

The flow of the psalms is intentional. The psalmist juxtaposes pleas for help (Ps 17) with songs of praise (Ps 18) and places instruction (torah) psalms (Ps 1; 19) in positive tension with royal psalms (Ps 2; 18). Psalm 18 is a messianic/royal psalm in which David celebrates his tender love for the Lord and the Lord's unfailing love for his anointed king. Psalm 18 is also recorded in 2 Samuel 22 with only slight variations. "David celebrates, in lofty strains," wrote John Calvin, "the wonderful grace which God had shown toward him. . . . He also shows that his reign was an image and type of the kingdom of Christ, to teach and assure the faithful that Christ, in spite of the whole world, and of all the resistance which it can make, will, by the stupendous and incomprehensible power of the Father, be always victorious."¹

This is a capstone psalm summing up the many ways God rescued David from Saul and subdued the nations under him. As David looks back over the many escapes and conquests he gives all the credit to the Lord for sparing his life and crushing the opposition. For all the talk about enemies and fortresses, violence and battles, disasters and deliverance, the watchword in Psalm 18 is love. David's dynamic life is all about devoted love.

Love is the theme: David's love for the Lord and the Lord's love for him. The psalmist begins by using a unique word for love to describe David's "deep feeling of compassion and tender affection" for the Lord.² He concludes this fifty verse psalm by celebrating Yahweh's "unfailing love to his anointed" (Ps 18:50). Love is not mentioned again in the forty-eight verses in-between but everything from beginning to end is framed by Yahweh's love, that is the love David has for the Lord and the love the Lord has for David his anointed.

Psalm 18 has the character of a memoir in which David describes the strength of the Lord (18:1-2), remembers the many times the Lord intervened to rescue him (18:3-19), clarifies the meaning of Lord's righteousness and faithfulness (18:20-30), details the way the Lord equipped and readied him for battle (18:31-45), and celebrates how the Lord has established his rule and reign (18:46-50). Psalm 18 is a big picture psalm, an all-encompassing epic, that lays out the fundamental themes of David's story in the context of worship. Psalm 18 provides a precedent for how believers reflect on God's intervention in their lives. His God-centered memoir gives shape to how we tell our stories.

My Rock

*I love you, Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

Psalm 18:1-2

David's devoted love for Yahweh is deeply personal. His ten-fold description of the Lord

¹ Calvin, Psalms, 256-257.

² Ross, Psalms, 441.

delights in enumerating all the ways the Lord is his strength. “Yahweh is my Rock” is the first time the “poetic imagery of a *Rock*, representing divine stability” has been used in the Psalms.³ Palmer Robertson attributes the use of this ancient imagery to the fact that David has been saved from all his enemies.⁴ The Rock stands “for the stability on which the messianic kingship rests” and signals a transition from David’s longsuffering struggle to the establishment of his messianic kingship.⁵

The word used for “my fortress” describes the huge rocky plateau located on the eastern fringe of the Judean Desert near the shore of the Dead Sea, between En Gedi and Sodom, known as Masada.⁶ Herod, king of Judea, would one day build a palatial fortress on top of the plateau in the style of the ancient Roman East. But in David’s day it was a natural fortress, rising 450 meters above the level of the Dead Sea (or 492 yards or five football fields), covering a plateau measuring 650 meters long (710 yards) and 300 meters wide (328 yards). The meaning of these militant metaphors and impressive descriptions is meant to underscore the saving power of Yahweh to deliver no matter who or what is the enemy.

My Rescuer

*I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies.
The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me.
In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.
The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry.
Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it.
He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet.
He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him – the dark rain clouds of the sky.
Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced,
with hailstones and bolts of lightning.
The Lord thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded.
He shot his arrows and scattered the enemy, with great bolts of lightning he routed them.
The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth*

³ Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 76

⁴ 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).

⁵ Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*, 78.

⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, 442.

