

## Songs for a King

The Lord is my Rock

Psalm 18

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*“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. The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me. 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” (Ps 18:1–6).*

*“The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation— the God who gave me vengeance and subdued peoples under me, who rescued me from my enemies; yes, you exalted me above those who rose against me; you delivered me from the man of violence. For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing to your name. Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever” (Ps 18:46–50).*

This week our nation mourned the passing President George H. W. Bush, and the news featured a number of historical reflections. I found myself feeling a bit old and nostalgic. President Bush was in office during my college years. The historical footage didn't feel that long ago to me.

I remember my college roommate telling me, “Dude, the Berlin wall has fallen.” And I thought he meant it fell over. For the next few hours, we watched as people pounded holes in the wall that separated East and West Berlin. People celebrated, sang, and reconnected with friends and family on the other side of the wall. And I also remember coming home for Christmas as multiple countries in the Soviet bloc experienced revolution.

This week I found myself reflecting, looking back, and remembering.

I don't know about you, but seasons of reflection probably don't happen enough in my world. I tend to live on the edge of “what-is-next.” It takes a level of intentionality on my part to stop and look backward.

I love the Christmas season because it creates some space to reflect. Advent invites us to consider what was involved in the birth of the Savior, what it means, and why it is important. This time of year allows for some personal and spiritual reflection.

Allow me to invite you to do this right now with a few questions:

- Consider December 2017. What circumstances, emotions, or challenges faced you?
- How did you see God at work in your life last year?
- In what ways did God answer your prayers?
- What should you be thankful for?

Just asking these questions helps us not only reflect, but also gain perspective. Some of you are walking through a really hard season. And by looking back, you can see the Lord's faithfulness. I hope this little exercise served to strengthen you and help change your perspective.

During advent, we are examining a number of royal psalms. These Old Testament songs celebrate the reign of an earthly king while pointing us to Jesus. They highlight the trustworthiness and faithfulness of God as they relate to Israel while also creating a longing for the Messiah.

Last week we looked at Psalm 2, a song that asked, "Why do the nations rage?" We learned about the paradox of God's reign and our rebellion.

This Sunday, Psalm 18 is our focus. It celebrates the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God at a very important time in David's life. This psalm reflects on a moment when David experienced the goodness of God in a dramatic way. His heart pours forth praise as he considers how God rescued him.

So, I'd like to invite you to join with me as we look at this psalm in the context of David's life, as we consider the connections to Jesus's life, and as we ponder our own moments where we experienced God's help. This psalm can serve as a reminder of God's work in the past. Or it can encourage you in the seasons where you are waiting for God's deliverance.

This royal psalm erupts in praise—for God's deliverance, his power, and his blessing.

### **1. Deliverance**

The first six verses celebrate God's intervention. David's heart is overwhelmed with gratitude for how God helped him. David's desperation met God's deliverance.

I love how this Psalm begins! "I love you, O Lord, my strength." This psalm reflects on the deep affection that David feels for God because of what had transpired in his life. David's heart beats with a deep love for God.

Before verse one, your Bible should record a statement that provides context for the writing of this psalm. You'll find these notes before other psalms. Sometimes they indicate who wrote the psalm, the tune, or the background. In this case, we learn that the psalm marks the moment when "the Lord rescued him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul." That's significant.

2 Samuel 22 also records this song. In that book, this song is written toward the end of David's reign. It may serve as a summary of David's heart.

The nation of Israel desired a king, and they chose Saul. However, God rejected Saul because of his disobedience and his wayward heart. The prophet Samuel anointed David as king because he was a man

after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). However, Saul still reigned as king. David would be the next king but not until Saul's death. As a result, Saul viewed David as a threat. Saul wanted David marginalized or killed.

Therefore, David became a man on the run—an outlaw. He faced opposition from every angle. As he was running from Saul, he had to determine who was willing to help him and with whom to make alliances. David lived on the edge, constantly fearing for his life. And when he had an opportunity to take Saul's life, he chose to spare him, despite the fervent protest from his men (1 Sam. 24). David dealt with false accusations, overwhelming odds against him, never-ending danger, isolation, and unenviable decisions. The season between his anointment and his crowning was extremely challenging.

However, the reign of David presented many additional challenges—some within his court, some without. Some issues David created on his own through his sinful choices.

This psalm takes a historical look. It celebrates the completion of long seasons of uncertainty, fear, and stress. It rehearses the faithfulness of God. In it, David celebrates his experience of God's kindness and deliverance.

You can probably think of a similar time—a moment when you could breathe a sigh of relief because your nightmare finally came to an end. Perhaps you take yourself back to the moment when you realized, "Wow! God helped me." Or maybe you've not even taken time to look back. You should.

Take note of the words connected to safety and protection in verse 2. The Lord is . . . my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my God, my rock, my shield, my salvation, and my stronghold. Notice the personal nature of these words with the use of the word "my." But you should also observe how these words describe a place of deliverance and safety. No doubt David had in mind the number of nights he spent hiding in caves. And through it all, God was with him.

