

“WHO IS A ROCK EXCEPT OUR GOD?”

As you can see by the title that is affixed to this psalm (and isn't it interesting that one of the longest psalm titles goes with one of the longest psalms?) this is one of the psalms of David. In fact, we find an almost identical psalm, including the title, in 2 Samuel 22. The context there tells us that this psalm was written near the end of David's life. It is a king's final song of thanksgiving, praising God for all of the ways in which he delivered David over the course of his lifetime. As you know, David faced many difficulties and obstacles in his life, including Saul's attempts to kill him, several insurrections, and a host of assaults from foreign enemies. But the Lord saw David through all of these troubles and gave him victory over all of his enemies. God was his rock, his fortress, and his deliverer. And for this reason, David declares that the Lord is worthy to be praised.

The psalm begins with the declaration “I love you, O LORD, my strength.” While many psalms begin with words of praise and thanksgiving, there are only two that begin with a declaration of love for the Lord (the other one is Ps. 116). Perhaps this is because our love for God is always a response to the love that he first lavishes upon us. In the words of the apostle John, “We love because he first loved us.” [1 Jn. 4:19] It makes sense, then, that the psalmists expressions of love for God do not typically come until after they have told us about some of the ways in which God extends his love to us. But here in Psalm 18, as David is reflecting back upon a whole lifetime of God's deliverances, he bursts forth with this exclamation of love at the very beginning. His love for God is obviously still a response to God's love for him, but he is so exuberant

that he declares it before he can even begin to reflect upon the things that the Lord has done for him. (By the way, we see the same sort of thing in Ps. 116, where the psalmist expresses his love for God because of how the Lord saved him from what had seemed like immanent death.)

Love is the proper response to the loving-kindness that God extends to us. The love of God is the essence of true godliness, as Jesus showed us when he said that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. To truly know God is to love him. As Jonathan Edwards once wrote,

“If persons have the true light of heaven let into their souls, it is not a light without heat. Divine knowledge and divine love go together... True discoveries of the divine character dispose us to love God as the supreme good.” [*Charity and Its Fruits*, 19]

The proper way to respond to God’s love for us is to love him back.

We need to be reminded of this, because it can be easy for us to enjoy God’s good gifts while paying little heed to the Giver. And even when we think that we are loving God, we do not realize how far we are from loving him with our whole heart. We are used to our hearts as they are, and for this reason we do not see how different our hearts would be if they were truly filled with love for God. This is why it is so important for us to continually reflect upon all that the Lord has done for us, that we might stir up our

hearts to love him all the more. And this is one of the ways in which the psalms are of such great help to us. They help us to meditate upon God's great deliverances in our lives.

As David reflects upon all that the Lord has done for him, he refers to God as his "rock." It is a term that he uses to describe God at four separate points in this psalm, so it is important for us to give some thought to what this image tells us about God and how he cares for his people. First of all, in desert climates large rocks offer protection and shade. Small oases often grow in the shade of great rocks. The image is used this way in Isaiah 32:2, where the Lord's righteous king is described as one who will be "like the shade of a great rock in a weary land." In this sense, the imagery of a rock tells us that God is our source of shelter and refreshment amid the desert-like experiences that we face in life.

Second, rocks can provide a good place to hide, as David knew firsthand from the times when he had to flee from his enemies. More than once, he found refuge in caves in the wilderness and was kept from harm by the protection they provided for him. In the same way, God is the hiding place of his people. He is our fortress and our stronghold against all that seeks our ruin.

And lastly, rocks provide a solid foundation upon which we can stand. The image is used this way in Psalm 40:2, where David says, "He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure." If we lack a solid footing, we will get mired down as we slog through life, like Christian

in *Pilgrim's Progress*. But the Lord is a rock for his people. He provides us with a firm foundation. He will not allow our feet to slip.

After giving several poetic descriptions of the trying situations that he had faced in his lifetime, David then tells us that he cried out to the Lord for help. "In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help." This is always the right way to respond to the troubles that confront us in life, whatever they may be. Cry out to the Lord. While this might seem obvious, it is not always our first impulse. Sometimes our troubles actually hinder our prayers. It is easy for us to get caught up in feelings of despair over our situation. We can begin to doubt that God even cares about us at all. Do not let yourself fall into that trap. Make it your habit to always go to the Lord for help, and to do so right away. For, as David tells us, God hears us when we call out to him. Our cry truly does reach his ears.

Verse 7 marks the key turning point in the psalm. David was in a tight spot, but then he cried out to the Lord. And verses 7 and following give us a poetic depiction of how God responded to his plea for help. The language that David uses here suggests that God is preparing for battle on behalf of his servant. And much of David's imagery here is drawn from God's mighty acts at the time of the exodus and conquest. This is very significant. David is drawing upon past events in redemptive history and using them to interpret what God has done for him. Listen to how Charles Spurgeon describes this:

“David has in his mind’s eye the glorious manifestations of God in Egypt, at Sinai, and on different occasions to Joshua and the judges; and he considers that his own case exhibits the same glory of power and goodness, and that, therefore, he may accommodate the descriptions of former displays of divine majesty into his own hymn of praise.”

