

## An Ode to Covenant Love: David in His Own Words

2 Samuel 22:1-23:7

Although Islam is a religion that affirms one supreme God like we do, the Islamic view of God is very different from the God of the Bible. According to Islamic teaching, Allah's supremacy is found in his raw power. He can do whatever he wants, with no limitations. And that means he cannot be limited even by his own words. For example, even though Allah has commanded us to follow the teachings of the Quran to seek eternal life, on the Day of Judgment he may very well decide that he wants to condemn all Muslims to Hell and grant to all Christians entrance to Paradise. That would be well within his rights, because it is simply his raw power that makes him supreme. The Bible gives us a different picture of God. Yes, our God can do whatever he pleases, but what he pleases is never out of accord with his character. And the character of our God is defined by love. The Triune God of the Bible is himself an eternal fellowship of self-giving, self-communicating love, the Father loving the Son, and the Son loving the Father, in the shared life of the Spirit. And that love flows out of God's own inner life to embrace us as well. The power of God is not divorced from his love, and that means that when God makes promises, he is bound to those promises, and we can rely on them. God is true to his Word.

One of the greatest obstacles to spiritual growth that I encounter in ministry is our natural difficulty trusting God's love for us. It just comes natural to us to interpret God's heart toward us through our circumstances rather than trusting his covenant promises. Aren't you glad David didn't do that? As an old man, David could have looked back over the chaotic circumstances of his life and concluded, "God must not love me." After all, he had been hunted mercilessly by King Saul, attacked by enemies on all sides of his kingdom, suffered the rape of his daughter Tamar by her half-brother, nearly lost his kingdom to his rebellious son Absalom, and buried three of his sons within his own lifetime. But here we are at the end of 2 Samuel with two poems written by David's own hand, one that looks back over his life and one that looks ahead to the future of his kingdom, and what is the main theme? It is the covenant love of God for David. David believed God's promises through all the chaos of his circumstances.

Where do we see the theme of covenant love highlighted? Notice all the first-person pronouns toward the beginning of David's psalm in 22:2-4: "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 and *my* refuge, *my* savior; you save *me* from violence. *I* call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and *I* am saved from *my* enemies." David speaks with the confidence of one to whom God has bound himself by covenant. All the difference in the world stands between knowing about God and knowing him as *my* God. That same reality is what David reflects on when he praises the "steadfast love" of God in 22:51 and when he refers to the "everlasting covenant" that the Lord has made with his house in 23:5.

I want to show you again how chapters 21-24 of 2 Samuel form a chiasm, and these two compositions of David stand at the center of it:

- A. David ends a famine by atoning for Saul's sin, 21:1-14
- B. David's giant-slaying men, 21:15-22
- C. **David's song of deliverance, 22:1-21**

C.' David's last words, 23:1-7

B.' David's mighty men, 23:8-39

A.' David ends a plague by atoning for his own sin, 24:1-25

As we meditate on these two sections today, let us remember that it is not our circumstances that define God's love for us. It is his covenant promises given to us in Jesus Christ. So let us reflect on the covenant love of God for us as we walk through David's psalm of deliverance in chapter 22 and his final words in 23:1-7. I want to note four results of God's covenant love for us in Christ.

First,

**1. Because of the covenant love of God in Christ, we will be delivered from death (22:1-20).**

Chapter 22 is a lengthy psalm (also known as Psalm 18) that praises God for David's many deliverances from his enemies, especially his deliverances from Saul, who epitomized all the enemies David faced. David celebrates these deliverances, not as signs of good luck, but as clear demonstrations that God has kept his covenant with David.

Note the severity of the threats that faced David in verse 5: "For the waves of death encompassed me, the torrents of destruction assailed me." Waves and torrents give us a picture of watery chaos, like that of Noah's flood or of Israel's passage through the Red Sea. David goes on in verse 6, "the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me." Death is pictured here not merely as the end of life, but as a power unto itself, an enemy that had David firmly in its grasp. At various times in his life, and especially when on the run from Saul, David was a dead man walking, with one foot already in Sheol, the realm of the dead.

