**# Commentary on Psalm 20**

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**## Psalm Text**

1.  לַמְנַצֵּ֗חַ מִזְמ֥וֹר לְדָוִֽד׃   For the leader. A psalm of David.

2.  יַֽעַנְךָ֣ ה׳ בְּי֣וֹם צָרָ֑ה יְ֝שַׂגֶּבְךָ֗ שֵׁ֤ם ׀ אֱלֹקֵ֬י יַעֲקֹֽב׃ May the LORD answer you in time of trouble,

the name of Jacob’s God keep you safe.

3.  יִשְׁלַֽח־עֶזְרְךָ֥ מִקֹּ֑דֶשׁ וּ֝מִצִּיּ֗וֹן יִסְעָדֶֽךָּ׃ May He send you help from the sanctuary,

and sustain you from Zion.

4.  יִזְכֹּ֥ר כׇּל־מִנְחֹתֶ֑ךָ וְעוֹלָתְךָ֖ יְדַשְּׁנֶ֣ה סֶֽלָה׃    May He receive the tokens of all your meal offerings,

and approve your burnt offerings. Selah.

5.  יִֽתֶּן־לְךָ֥ כִלְבָבֶ֑ךָ וְֽכׇל־עֲצָתְךָ֥ יְמַלֵּֽא׃   May He grant you your desire,

and fulfill your every plan.

6.  נְרַנְּנָ֤ה ׀ בִּ֘ישׁ֤וּעָתֶ֗ךָ וּבְשֵֽׁם־אֱלֹקֵ֥ינוּ נִדְגֹּ֑ל יְמַלֵּ֥א ה׳ כׇּל־מִשְׁאֲלוֹתֶֽיךָ׃ May we shout for joy in your victory,

arrayed by standards in the name of our God.

May the LORD fulfill your every wish.

7.  עַתָּ֤ה יָדַ֗עְתִּי כִּ֤י הוֹשִׁ֥יעַ ׀ ה׳ מְשִׁ֫יח֥וֹ יַ֭עֲנֵהוּ מִשְּׁמֵ֣י קׇדְשׁ֑וֹ בִּ֝גְבֻר֗וֹת יֵ֣שַׁע יְמִינֽוֹ׃  Now I know that the LORD will give victory to His anointed,

will answer him from His heavenly sanctuary

with the mighty victories of His right arm.

8.  אֵ֣לֶּה בָ֭רֶכֶב וְאֵ֣לֶּה בַסּוּסִ֑ים וַאֲנַ֓חְנוּ ׀ בְּשֵׁם־ה׳ אֱלֹקֵ֣ינוּ נַזְכִּֽיר׃    They [call] on chariots, they [call] on horses,

but we call on the name of the LORD our God.

9.  הֵ֭מָּה כָּרְע֣וּ וְנָפָ֑לוּ וַאֲנַ֥חְנוּ קַּ֝֗מְנוּ וַנִּתְעוֹדָֽד׃    They collapse and lie fallen,

but we rally and gather strength.

10. ה׳ הוֹשִׁ֑יעָה הַ֝מֶּ֗לֶךְ יַעֲנֵ֥נוּ בְיוֹם־קׇרְאֵֽנוּ׃ {פ}    O LORD, grant victory!

May the King answer us when we call.-c

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**## Introduction**

Prayer before battle is one of the oldest forms of statecraft. Psalm 20 preserves such a prayer, but it does more than ask for success: it rehearses a theology of kingship that measures power not by horses and chariots, but by the name—the revealed character—of Israel’s God. The psalm is best heard as a liturgy spoken around the king on the brink of conflict, with carefully staged voices moving from petition to confidence to proclamation.

The opening strophe (vv. 2–5) is a cascade of jussives—“May he answer… may he set you on high… may he send… may he remember… may he fulfill.” Jussives are wish‑forms in biblical Hebrew; set one after another, they create an anaphoric rhythm (anaphora is the deliberate repetition of a form at the head of successive lines). This liturgical incantation does practical work: it gathers the king’s need into speech before God and locates help where it must be found—“from the sanctuary” and “from Zion” (v. 3). The prayer is simultaneously personal and public: “your offerings… your desires… your counsel” (vv. 4–5) involve royal decisions and their national consequences. In this light the sacrificial language of v. 4 matters. When the assembly prays that God “remember all your grain‑offerings and make fat your burnt offering” (יְדַשְּׁנֶה), they ask for more than ritual completeness. The verb’s root (דשׁן) connotes richness, favor, acceptance. Classical commentators took it so: “accept them willingly like fat burnt offerings” (Rashi); “send fire to consume it and receive it favorably” (Radak). Sacrifice in this psalm is not a manipulation of the divine but the theatre of divine pleasure: acceptance in the court of heaven authorizes action on earth (v. 5).