As far as we know, David never saw the earth quaking in response to the presence of the Lord. He never saw any of the great displays of power that Moses and Joshua and the Israelites of their generation saw. But he believes that his God is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. And through eyes of faith, he sees that the deliverances that the Lord brought about in his own life were not any less glorious than those which he had brought about in the past. And the same is true for you and me. We are probably not going to see anything even remotely like the plagues that the Lord sent upon Egypt. We are not likely to experience anything like walking through the Red Sea on dry ground. But our God is the same God who brought about those mighty deliverances. He still responds to his people’s cries for help. He is an all-powerful God, and he is always concerned for the welfare of his saints.

Beginning in verse 20, we come to a section that may be a bit perplexing to us. After recounting how the Lord rescued him from his troubles, David says, “The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.” It might sound as though David is saying that he deserved the help that

God had provided for him. But this is a problem that is fairly easy to resolve. Despite David's claim that he was "blameless," we know for a fact that he did not lead a blameless life. He did some very bad things. And he did not deny this either. He wrote a number of psalms in which he confessed his guilt. This forces us to think more carefully about what David means when he says he was "blameless." He is not claiming that he never sinned. He is only saying that in his conflicts with his enemies, his cause was right and his conscience was clear. Saul and Absalom and the Philistines were in the wrong. David had not done anything to deserve the trouble that they were bringing against him.

In addition, there is a sense in which David was righteous before God. He was righteous in the same way that Christians are righteous today. He had a righteousness that came through faith. And the righteousness that comes through faith includes sanctification as well as justification. Despite his faults, David did walk with the Lord. His faith bore fruit. God led him in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. And the Bible tells us that the Lord rewards the righteousness that he works within his people. Even in this life, God honors the righteous and blesses those who seek to honor him. Now it is true that these honors and blessings do not always seem like much from a worldly point of view, but the principle still holds true. For we know that even a believer's trials are a source of blessing to him, because God works through them to perfect his faith.

That being said, there is also a sense in which the claims that David makes here point beyond himself. In psalms like this we are made especially aware of the fact that the

psalms are both the prayers of men and the word of God. Many of the psalms are prayers, but there are times when we can have a hard time praying them as our prayers.

Listen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's observations on this:

“A psalm that we cannot utter as a prayer, that makes us falter and horrifies us, is a hint to us that here Someone else is praying, not we; that the One who is here protesting his innocence, who is invoking God's judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself. He it is who is praying here, and not only here but in the whole Psalter.” [*Life Together*, 45]

Ultimately, then, this psalm points to Christ. Only Jesus can claim absolute righteousness before God. Only he can perfectly say that the Lord has rewarded him according to the cleanness of his hands.

A new section begins in verse 31, where David extols the Lord for giving him strength and skill for battle. David was a great warrior-king. He was victorious in many battles. But notice how he gives God the credit for his abilities and accomplishments.

This is another important aspect of biblical piety. We always need to remember that all of our accomplishments are really God's accomplishments. And for this reason, he deserves all of the praise, all of the thanks, all of the credit.

In the latter sections of the psalm, we see more and more signs that point forward to Christ. For example, when David says in verse 43, “you made me the head of the

nations,” we would have to take this as a poetic exaggeration if we saw it as only applying to David. While it is true that the kingdom of Israel enjoyed a period of significant expansion under David’s reign, he was obviously not the head of all nations. But Jesus is. The nations are his heritage, and the ends of the earth are his possession.

This psalm’s most explicit prophecy of Christ comes in verse 49, where David writes, “For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations.” While this may not seem like much of a prophecy, we know that it is because the apostle Paul cites it in Romans 15:9 as a prophecy that has been fulfilled in Christ. The gospel is being sung and proclaimed among all the nations.

We noted at the beginning of this sermon that David sang this song near the end of his life. It is the song of his life. We have also noted that this psalm is not ultimately about David but about Christ. David was a typological foreshadowing of Christ. This song can only be perfectly sung by Christ. Though the cords of death encompassed him and the torrents of destruction assailed him, the Lord rescued him because he delighted in him. Only Jesus can speak the words “The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness” without having to make any qualifications whatsoever. In the fullest sense, this is the song of Christ’s life. And for this reason, if you belong to Jesus Christ, this psalm is the song of your life as well. Here again is Bonhoeffer:

“Because those who pray the psalms are joining in with the prayer of Jesus Christ, their prayer reaches the ears of God. Christ has become their intercessor.” [*Life Together*, 46]

Because Jesus perfectly kept the ways of the Lord, you can trust that God hears your voice in the day of your calamity. He draws you out of deep waters. He is your support. He equips you with strength. He makes your way blameless. His gentleness makes you great. How else shall we respond to this, except to join with David in exclaiming, “I love you, O LORD, my strength.”