But David's posture in the face of such terrors was not one of cowering in fear. It was one of prayerful dependence on God. Verse 7 reads, "In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I called. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry came to his ears." Then what happened? God showed up. David pictures God's response as a supernatural intervention in verses 8-20. Notice the various supernatural elements of God's deliverance in these verses. We have an earthquake and a "heavenquake" in verse 8: "Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations of the heavens trembled and quaked, because he was angry." We have a volcanic eruption in verse 9: "Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him." We have an intense storm in verses 10-15: "He bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew; he was seen on the wings of the wind. He made darkness around him his canopy, thick clouds, a gathering of water. Out of the brightness before him coals of fire flamed forth [lightning bolts]; The LORD thundered from heaven, and the Most High uttered his voice. And he sent out arrows [lightning again] and scattered them; lightning, and routed them." In all these supernatural events, you may be reminded of an earlier story in the Bible, namely, the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt and meeting with God at Mount Sinai. Here are some other echoes of the exodus: in verse 16 David says, "Then the channels of the sea were seen; the foundations of the world were laid bare, at the rebuke of the LORD, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils." Not only does the reference to the sea call to mind the mighty work of parting the Red Sea, but the phrase "the blast of the breath of his nostrils" is only used in one other place in Scripture, and that is in Moses' song of deliverance after the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 15:8. Verse 17 continues this

theme when David says, “He sent from on high, he took me; he drew me out of many waters.” The Hebrew word “drew me out” is the same word used of Moses when he was drawn out of the Nile as a baby, when he got his name (Exod. 2:10). David presents his own deliverance from his enemies as an act of God that resembles his past deeds of salvation for Israel.

But if you read the book of Exodus, and you see the amazing miracles on display in the plagues on Egypt, in the parting of the sea, in the fiery display of God’s presence at Mount Sinai, and then you turn to the stories of David in 1-2 Samuel, you don’t see the same kinds of miracles. Yes, David is delivered from his enemies time and time again, but not with miraculous displays of God’s power over the natural world. David is delivered in much more “ordinary” ways, we might say. Saul throws a spear at David, and it misses. David’s wife Michal covers for him when he slips away unnoticed from Saul’s men. Saul’s son Jonathan warns David about what Saul is planning to do next. It doesn’t read like an account of cosmic disruption, of earthquakes, volcanoes, and violent storms. What is David teaching us by casting his deliverance in such poetic ways? He is teaching us how to see the world as the arena of God’s activity. Whether we’re talking about clearly miraculous events or the subtle directions of God’s “ordinary” providence, it is all from God, and it is all a testimony to his covenant love. For through those “ordinary” events, God is moving heaven and earth for the good of his people. Romans 8:28 assures us that *all things* work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his promise.

But we also need to look beyond David to see the fulfillment of this passage in Christ. Whereas David was on multiple occasions delivered from dying at the hands of his enemies, Christ was actually put to death by his enemies. And then God delivered him by raising him from the dead. David could feel Sheol’s breath on the back of his neck. Jesus Christ was immersed in the depths of Sheol, and he came back from it like Jonah from the belly of the fish. In this, Jesus Christ is not only our Savior, but also the paradigm of our salvation. We look to the one who was brought back from death and hold to the promise of Jesus from John 11:25-26: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” A week ago, September 8<sup>th</sup>, was the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of my grandfather who died in 2007. Written on his headstone at a small cemetery in Cass County, Texas, are the simple words “At rest til the resurrection morn.” Because of Jesus Christ and our covenantal union with him, we will experience death not as a threat to be feared, but as the sweetness of rest until the day he calls our bodies out of their graves. We have been and will be delivered from death in Jesus Christ.