The center turns on a single abrupt line: “Now I know” (v. 7). The formula (“Now I know,” עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי) elsewhere marks decisive recognition (Gen 22:12; Exod 18:11; Judg 17:13). Who speaks? The psalm does not say. Some heard the congregation, others the “singer in the holy spirit” (Ibn Ezra). It reads as a cultic oracle, the voice of the liturgy itself suddenly assured: “the LORD saves his anointed, he answers him from his holy heavens.” The spatial axis shifts—earlier “from the sanctuary” (earthly, v. 3), now “from his holy heavens” (v. 7). Biblical worship often lives on that vertical line. Help issues from Zion because Zion is the earthward expression of a higher court; what is decided above is effected below. The psalm refuses to choose between temple and heaven, preferring to map the king’s plea onto both.

The antithesis that follows is among Scripture’s most pointed: “These in chariots and those in horses, but we—we invoke the name of the LORD our God” (v. 8). The Hebrew is as crisp as the thought: אֵלֶּה… וְאֵלֶּה… וַאֲנַחְנוּ. This is not disdain for technology per se; it is a theological refusal to stake legitimacy on the dominant military hardware of the age. The point is concentrated by Israel’s own law of the king: “Only he must not multiply horses” (Deut 17:16). To trust in horses and chariots was to reenact the allure of Egypt and Assyria; to trust in the name was to take the covenant seriously. In biblical idiom “the name” (שֵׁם) is not a label but an extension of presence and character: to invoke God’s name is to lay claim to the relationship God has established. The verb here, נַזְכִּיר (“we cause to be remembered/mention”), reaches into cultic practice (cf. the grain‑offering’s אַזְכָּרָה, “memorial portion,” Lev 2). What the altar “remembers,” the army “remembers”: prayer and battle are not separate spheres.

Psalm 20’s frame is as carefully made as its center. It begins with “the day of trouble” (v. 2) and closes with “the day we call” (v. 10), an inclusio (framing device) that holds distress and appeal within one liturgical hour. The final verse is intentionally ambiguous: “O LORD, save! May the King answer us in the day we call.” Is “the King” the human king (David) or the divine King? The accents allow “the King” to be the subject of “answer us,” not a vocative; most traditional interpreters rightly hear God: “the King [of the world]—may he answer us” (Radak). The ambiguity is part of the point. The human monarch is “his anointed” (מְשִׁיחוֹ) only by derivation. The people cry to the LORD and ask the King to answer; the earthly king’s authority is transparent to the divine.

Two contextual observations complete the picture. First, Psalm 20 stands naturally with Psalm 21. The one asks for victory, the other thanks God for having granted it; together they model pre‑ and post‑battle liturgy. Second, the psalm’s rhetoric of trust and technology is not abstract. In the Iron Age, Egypt fielded formidable chariot corps; Assyria perfected cavalry; Israel—by law and circumstance—sat in that shadow. The psalm is a counter‑liturgy to imperial common sense. Victory in Israel cannot be purchased; it is granted. Hence the progression of “name” in the psalm. We begin at a distance—“the name of the God of Jacob” (v. 2), the ancestral title; move to “the name of our God” (v. 6), as the community binds itself to the king’s fate; and arrive at full covenant naming—“the name of the LORD our God” (v. 8), invoking the tetragrammaton that grounds Israel’s worship.

None of this sentimentalizes warfare. The verbs of v. 9 are stark: enemies “collapse and fall,” but “we arise and are set upright.” The line for “being set upright” (וַנִּתְעוֹדָד) is rare and lovely; it likely means “we were restored/established” (cf. LXX ἀνωρθώθημεν, “we were set upright”). The liturgy does what good liturgy always does: it steadies the community near danger and compels them to remember what they have already said about God—that help issues from the sanctuary because it issues from the heavens; that plans succeed only as God fulfills them; that kings are only kings as they are the LORD’s “anointed.”

Technical terms used above: jussive (a verb form expressing wish/entreaty), anaphora (repetition at the head of lines), inclusio (a framing repetition at beginning and end). All three are tools the psalmist uses to turn crisis into confidence. In the end the psalm’s political theology is plain: the king’s legitimacy flows from the God who answers. Horses and chariots may glitter; the name endures.

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**## Verse-by-Verse Commentary**

**### Verse 1**

לַמְנַצֵּ֗חַ מִזְמ֥וֹר לְדָוִֽד׃

For the leader. A psalm of David.

“To the choirmaster. A psalm of David.” The superscription is characteristically spare. “To the choirmaster” (לַמְנַצֵּחַ) likely assigns the piece to the guild responsible for performance; proposals that all such psalms derive from a “Director’s Collection” are suggestive but remain hypotheses. The Davidic tag (לְדָוִד) can mark authorship, patronage, or tradition; here it situates the prayer in the royal cult. The economy of the title belies the complex staging that follows: a service with shifting speakers, suited to a pre‑battle rite.

