

The Davidic character of this royal psalm is evident even though the psalm may have been written in the post-exilic period for worship in the Second Temple. The psalmist composed the psalm by drawing on a number of David psalms especially Psalms 18.<sup>1</sup> He sought to inspire a new generation of worshipers with the hope and confidence of David. These forlorn refugees returned to Jerusalem from Babylon under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra. They faced tremendous challenges. They were under constant threat by surrounding hostile powers and they faced the daunting physical task of rebuilding Jerusalem. The psalmist sought to inspire the people of God by the timely application of David's bedrock trust in the Lord. The same bold humility and grateful thanksgiving that had shaped God's people during David's reign promised to bring spiritual renewal and hope to a struggling people once again.

The psalmist's effort to bring the psalms forward into his own experience is a model for praying the psalms today. Within the Psalter there are examples like Psalm 144 of development and editing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. By re-framing the content of a psalm for a new context in order to strengthen and inspire believers we are encouraged to interpret the Psalms for the Church today. Psalm 144 invites Christ's disciples to inhabit David's passion for the Lord and practice David's trust in the Lord's steadfast love.

The psalmist develops the leaders' participatory dependency on the Lord. David's role and timing in salvation history meant that he was called to fight to preserve the integrity of the people of God against the surrounding nations. Thus, his militancy is understood in specific ways compatible with that calling and in keys ways antithetical to the calling of Christians today. The metaphors for war carry over into the Church today because we are still at war, but we reinterpret these images in the light of the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Cross of Christ. The psalmist concludes with a beautiful picture of the Lord's abundant material blessings, but such a vision of success should not be misconstrued in support of a prosperity gospel. Believers are children of the King, but that doesn't legitimize egotistical materialism.

### *My Defender*

*Praise be to the Lord my Rock,  
who trains my hands for war,  
my fingers for battle.  
He is my loving God and my fortress,  
my stronghold and my deliverer,  
my shield, in whom I take refuge,  
who subdues peoples under me.*

Psalm 144:1-2

<sup>1</sup> Goldingay, Psalms, 683. Goldingay links Psalm 144:1-2 to Ps 18:2, 34, 46-47; Psalm 144:3 to Ps 18:4 (on the brevity of life); Psalm 144:5-11 take up Ps 18:9, 14, 16, 17, 44-45, 50 and Ps 33:2-3. He also finds phrases in Psalm 144 that parallel Pss 39, 102 and 104. Goldingay identifies several "Aramaisms" which suggests a post-exilic composition ('snatch away' = 'deliver' in v.10; 'kind' = 'kind of provision' v.13; 'relative' = 'people' v.15b).

The psalmist's unself-centering on the Lord is accentuated by his ten personal references (eleven in the ESV). Apart from the Lord who is his Rock and who trains him for war the leader has nothing. He declares his exclusive and absolute dependence upon the Lord. He captures this confident trust in word pictures: an impregnable fortress, an unscalable high tower, an unconquerable protector, an impenetrable shield, and an unassailable refuge. The psalmist revels in the security the Lord provides, and confesses, "He is my loving God." In the midst of these militant images of security and deliverance, the Lord's steadfast love is not to be confused with romantic or sentimental love. This is the love of a King for his subjects, of a commander for his troops, and of parents for their children. This is the redemptive love of the Savior of the world. The strong, saving love of Yahweh overcomes the enemy. The psalmist's intent is to build on King David's royal legacy of faithfulness and fidelity.

The controlling metaphor and motivation for praise is "my Rock."<sup>2</sup> The Rock stands "for the stability on which the messianic kingship rests." In Psalm 18 it signals a transition from David's longsuffering struggle to the establishment of his messianic kingship.<sup>3</sup> In Psalm 144 it reaffirms the saving power of Yahweh and expresses "the belief that the Lord is strong, solid, and immovable."<sup>4</sup> Jesus applied the typology of the "rock" to himself and to his ministry and the apostles developed the metaphor in keeping with Jesus' own interpretation (Matthew 7:24-27; 16:18; 1 Peter 2:4-7). Jesus used the image of the rock to explain his rejection (Matthew 21:42; see Ps 118:22-23) and to illustrate acceptance. When Peter confessed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:16-18). The believer's rejoicing depends on Jesus the Rock of our salvation.

