

PSALMS

Standing on Holy Ground

Expositions of the Psalms

Reasons to Rejoice

Psalm 18

Main idea: We must rejoice in God because of who He is and what He does on behalf of those who trust Him. This psalm gives praise to God, who, because of His lovingkindness, always gives *protection*, *deliverance*, and *victory* to His faithful people throughout their lives.

Introduction:

Psalm 18 is a very personal poetic autobiography. The relationship between Psalm 17 and Psalm 18 is this: in Psalm 17, David *prays for deliverance*, but here in Psalm 18 he *praises God for deliverance*. Psalm 18 provides us with *Reasons to Rejoice*.

Every psalm has its lessons, and this psalm has three powerful lessons to teach us, but the last is the *main* lesson and the *greatest*.

The first lesson is this: *there is a time to look back*. The superscription which heads this psalm makes this clear.

For the choir director. A *Psalm* of David the servant of the LORD, who spoke to the LORD the words of this song in the day that the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. And he said,

This is the setting. David sees himself as nothing more than *a servant of the Lord*. A servant of the Lord is any man, woman, or young person who is eager to make the Lord's commandments the rule of their lives. A servant of the Lord is someone who sees themselves on a mission. Someone who is under orders. Someone who has been given a specific task by God, and he/she has to spend their entire lives living out that task. This is how David sees Himself. David has been a hero, and then he was a fugitive being hunted down like a wild dog. Saul has been intent on murdering him, and he barely escaped with his life on a number of occasions. Saul is now dead, as is David's best friend Jonathan—Saul's son is also dead, and David is king. David had been a *fugitive*; now, he was the *king*. He had been the king of a *divided* nation; now, he was the king of a *united* nation. He was the king of a *threatened* nation, but the enemies had been defeated, and now he was the king of a *peaceful* nation. He has had battle after battle after battle with surrounding enemies, and now a number of years have gone by, and God has given him victory on all sides.

Now David stands still at this significant moment in his life, and he celebrates it *by getting alone with God* and writing this song as he *looks back*. There is a time to look back, and that's what David does in this psalm, and it's the first lesson.

The second lesson is that *there is a right way to look back*. When we look back, is there *a right way* to look back that produces joy? The answer is yes! And David shows us the way in the first three verses by looking past *the secondary causes to the primary cause for his deliverance*. Let me explain.

Exposition:

A. David's Rejoicing (vv.1-3)

Notice that David's rejoicing takes off as he draws from his personal experience of deliverance in the wilderness while fleeing from Saul.

"I love You, O LORD, my strength."

² 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.

³ I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
And I am saved from my enemies.

Nine times the repeated personal pronoun "**my**" is used as he recalls *what God has done for him personally*. What the phrase "*my God*" is to the Book of Psalms, what the phrase "*in Christ*" is to the Epistles of Paul. It is a summary and the heart and soul of everything that he says. Everything that we have is because of our union with Christ, and all that David had was because of his relationship with God. But notice how David lines up or (heaps up) rich metaphors that take us inside his heart and mind and help us to trace the source of His joy.

"I love You, O Yahweh, my strength...." At some time in the past, David felt weak, and God gave Him strength.

"The Lord is my rock...my fortress...my deliverer...my God...my rock...my shield...the horn of my salvation...my stronghold (tower)."

The best way for this point to come home to us is to see the stress that David places on the conjunction "**and**." God is this, *and* this, *and* this, *and* this...The implication is that Yahweh always proves to be more than he thought Him to be.

Now David is NOT looking back to simply dwell on experience for the sake of stirring up his joy, but rather, he is distinguishing the shadow from the reality. This is the right way to look back.

When he says, "**My rock...my fortress...my stronghold**..." he is inviting us to go back with him and remember how he spent years in the fortress of Adullam (1 Sam.22). This where David had to flee to with his troops and his family, and this is where they held out against the forces of Saul for a long time. This is where the poor and oppressed came to join David (1 Sam.22:2). They came to this fortress, and they were safe. It was in that natural fortress, carved out in the hillside, which was almost unassailable from a military point of view, that David dwelt in. But as David looks back, he is telling us that *it was not Adullam that was his fortress, but God Himself*. Adullam was the *shadow*; the reality was *God*.