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**### Verse 2**

יַֽעַנְךָ֣ ה׳ בְּי֣וֹם צָרָ֑ה יְ֝שַׂגֶּבְךָ֗ שֵׁ֤ם ׀ אֱלֹקֵ֬י יַעֲקֹֽב׃

May the LORD answer you in time of trouble,

the name of Jacob’s God keep you safe.

“May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble; may the name of the God of Jacob set you on high.” The verse pairs answer and elevation. The second verb (יְשַׂגֶּבְךָ) means “set securely on high,” the idiom of refuge. “The day of trouble” frames the psalm (cf. v. 10 “the day we call”), a tight inclusio. The epithet “God of Jacob” is a psalmic favorite (e.g., 46:8): ancestral and covenantal, it invokes a God known for rescuing strugglers. Already we have the theme of the “name” (שֵׁם)—not a mere label, but God’s presence and character made available; to be “set on high” by the name is to be secured by that relationship.

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**### Verse 3**

יִשְׁלַֽח־עֶזְרְךָ֥ מִקֹּ֑דֶשׁ וּ֝מִצִּיּ֗וֹן יִסְעָדֶֽךָּ׃

May He send you help from the sanctuary,

and sustain you from Zion.

“May he send you help from the sanctuary, and support you from Zion.” The parallel lines identify source and echo. “Sanctuary” (מִקֹּדֶשׁ) and “Zion” answer to each other; the help that comes is both earthly (from the temple mount) and, by implication, heavenly (cf. v. 7). The second verb (יִסְעָדֶךָ) is chosen for weight: “support, sustain,” often used for what prevents a collapse (cf. Ps 18:36). The preposition “from” in both cola draws an arc from the holy place to the battlefield. Compare Psalm 3:4–5: the cry goes up, the answer comes “from his holy mountain.”

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**### Verse 4**

יִזְכֹּ֥ר כׇּל־מִנְחֹתֶ֑ךָ וְעוֹלָתְךָ֖ יְדַשְּׁנֶ֣ה סֶֽלָה׃

May He receive the tokens of all your meal offerings,

and approve your burnt offerings. Selah.

“May he remember all your grain‑offerings; your burnt offering—may he make it fat. Selah.” “Remember” (זכר) in cultic contexts means “act favorably on the basis of relationship.” The grain‑offering and burnt offering are the standard gifts of petition. The crux is יְדַשְּׁנֶה, from דשׁן (“rich, fat”). Traditional readings converge: accept with favor, as with a fat offering; or, send fire to consume, turning it to ashes—the sign of acceptance. The LXX’s πιαίνειν (“make rich/fat”) supports the positive nuance. Selah plausibly marks a liturgical pause—just where the ritual action would occur. The theology is precise: acceptance at the altar prefaces the king’s strategy (v. 5).

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**### Verse 5**

יִֽתֶּן־לְךָ֥ כִלְבָבֶ֑ךָ וְֽכׇל־עֲצָתְךָ֥ יְמַלֵּֽא׃

May He grant you your desire,

and fulfill your every plan.

“May he grant you in accord with your heart, and fulfill all your plans.” “Heart” (לֵבָב) is the biblical inner person—mind, will, desire. The prayer moves from cult to conduct: from offerings (v. 4) to intentions and counsel (עֵצָה can be “strategy”). God’s fulfillment (יְמַלֵּא) is emphatic; when applied to God it implies completeness rather than partial success. The verse is not a blank check; within the psalm’s logic, the king’s plans are to be aligned through sacrifice and prayer (vv. 3–4). Deuteronomy’s war liturgy (Deut 20) belongs in the background: before battle the priest addresses the army; confidence is derivative, not innate.

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**### Verse 6**

נְרַנְּנָ֤ה ׀ בִּ֘ישׁ֤וּעָתֶ֗ךָ וּבְשֵֽׁם־אֱלֹקֵ֥ינוּ נִדְגֹּ֑ל יְמַלֵּ֥א ה׳ כׇּל־מִשְׁאֲלוֹתֶֽיךָ׃

May we shout for joy in your victory,

arrayed by standards in the name of our God.

May the LORD fulfill your every wish.

“We will shout for joy in your victory, and in the name of our God we will raise the banner; may the LORD fulfill all your requests.” The communal “we” breaks in. The middle line hinges on a rare verb (נִדְגֹּל), from a root associated with banners/standards (cf. Song 6:4, 10). Most take it, sensibly in context, as “raise the standard” or “be conspicuous like a banner.” The Greek renders “we shall be magnified,” which may reflect a different Hebrew (“we will make great the name”), but the Masoretic text’s military image suits the scene. Note the movement in the name motif: from “the God of Jacob” (v. 2) to “our God” (v. 6). The stanza returns to petition (“may the LORD fulfill…”), balancing celebration with dependence.