We come now to a second result of God’s covenant love:

**2. Because of the covenant love of God in Christ, we will be vindicated on the Day of Judgment (22:21-28).**

We notice a shift in these verses from a focus on God’s deliverance to his righteousness in vindicating those who are righteous and opposing those who are wicked. Verses 21-25 are themselves a small chiasm within this poem. Notice how verses 21 and 25 mirror each other: “The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me” (v. 21). “And the LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to my cleanness in his sight” (v. 25). These verses speak of what God has done in response to David’s righteousness. Now note the same dynamic between verses 22

and 24: “For I have kept the ways of the LORD and have not wickedly departed from my God” (v. 22). “I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt.” Here David upholds his behavior as righteous. The center of the chiasm is in verse 23: “For all his rules were before me, and from his statutes I did not turn aside.” David kept the Word of God before him, which led to the righteousness of his character and actions, which in turn resulted in his vindication from the Lord over his enemies.

And at this point you may be asking, “What in the world? Has David read 2 Samuel 11, where he slept with the wife of one of his loyal soldiers and then had him murdered to cover it up when he learned she was pregnant? How can David claim to be righteous?” The answer is that the Bible speaks of righteousness in different ways. If we are talking about God’s standard of justice, before which we will either be justified or condemned, then the Bible’s testimony is “None is righteous, no not one” (Psalms 14:3; 53:3; Rom. 3:10). We all need the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ counted to us to cover our sin and give us the standing of righteousness with God. And yet, the Bible often contrasts two categories of people: the righteous and the wicked. So it can speak of righteousness in a relative sense, as a way of describing sinful people whose hearts have been transformed and whose direction in life is driven by faith and oriented toward obedience. So when those who are righteous in this second sense commit sin, at some point it will prick their consciences, and they will repent of it. That is exactly what we see in David’s life. His sins were terrible. But even a man who committed adultery and murder is not known to us primarily as “adulterer David” or “murderer David,” but as the righteous and godly king David. In fact, David is the standard by which future kings of Judah will be measured. Let that be a word of hope to you who hold on to guilt from sins you have committed. You will never be perfect in this life, but you can be repentant whenever you sin, and if you are, the Bible speaks of you as righteous, not wicked.

Verses 26-27 then speak in more general terms of God’s righteous judgment: “With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless man you show yourself blameless; with the purified you deal purely, and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous.” God is gentle in dealing with hearts that are seeking to obey him. But those who break his law and seek to evade justice by their crooked schemes, God is tortuous, meaning he can twist himself around to block their every attempt to evade his justice. We live in a world where the justice system is clearly not perfect. It is limited in its power and often biased in its decisions, and countless people have evaded it for their whole lives. We live in an age when rioters who burn down cities will be bailed out of jail by political leaders, but peaceful protesters at abortion clinics will be raided by the FBI and sent to prison for years. But instead of letting injustice make you angry all the time, let it drive you to reflect on the justice of God and the certain hope that one day, justice will come. God has shown his justice throughout history in measured ways, and the day is coming when all wrongs will be made right, and the deep longing of our hearts for justice will be fulfilled, because God is righteous.

When the Jewish Sanhedrin pronounced their verdict over Jesus on a Thursday night, they said, “Guilty of blasphemy and under the curse of God!” And when they saw him hanging on a cross under a darkened sky on a Friday, they said, “Guilty of blasphemy and under the curse of God!” And then when God raised him from the dead on a Sunday morning, God said, “Not guilty! This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!” It is in the hope of that vindication that we must

rest in a world that condemns us. I have been on the receiving end of slander many times in my life, and I have no doubt I will be slandered again in the future. And though I am by no means perfect at this, I believe the Lord has taught me how to leave those matters with him and relinquish the desire to defend myself. In most situations, it is best to let the Lord answer for you, and trust that, if you are in Christ, you are clothed in his righteousness and will one day share in his public vindication against those who slander you, all because God is a God who loves you and will keep his covenant with you.

But not only will God deliver us from death and vindicate us on the last day, there is more:

**3. Because of the covenant love of God in Christ, we will triumph over our enemies (22:29-51).**

This may sound like a repeat of the same idea from verses 1-20 regarding David's deliverance from his enemies, but now there is a different emphasis. This section of the psalm does not speak merely of David's *deliverance* from his enemies, but of his *conquest* of them. It's not just that his enemies came up empty-handed and said, "Well, foiled again! We'll get you next time, David!" It is rather that by God's power, David rose up against the enemies all around him and crushed them.

