
Psalms 21 — The King Shall Joy in Thy Strength — The Thanksgiving After the Battle, the Crown of Pure Gold, and Length of Days For Ever

Psalm 21: a royal thanksgiving psalm, the companion and answer to Psalm 20. Where Psalm 20 prayed for the king before he went out to battle, Psalm 21 gives thanks after the victory the Lord granted — the king rejoicing in God's strength and salvation, crowned, given his heart's desire and length of days, kept unmoved because he trusts the LORD; then confidence that the King's enemies will not stand, closing in a congregation's doxology. Ascribed to David, for the chief Musician; sung in the temple worship of the Davidic monarchy.

Read Psalm 21 with Psalm 20 open beside it, because they are two halves of one act. Psalm 20 is the prayer *before* the battle — the congregation gathered around the king as he goes out, pleading, "The LORD hear thee in the day of trouble... Send thee help from the sanctuary" (Ps. 20:1–2), and refusing the world's confidence: "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God" (Ps. 20:7). Psalm 21 is what they sing when he comes home alive and the enemy is broken. The petitions of chapter 20 — "Grant thee according to thine own heart, and fulfil all thy counsel" (Ps. 20:4) — are answered word for word in chapter 21: "Thou hast given him his heart's desire, and hast not withholden the request of his lips" (21:2). This is the temple's liturgy of gratitude, sung over a king who asked and received.

Hebrew Word Studies

oz (H5797) (זֹרֶךְ) — strength, might, power — and, by extension, the refuge that strength provides vv. 1, 13. This is the word that frames the whole psalm, and where it sits is the whole lesson. Verse 1: "The king shall joy in *thy* strength" — the king's gladness rests on a strength that belongs to God. Verse 13: "Be thou exalted, LORD, in *thine* own strength" — the congregation ends by handing the word firmly back to its owner. Oz is the strength of the God who is a refuge: "God is our refuge and strength" (Ps. 46:1); "The LORD is my strength and my shield" (Ps. 28:7); "The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation" (Ex. 15:2) — that last line pairing oz with the very word for salvation this psalm celebrates in the same breath. A king wins a battle; the psalm refuses to let him keep the credit. This is the Old Testament's steady polemic against the arm of flesh — "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses" (Ps. 20:7) — and the Book of Mormon prays the same instinct: "O Lord, wilt thou grant unto us that we may have success" (Alma 58:10), success asked for, never assumed. Strength that saves is borrowed strength, and the wise king knows the lender.

chay / chayyim (H2416) (חַי / חַיִּים) — living, alive; life, lifetime — often in the plural "lives," the fullness of life v. 4. "He asked *life* of thee, and thou gavest it him." *Chay* is the pulse-word of the Old Testament — the "living God" (as opposed to the dead idols), the oath "as the LORD *liveth*," the breath God breathed into Adam so he "became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). Here the king asks for it and receives it, "even length of days for ever and ever" — and the plural *chayyim* already leans toward more than a long reign. It is the word Moses sets before Israel as the whole choice: "I have set before you life and death... therefore choose *life*" (Deut. 30:19). It is the tree in Eden's midst, the "tree of *life*" (Gen. 2:9), guarded until Lehi's dream and the Revelator's city restore its fruit (1 Ne. 8:10–11; Rev. 22:2). A crowned king asking *chayyim* of God and being answered "for ever and ever" is a line the risen Christ fulfils literally — "In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (Jn. 1:4) — and then extends: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). The King asked life; the King now gives it away.