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**### Verse 7**

עַתָּ֤ה יָדַ֗עְתִּי כִּ֤י הוֹשִׁ֥יעַ ׀ ה׳ מְשִׁ֫יח֥וֹ יַ֭עֲנֵהוּ מִשְּׁמֵ֣י קׇדְשׁ֑וֹ בִּ֝גְבֻר֗וֹת יֵ֣שַׁע יְמִינֽוֹ׃

Now I know that the LORD will give victory to His anointed,

will answer him from His heavenly sanctuary

with the mighty victories of His right arm.

“Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed; he answers him from his holy heavens, with mighty deeds of the victory of his right hand.” The liturgy pivots on “Now I know” (עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי), the formula of decisive recognition (Gen 22:12; Exod 18:11). Whether we hear the congregation, a leader, or a temple prophet, the service receives assurance. The spatial axis widens: help formerly “from the sanctuary” (v. 3) is now “from his holy heavens.” The king is named “his anointed” (מְשִׁיחוֹ), not for messianic speculation here, but to mark royal office as derivative. The “right hand” is a standard metaphor for God’s effective power; the plural “mighty deeds” (גְבֻרוֹת) underscores repeated interventions, not a single stroke.

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**### Verse 8**

אֵ֣לֶּה בָ֭רֶכֶב וְאֵ֣לֶּה בַסּוּסִ֑ים וַאֲנַ֓חְנוּ ׀ בְּשֵׁם־ה׳ אֱלֹקֵ֣ינוּ נַזְכִּֽיר׃

They [call] on chariots, they [call] on horses,

but we call on the name of the LORD our God.

“These in chariots and those in horses, but we—by the name of the LORD our God we will invoke/remember.” The line is all clenched antithesis: אֵלֶּה… וְאֵלֶּה… וַאֲנַחְנוּ. The verb נַזְכִּיר (“cause to remember/mention”) is cultic and fits the psalm’s sacrificial texture (cf. the grain‑offering’s אַזְכָּרָה). Some prefer the Greek’s “we shall be magnified,” which would imply a different Hebrew, but the Masoretic sense is bracing: our “weapon” is invocation. Deuteronomy stands behind this defiance: the king must not “multiply horses” (Deut 17:16), and Israel is warned against trusting Egyptian cavalry (Isa 31:1). Psalm 33:16–17 sharpens the point: “A horse is a vain hope for victory.” Here theology answers technology.

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**### Verse 9**

הֵ֭מָּה כָּרְע֣וּ וְנָפָ֑לוּ וַאֲנַ֥חְנוּ קַּ֝֗מְנוּ וַנִּתְעוֹדָֽד׃

They collapse and lie fallen,

but we rally and gather strength.

“They—they have knelt and fallen; but we have arisen and been set upright.” The syntax juxtaposes completed defeat with completed restoration. The rare final verb (וַנִּתְעוֹדָד), a reflexive of a root meaning “restore/relieve,” likely means “we were set upright” (LXX ἀνωρθώθημεν). The physical metaphors for posture (falling/standing) carry legal and existential freight in biblical idiom (cf. Ps 1:5: the wicked will not “stand” in judgment). The line is not triumphalist so much as capacious: it promises not only surviving the battle but regaining one’s bearings.

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**### Verse 10**

ה׳ הוֹשִׁ֑יעָה הַ֝מֶּ֗לֶךְ יַעֲנֵ֥נוּ בְיוֹם־קׇרְאֵֽנוּ׃ {פ}

O LORD, grant victory!

May the King answer us when we call.-c

“O LORD, save! May the King answer us in the day we call.” The closing acclamation gathers the psalm’s strands. “O LORD, save!” (ה׳ הוֹשִׁיעָה) is the oldest cry of Israel’s worship (compare Ps 118:25). The next clause is syntactically ambiguous: is “the King” the human monarch or the divine King? Accents favor reading “the King” as subject, not direct address; traditional Jewish exegesis takes “the King” as God (Radak: “the King of the world”). The ambiguity is artful. In a psalm where the human king is consistently “his anointed,” it is fitting to end with the King whose answer makes every other cry meaningful. The inclusio closes: we have moved from “the day of trouble” (v. 2) to “the day we call,” and in between the community has learned how to name help.

Poetics and framing deserve one last word. The psalm’s first half (vv. 2–5) is built on anaphoric jussives that gather the congregation’s hopes into a cadence; the center (v. 7) supplies the oracle; the antithesis (v. 8) states the program; the posture (v. 9) supplies the image; the final acclamation (v. 10) returns us to prayer. Read with Psalm 21, the whole becomes a ritual diptych of asking and thanksgiving. Read on its own, Psalm 20 instructs the royal imagination: trust the name; keep the offerings; look beyond the chariots; and call on the King.

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