*laid bare at your rebuke, Lord, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.
He reached down from on high and took hold of me;
he drew me out of deep waters.
He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me.
They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support.
He brought me into a spacious place;
he rescued me because he delighted in me.*

Psalm 18:3-19

David's message might have been compressed into a few succinct propositions, such as, "The Lord is my strength. I have kept his ways. He has saved me from my enemies." Instead, the creativity of David's praying imagination is put on full display. In the Spirit and with poetic freedom he compares the coming of the Lord to earthquakes, volcanos, lightning strikes, and tornadoes. Calvin reasoned that it was impossible for David to extol the power of God's aid "sufficiently and as it deserved" without turning to the power of nature.⁷ Yahweh's voice is like thunder and his actions are like great lightning bolts. David used high impact language, claimed Calvin, because we are so slow to comprehend God's saving greatness. Our "sluggish and weak understandings" required David to dig deep in metaphor and imagery to impress us with "the omnipresent majesty of God."⁸ Like a good preacher David opts for soulful word pictures over flat indicative statements. He wants us to recall the time we witnessed first hand an earthquake or a blizzard or experienced the sheer terror of a tornado. David wanted the worshiper to associate nature's upheaval with the great truth of the Lord's coming. The Lord makes his powerful presence felt in unforgettable ways. Theoretical epiphanies may be good for debate, but an actual encounter with the living God and his awesome power is life-changing. Moses and all Israel experienced the untamed presence of God at Mount Sinai. The disciples experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The apostle Paul experienced the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus.

David's earth shattering cataclysmic language also applies figuratively to the much less spectacular but no less dramatic encounters with God that we experience. When he describes God reaching down from on high and taking hold of him and "drawing him out of deep waters," we are invited to recall the times when God has intervened to save us. The poetry sparks in our imaginations the times when the Lord intervened to rescue us. *Drawing me out of deep waters* triggers within me a vivid memory. When I was about seven or eight I was swimming in the deep end and became disoriented thinking down was up and up was down. I kept swimming down toward the bottom to get to the surface. I remember thinking that it was odd that my exhaled air bubbles were racing in the opposition direction. The next thing I remember was a great force literally snatching me and propelling me out of the water. It was my dad who saw me drowning who rescued me. The psalmist gives us language for the times our heavenly Father rescues us. The Holy Father draws us out of deep waters. He was is there to protect and comfort in the midst of loss and suffering.

⁷ Calvin, Psalms, 267.

⁸ Calvin, Psalms, 268-269.

David's almost apocalyptic description of God's intervention is commensurate with God's intervention in David's victory over Goliath, his escape from king Saul, his anointing as king, and his defeat of the Philistines. There is a poetic parallelism between the language of divine deliverance and the experience of God's saving presence in our lives. When we pray for a lost soul to come to Christ we are praying figuratively for the earth to quake and for the mountains to shake. In the Spirit, this is the language that David used to drive home the truth that the real presence of God is living, not dead; momentous, not trivial; eternal, not temporal. When Christians pray against their enemies they are praying "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

My Refuge

*The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness;
according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me.
For I have kept the ways of the Lord;
I am not guilty of turning from my God.
All his laws are before me; I have not turned away from his decrees.
I have been blameless before him and have kept myself from sin.
The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness,
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.
To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless,
to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the devious you show yourself shrewd.
You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.
You, Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.
With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall.
As for God, his way is perfect: The Lord's word is flawless;
he shields all who take refuge in him.*

Psalm 18:20-30

David lives in a state of grace that is dependent upon the word and spirit of God. His claim to righteousness is not naive like the rich young ruler who boasted of his obedience to the law since he was a boy (Luke 18:21). His testimony is not a claim to perfection but the determination of his whole being – body, mind, and soul – to honor and obey the ways of the Lord. He attributes God's blessing to his deep desire to remain faithful to the will of God by means of the grace of God. Psalms 15, 17, and 18 pick up on this theme. Righteousness is not a vague emotional state, but a knowable reality based on the revelation of God. It is not a matter of feeling good about oneself; it is a matter of a clean conscience before God. To have clean hands in the Lord's sight is to be committed in heart-felt surrender to the knowable revealed will of God.

David is convinced in his soul that God is being honored in his life – not in sinless perfection, for only one was without sin (Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 John 3:5) – but by the grace of God. He is not obeying the law as an imposed duty but as a privileged delight. He does not perceive God as a prison warden standing over him demanding compliance, but as his heavenly

Father loving him and wanting only what is best for him. The length of David's testimony runs somewhat parallel to the length of his description of God's intervention. Although the psalmist emphatically maintains his integrity before God because of God, the emphasis at the end of this section shifts to God's faithfulness, God's blamelessness, God's purity, God's perfection, and God's flawless word. David is confident, not in himself, but in God. This is why he says, "You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty" (Ps 18:27). This is why he credits God with everything good in his life: "You, Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall" (Ps 18:28-29). If there is any boasting to be done it is in the Lord who is his refuge. He alone deserves all the praise and glory.

