he a) stands for truth, b) acts as the servant of YHWH, and c) defends the cause of those oppressed by injustice, he acts as the agent of the heavenly king, and so “achieves awesome deeds” (v.4).

Of course, there are always those who stand against such a leader. He has enemies within Israel, as well as foreign rulers who come to destroy Israel. The poet therefore offers a prayer that these enemies will fall, that they will not survive their attempts to destroy this great king (v.5). The language is violent, but Israel’s king literally did lead an army that killed their enemies to ensure their survival.

45:6. The poet now makes explicit what we have been saying, that Israel’s king represents the heavenly king. The throne of Israel is the throne of God, for Israel is God’s representative kingdom among the nations.

Of course, the whole earth is God’s kingdom. But because it rebelled against the heavenly ruler, God chose Abraham’s descendants as the kingdom that would represent him among the nations, and ultimately restore the blessing of his reign to the nations. The poet can therefore look at Israel’s king as a living image of God, the ultimate ruler.

45:7. As God’s representative ruler, the king must therefore love what the heavenly ruler loves (*righteousness*) and hate what the heavenly ruler hates (*wickedness*). That is what the king represents, since God has elevated him as ruler over others. The anointing *oil* that makes him God’s representative king is *joy* for the people under his rule.

45:8. The poet selects details that capture the magnificence of the occasion. The aroma of spices on the prince's garments, the spectacle of the ivory-adorned palace, the harmony and rhythm of the accompanying strings all combine to overpower the senses of the guests, underscoring the significance of this auspicious occasion.

The stunning bride (45:9–15)

45:9. The poet now turns his attention to the princess taking her place at his side. The royal bride is about to join herself to this magnificent man who represents the heavenly ruler. Becoming one with him, she will be a queen who represents heaven also. This was the highest and most wonderful calling any woman could receive in ancient Israel.

45:10-12. Even if she was a princess who grew up in a palace in another land, those things are nothing compared with the regal honour she takes on in this moment: marrying the prince of God, to reign with him. The poet entreats her to realise what magnificence and power the king is gifting her by inviting her to join her life with his, to live by his side. By choosing her, the king has honoured her; she responds by honouring him, joining herself with and recognising the heavenly authority entrusted to him. For not just Israel but people from other places (like *Tyre*) will give honour to her husband.

45:13-15. You can hear the gasps of the guests as the princess appears in view, robed in a beautiful wedding gown trimmed with gold thread. Her entourage leads her forth from her chambers, to meet her man. The whole place erupts with *joy and gladness* as her procession reaches the regal *palace* where she will share life with the king.

Their future (45:16-17)

The future of God's people depends on this couple. While that's true for their own generation, the poet observes that future generations of kings will come from this union—the princes who will lead God's people in the generations and the centuries to come. The significance of this beautiful couple lasts far beyond their own lifetime.

Meaning in the light of Jesus

As Israel's history progressed, things did not work out as this poet imagined. God's nation divided into Israel (the north) and Judah (the south). Israel was destroyed by Assyria, and Judah was exiled to Babylon. A remnant returned from exile, but the princes of Judah were no longer kings. For more than 500 years, the Jews were ruled by foreign kings. They were no longer God's representative kingdom among the nations, but God's crushed people tossed from empire to empire—Babylon, Persia, Greece, the Seleucids, and then Rome. Apart from brief rebellions when different leaders claimed power, there were no kings, no kingdom, no royal weddings.

Then Jesus appeared, proclaiming the restoration of the kingdom of God. The Jewish leaders were sceptical—and worried about how the Romans would respond to such a claim. But it was a popular message among the less educated and less powerful people in Galilee.

Jesus believed it was his vocation to restore the kingdom of God on earth. He proclaimed the kingdom of God in stories and parables. He demonstrated that God was setting people free by casting out demons and healing sick people, painting a picture of restored humanity. Then he came to Jerusalem to confront the religious leaders who were trying to maintain the status quo. They saw Jesus as a threat to their own power, their position under their Roman overlords, so they arranged for Jesus to be executed.

