

Rejoicing in the Rock

Psalm 18

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To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, the servant of the LORD, who addressed the words of this song to the LORD on the day when the LORD rescued him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said:

I love you, O LORD, my strength.

*The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

*I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
and I am saved from my enemies. – Psalm 18:1-3, ESV*

Introduction: When We Need Deliverance

We really love a good rescue story, don't we? From the Bible to ancient Greek mythology to the latest blockbuster movies, we love stories of deliverance from danger. In a good deliverance story, the bigger the danger and more overwhelming the odds, the better the rescue is. The two most successful *Star Wars* movies of all time, Episode 4 & Episode 7, both feature a dramatic rescue, Princess Leia in Episode 4 and the young woman who is most likely her niece, Rey, in Episode 7.

Of all the characters in the Bible, King David probably faced the most dramatic peril repeatedly and was the subject of deliverance from the hands of his enemies more than almost anyone else. From Goliath to Saul to the Philistines to his own son, Absalom, and more obscure men like Ishbi-benob, one of the descendants of the giants, whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of bronze, David found himself in repeated grave danger, sometimes fleeing from his enemies and hiding in the wilderness, calling on the Lord for deliverance. And God was faithful to deliver David time and time again.

Near the end of his life, David wrote this Psalm to recount the Lord's faithfulness and give praise to Him for repeatedly saving him. The same Psalm is recorded for us in 2 Samuel 22.

But while David's psalm is a beautiful song of praise to the Lord for delivering David, it points us beyond David to David's greater son, Jesus. Even the heading, which refers to David as "the servant of the Lord," points to Jesus, who is given this title in Isaiah. Verse 2 is quoted in Hebrews 2:13 as the words of Jesus and verse 49 is quoted in Romans 15:9 as the words of Jesus, too. So, clearly, the New Testament writers viewed this Psalm as being about Christ, and most interpreters throughout church history have agreed. In the *Treasury of David*, Charles

Spurgeon writes, “Reader, you will not need our aid in this respect; if you know Jesus you will readily find him in his sorrows, deliverance, and triumphs all through this wonderful psalm.”

But can we also sing a psalm written by David which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is ultimately about Jesus? In other words, can this be our psalm, too? Well, if we belong to Jesus by faith in Him, then we, too, are children of God and servants of the Lord. We, too, come under the Fatherly protection of the Lord and He comes to our rescue, too. So, from David to Jesus and then to us, these words speak powerfully of the God who delivers from great distress, great bondage, great peril. Our lives may bear little resemblance to a *Star Wars* movie or to the life of David, but we do face real and grave dangers from which the Lord does indeed powerfully deliver us!

A. A Great God to Love, vv. 1-3

1. Great Love for God – “I love you, O LORD, my strength.” V. 1

This psalm opens with one of the most powerful expressions of love for God found anywhere in the Bible. Believe it or not, this is the only place in the Old Testament where anyone is recorded as saying to God directly, “I love you, Lord.” Of course, we know that God commanded His people in Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and might,” but this is the only place where someone is directly recorded as saying to God, “I love you, Lord.”

The word used here for “love” is a very strong emotional word. John Calvin translated this verb as, “affectionately love” and other translators have rendered it “vehemently love” or “tenderly love” or “dearly love” or even “most affectionately and with my whole soul.” It is fitting, if these words are really reflective of the heart of Jesus, because Jesus is the only man who has ever lived who actually did love God with all of His heart and soul and might, perfectly.

Interestingly, the only other place in the whole Bible where someone says “I love you” directly to the Lord is when Peter is restored by Jesus at the end of John’s Gospel. There, Jesus asks him, “Simon Peter, do you love Me?” three times and Peter answers each of the three times, “Yes, Lord, I love you.”

2. A Great God to Love – “The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.” – v. 2

David then heaps up words to describe and define what God had meant to him in his life and why he loves Him so much. He uses eight terms to describe YaHWeH, the LORD. He says that

YaHWeH is . . .

1. My rock, emphasizing strength and stability
2. My fortress
3. My deliverer
4. My God, or “my mighty One”
5. My rock, using a different Hebrew word, this time emphasizing a hiding place of refuge
6. My shield
7. The horn of my salvation
8. My stronghold

As a man of war who faced many military enemies who literally sought His life, David valued the strength and power, the protection and stability and refuge provided by the Lord. But notice how personal these are all to David. God is not just “a rock” or “a fortress,” but He is “my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God.”