Calvin's meditation on David's testimony offers an important perspective:

"We ought not, however, to think that David, for the sake of obtaining praise among men, has here purposely indulged in the language of vain boasting; we ought rather to view the Holy Spirit as intending by the mouth of David to teach us the profitable doctrine, that the aid of God will never fail us, provided we follow our calling, keep ourselves within the limits which it prescribes, and undertake nothing without the command or warrant of God. At the same time, let this truth be deeply fixed in our minds, that we can only begin an upright course of life when God of his good pleasure adopts us into his family, and in effectually calling, anticipates us by his grace, without which neither we nor any creature would give him an opportunity of bestowing this blessing upon us."⁹

My Redeemer

*For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God?
It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure.
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights.
He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze.
You make your saving help my shield, and your right hand sustains me;
your help has made me great.
You provide a broad path for my feet, so that my ankles do not give way.*

*I pursued my enemies and overtook them; I did not turn back till they were destroyed.
I crushed them so that they could not rise; they fell beneath my feet.
You armed me with strength for battle; you humbled my adversaries before me.
You made my enemies turn their backs in flight, and I destroyed my foes.
They cried for help, but there was no one to save them – to the Lord but he did answer.
I beat them as fine as windblown dust; I trampled them like mud in the streets.*

*You have delivered me from the attacks of the people;
you have made me the head of nations.
People I did not know now serve me, foreigners cower before me;*

⁹ Calvin, Psalms, 280.

*as soon as they hear of me, they obey me.
They all lose heart; they come trembling from their strongholds.*

*The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be God my Savior!
He is the God who avenges me,
who subdues nations under me, who saves me from my enemies.
You exalted me above my foes; from a violent man you rescued me.
Therefore I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;
I will sing the praises of your name.
He gives his king great victories; he shows unfailing love to his anointed,
to David and to his descendants forever.*

Psalm 18:31-50

Three powerful messianic realities bring this psalm to a conclusion. The Lord's anointed is perfectly prepared and equipped for battle. The Lord's anointed is completely victorious over his enemies. And the Lord's anointed is rightly sovereign over the nations. The scope of the promise and fulfillment corresponds to Psalm 2 and Psalm 8.

Whatever victories David achieved were all because of the Lord's empowerment and equipping. God is the source of all his strength and security.¹⁰ The psalmist's description of God's hands-on-preparation, "*He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze,*" reminds believers of the apostle Paul's prayer for the saints at Ephesus that they would have power, "*together with all the Lord's people,*" to grasp the love of Christ (Eph 3:18). This power to grasp – this ability to lay hold of God's love— requires a certain kind of strength. An ocean lifeguard works out regularly to build up his forearm and strengthen his grasp. There are more than eight muscles in the forearm that wrap around the bone and give it strength. For most of us, these muscles fibers are more like rope, but in lifeguards and carpenters they seem more like steel cables. Any lifeguard or carpenter can identify with the psalmist's metaphor to bend the bronze bow and Paul's metaphor to grasp the love of God.

Physical strength and prowess represent God's power to protect and deliver. God's right hand is a metaphor for God's unbeatable power and undisputed victory. Yet in the midst of all these power images of triumph, the psalmist suddenly shifts to an unexpected and personal description of God's humility and vulnerability. "Your help has made me great" (Ps 18:35c). The Hebrew noun can be translated as "humble," or "meek," and is translated "Your gentleness made (or will make) me great" (AV, RV, RSV).¹¹ David's witness to God's gentleness in the context of his exalted military invincibility and his graphic portrayal of his vanquished enemies is quite remarkable. For David to reason that it was the gentleness of God that made him truly great is both profound and unexpected.¹² David is humbled by the humility of God that would choose him to accomplish his glory. African theologian Cyril Okorochoa writes, "When David says, 'You

¹⁰ Ross, Psalms, 455.

¹¹ Kidner, Psalms, 95.