But on the third day, Jesus, the descendant of King David, was back from the dead. God had given to him all authority: the authority of heaven now operates on earth, through this resurrected man! The kingdom of God has been restored!

As a result, all the unfulfilled hopes of the Old Testament end up finding their fulfilment in the most unusual way—through the king who did not overpower the evil rulers with force. In fact, it appeared that those powers had overpowered and destroyed the King of the Jews! Nevertheless, God has made the resurrected Jesus the Lord over all rulers. He is the Christ—the anointed king, the one who restores the kingdom of God not only to Israel but to the entire earth!

In light of the astoundingly good news about Jesus, can we go back to passages like Psalm 45 and view Jesus as the ultimate king of the Jews? Should we see Jesus as the mighty prince who fulfilled all Israel's failed expectations that fell apart in the centuries before Jesus?

The answer is a resounding Yes! Jesus is the one who fulfils the promises to King David that his son would rule on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7:14). That is precisely how the apostles and NT writers understood Jesus. That how Hebrews 1:8-9 understands Psalm 45:6-7.

So, let's read Psalm 45 as a story that ultimately finds fulfilment in Jesus, the king who restored David's fallen kingdom!

Our magnificent prince

45:1. Is your heart stirred as you recite these verses for our king?

45:2. Jesus is the most excellent of men! We look at him, and for the very first time, we understand what a true human is. He is the first untwisted human. There is no greed in him, no lust for power to crush other people. His lips have been anointed with grace, declaring God's favour. Jesus is the ruler God has blessed forever.

45:3-5. The sword that Jesus carries is not one that cuts people to shreds. Rather it is the truth that comes from his mouth, the truth that cuts straight through the lies and deception through which evil people claim power over other humans. It is a sword that cuts through the powers that bind us, as he reveals the reign (kingdom) of God instead of the oppression of evil.

Jesus is filled with splendour and majesty. That's what the disciples saw on the mount of transfiguration. But most of the time his majesty is not on show. From his lowly birth, he did not display his majesty, yet he led forth in "the cause of truth, humility, and justice" (v.4), achieving "awesome deeds" that crowds came to see.

When arrested in the garden, Jesus did not reach for a bow to shoot his enemies. Pilate thought Jesus was a pitiful, powerless creature, yet Jesus assured him that Pilate had no power except what the heavenly ruler had permitted. Jesus' power became visible when God overruled the decisions of Pilate and the high priests by raising Jesus from the dead. Our king now commands the nations.

45:6-7. We look at the resurrected Jesus, and we see that the apparently powerless Jesus of Nazareth was actually God walking among us! He was the son of David, the prince of Judah who could restore David's fallen dynasty, but he was far more than a mere representative of God's authority in the way the kings of Judah were in Old Testament times.

Remember how Thomas doubted that Jesus really was back from the dead? When he finally saw Jesus, he fell at his feet, declaring, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). The words addressed to the king of Judah on his wedding day many centuries before Jesus are literally true of Jesus as the king who restores God's rule:

*45⁶ Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.*

Jesus is the one who dealt with evil rule (wickedness), replacing it with God's rule (righteousness), restoring the joy of God's reign to humanity:

*45⁷ You love righteousness and hate wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you above your
companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.*

(Hebrews 1:8-9 views these words as declarations addressed to Jesus.)

45:8. Can you sense the excitement this releases for humanity? The fragrance of spices, the vision of God's palace ruling earth, the sounds of divine music transforming our lives ... these are gospel images—the good news of Jesus' reign.

So, who is his bride?

Most Christians have come across the image of the church as the bride of Christ in the New Testament. The NT writers didn't invent it: it's how they understood OT passages like Psalm 45.