3. **A Great God Who Saved** – “I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.” – v. 3

And then David concludes the opening three verses, the introduction to the psalm, by relating his personal experience of God as his deliverer, his rescuer, his savior. David doesn’t just theoretically know that the Lord is his rock, his fortress, his deliverer, etc. He has personally and powerfully experienced God’s deliverance in his life. David has been repeatedly saved from his enemies not because of his own wit, cunning, fighting skill, bravery or agility but because he has called upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and he had been saved from his enemies.

Hebrews 5:7 tells us that Jesus knew this powerful and personal experience of salvation from God, too. “*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.*” (ESV)

So David goes on immediately to recount just how great a danger he faced, how he cried to God and how God responded.

B. Great Deliverance to Recall, vv. 4-45

I. He Rescued, vv. 4-19

*The cords of death encompassed me;
the torrents of destruction assailed me;*

⁵ *the cords of Sheol entangled me;
the snares of death confronted me.*
⁶ *In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I cried for help.*
*From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.*

David uses two images here, the image of being tied up in strong cords and the image of being drowned in a mighty flood. The combination is a rather terrifying image, of being tied up in cords and swept away in a torrent. We could think of the time in David's life when he was fleeing from Saul and hiding in the cave of Adullam, hunted down by the army of Israel. We could also think of the time when he was fleeing from Absalom, camping out in the wilderness, being pursued by his own son and by the army of Israel again.

But David himself never actually faced anything as severe as is depicted in these verses. Here, the speaker is literally facing death. These images are images of dying. If the cords of death encompass you and the cords of Sheol entangle you, then you are dying and being put into the grave. And so we can see that this is powerfully reflective of the cry of Jesus as He faced death. We already saw that Hebrews 5:7 tells us that Jesus cried out with "loud cries and tears." This is probably a direct reference to the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus could feel the cords of death tightening around Him and His agony was so great that He was sweating great drops of blood.

On the cross itself, Jesus felt the wrath of God come upon Him and He cried out "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" But later, as He died, Jesus prayed, "Lord, into Your hands I commit My spirit." In His distress, in the garden and on the cross, Jesus cried out to His Heavenly Father and God, from His holy temple in heaven, heard Jesus' cry. Jesus' voice reached the ears of His Father.

a. A Powerful Rescue

⁷ *Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.*
⁸ *Smoke went up from his nostrils
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.*
⁹ *He bowed the heavens and came down;*

thick darkness was under his feet.

- ¹⁰ *He rode on a cherub and flew;
he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.*
- ¹¹ *He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,
thick clouds dark with water.*
- ¹² *Out of the brightness before him
hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.*
- ¹³ *The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.*
- ¹⁴ *And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.*
- ¹⁵ *Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.*

For David, this language may have been a poetic reflection of the great power of God in coming to his rescue, but we know that as Jesus died, His Father showed His power. The earth shook. The sky turned black. The veil in the Temple was torn in two. Darkness was over the face of the land for three hours. The signs of power were strong enough that the Centurion supervising the crucifixion cried out, “Surely, this man was the Son of God.”

Then, three days later, the earth shook again, the stone was rolled away from the tomb, a great light from heaven overpowered the guards and angels descended to tell of the rescue of the Son of God from the cords of death and Sheol.

And yet this powerful imagery of God coming down to the rescue, with such awesome displays of power and authority, has a yet-future fulfillment still waiting. One day, Jesus will indeed bow the heavens and come down. When He does, the display of God’s power and authority and the victory and judgment of Jesus over His enemies will be unmistakable, undeniable, absolute and final!

b. A Personal Rescue

- ¹⁶ *He sent from on high, he took me;
he drew me out of many waters.*
- ¹⁷ *He rescued me from my strong enemy
and from those who hated me,
for they were too mighty for me.*

¹⁸ *They confronted me in the day of my calamity,
but the LORD was my support.*

¹⁹ *He brought me out into a broad place;
he rescued me, because he delighted in me.*

What David says about God's rescue in these verses is even more important, for God's power was not just generically exercised to rescue David. No, these verses speak of the personal care of a God who delights in David. And they speak of the personal rescue of a loving Heavenly Father, who delivered His Son from death because He delighted in Him.

"He took me, He drew me out of many waters" is the imagery of a hand reaching down to personally take hold and bring out. From the watery bondage of death, Jesus was brought forth into the broad place of resurrection, of eternal life, of victory, because God His Father delighted in Him!

When God rescues us in Jesus, He delivers us from enemies who are too mighty for us. He delivers us from those who hate us and wish to destroy us. We're not talking about ISIS here, but about an enemy far more powerful, deadly and persistent: Satan and sin and death and hell – eternal condemnation and destruction through sin and death. God delivers us from them through the victory of Jesus Christ because He delights in us, too.

