

# “My Shield, Strength & Stronghold”

2 Samuel 22:1-3 (2 Samuel 22; Psalm 18) <sup>1</sup>

This morning we come to the book of 2 Samuel, which tells the story of David’s forty-year reign, first over Judah, and then over the United Kingdom of Israel. The truth of the matter is that 2 Samuel doesn’t contain very much that’s pretty, nor does it record much that’s worthy of emulation. The book is filled with violence and intrigue, and it’s here that we learn of David’s adultery with Bathsheba, his subsequent murder of her husband, of rape and incest in David’s family, of Absalom’s ill-fated rebellion against his father, and of David’s penchant for revenge. At the very least, 2 Samuel is a good example of the Bible’s in-your-face honesty about the often awful behavior of many of its heroes.

As I reviewed all this, I didn’t see much that was edifying, except by way of bad example, and I nearly despaired of finding a text I wanted to explore. Then I came to 2 Samuel 22:1, where it’s recorded that “*David sang this song to the LORD after the LORD had rescued him from all his enemies and from Saul.*” As I read that song, the marginal notes reminded me that this song also appears in the Bible as Psalm 18, and I decided that we could perhaps redeem 2 Samuel by examining that psalm. So that’s what we’re going to do, and you’ll probably want to follow along in your Bible as we make our way through this poem of praise.

There are those who consider Psalm 18 to be the finest poem David ever wrote—at least the finest of his poems that is recorded in Scripture. Its style is distinctly David’s in its honesty, its eloquence, its hubris, and its use of nature as a means for discovering God.<sup>2</sup> As one commentator put it, for David, the whole earth had metaphorically become “a church filled by the living presence of the eternal God; on every side was the burning altar, and the whole air was charged with holy incense.”<sup>3</sup> For David, every experience, every location, had the potential to become “*the house of God, the very gateway to heaven*” (Genesis 28:17).

The psalm has a carefully-designed inverted poetic structure called chiasm, about which you can learn more in the online version of this message.<sup>4</sup> It probably celebrates, not a single deliverance or victory, but rather gathers up a number of experiences in David’s heartfelt praise to God early in his reign, when his power was at its height, and before his sin with Bathsheba had left its mark on his soul and its shadow on his kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 25, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Parker, *The People’s Bible: Discourses upon Holy Scripture*, vol. XII, “The Psalter” (New York: Funk & Wagnall’s, 1890), p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> Parker, p. 153.

<sup>4</sup> The psalm might be diagrammed as “faith – distress – deliverance – praise – deliverance – distress – faith.” Chiasm is a literary structure that can be seen as x-shaped (the shape of the Greek letter chi, hence the name), for example a-b-c-b'-a' where a and a', b and b' are in some way parallel or related. For example, in the English of the NRSV Jeremiah 4:5a reads a-b-a'-b': "Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem" but in the original Hebrew the word order is "declare in Judah, and in Jerusalem proclaim" which is chiastic (a-b-b'-a'). Chiastic structures are sometimes also called [palistrophic](#). The structure of psalm 18 is as follows:

- A. Yahweh, the Rock of Israel (vv. 1-3)
- B. Affliction (vv. 4-6)
- C. The Lord's Coming to Help (vv. 7-15)
- D. The Lord's Deliverance (vv. 16-19)
- E. God's Faithfulness to the Faithful (vv. 20-29)
- D'. The Divine Perfections (vv. 30-36)
- C'. The King's Victory Over the Enemies (vv. 37-42)
- B'. The Glorious Deliverance (vv. 43-45)
- A'. Yahweh, the Rock of Israel (vv. 46-50)

<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 91.

John Calvin thought that this psalm ought to be read every day (1:307), pointing out that its deepest meaning has more to do with the Lord Christ than it does with King David. The hymn, “I Have Come from the Darkness,” which we sang earlier, was inspired by this psalm, as were several praise songs that I’ll point out as we go along.