It is not difficult to see how Psalm 144 may have emboldened Nehemiah and the builders of the Jerusalem wall. They were under constant threat of attack from their enemies. Nehemiah challenged the people to put their trust in the Lord and to be prepared to fight for their families. They built the wall with their weapons by their side (Neh 4:16-18). David's praise and gratitude to the Lord because he had trained his hands for war and his fingers for battle undoubtedly inspired the people to be vigilant. Post-exilic Israel was not commanded by God to conquer the surrounding nations as Joshua had been charged to do nor as David had sought to do, but they were called to pray for the Lord's protection and challenged to defend themselves. This implicit just defense strategy may be instructive to Christians today who find themselves in dangerous situations where they need to take up arms to defend their families and innocent victims of

---

<sup>2</sup> Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 76-77. "The ancient imagery of the Lord's unshakable stability goes back to the prophetic pronouncement of the patriarch Jacob over his favored son Joseph. The 'Rock' of Israel steadied Joseph's bow in the face of all his opponents (Gen 49:24). Moses' final song also hails the unwavering faithfulness of God as 'the Rock' whose ways are always just, a God who does no wrong (Deut 32:4). Israel erred greatly when the nation rejected 'the Rock' their Savior (Deut 32:15). They deserted the 'Rock' who had fathered them (Deut 32:18). In no way could they lose a battle, unless their 'Rock' abandoned them (Deut 32:30). For the 'rock' of other nations cannot compare to Israel's 'Rock' (Deut 32:31). Again, Samuel's mother Hannah anticipates her son's role when the time comes for God to give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed (1 Sam 2:10c). With that future prospect before her, she delights to declare, 'There is no Rock like our God' (1 Sam 2:2).

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 78.

<sup>4</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 895.

terrorist attacks and mob violence. For Christians this “just defense” strategy is a last resort in a dire situation. It is only when authorities have abandoned their responsibility to pursue justice and protect the innocent that such extreme measures may be taken. A defensive strategy does not seek to go after the perpetrators of injustice, but only to defend and protect the innocent. It is limited “police” action in response to government abdication. It must not be allowed to become vigilante justice. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,” must be the believer’s chief concern (Rom 12:21).

With that in mind it is important to understand that the psalmist’s militant metaphors are transposed in the Church today from physical violence to spiritual combat. The militancy of the gospel is radically different from the militancy of the world. Jesus commanded believers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5:43). We are called to be peacemakers and to leave room for God’s wrath (Matthew 5:9; Rom 12:19). As Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matthew 5:11). The believer’s commitment to combat readiness is intentional, but instead of being armed with the “weapons of the world” (2 Cor 10:4), she follows the example of Jesus who was willing to suffer for the good. Karl Barth describes the believer’s militancy:

“The militant revolt demanded of Christians — and this distinguishes it from all kinds of other revolts — is not directed *against* people: not even against the host of unbelievers, false believers, and the superstitious. . .nor even. . .against the wicked. . . In terms of their commission — even though they will sometimes clash with all kinds of people in discharging it — they rebel and fight *for* all men, even, and in the last resort precisely, for those with whom they may clash.”<sup>5</sup>

The psalmist concludes his opening praise by thanking the Lord for subduing “peoples” under him. This implies that the Lord had subdued Israel’s enemies. But the Hebrew text reads, “my people,” which implies Israel had been subdued. The corresponding verse in Psalm 18:39 states “adversaries” but the psalmist may want to emphasize something different here — the people of Israel’s cooperation under the post-exilic leadership. In either case the Lord is gratefully acknowledged as the one who makes the leader’s administration possible. As Calvin wrote, “The settled state of the kingdom was owing not to any counsel, valor, or authority of his own, but to God’s secret favor.”<sup>6</sup>

### *The Arc of Deliverance*

*Lord, what are human beings that you care for them?  
mere mortals that you think of them?  
They are like a breath;  
their days are like a fleeting shadow.  
Part your heavens, Lord, and come down;*

---

<sup>5</sup> Harink, *1 Peter*, 127. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4/4: Lecture Fragments, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 210 (emphasis original).

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 261.

*touch the mountains, so that they smoke.  
Send forth lightning and scatter the enemy;  
shoot your arrows and rout them.  
Reach down your hand from on high;  
deliver me and rescue me  
from the mighty waters,  
from the hands of foreigners  
whose mouths are full of lies,  
whose right hands are deceitful.  
I will sing a new song to you, my God;  
on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you,  
to the One who gives victory to kings,  
who delivers his servant David.  
From the deadly sword deliver me;  
rescue me from the hands of foreigners  
whose mouths are full of lies,  
whose right hands are deceitful.*

Psalm 144:3-11

The psalmist begins the arc of deliverance with astonishment. Instead of focusing on the littleness of human beings in comparison to the cosmos (Ps 8:5), the psalmist focuses on the insignificance of human beings in comparison to time. “Mere mortals, Lord, why do you care? We’re nothing more than a puff of air, a breath, a passing shadow.” Job will ask a similar question and agonize over the significance he wished he didn’t have: “What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention, that you examine him every morning and test him every moment?” (Job 7:17-18). But the psalmist knows that contrary to anything we might think, human beings are significant in the Lord’s eyes.