Believers who respond to Christ by submitting to his authority as ruler of heaven and earth are restored in Christ. We are united with him. Just as a husband and wife join their two lives together into one, we are united with Christ, to share his life. (This is really good news, because our own life was dead until Jesus breathed his life into us.)

We are therefore the bride of Christ, humanity restored in King Jesus, joining him in his reign. Just as the bride of Psalm 45 left her previous family to be united with her new husband, we give ourselves to the one who gave himself to us, to be united with him, to share his life, and to reign with him in his world!

Consequently, Psalm 45:9-17 is our story. We could **paraphrase** its application for us as the bride of Christ like this:

¹⁰ Listen, daughter, and pay careful attention. Forget the former way of life you had, the life you received from your natural parents when you walked as broken humans expressing all manner of dysfunction and brokenness. Enter into the life of your new humanity, the life you share with Jesus.

¹¹ Let King Jesus be enthralled by your beauty, for that's the way he sees you—without any blemish or wrinkle or any of the old brokenness. So honour him! Give yourself to the King who chose you as his bride!

¹² For even other people—people of the nations—will come to give him honour. Influential people will give honour and praise to your bridegroom.

¹³ You are his princess, all glorious in the pure garments provided to you by the one who chose you to be his own.

¹⁴ In those richly textured garments—the picture of living beauty—you are being led to the King. With the honour of your attendants, ¹⁵ you are being led with joy and gladness into this palace—the life you share with earth's king!

¹⁶ The sons of the kingdom will be princes of God's kingdom, recognised everywhere.

¹⁷ The bride and the King will live on through all generations, until all nations submit to the King and give him honour for ever and ever.

Meaning for us

How would you feel if a prince from another realm chose you to be his bride? If he asked you to leave your mundane life and join his royal life—as his partner, reigning in his kingdom?

What if he chose you even though you were currently a slave-girl? A prince who liberates you to be everything you were destined for before you were enslaved! Something in the Cinderella story resonates with our human need and hopes.

So, are you willing to leave behind the familiar life of slavery to take on the responsibilities of reigning with your king in his world? Are you willing to let him take your filthy rags, wash you from the dirt, put on the fine pure clothes he provides, and lead you into his palace? Are you willing to share his life instead of the slavery you know? Are you willing to pursue the splendour of his reign—truth, humility and justice for those who have been downtrodden, rather than your own self-interest? Are you willing to give yourself to this prince?

Viewed in this light, the entire story of Scripture is the story of Jesus and his bride. In Ephesians 5:31-32, Paul takes the original text on marriage and describes it as the love story of history. Genesis 2:24 describes marriage as a man leaving his father, to be joined to his wife, to be united as one with her. That, Paul says, is what Jesus has done: leaving his father, to be united with his bride, who becomes one with him.

Talk about redefining your life!

Psalm 89

This is the last psalm in Book 3, so verse 52 is not actually part of the Psalm. It is the end-of-book marker (just as 41:13 marks the end of Book 1, and 72:20 marks the end of Book 2).

Meaning for Israel

Psalm 89 is a **celebration of God's faithfulness**, his steadfast love. God committed himself to Abraham's family, and so he shows them unfailing kindness, ... even when they have not been faithful to him.

The Hebrew word *hesed* means kindness, mercy, or steadfast love. It is a strong word when it appears in the context of the covenant, representing God's faithful kindness. This is a keyword of Psa 89, appearing in verses 1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33 and 49.

The other keyword is *emunah*, meaning faithfulness, in verses 1, 2, 5, 8, 24, 33, and 49. It is often the parallel word for *hesed*. The message of the Psalm is therefore God's faithfulness: he stands with and cares for his people, even when they have not been faithful to him.

Within this picture of the constant faithfulness of God towards his covenant people, the psalm has a particular promise in mind. Verse 4 refers to the promise God gave to David that his son would reign on the throne forever:

2 Samuel 7 ¹² When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up **your offspring** to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be his **father**, and he will be my **son**. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. ¹⁵ But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. ¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom will endure **forever** before me; your throne will be established **forever**.

