

July 16, 2023

A SONG OF PRAISE FOR DELIVERANCE

Psalm 18

(1 of 2 in a series of selected Psalms)

It's astounding just how frequently and boldly Paul calls upon his readers to imitate the example he provides for them in his life. Just as a taste of how he does this, listen to these exhortations. He says to the Corinthians, "I urge you, then, be imitators of me," before later adding, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). He says to the Philippians, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us," while adding in the next chapter, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things" (Phil 3:17; 4:9). Then, to the Thessalonians, he notes, "For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us" (2 Thess 3:7). And I could show you other examples as well, but it should be clear that Paul does not hesitate in calling others to watch and imitate what he does as an example of what it looks like to follow and obey Christ.

Why would Paul do that? My guess is that it is simply the easiest and most straightforward way he knew to be obedient to the Great Commission. If Jesus had commanded his followers to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that Christ has commanded, I assume Paul thought one of the easiest ways to teach others to obey what Christ commands is by showing them how to do it. Isn't that true in almost any task we're trying to learn?

The recognition that Paul holds himself up as an example to follow, however, may well cause us to become a bit disheartened. After all, Paul is no longer here. Perhaps we could find ourselves grieving that we don't have the apostle Paul to watch and follow and imitate as we seek to follow Christ ourselves. But we need not do that because I think we have more. For one, we have a multitude of believers who have come after Paul. One of the rich blessings of belonging to a local church is that you're covenantally bound to a number of fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters in the faith who can provide rich examples of what it looks like to follow Jesus, just as Paul provided in the first century. At the same time, however, we still can look at Paul's example as well by reading his letters and seeing what he does, what he says, how he thinks, etc. So, we still have Paul, and yet we have more. But there's more. We're not limited to Paul's example when we read the Scripture. We can open the Bible to books and chapters written by different authors and follow their examples as well, and I think that Psalm 18 asks us to do that very thing as we look at this psalm written by David.

Psalm 18 reads like a picture or an example of what our devotion to the Lord should look like, how to express our hearts rightly to him, and how to stir our hearts to love and praise. In other words, if someone were to ask you, "What should characterize my heart toward the Lord, and how should I go about moving my heart in that direction?" you might answer by saying, "Meditate on Psalm 18 and follow David's example there." And that's precisely what I want us to do this morning. But, first, let me note a few things about the psalm itself.

First, Psalm 18 is an obviously lengthy psalm. If you work your way through the psalter, beginning with the first psalm, then you'll find that this psalm stands out for its length. When I was a kid, our church had envelopes that you were given at the beginning of the year to put your offering in, but the envelope also had a place where you could check how many chapters of the Bible you'd read that week. And so I was driven—by my competitive spirit more than a godly heart—to get a number of chapters under my belt each week. And when I discovered how short most of the psalms were, I felt like I'd found a way to cheat the system. I just started reading through the Psalter. After all, there's no psalm longer than twenty verses in the first seventeen psalms. And then you get to Psalm 18, and it's fifty verses. Needless to say, I skipped over Psalm 18 when I compiling my list of read chapters that week as a kid. But the length isn't the only interesting aspect of the psalm.

Psalm 18 also is recorded nearly verbatim in another part of the Scripture (including the superscript). You can see from the superscript that this is a song that David wrote as the Lord had delivered David from the hand of Saul and from the hand of all his enemies. Consequently, you'd think that this psalm may well have been penned by David late in his life as he looked over the years in which God had delivered him from Saul (who'd wanted to kill him) and from so many enemies he faced along the way. And you'd be right to think that way because the other place this psalm occurs in Scripture is in 2 Samuel 22, right at the end of David's life. As David reflects back on all that the Lord has done to deliver him from Saul and the hands of his other enemies, he sits down and writes this psalm as an expression of love, praise, and thankfulness.

And, finally, let me note the psalm's arrangement. I think it has a bit of a chiasmic arrangement (think the left side of the letter "x"). The psalm breaks down into six parts, and the latter three parts correspond (in reverse order) to the first three parts. We can picture it this way:

- A – David praises God as his rock whom he loves (vv. 1-3)
- B – David outlines how God delivered him from God's perspective (vv. 4-19)
- C – David notes his faithfulness toward God (vv. 20-24)
- C' – David notes God's faithfulness toward him (vv. 25-30)
- B' – David outlines how God delivered him from David's perspective (vv. 31-45)
- A' – David praises God as his rock and salvation (vv. 46-50)¹

Therefore, to sum up, these fifty verses are recorded twice in the Scriptures for us, are carefully constructed, and (as I've noted) I think they give us the great benefit of seeing an example of someone whose heart is turned toward the Lord, which is something we all should desire for ourselves. Therefore, let's walk through this psalm, see what we see David doing, and then apply it to ourselves along the way. I want to tackle it by looking at it in four stages (grouping together some sections that correspond to each other). First, we see that David expresses his love for the Lord.

¹ This chiasmic pattern is noted by James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 153.