Like all the psalms, Psalm 18 aids us in our prayer and worship by giving voice to deep feelings that few of us have the ability to express on our own. As one commentator wrote in the 1890’s, “David had the gift of expression even in [the] matter of trouble; he remembered every pang; he saw every spectral image; he could give a name to every passing emotion; he grew eloquent in the redundancy of his language in setting forth the blackness and terribleness of the night through which his soul had been supernaturally conducted. [Most of us] have no gift of telling the extent of affliction which [we] have undergone. [We] know [we] have been in trouble, but have no words wherewith to set forth before the minds of others adequate images of [our] actual distress.”<sup>6</sup> David could do that; and one of the reasons the Psalter is so beloved is that its poets help us express to God the things we’re feeling on days both good and bad.

And so let’s turn our attention to the text itself. We’ll only be able to “hit the high points” this morning. I hope you’ll turn again to Psalm 18 this afternoon and let it continue to speak to your heart.

Verse 1 simply says, “*I love you, LORD, my strength.*” To say it in a sentence, Psalm 18 is a love song to God, not unlike the chorus “I Love You, Lord.” Let’s sing that together. It’s number 78 in the hymnal: “I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice to worship You. O, my soul, rejoice! Take joy, my King, in what You hear: may it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.” Isn’t that good? Psalm 18 is a similar song.

Verse 2 completes the initial statement of the theme of the psalm: “*The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the strength of my salvation, my stronghold.*”

David was a warrior, well-schooled in battle, and well familiar with the various ways in which geography could be used to provide both protection and strategic advantage. During the years in which he was a fugitive from Saul’s fury, David’s life frequently depended on his finding and using rocky strongholds that could be defended by a small force against a much larger army. He remembers those safe places as he thinks of God as his protecting rock, his craggy stronghold against those who would do him harm. For you *Lord of the Rings* fans, this verse calls to mind the desperate battle of Helm’s Deep.

Verses 4-6 describe how David felt time after time when Saul and other enemies advanced against him: “*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.*”<sup>7</sup>

Verses 7-15 describe an experience called a “theophany,” or a unique manifestation of God’s presence. Other examples of theophanies in the Old Testament include God’s appearance to Abraham in the visitors who came to destroy Sodom (Genesis 18); to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3-4); to Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19); and to Joshua on the plain of Jericho (Joshua 5:13-15).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Parker, p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> Another *Lord of the Rings* image similar to this is when the murky monster of the dark pool wrapped its inky tendrils around Frodo’s foot as the Fellowship of the Ring entered the Mines of Moria.

<sup>8</sup> See also Psalm 68:7-8; Isaiah 13:9-10; Joel 3:15-16; Nahum 1:3-6.

What we see in Psalm 18, though, has been called the most magnificent description of a theophany anywhere in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> Here's part of it: *"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 [sounds positively dragonish]."*

*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 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" (vv. 6b-10, 16-17)<sup>10</sup>*

This is, of course, a poetic description, and the first thing to see here is the surprising and enormous worth God places on the struggles of just one person, "moving heaven and earth" to rescue one of His children in distress. The second thing to notice is the tender care that follows the titanic scale of the rescue. Skip over for a moment to verses 35-36: *"You have given me the shield of your salvation. Your right hand supports me; your gentleness has made me great. You have made a wide path for my feet to keep them from slipping."* If you've ever hiked in the mountains and had to traverse a narrow and dangerous defile, you can appreciate this image. What's really surprising, though, is the gentleness of this "heavenly monster."

Verse 16, *"He reached down from heaven and rescued me; he drew me out of deep waters,"* has a later counterpart in Isaiah's prophecy: *"But now, O Israel, the LORD who created you says: 'Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior'" (Isaiah 43:1-3).*

Verse 16 is also similar to our hymn, "Love Lifted Me." Let's sing the first verse of that together. It's #508: "I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore, very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more; but the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry, from the waters lifted me, now safe am I. Love lifted me! Love lifted me! When nothing else could help, Love lifted me."