When David says, "**My deliverer...my shield...the horn of my salvation**..." he is inviting us again to remember the numerous times when Saul was just about to lay hold of him, and certain political events or circumstances appeared to have delivered David (1 Sam.18). But it was not chance that delivered David; the Philistine army was the *shadow*, the reality was *God*. But do you see what David is doing? He is distinguishing the *shadow* from the *reality*, between the *secondary* from the *primary*.

As David looks back, he sees the rock, he sees the fortress, he sees the shield, he sees the deliverances, but those were only the secondary causes. Behind it all was God.

Application: Perhaps there was a time in your life that you struggled with *doubt*. And someone gave you a book to read or spoke a word to you, and your doubts were settled. You may be tempted to give credit to the book you read or to the friend that talked to you, but if you were rescued from doubt, it was God who did it! Some of you have been in need financially, emotionally, or even spiritually, and a person or their gift has met that need. You may be tempted only look at the second cause or the shadow, but look beyond it and see the reality. It was God who supplied the need!

Some of you have been ill, and you went to the doctor and help has come. Now the temptation is to attribute the aid to the doctor or the medicine, but in fact, it was God who helped you. The right way to look back is to look beyond the secondary causes to the primary cause—beyond the shadow to the reality. It was God. This is why David says, “**I love You, Yahweh.**”

- The first lesson—*there is a time to look back*.
- The second lesson—*there is a right way to look back*.
- Now the third and most crucial lesson does not come until the end of the psalm, so you’ll have to wait for it. But the way David brings the lesson to us is by looking back in the right way, and the right way involves *meditating upon three of God’s attributes*: 1) *God’s mercy* (vv.4-6), 2) *God’s power* (vv.7-19), and 3) *God’s justice* (vv.20-27).

B. David’s Reasons (vv.4-50)

Keep in mind that this psalm was to be sung and meditated upon. Meditation is important because it ties our fluttering thoughts to the true spiritual anchor of stability. “Meditation,” wrote William Bates, “chains and fastens our minds to a spiritual object.”

Thomas Watson wrote, “A Christian enters into meditation as a man enters into the hospital, that he may be healed.” For that reason, the best way to grasp this psalm is not to attempt to analyze all its language. To do so would destroy the rich cadence with which it flows and violate its appeal to the imagination.

What Psalm 18 does is “to seek at one and the same time to witness to, yet to keep wrapped in mystery, the awesome glory, and power of God. It is for congregational singing, not for grammatical dissection!”¹

1. God’s mercy rescued me personally from death. (vv.4-6)

The cords of death encompassed me,
And the torrents of ungodliness terrified me.

⁵The cords of Sheol surrounded me;
The snares of death confronted me.

⁶In my distress I called upon the LORD,
And cried to my God for help;
He heard my voice out of His temple,
And my cry for help before Him came into His ears.

“Cords, torrents, snares, distress...” This is all the language of entrapment. In essence, what David says here is this: “There was a tiny step between me and death, and God intervened in tender mercy to rescue me.” Can you look back to see situations where there was no way out, and there was no wall between you and death, and then you see the mercy of God. Perhaps, it was not to the point of

¹ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 66.

death, but it was the same sticky situation, and it was the same mercy and kindness through which God dealt with us and brought us through.

Now, if I stand before you and say, "God is all-powerful." It is true, but it's a pretty weak way of saying it. If I say, "Friends, God is omnipotent!" That sounds a little more sophisticated, but David is not interested in sounding tedious or complicated. He wants to make a lasting, transforming impression upon us.

Someone has said, "if you want to understand the power of God, go outside in the middle of a thunderstorm or climb a mountain and watch the storm. See the lightning flash! Hear the thunder! Watch the downpour! Feel the earth shake under your feet! The bravest man or woman shudders when the sky goes black, and everything is unpredictable."