David expresses his love for the Lord

David begins with a declaration of his love for the Lord. He writes, “I love you, O LORD, my strength” (v. 1) before going on to speak of God as his rock, fortress, deliverer, shield, stronghold, and one who is worthy to be praised. And it might be odd for us to hear that or to think that somehow this sounds odd coming from one who was such a man who was a victorious king in war over his enemies. Perhaps we’ve confined an expression of love for God to children or immature Christians. But if we think that way, we’ve actually wandered far afield from the Bible. Remember that David’s heart was turned toward the Lord, and also remember that God’s greatest commandment given to his people is that we love him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. David’s expression is an expression of one who is seeking to obey God in what God commands of us.

The very thing that David expresses here must be the aim of our lives. There is nothing more important in our lives than that you and I love God. We may have dreams of being a great preacher, or singer, or servant, but none of those is as important as loving God. In fact, the Scripture says that we can do all kinds of impressive things and have not love, and those things are worthless. Therefore, if you strive to excel in every other avenue (even in service to the Lord) and achieve great proficiency, but don’t love the Lord, then all of it is worthless.

This also means that we can’t reduce love to merely our acts. Again, Paul can envision in 1 Corinthians 13 someone giving his body to be burned but not having love. There isn’t a more service-oriented, committed act than that, and yet it can be empty of love. Love must include our affections, the disposition of our hearts, toward another. And the Lord commands that the utmost affections of our hearts be directed toward him. This is our greatest commandment.

And, as I’ve noted before, some encouragement. You may never be the greatest speaker, singer, writer, administrator, or whatever else. We all have our limitations. But there’s nothing that keeps you from loving the Lord as much as anyone who has ever lived. So make that your goal. Love the Lord as David obviously did. Love the Lord more than David did. There is nothing greater to strive after in our lives. So, that’s where we start.

But how? That is, how do we get our hearts there? Well, let’s look at what David did. What did David do to stir his heart so that it overflowed in love to the Lord? He remembered how the Lord had delivered him, time and again.

David reflects on how God has delivered him

In verses 4-19 David pictures God coming to deliver him from the hands of his enemies time and time again, but he doesn’t picture it in calm, peaceful terms. Rather, he uses imagery from the Old Testament where God is pictured as coming to his people in earth-shaking kinds of ways—like at Mount Sinai, or with Joshua, or with the judges. He speaks of calling to the Lord as he thought he was about to die (vv. 4-6) and then of God coming to his rescue. As David describes

God coming to rescue him, he speaks of God causing the foundations of the earth to tremble (v. 7), smoke and fire (v. 8), with hailstones and coals of fire (v. 12), with thunder (v. 13), and lightning (v. 14). Then, David pictures God taking him and drawing him out of deep waters and out of the hands of his enemies who were too mighty for him (vv. 16-17). So, in verses 4-19 David is picturing all the times he was delivered from his enemies in powerful pictures of God coming to him.

Then, when you come to verses 31-45, David isn't switching topics or contradicting himself. He's still speaking of how God delivered him from his enemies, but now he's speaking practically of the means God used to allow him to escape or conquer those against him. He notes that God equipped him with strength (v. 32), made his feet secure (v. 33), trained his hands for war (v. 34), supported him with his right hand (v. 35), and made it so that David did not slip (v. 36). Consequently, David was able to pursue, overtake, and destroy his enemies (vv. 37-40) and become the head of nations (v. 43).

So, David is investing some mental imagery in thinking about, recounting, and writing down all that God has done to deliver him throughout his life. But why? Why is this so meaningful to David? I think the answer is in why David believes God has done these things for him. He writes, "He rescued me, because he delighted in me" (v. 19). David knew that God's work of deliverance in his life was an expression of God's love for him. And that's why he loved God. That's the connection between verses 1-3 and the rest of the psalm? One reason David unabashedly proclaims his love for God is because he's certain of God's love for him—which is evidenced in God's many acts of deliverance.

That's true for us as well. At its most foundational level, our love for God is rooted in us knowing God's love for us. If you never grasp God's love for you, you simply will not love God as you should. But if you do begin to grasp God's love for you, then you'll find your heart not only growing in your affections toward God, but you'll also feel freer to love your brothers and sisters in Christ and your neighbors as well.

"But," someone might say, "David has a unique advantage. He can consider all the ways that God has expressed his love for him through all the times he's delivered David from the hands of his enemies. How can we match that?" And here is where we need to see that the redeeming work of Jesus Christ—living, dying, and rising—is an expression of God's love for us. In the act of sending his Son, God did more than move heaven and earth for our sake, he gave up his son for us. The Scripture repeatedly ties together God's love for us and Christ's redeeming work for us. John 3:16 is a classic text on this point, but it's far from the only one. In Romans 5:8 Paul tells us that God shows his love for us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. In Galatians 2:20 he'll write of the Son of God "who loved me and gave himself for me." And in Revelation 1:5 Jesus is introduced as the one who "loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood." And that's just a sampling. Our Father wants us to consider the death of Jesus for us and recognize that it is a declaration of his deep love for us, a love that Paul reminds us in Ephesians 3 that is beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

Therefore, we're not in a disadvantaged position in comparison to David but in a greater one. As he considered his military victories and rightly saw it as a reminder that his God delighted in him so that it stirred David's affections, so we can consider the cross and do the same. If you want to stir your heart in affection for God, start at the cross and meditate on all that God has done for your good. But David adds to this. Just as you can turn a diamond and see another facet of its beauty, now David reflects on all that God has done as an expression of God's faithfulness. So in verses 20-30 we see that David proclaims God's faithfulness.