Verse three summarizes the theme of this entire Psalm. David calls upon the Lord. God is worthy to be praised. God delivers from enemies. This psalm celebrates that reality through a historical lens.

This rehearsing of deliverance is not only helpful for David, but this psalm was sung by worshipers as they gathered together in the temple and in synagogues. David's praise became their own. He put words in their mouths to reflect upon the goodness of the Lord. Friends, we need reminders like these. And when it comes to advent, we need to see one of the clearest displays of God's deliverance: the sending of the Christ-child. The angels announced the birth of the savior to the shepherds (Luke 2:11). That historic deliverance reminds and encourages us that God helped us in the past. He can help us now.

I love the gut-level honesty of verses four and five. Isn't that why we love the psalms? David rehearses the dark places of his past. Notice the strong and descriptive language:

"The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me" (Ps. 18:4–5).

He describes his condition as being bound up with the cords of death, flooded with destruction, and assaulted with traps of evil. These verses are bleak and frightening. They may describe the state of your soul today. Perhaps it feels like you are facing opposition, evil, and pain at every turn. Can I just remind you that there are forty-five more verses in this psalm? Can I remind you that the disciples thought evil was victorious at the death of Jesus? I'm sure Mary and Joseph were scared out of their minds as they fled to Egypt when Herod sought to kill their newborn son.

That's what makes verse six so glorious. In the distress of life, David called out to God for help. And God heard his cry. The Father heard the cry of his Son, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And he hears your cry.

And you must remember that God works in ways that you cannot see. A divinely designed floor lies underneath our hardship and suffering.

In the classic story *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Hopeful arrive at their destination—the Celestial City. However, a wide river stands between them and paradise. As they waded into the water, Christian panics because the water is deep and nearly over his head. But Hopeful says, "Be of good cheer, my brother; I feel the bottom and it is good."<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 18 tells us "I feel the bottom, and it is good!" The deliverance of David tells us the same message. The birth and resurrection of Jesus encourage us with the same truth. And if you have a story of God's faithfulness, you should share it as well.

If you are in a place today where you are facing a substantial challenge or you are suffering, I just want to remind you—there is a God-ordained floor. God is always good. God delivers.

## **2. Power**

If you are keeping track of our progress in this psalm, you'll notice that we probably need to pick up the pace a bit. We will. Verses 7-45 feature a wide-ranging display of God's power. David doesn't just tell you that God delivered him, he paints a vivid picture.

### **a. Over Creation**

Verses 7-15 connect God's power over the created order. David uses language related to nature: "the earth reeled" (v. 7), "he bowed the heavens and came down" (v. 9), "he made darkness his canopy" (v. 11), "thick clouds with water" (v. 11), and "hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds" (v. 12). Thunder, lightning, the sea, and the foundations of the earth respond to his command (v. 15).

"Don't mess with God." That's the message. The created world, with all its mystery and power, obeys the voice the God who is David's rock! God powerfully moves in judgment.

### **b. To Save**

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<sup>1</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring the Psalms – Volume 1, Psalms 1-88*, (Loizeaux Brothers, New Jersey: 1988), 140.

David expresses amazement in verse 16 that God would rescue him. Notice the sound of desperation and helplessness: “drew me out of many waters” (v. 16) and “rescued me from my strong enemy” (v. 17). What’s more, when his back was against the wall, the Lord helped him (v. 18). The Lord set his affection on David. The Lord delighted in David. That’s why he rescued him.

David makes a direct connection between God’s love and his power to save. The power of God expresses the love of God.

c. For the Faithful

In verses 20-30 David connects the powerful deliverance of God to his faithfulness. For example, “The Lord dealt with me according to my righteousness . . .” (v. 20). If you read further, you’ll find other statements that sound similar (vv. 21, 23). David makes a direct connection between his deliverance and his faithfulness.

Now I don’t think David is suggesting that he was perfect. Rather, he celebrates the better path of faithfulness to God. Verse 30 bears this out. God’s ways are perfect, and the Word of the Lord proves true (v. 30). Whenever God’s people make long-haul choice of faithfulness, they stake their hope in God to be true to his Word.

I’m reminded of the words of Peter in 1 Peter 2:20-23.

“For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, **but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly**” (1 Pet. 2:20–23).

God powerfully works for the merciful, the humble, and the person who trust in his Word. And, of course, no one did this better than Christ. While David obeyed imperfectly, Jesus never sinned. He obeyed and fulfilled this psalm in a way that was impossible for David.

d. For Strength

In verse 31, David returns to the theme of the character of God—“Who is God, but the Lord?” However, he says this and immediately connects the way that God helped him. David’s deliverance sometimes occurred through his actions, but he knew God was behind it. God gave him strength (v. 32).

David may have thought about particular battles, and he knew God was at work. Verses 33-36 use language that has battles in mind. He talks about training his hands for war and bending a bow of bronze (v. 34). And yet he also talks about the shield of salvation (v. 35).