In the heavens, God's faithfulness is firm and unassailable (vv 5-8). The surging seas may try to overrun God's order, but God brings them under control (vv 9-11). The mountains stand above the countryside like lasting testaments that what God decrees stands (vv 12-13).

God's authority rests on his righteousness and justice, so *hesed* and *emunah* characterise his reign (steadfast love and faithfulness—v 14). Humans aligned with his reign experience his blessing and protection (vv 15-18).

Once again, the psalmist reminds us of the promise God gave to David that his descendants would always reign because God had anointed them as kings representing his reign (vv 19-20). Sustained by divine authority, they could not be crushed by their enemies (vv 22-23). God's *hesed* keeps them (vv 23-24).

In 2 Samuel 7, the king is not only David's son: he is also called God's son, for he is the prince who represents the heavenly ruler on earth. Israel's king responds in v.26 by calling God his Father, his God, his Rock, and his Saviour. Israel's king receives the inheritance of the firstborn, i.e. the heavenly ruler entrusts to him the authority to reign on earth (v.27). These promises carry the guarantee of the heavenly king, so they cannot fail (vv 28-29).

In 2 Samuel 7, God said he could punish the people the way a father does when his children are disobedient, but he would never disown them (vv 30-37). This is precisely what happened in the exile. Babylon invaded, destroyed the temple, broke down Jerusalem's walls, and took the people into exile like slaves because of their disobedience. But God had promised to be faithful to them.

The trouble was that, although some had come back from exile, the Davidic kingship had not been established again. The promise to David remained unfilled, for they had no king of their own. For century after century, they remained under foreign domination. The psalmist therefore charges that God has rejected his people and thrown away the people he chose (v. 38)! The kingship is over, and there seems to be no way to rectify this (vv 39-45).

So, how long will this anomaly continue (v.46)? When will God act to set things right (vv 47-48)? Where is God's *emunah* (faithfulness), his promise to David (v.49)? It's unbearable (vv 50-51)! There is no respite!

And that's where the Psalm ends—the unbearable failure of God's people, and the unfulfilled promise of God. That unsatisfying conclusion was as far as the story had gone in this conflicted psalmist's life. The psalm celebrates God's faithfulness, even though it is not the psalmist's experience in his day.

Meaning in the light of Jesus

So, Jesus turns up on the scene, announcing that, finally, the time had come for the kingdom to be restored. He called it, “Good news!”

Jesus is that king—the descendant of David, who re-established God's reign over the nations in the most unexpected way. Jesus faced the oppression of evil rule, and was apparently defeated by it as had happened in generation after generation. But his resurrection changed everything: when Jesus came back from the dead, evil lost its hold over humanity, and a son of David was installed as king over all nations, over the whole earth.

That is the message that Paul dedicated himself to. It's how he began to explain the good news about King Jesus to the church in Rome:

Romans 1 ¹ Paul, a slave of King Jesus, called as an emissary, dedicated to the good news ² that God declared beforehand through his spokesmen in the Old Testament— ³ the good news about his Son, the physical descendant of David ⁴ whom God announced to be his Son with power. He did this through the Spirit of holiness by resurrecting Jesus from the dead. Jesus, the anointed King, is our Ruler. ⁵ Through him we have been shown kindness and appointed as emissaries to bring the nations to obedience, giving him their allegiance, so that his name is honoured everywhere, ⁶ including you in Rome who are called to belong to King Jesus. (Original translation)

Jesus is the one who restores God's reign, not only over the Jewish people, but over all the earth, all nations. We do not yet see everyone

and everything submitted to his authority, but we see what God has done in Jesus, and we know that this is how he resolves the seemingly unending oppression of the ages.

God was faithful to his promise to David. He has appointed his son, the son of David, the son of God, to reign over his world. Jesus is Lord. Earth is no longer under evil rule. This is good news!