2. He Rewarded, vv. 20-24

*The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness;
according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.*

²¹ *For I have kept the ways of the LORD,
and have not wickedly departed from my God.*

²² *For all his rules were before me,
and his statutes I did not put away from me.*

²³ *I was blameless before him,
and I kept myself from my guilt.*

²⁴ *So the LORD has regarded me according to my righteousness,
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.*

a. David's Righteousness

At first glance, it might seem impossible that David could honestly and truthfully write these words. David was not righteous. His hands were not clean. He did not always keep the ways of the Lord. David was not only an adulterer and someone who conspired to kill the husband of his mistress, but he also showed favoritism among his own children, could be petty and temperamental, wavered at times in the face of danger, such as when he went to live among the

Philistines. He was a sinner, so how could he claim “I was blameless before Him, and I kept myself from guilt”?

David’s claim to righteousness was limited to the specific situations of danger he faced, especially from Saul. Though he was not without sin, David could honestly say that he was innocent in his relationship with Saul. He was not a traitor or an insurrectionist, as Saul believed. He was blameless in the matter and justice was on his side. Likewise, God calls Christians today to be “above reproach.” This doesn’t mean that we’re ever sinlessly perfect, but that we are not to be guilty in the eyes of the world.

b. Christ’s Righteousness

But Jesus could claim to be perfectly clean, without sin and truly blameless in the eyes of His Father. Hebrews 5:7 says Jesus was heard “because of His reverence.” Verse 8 goes on to explain, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Just a few verses earlier, Hebrews 4:15 said “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

Jesus was tempted and tried, He suffered and learned obedience through it. He was without sin, perfectly, and this is why He was rescued from death. He is the only man who ever lived who did not deserve to die. He died because He took on our sin upon Himself. But the perfection of His own life led to His full vindication and resurrection triumph over the grave.

c. Our Righteousness

Ultimately, for us, the righteousness we claim as the basis for our deliverance from death is the righteousness of Jesus. The blamelessness we need is the blamelessness of Jesus. Yet even in this life, the Holy Spirit so infuses the righteousness of Christ into our souls and lives that we can walk in obedience and bear the fruit of the Spirit- not perfectly, but truly and effectively, by God’s grace.

3. He Empowers, vv. 25-42

Our next section shows us that the God who rescues is also the God who empowers.

a. Who God Empowers

With the merciful you show yourself merciful;
 with the blameless man you show yourself blameless;
²⁶with the purified you show yourself pure;
 and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous.

²⁷ For you save a humble people,
but the haughty eyes you bring down.

Verses 25-27 are a powerful statement of the justice of God. God cannot rescue and empower the crooked and evil people of the world. We must be forgiven and cleansed before we can be assured that God fights on our side.

The line here that trips many people up is “with the crooked You make Yourself seem tortuous.” But think about how this applies in the case of Jesus. The crooked were those who conspired against Jesus, including Satan, who entered Judas Iscariot and led him to betray the Lord. The Chief Priests, the Sanhedrin, the scribes and Pharisees, the Sadducees, Pontius Pilate and Satan all thought they were getting rid of Jesus by putting Him on the cross. What they were, in fact, doing was sealing their own doom. What they were doing was furthering the mission of Jesus and helping to ensure His victory. God often uses the evil desires of the wicked to ensnare them and bring about their own destruction.

Verse 27 is then a reminder of the importance of humility, because arrogant self-righteousness will keep us from God’s blessing as surely as anything else.

b. How God Empowers

So we see who God empowers – the merciful, the blameless, the pure, the humble – and now we see how He empowers, especially how He empowered Jesus.

²⁸ For it is you who light my lamp;
the LORD my God lightens my darkness.
²⁹ For by you I can run against a troop,
and by my God I can leap over a wall.
³⁰ This God—his way is perfect;
the word of the LORD proves true;
he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.
³¹ For who is God, but the LORD?
And who is a rock, except our God?—
³² the God who equipped me with strength
and made my way blameless.
³³ He made my feet like the feet of a deer
and set me secure on the heights.
³⁴ He trains my hands for war,

so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

³⁵You have given me the shield of your salvation,
and your right hand supported me,
and your gentleness made me great.

³⁶You gave a wide place for my steps under me,
and my feet did not slip.

“Light my lamp” and “Lighten my darkness” are both metaphorical expressions of being brought to life after death or of being brought through a horrible darkness into victory. For David, God’s empowerment often brought success in battle – against Goliath, against the Philistines, etc. But Jesus is given even greater victory.