David honors the Lord for victory over his enemies. God allowed him to overtake his enemies (v. 37). He surveys the battlefield, knowing that the victory would not have happened without God's help (v. 40). God was empowering him with strength for victory.

If you survey the New Testament, you will find multiple examples of Jesus being filled and empowered by the Spirit. In Luke 4, Jesus announces his ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me" (Luke 4:18). Luke also describes Jesus as being "full of the Holy Spirit" (4:1) and doing ministry "in the power of the Spirit" (4:14).

How amazing to consider that the same Spirit that empowered Christ has now been poured out on us. The Bible promises that the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us when we face persecution and insults (1 Pet. 4:14). And Jesus told the disciples not to worry what to say when brought to trial because the Spirit would help them know what to say (Matt. 10:19).

Can I encourage you if you are not yet a Christian and you are facing what seems like an impossible situation? It may be that God is using this hardship in order to reveal that you cannot continue to try to make it on your own. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus helps us with our greatest need, our sin, and he keeps helping us. Perhaps you are just now coming to realize that you need a deeper, more long-lasting solution. Turn to Christ today.

#### e. For Exaltation

David ends this section that surveys God's power by rejoicing in the exaltation and victory God had provided. He experiences deliverance from strife (v. 43). His kingdom rules over other nations (v. 43). Foreigners submitted to his reign (v. 44-45). David sees the peace and the victory that comes through exaltation as a gift from God.

Of course, the same is said about Jesus. Philippians 2 says, ". . . God has exalted him . . . so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth . . ." (Phil. 2:9-10).

This list is amazing, isn't it? David rehearses his life, and he sees all the places and all the ways that God helped him. You see the same thing in the life of Jesus. Do you see it in yours? Have you seen the strength of God in your life this year? Christian, do you sense the power of the Spirit at work in you? When we see God at work in us, it increases our assurance and our love for God. So seek his strength. Ask him to help you. Rely on his power, not your own.

### **3. Blessing**

The final praise is found in verses 46-50. These verses summarize much of what we've already heard. David attributes the blessings of life as gifts from God. Some Old Testament scholars see this as a doxology.

God is praised in verse 46 because he lives! The idea here is that David sees the connection between his life and the blessing of God. He rejoices in the provision of salvation (v. 46), deliverance over enemies (v. 47), and the rescue from rebellion (v. 48). David sees the hand of God behind all of these things.

As a result, he breaks out in praise. David is determined to tell the world about the blessing of God and to lift up his voice in song as he stands in awe of what God has done (v. 48).

He recounts his blessings. Salvation has been brought to the king (v. 49). God was the one who made his victories happen. God overwhelmed David with his steadfast love. He surveys his life, and he recounts the amazing blessing of God.

The Lord lives! The Lord gives! The Lord is gracious! No wonder David says, "I love you, O Lord, my strength" (Ps. 18:1).

## **Applications**

This lengthy psalm is loaded with great truths about the trustworthiness of God. Through David's experience, the incarnation of Jesus, and our own story, we can agree with David—"The Lord is my rock."

We've covered a lot of ground in this psalm. Allow me to summarize four brief applications. What does this psalm invite us to do?

**Reflect** – This psalm and this season of the year invite us to pause and look back. They invite us to consider the ways we've seen the Lord's faithfulness and help. The pace of life and the hectic nature of this time of year don't naturally create this kind of posture. So, let me encourage you to take some time to review what has happened in 2018 or maybe even before. Walk through your calendar, scroll through your pictures, and write down what transpired. Pull back the lens of your life and consider the bigger story of God's grace in your life.

**Marvel** – When David did this, it led him to worship—calling God his fortress, his deliverer, his refuge, and his stronghold. When you consider advent, don't allow the familiarity of the story to steal your amazement at what God accomplished for you. Some of you became a Christian this year. Some of you walked through deep waters. Some of you are still there. Rejoice that the Lord lives! He helped you! Marvel at his goodness in your life.

**Trust** – This psalm was not only sung by David, it became part of the worship music for people as they gathered in the temple or the synagogue. As these worshippers rehearsed God's faithfulness, it strengthened their faith in their immediate circumstances. Hopefully, that happened in your heart as you heard this message. This psalm and the advent season call us to keep trusting God when it feels as though evil is winning, dark clouds are looming, or you are being unfairly treated. When the cords of death feel like they are wrapped around you, and when destruction is flooding your life, take heart! In your distress call upon the Lord for the help you need. Trust him.

**Declare!** – David longed to praise the Lord among the nations. He hoped to sing God's name to anyone who would listen. In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul quoted Psalm 18 as the basis for his missionary ministry. Christian, the reason God worked in your life is not just to deliver you, but also to rescue others by your deliverance. He saved you to save others. He set you free to set others free. So,

tell people! Go—tell it on the mountain! Platform the glory of God through the story of God’s mercy to you.

Friends, God is worthy of our praise. He delivers, he empowers, he blesses. Psalm 18 records David’s praise as he reflects, and advent invites to do the same.

Let this be a season where you say: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”

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