Notice a repeated emphasis on David's actions in war, as they are empowered by God, in verses 34-43: "He made *my feet* like the feet of a deer and set me secure on the heights. He trains *my hands* for war, so that *my arms* can bend a bow of bronze. You have given me the shield of your salvation, and your gentleness made me great. You gave a wide place for *my steps* under me, and *my feet* did not slip. *I* pursued my enemies and destroyed them, and did not turn back until they were consumed. *I* consumed them; *I* thrust them through, so that they did not rise; they fell under *my feet*. For you equipped *me* with strength for the battle. You made those who rise against me sink under *me*. You may my enemies turn their backs *to me*, those who hated me, and *I* destroyed them. They looked, but there was none to save; they cried to the LORD, but he did not answer them. *I* beat them fine as the dust of the earth; *I* crushed them and stamped them down like the mire of the streets." Whereas in verses 8-20 picture God coming down from heaven as a warrior to rescue David, here David presents himself as the warrior whose conquers his enemies by the Lord's strength. Both perspectives are true.

Note also that David's triumph over his enemies secures his kingdom and makes it into an empire. Verses 44-49 read, "You delivered me from strife with my people; you kept me as the head of the nations; people whom I had not known served me. Foreigners came cringing to me; as soon as they heard of me, they obeyed me. Foreigners lost heart and came trembling out of their fortresses. The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation, the god who gave me vengeance and brought down peoples under me, who brought me out from my enemies; you exalted me above those who rose against me; you delivered me from men of violence." The whole psalm crescendos into a celebration of David's kingdom, not merely in his rule over Israel, but over the nations around him.

The psalm ends with verses 50-51: "For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing praises to your name. Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever." You may recall that early in 1 Samuel we also had a long poetic section, the prayer of Hannah (2:1-10). Hannah ended her prayer by saying, "The

LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.” Hannah, who lived before Israel ever had a king, foresaw and prophesied of the Lord’s anointed one to come. Verse 51 looks back over David’s life and reign and says, “Look, what Hannah prayed has happened!”

Does this mean that as believers we are, like David, to take up the sword against our enemies with the expectation that God will likewise empower us to conquer them and build an empire? No, that is not a legitimate application of this text. We are called to love our enemies, to pray for them, and to seek the good of their repentance and faith. Why? Because we are living between the two comings of Christ, the time of God’s patience. Yes, Christ has been enthroned over the cosmos, but he is not yet exercising a coercive rule over his enemies. Instead, he has commanded us to go to them and preach the message of salvation. And that’s exactly how Paul applies 2 Samuel 22:50 in Romans 15:8-9: “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.’” David writes of praising God among the subdued nations who tremble in fear before him. Paul sees in that text a foretaste of the day when the nations will join together in praising God because of the good news of Jesus proclaimed to them. The day will come when Christ will return and crush his enemies. But until that day comes, he has commanded us to love our enemies and to proclaim the gospel to the world. We are not called to build an earthly empire, but to be ambassadors for a heavenly one.

The covenant love of God guarantees for us deliverance from death, vindication on the day of judgment, and future triumph over our enemies. We have now reached the end of David’s psalm in chapter 22 and move into his final oracle in chapter 23 and a fourth and final result of God’s covenant love:

**4. Because of the covenant love of God in Christ, we will inherit a kingdom of blessing and righteousness (23:1-7).**

This oracle is identified as David’s last words, which doesn’t mean he uttered them on his deathbed, but rather that they are his last official words in his time as king. They are David’s words, but also God’s words, as verses 2-3a make clear: “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me.” This is one of countless examples in the Bible where Scripture itself tells us that it is the very Word of God.

After the long introduction, David’s oracle speaks of the blessings of a godly king in verses 3b-4: “When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.” One of my favorite practices is to sit out on my deck in the early morning, with coffee and a Bible, and listen to the sounds of the world waking up while watching the beautiful colors of the sunrise slowly light up the darkened sky. A king who fears the Lord is like that morning sun that dispels the darkness. Or he is like rain that revitalizes a dry land, bringing vibrant life to pastureland that makes it suitable for animals to graze in. A godly king, as a federal head of his people, brings life, blessing, and joy to the kingdom under his rule.