Notice that David says that it is God, whose way is perfect (v. 30) who “made my way blameless” or perfect (v. 32). God is perfect in all His ways. The words of praise from David here are similar to those from Moses in Deuteronomy 32:4:

*“The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.*

*A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and upright is he.”*

William S. Plumer, in his wonderful commentary on Psalms, wrote, “God’s way is perfectly just, perfectly wise, perfectly good, perfectly sure to prevail, perfectly honorable to Himself, perfectly safe to His people. It sometimes looks dark or doubtful because we do not see the end.” He then went on to write about verse 32, “From the same source comes the blessing that our way is perfect. Without God, nothing is strong, nothing holy, nothing finished, nothing successful, nothing perfect.”

Hebrews 10:14 says of Jesus, *“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”*

c. What Happens When God Empowers

So how complete is the victory God gave Jesus?

³⁷I pursued my enemies and overtook them,
and did not turn back till they were consumed.

³⁸I thrust them through, so that they were not able to rise;
they fell under my feet.

³⁹For you equipped me with strength for the battle;
you made those who rise against me sink under me.

- ⁴⁰ You made my enemies turn their backs to me,
and those who hated me I destroyed.
- ⁴¹ They cried for help, but there was none to save;
they cried to the LORD, but he did not answer them.
- ⁴² I beat them fine as dust before the wind;
I cast them out like the mire of the streets.

Speaking of the cross, Colossians 2:15 says, “*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.*” Jesus triumphed completely and vanquished the power of the devil.

Hebrews 2:14-15 says, “*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*”

4. He Exalts, vv. 43-45

Not only did God grant victory over enemies, but God highly exalted Jesus, too.

- You delivered me from strife with the people;
you made me the head of the nations;
people whom I had not known served me.*
- ⁴⁴ *As soon as they heard of me they obeyed me;
foreigners came cringing to me.*
- ⁴⁵ *Foreigners lost heart
and came trembling out of their fortresses.*

a. How This Was True for David

David saw this exaltation to a limited extent in his own life. God subdued the Philistines and other foreign nations under David’s rule.

b. How This is Ultimately True for Christ

But Jesus has been exalted over every nation and over every power. This language reminds me of Philippians 2:9-11:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the

earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (ESV)

c. What This Means for Missions & Evangelism

For us, the exaltation of Christ as the “head of the nations” should give us great encouragement for evangelism and missions. After His resurrection, Jesus said, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations* (Matt. 28:18-19, ESV).” He has been given the authority as head of the nations, and He sends us with His authority, as His ambassadors.

C. A Great Gospel to Proclaim, vv. 46-50

The Gospel Jesus sends us to the nations to proclaim can be expressed in many different forms and the Bible gives us different language for proclaiming the Gospel. But we can see here in the final five verses of this wonderful psalm a simple, three-part Gospel proclamation:

1. The Lord Lives! (vv. 46)

The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock,
and exalted be the God of my salvation—

The Lord lives. We serve and proclaim a living God, He is our Rock and He is the God of our salvation!

2. The Lord Delivers! (v. 47-48)

*the God who gave me vengeance
and subdued peoples under me,
⁴⁸who delivered me from my enemies;
yes, you exalted me above those who rose against me;
you rescued me from the man of violence.*

The Lord who lives is the God who delivers. He delivered Jesus from death and gave Him victory over all of His and our enemies. The resurrection of Jesus is absolutely central to rightly proclaiming the Gospel to the nations and our neighbors. Jesus has been rescued from death, exalted to the right hand of God the Father and the peoples of the earth have been put under His authority!

3. The Lord is to be Praised! (vv. 49-50)

*For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations,
and sing to your name.*

⁵⁰ *Great salvation he brings to his king,
and shows steadfast love to his anointed,
to David and his offspring forever.*

Our response to what God has done must be a response of praise. We must praise Him, sing to His name and tell of His great salvation and steadfast love. God calls people not just to repent of sin and trust in Jesus but to praise His name and worship Him. This is what we were created to do and this is the end goal of our Gospel proclamation.

“Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more.” - John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!*

Application: Is He Your Rock?

And so we have to ask as we close:

Is the Lord your rock and your salvation?

Are you trusting in Jesus and in the victory over sin and death and hell that God granted Him for His people?

Do you belong to the victorious King Jesus as His subject, even as His younger brother or sister and co-heir of the world?

Are you worshiping Him, trusting Him, proclaiming Him?

Is He Yours and are You His?