David proclaims God's faithfulness

David proclaims God's faithfulness in two stages. First, in verses 20-24 he shows God's faithfulness by reflecting on himself personally. David first acknowledges that his heart is turned toward the Lord in obedience. He brackets this section by acknowledging in verses 20 and 24 that the Lord has dealt with him according to his righteousness, rewarding him for the cleanness of his hands. And in verses 21-23 David describes his own personal righteousness, noting that he kept the Lord's ways, has not departed from him, did not put his rules aside, kept himself from guilt, and was blameless before the Lord.

Now, if you're aware of David's life, this might be confusing. Among David's other sins, you might think, "We know David committed adultery and then had the woman's husband killed. He sure measures blamelessness in a weird way." But we need to consider that David isn't saying that he lived a morally perfect life. What he's saying is that the disposition of his heart and life is toward the Lord in obedience. Yes, there were times he sinned, but he ultimately confessed and turned from those sins. In other words, if you're a believer, David is describing our experience. Can't we say of ourselves that we live under God's Word, with obedient hearts toward him? Certainly we can and should. But by that we don't mean that we live in sinless perfection. We mean that the orientation of our hearts is toward wanting to obey and honor the Lord in our lives. That's all David is saying.

And, like us, David understands that this is all due to God's grace. He will acknowledge in verse 27 that God brings down the arrogant but saves the humble. He couldn't write that if he had been saying in verses 20-24 that he thought he did righteous deeds apart from God's sustaining grace. That would be arrogant. He's saying something along the lines of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:10 when Paul compared himself to the other apostles, saying, "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

And David's point that he then elaborates on in verses 25-30 is that with those whose heart are turned toward the Lord in obedience, God's disposition toward them is to do them good. He shows himself merciful to the merciful, blameless to the blameless, and purified to the pure. To those who are haughty, he brings down, but to those who are humble, he saves.

This certainly doesn't mean that he spares us from struggle. For creatures like us who need to grow in our trust of the Lord, reliance on him, and obedience to him, it would be unloving of God

to withhold suffering and struggle from us. We need it, and so he disciplines us through the hardships of our lives in love. But it does mean that he takes every aspect in our lives and works them for our good. He's crafting everything in our lives to the end of making us more like Jesus. That's what David is saying—for those whose hearts are toward the Lord, the heart of our God is toward us as well. And we can know that at any moment.

In your struggles, do not believe that the Lord is abusing you for kicks. As you struggle through childlessness, loneliness, chronic sickness, pain of loss, or a multitude of other difficulties that cause us to yearn for the life to come, you can know that your Father is for you, loving you, and treating you as his child in whom he delights. His heart is never turned from you. Hold on to that in every moment. Remind yourself of it so that you might not lose sight of his deep love for you that can stir your love for him in return. That's what David does at the center of this psalm. He reflects on God's acts of deliverance as expressions of divine love, and he reflects on God's faithfulness as he remembers God's goodness toward him. And these reflections ultimately lead David back to where he began. In verses 46-50 we see that David praises God.

David praises God

David ends the psalm by declaring praise to the Lord. He once more notes all that God has done for him, reminding us that God destroyed David's enemies, rescued him, and exalted him. Then David adds, "For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing to your name" (v. 49). God's love for us merits our praise as well. He loved us when we were unlovable. He rescued us when we didn't merit rescuing. We were sheep who'd gone astray from our master only for him to come after us at great cost. We were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ. Therefore, we should praise him. As you spend time reflecting on God's love for you, let it stir you to praise—personally and corporately.

And there is one final element in this psalm that reminds us that we should praise the Lord. In verse 50 David writes, "Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever." With those words, David ends the psalm, pointing us forward. It's hard to read of David's offspring without our minds taking us to the great son of David, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate king to come from David's line, and he too faced enemies—the ultimate enemies of Satan, sin, and death. Unlike David, who felt ensnared by death but lived, his greater Son actually did die, but then he was delivered, being raised from the dead on the third day so that you and I—though faith in him—might become children of God and know the glorious and intimate relationship with our God that David pictures here.

Therefore, as those who have faith in Christ, let's make it our aim to love our God deeply, to meditate on his work to deliver us, to remember his faithfulness toward us, and to praise his great name. And may we do so even now as we come to the table. Amen.