Having spoken in general terms about a godly king, David now applies that truth to his own dynasty in verse 5, which is the heart of this oracle: “For does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?” David trusts the promise of God from 2 Samuel 7 that his kingdom will endure beyond his life, culminating in a promised Messiah.

And one of the tasks of the righteous king who is to come is to remove worthless men from his kingdom, which is the subject of the concluding section of this oracle in verses 6-7: “But worthless men are all like thorns that are thrown away, for they cannot be taken with the hand; but the man who touches them arms himself with iron and the shaft of a spear, and they are utterly consumed with fire.” The picture here is of thorns that you can’t pull up with your bare hands, so you grab an iron tool to pull them out of the ground and throw them into the fire. John the Baptist used a similar metaphor of the coming Messiah in Matthew 3:12: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” The kingdom of the Messiah, when it is fully consummated, is a kingdom in which all wickedness has been purged. The wheat and the tares grow up together now, but the day is coming when they will be finally separated.

We are once again in a highly charged political season. I have my own opinions about how I intend to vote, and I hope you will plan to cast an informed vote as well. But it is also important to recognize that even when your preferred candidate or party wins, the result in a fallen world is always going to be a mixture of good and bad. Political victory will never bring with it perfect righteousness. Power has a tendency to corrupt people, so when sinful people wield power over others you can be sure that injustice will result at some point. That’s why one of the fundamental values of the American Constitution is the limitation of the power of the federal government, as well as the separation of its powers into three branches that have checks and balances on each other. The American Founders, steeped in a Christian heritage, understood that the best way to protect the God-given rights of the people is to limit the power of their leaders. And yet, even with the brilliant design of our Constitution, we have seen the federal government grow in size and power enormously since the time of our founding. Don’t expect politicians to save you. The most I think we can hope for from government in this present age is what Paul writes about when he calls upon us to pray for all who are in authority in 1 Timothy 2:2, namely, “that we lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” Earthly governments cannot implement the righteousness of the kingdom of God. The best they can do is allow us the freedom to live quietly, pursuing godliness and preaching the gospel without hindrance.

Our hope for a day when worthless men will have no more influence over society, when perfect righteousness will prevail, must await the day when Christ returns to reveal his royal authority to the world. David’s last words point us to a vision of that coming day. Let that be a reminder to us not to get so drawn into the political season that we assume that everything hangs on the outcome of this upcoming election. In 2004 I was a student at Southern Seminary in Louisville, and I remember attending the chapel service on a Tuesday in November when the 2004 presidential election was being held. We sang hymns together that day, as we always did at seminary chapel, and one of the hymns we sang was “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name,” which ends with these words: “O that with yonder sacred throng we at his feet may fall; we’ll join the everlasting song and crown him Lord of all. We’ll join the everlasting and crown him Lord of

all.” I remember that on that particular Tuesday, Dr. Albert Mohler, president of the seminary, walked up to the pulpit and asked the music director to lead us in that last verse again to remind ourselves on election day 2004 that “This is one office that is not up for a vote today.” So we sang it again, not knowing whether Democrats or Republicans would shortly be coming into power over us, but rejoicing to know that whatever the outcome, Christ is Lord over all, and nothing can change that.

David was a man who endured a lot of chaos in his life, but he did not interpret his circumstances as the measure of God’s love for him. He held to the covenant promises of God to interpret the love of God for him. And at the end of this book that tells of his often chaotic and painful life, we see that David was a man held in the grip of the covenant love of God. In Christ, that same covenant love is directed toward us, promising us deliverance from death, vindication in the day of judgment, triumph over our enemies, and a future kingdom of blessing and righteousness in which we will know endless joy. May these words of David join the chorus of biblical testimony to us who are in Christ that God is true to his covenant promises, and because he is, we can be assured no matter what our circumstances that his love will never fail us. Amen.