¹² Kidner, Psalms, 95.

stoop down to make me great,' he recognizes his humble position in regard to God. But God's stooping was even greater than David realized, as we can see in the light of Christ's humbling himself."¹³ The paradoxical impulse that David sensed grows into a full blown theology of salvation. The exalted Lord of creation made himself known in the God who kneels and washed the feet of the disciples (John 13). "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). The full extent of God's humility – his ability to stoop – to transcend his transcendence – and empty himself of his divine prerogatives – only became apparent when Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8).

The humility of God towards David is given as the reason for the miraculous vindication of David over his enemies. The gentleness of God is set in marked contrast to the brutality of David against his foes. It is understandable why Christians find David's enemy talk disconcerting. Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. But in Psalm 18 David revels in pulverizing his enemies into windblown dust and trampling them in the streets. His enemies cried out for help, but the Lord turned a deaf ear to their plea and David utterly vanquished them.

Two important perspectives help today's believer to understand David's response to his enemies. First, we ought to appreciate David's place in salvation history. *Where we stand on the salvation time-line makes a difference.* God chose to make a great nation out of an enslaved people. He redeemed them from bondage and set them apart to be a holy people. Yahweh honored the promise he made to Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3). God chose one nation among the nations to deliver the message that Yahweh was the God of all creation and the Lord of history. Israel's integrity and survival as the people of God depended upon obeying God's specific command to destroy the nations that occupied the promised land. Under no circumstance was Israel to accommodate herself to the surrounding cultures. These idolatrous and degenerate cultures were a serious threat to her relationship to the Lord and the message of Moses made this clear (Deut 7:2-6).

Both Israel and the Church were *set apart* and *set above* for the holy purpose of revealing the one and only God to all the nations, but their respective strategies are polar opposites (1 Pet 2:9). The Church is commanded to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). David's conquest strategy was necessary in his day and Jesus' great commission strategy is necessary in our day. The power of the cross, which refuses to rely on violence and coercion, replaces political and military aggression. The Son of David came with a radically different agenda, one that was anticipated from the beginning, but only implemented with the coming of Immanuel, God with us, the Incarnate One, who came to save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21). "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17). The world remains, "enemy-occupied territory," wrote C. S. Lewis, and "Christianity is the story of how the

¹³ Okorochoa, Psalms, African Commentary, 627.

rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.”¹⁴

The second perspective necessary for interpreting Psalm 18 reads David’s annihilation of the wicked as foreshadowing the end of evil when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead. God promises an absolute end of evil in the new heaven and the new earth. The wars, killings, rapes, and abortions must come to an end. The gang violence, the school massacres, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the trading in human cargo must end. The adultery, abandonment, abuse, and divorce must end. The plagues, epidemics, malignancies, and deformities, must end. The earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and famines must end. The volcanos, tornadoes, hurricanes, and droughts must end. The lies, slander, deception, manipulation, must end. The fraud, greed, bribes, and kickbacks must end. The addictions, obsessions, fixations, and perversions must end. The gluttony and starvation must end. If we itemize every sin, every crime, every disease, every form of deviancy and perversion would there ever be an end to evil? But all evil will end one day. The apostle John in The Book of Revelation announces this end and plays it out live on the stage of our praying imagination so we can feel the drama of the cataclysmic end of evil.

David’s concluding doxology (Ps 18:46-50) anticipates the power of God’s Anointed One to subdue the nations (that impersonal collective of persistent unbelief) and establish his everlasting kingdom. “The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock!” acclaims the psalmist. “Exalted be God my Savior!” Psalm 18 expands on the messianic themes of Psalm 2 and points forward to the coming of the king who will “rule the nations with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery” (Rev 2:27; Ps 2:9). Yahweh will comprise his kingdom of priests from every tribe and language and nation, creating in himself “one new humanity” (Rev 5:9-10; Eph 2:15). The apostle Paul drew from Psalm 18 to prove that the gospel of Christ was intended not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles (the nations). “For I tell you,” wrote Paul, “that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name’” (Rom 15:8-9; see Ps 18:49). Psalm 18 anticipates the universal reach of the eternal gospel of salvation and judgment. The good news, made possible through Yahweh’s “unfailing love to his anointed,” will be preached boldly, throughout the world, to every nation, tribe, language and people.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Collier, 1960, 46.