Jesus is the faithfulness of God in person.¹

Meaning for us

The author of Psalm 89 (Ethan the Ezrahite) wrote a magnificent song of praise to YHWH for his *emunah* (faithfulness), his *hesed* (unfailing love) for his covenant people. He did this when the promises of God about the Davidic kingship seemed to have fallen apart, remaining unfulfilled for generation after generation. That's faith! Will you still trust God if he doesn't resolve everything in your lifetime?

God did resolve the injustice of the rule of evil in his world. He did install Jesus as ruler over the entire earth. Jesus is Lord! But Jesus became Lord without obliterating his enemies, so they are still present in his world and they still trouble Jesus' ambassadors. We therefore have unresolved troubles in our lives, but they are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed when Jesus' kingship is realized, when he pulls everything into line and all his enemies are subdued:

Romans 8¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

In the meantime, Psalm 89 encourages us to do two things:

- a) We sing praise to our faithful God for his unfailing love toward his covenant people.
- b) We present our unresolved struggles to him, confident that—even though we may not see it all resolved in our lifetime—he will resolve all things and restore his justice and good reign over all the earth.

No pretence that it's all okay when it's not! No demands that God must fix everything now for me! Just complete confidence in the character of our heavenly ruler, based on the faithful leadership he has provided for his people over the millennia, and the astounding revelation of his character in overpowering evil and saving his world through Jesus.

We see so much more than Ethan the Ezrahite did. We see Jesus!

¹ Richard Hays takes this further, claiming the whole OT narrative finds its fulfilment though “the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” See *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*. (Eerdmans, 2002).
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Conclusion

Not all psalms have such strong Christological messages as these, but it's always worth asking the question, "How should we read this Psalm in light of Jesus?"

Jesus is our king. We are so privileged to be his bride, sharing in his reign as he sets things right in his realm. We don't see everything set right yet, but we see Jesus! When life gets tough, when we don't see things resolved as quickly as we would like, we keep our eyes on Jesus. He has conquered evil at the cross. He has conquered death in his resurrection. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth! We are his people, partners of this king, the bride participating in his care of his world.

My life is a song about the steadfast love of the Lord;
my story is all about his faithfulness to all generations!

Memory verse

Psalm 89:1 (NIV)

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.

Take home exercise

Read Psalm 45 again. How did you feel about the way we read this Psalm for what it meant to Israel and then for what it means in the light of Jesus? Peter Craigie explains further:

Psalm 45 is a superb example of what C. S. Lewis has called "second meanings in the Psalms" (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 101–15). The primary meaning of the psalm is clear; it is a wedding song, celebrating the marriage of a king to a princess. In its original sense and context, it is not in any sense a messianic psalm. And yet within the context of early Christianity (and in Judaism before that), it becomes a messianic psalm par excellence. The express evidence for the transition is to be found in Heb 1:8–9, where Ps 45:7–8 is quoted with explicit reference to Jesus Christ. But the "second meaning" extends to the whole psalm, not merely to the two verses quoted, and it develops further the way in which the OT's portrayal of human love and marriage may become the basis of an allegory of Christ and the Church, the Groom and the Bride. Thus Ps 45 supplements the positive allegory of the Song of Songs (in its "second meaning") and the negative allegory of Hosea 1–3; it is closer to the parable of Ezekiel 16, though it goes beyond that too. For Ps 45, in its second meaning, develops not only the allegory of love, but also that of royalty. Christ, the King, has been enthroned by God (v 7) and rules in righteousness. The Church, the Bride, is called upon to leave home and worship the King (v 12). But the ultimate blessing of the marriage is that of the children (v 17), the future generations through whom the kingdom would flourish.²

In preparation for next week, read Psalms 108 and 137. Psalm 137 says some really nasty things against the Babylonian invaders. How should we read a Psalm like that in light of Jesus?

² Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 2nd ed. Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2004), 340–341.
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