While David's claims of righteousness in verses 16-24 seem rather overstated in relation to his many failings, they do apply with undiminished force to our Lord Jesus, about whom this psalm also speaks.

Verses 25-26 teach another important truth: *"To the faithful you show yourself faithful; to those with integrity you show integrity. To the pure you show yourself pure, but to the wicked you show yourself hostile."* God is always faithful to His nature; but that faithfulness operates differently according to how we ourselves respond to it.<sup>11</sup> You and I are only able to see, hear, and know those parts of God's character that we have prepared ourselves to experience through disciplined obedience to His commands. God does indeed want us to know Him, and to know Him fully; but we can no more see God while living unholy lives than Dr. Ben Carson could do surgery with a table knife. Proper training and proper tools are essential to success.

Verse 28, *"You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light,"* was the inspiration for the hymn, "I Have Come from the Darkness," which we sang earlier. Here are

<sup>9</sup> John I. Durham, "Psalms," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> For other instances of cherubim, see Genesis 3:14; Exodus 25:18-22; 1 Kings 6:19-28).

<sup>11</sup> Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, *The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 193.

the words of the first verse once more: “I have come from the darkness to the light of the Lord; I have come from the night to the day. He has guided my footsteps in the truth of His Word; by His love He has shown me the way. I have come from the darkness to the light, to the light of redemption from sin. Oh, my soul will rejoice in His might, for my Savior dwells within.”

Verse 30 is a wonderful reminder that needs no commentary: “*As for God, his way is perfect. The LORD’s word is flawless; he shields all who take refuge in him.*”

Verses 37-45 describe the crushing victories David achieved more than once over his enemies, but again, their true and final fulfillment is still in the future even now. As John recorded in the Revelation, “*Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. And the one sitting on the horse was named Faithful and True. For he judges fairly and then goes to war. His eyes were bright like flames of fire, and on his head were many crowns. . . .*

*He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the Word of God. The armies of heaven, dressed in pure white linen, followed him on white horses. From his mouth came a sharp sword, and with it he struck down the nations. He ruled them with an iron rod, and he trod the winepress of the fierce wrath of almighty God. On his robe and thigh was written this title: King of kings and Lord of lords”* (Revelation 19:11-6).

The psalm ends with another exclamation of praise to God for His love, power, and deliverance. Verse 46, “*The LORD lives! Blessed be my rock! May the God of my salvation be exalted!*” has also inspired a familiar praise song, “I will call upon the Lord.” It’s in the form of “call and response,” which means that phrases are sung by the leader and repeated by the group. We sing this from time to time, so you’ll probably remember it. Jenetha will “call” and the rest of us will “respond”:

I will call upon the Lord,  
Who is worthy to be praised!  
So shall I be saved from my enemies.  
The Lord liveth! Blessed be my Rock!  
May the God of my salvation be exalted!<sup>12</sup>

Well, where do you find yourself this morning in the scheme of Psalm 18? Do faith and praise come easily to you today? Are you able to say with David, “*I love you, LORD; you are my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection. He is my shield, the strength of my salvation, and my stronghold”?* If so, then I hope you’ll be careful to give God praise!

But it may be that you’re here this morning in distress and crying out for deliverance, as David also did. Perhaps Anna Russell was thinking of this Psalm when she wrote our concluding hymn, “Wonderful, Wonderful Jesus.” It’s number 749.

There is never a day so dreary, there is never a night so long,  
but the soul that is trusting Jesus will somewhere find a song.  
There is never a cross so heavy, there is never a weight of woe,  
but that Jesus will help to carry because He loves you so.  
There is never a care or burden, there is never a grief or loss,  
but that Jesus in love will lighten when carried to the cross.  
There is never a guilty sinner, there is never a wandering one,  
but that God can in mercy pardon through Jesus Christ, His Son.  
Wonderful, wonderful Jesus! In the heart He implanteth a song:  
a song of deliverance, of courage, of strength; in the heart He implanteth a song.

<sup>12</sup> “I Will Call Upon the Lord,” Sound III, Inc., 1981.