ataret (H5850) (אֵתֶרֶת) — crown, wreath, diadem — the encircling ornament of honor v. 3. "Thou settest a *crown* of pure gold on his head." *Ataret* is the crown as gift and as glory, and its grammar in this psalm matters: God is the one who sets it there. In scripture the crown is rarely something a person claims; it is bestowed. Wisdom is "an *ornament of grace* unto thy head" and gives "a *crown of glory*" (Prov. 4:9); "a virtuous woman is a *crown* to her husband" (Prov. 12:4); grey hair, honestly earned, is "a *crown of glory*... found in the way of righteousness" (Prov. 16:31). The prophets promise that in the day of the Lord he himself "shall be for a *crown of glory*... unto the residue of his people" (Isa. 28:5) — God is the crown, not merely the crowner. The New Testament carries the image to its end: a "*crown of righteousness*" (2 Tim. 4:8), a "*crown of life*" (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), a "*crown of glory* that fadeth not away" (1 Pet. 5:4) — every one of them laid up, awarded, given, never grabbed. And it passes through the mocking crown of thorns (Jn. 19:2) before it becomes the "many crowns" the King wears returning (Rev. 19:12). The pure gold on the head is the sign that the honor came down from above.

***batach* (H982) (בָּטַח) — to trust, to rely on, to feel secure and unafraid — the confidence that leans its full weight on another v. 7.** "The king *trusteth* in the LORD." *Batach* is the Old Testament's great verb of reliance, and it always forces a question: trust in *what*? The psalm has already answered it by contrast — not chariots, not horses (Ps. 20:7), not "an arm of flesh" (Jer. 17:5), not "in oppression" or "in riches" (Ps. 62:10), but in the LORD. "*Trust* in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding" (Prov. 3:5); "*Trust* ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength" (Isa. 26:4) — again strength and trust in one breath, as here. The reward of *batach* is always the same: security, stability, the unmoved footing of verse 7. "Blessed is the man that *trusteth* in the LORD... he shall be as a tree planted by the waters" (Jer. 17:7–8) — rooted, not shaken. Nephi builds his whole psalm on it: "O Lord, I have *trusted* in thee, and I will *trust* in thee for ever. I will not put my *trust* in the arm of flesh" (2 Ne. 4:34). The king in Psalm 21 wins the battle, wears the crown, holds the life for ever — and the psalm names none of these as his security. His security is that he *trusts*. Everything else is the fruit of the leaning.

***chesed* (H2617) (חֶסֶד) — covenant-love, lovingkindness, mercy, steadfast faithfulness — loyal love that keeps its promises v. 7.** "Through the *mercy* of the most High he shall not be moved." *Chesed* is one of the richest words in the Hebrew Bible — not mercy as a mood but mercy as *covenant loyalty*, God's unbreakable faithfulness to those he has bound himself to. It is the word that thunders twenty-six times through Psalm 136, once per verse: "for his *mercy* endureth for ever." It is God's self-revelation on Sinai — "The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious... abundant in goodness [*chesed*] and truth" (Ex. 34:6). And it is precisely what keeps the king *unmoved*: not his own steadiness but the reliability of God's steadfast love holding him in place. Trust (*batach*) reaches up; *chesed* reaches down; where they meet, a man "shall not be moved." The Book of Mormon breathes the same conviction: "his *mercy* endureth for ever" (Ps. 136 echoed in Alma's and Nephi's praise), and the covenant certainty that "the Lord... hath covenanted with all the house of Israel" (Morm. 5:20) rests on this same loyal love. The king's stability is not a testament to the king. It is a testament to the *chesed* of the most High.

From the Chapter's Architecture

The artistry is in the frame, and it is genuine, not imposed. The word strength (oz) opens the psalm and closes it — but watch the ownership move. Verse 1: the king joys in thy strength. Verse 13: "Be thou exalted, LORD, in thine own strength." The psalm begins by locating the king's joy in God's strength and ends by handing that strength back to God with both hands, refusing to let even a victorious, crowned, God-blessed king keep it. That is not a chiasm — I will not manufacture one — but it is a deliberate inclusio, a strength-to-strength frame, and it is the psalm's theology in miniature. Everything between the two occurrences of oz is gift; the two occurrences themselves are the reminder of who the giver is. The last word of a psalm about a crowned king is not the king. It is "we will sing and praise thy power."