The psalmist’s astonishment that the Lord really cares is met with a bold request. He appeals to the Lord for his supernatural deliverance. “Part your heavens, Lord, and come down.” He is not asking for the Lord to prove himself, nor is he questioning the Lord’s desire to rescue and save his people. He believes in the Lord’s love and power with all his heart. The request is prompted by his desperate straits and the threat of the enemy. The enemy is about to overwhelm him like a tidal wave and the psalmist pleads for the Lord to “reach down your hand on high” and pull him out of the mighty waters. He writes as the representative of the people and he wants the Lord to snatch him out of the hands of deceptive, deceitful enemies. The image of a raging torrent was used by the apostle John in the Book of Revelation to capture the nature of the devil’s oppression (Rev 12:5). The world is drowning in the devil’s deception. The serpent is spewing out lies and accusations. The sheer volume of deceptive words is overwhelming. The metaphor of a flood captures what faithful Christians are up against.

The language of descent and rescue triggers in the believer’s praying imagination the self-emptying of Christ, “Who, being in very nature God. . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Phil 2:6-7). As Ross says, “So here is

another case of a messianic interpretation that uses a type to point to the time when the poetic language will be historically literal.”<sup>7</sup>

The arc of deliverance goes from astonishment that the Lord cares, to a humble boldness that requests the Lord to act, to the grateful and exuberant joy of a new song to “my God.” The song is dedicated to the One who gives salvation. He delivers his chosen ones from “the deadly sword,” and from “the hands of foreigners, whose mouths are full of lies, whose right hands are deceitful” (Ps 144:11). The psalmist is captivated by the beauty of the Lord’s deliverance and he concludes the psalm by painting a picture of the abundant life (John 10:10). The apostle John will do something similar in his vision of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21-22).

### *True Human Flourishing*

*Then our sons in their youth  
will be like well-nurtured plants,  
and our daughters will be like pillars  
carved to adorn a palace.  
Our barns will be filled  
with every kind of provision.  
Our sheep will increase by thousands,  
by tens of thousands in our fields;  
our oxen will draw heavy loads.  
There will be no breaching of walls,  
no going into captivity,  
no cry of distress in our streets.  
Blessed is the people of whom this is true;  
blessed is the people whose God is the Lord.*

Psalm 144:12-15

The vantage point for this description of human flourishing is centered in the Lord’s blessing. It is not found in expressive individualism or in the prosperity gospel. This vision for the good life is grace-based and runs contrary to human pride and selfishness. The Lord is the vantage point for this integrated vision that sees all of life under the reign of God. Family, work, fertility, security, and peace, come together to form a picture of blessing.

The psalmist begins with sons who thrive like healthy plants and daughters who are as graceful and elegant as hand-crafted columns. These images of relational blessing drawn from agriculture and architecture may be especially well-suited to the returning exiles as they sought to reestablish themselves in their homeland. The psalmist reminds planters and builders that their real legacy is not in plants and buildings, but in their sons and daughters. It is they who stand for a future filled with promise. Besides strong families, the psalmist envisions great harvests and fertile flocks. The land will be so productive and fertile that strong oxen will be needed to draw heavy loads to market. Finally, the psalmist promises security and safety to refugees who had lived through

---

<sup>7</sup>Ross, Psalms, 898.

many years of hardship and suffering. It must have been immensely reassuring to be told, “There will be no breaching of the walls, no going down into captivity, no cry of distress in our streets.” They were at long last safely home – recipients of the Lord’s steadfast love and blessing. They had trusted in the Lord and the Lord had brought them home to grow their families, harvest their crops, increase their herds, and give them his shalom. Those who trust in the Lord receive tangible spiritual blessings. Jesus promised the same to his disciples who left family and work to follow him. He promised “a hundred times as much in the present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).

Martin Luther - “Christians do not fight for themselves with sword and musket, but with the cross and with suffering, just as Christ, our leader, does not bear a sword, but hangs on the cross. Your victory, therefore, does not consist in conquering and reigning, or in the use of force, but in defeat and in weakness.”  
“Admonition to Peace,” LW 46:32