Now, David takes that picture and looks back on how God's power rescued him powerfully from heaven.

2. God's power rescued me powerfully from heaven. (vv.7-19)

⁷ Then the earth shook and quaked;
And the foundations of the mountains were trembling
And were shaken, because He was angry.
⁸ Smoke went up out of His nostrils,
And fire from His mouth devoured;
Coals were kindled by it.
⁹ He bowed the heavens also, and came down
With thick darkness under His feet.
¹⁰ He rode upon a cherub and flew;
And He sped upon the wings of the wind.
¹¹ He made darkness His hiding place, His canopy around Him,
Darkness of waters, thick clouds of the skies.
¹² From the brightness before Him passed His thick clouds,
Hailstones and coals of fire.
¹³ The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
And the Most High uttered His voice,
Hailstones, and coals of fire.
¹⁴ He sent out His arrows, and scattered them,
And lightning flashes in abundance, and routed them.
¹⁵ Then the channels of water appeared,
And the foundations of the world were laid bare
At Your rebuke, O LORD,
At the blast of the breath of Your nostrils.

Now, where is David getting this vivid, marvelous imagery from? It's not being spun out of his own head. He is pulling it from the Pentateuch, and particularly the book of Exodus where hailstones and fire were the seventh plague (*Ex.9:23-24*), the blasting of the nostrils brings about the parting of the Red Sea (*Ex.15:8*), and then at Sinai, there are thunder and lightning and smoke and fire (*Ex.19:16-20*). And so, David is not just tossing out metaphors without meaning, but rather, he is revealing to us that *God moves the universe to answer His servant's prayers*. God unglues creation to rescue His people!

Why do we need this "rip-snorting" picture of God? Because *truth expressed* is one thing, but David wants to stir our imagination, he wants to "blow to smithereens" small notions of God. He wants to impress us with the reality of God that we will not forget!

God's power rescued him *powerfully from heaven and perfectly from his foes*.

¹⁶ He sent from on high, He took me;
He drew me out of many waters.

¹⁷ He delivered me from my strong enemy,
And from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me.

¹⁸ They confronted me in the day of my calamity,
But the LORD was my stay.

¹⁹ He brought me forth also into a broad place;
He rescued me, because He delighted in me.

Does the language remind you of Moses being "drawn out" of the Nile? David is using wordplay to tell us of the power of God that worked powerfully in his experience. It was like a great storm and a military operation. Moses had his experience, and David had his!

Now, this is not some far off ancient power that worked in the past and is not available today. In fact, if you are saved, this is the same power that brought you out of spiritual death and into spiritual life. This is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead! This is the same power that keeps you throughout your pilgrimage on earth, and this is the same power that will bring you safely home to glory and transform you entirely into the likeness of Christ Himself. What power is this? It is the same power that spoke the world into existence! It is the power of God! Is this not a reason for rejoicing?

Review:

There is a right way to look back, and

- It involves looking beyond *the secondary causes to the primary cause*.
- It involves looking beyond *the shadows to reality*.
- It involves looking back in the right way at *God's mercy* and *God's power*, and now...

3. God 's justice rewarded me perfectly in righteousness. (vv.20-27)

²⁰ The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness;
According to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me.

²¹ For I have kept the ways of the LORD,
And have not wickedly departed from my God.

²² For all His ordinances were before me,
And I did not put away His statutes from me.

²³ I was also blameless with Him,
And I kept myself from my iniquity.

²⁴ Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness,
According to the cleanness of my hands in His eyes.

Now don't think that David believed in salvation by works. No, David believed that we are saved by grace and judged by works. He is not tooting his own horn here; instead, he is declaring his loyalty to God. Dear friends, *commitment* and *character matter*, and here David explains why.

²⁵ With the kind You show Yourself kind;
With the blameless You show Yourself blameless;

²⁶ With the pure You show Yourself pure,
And with the crooked You show Yourself astute.

²⁷ For You save an afflicted people,
But haughty eyes You abase.

David teaches us that God will deal with us based upon our character. *God is merciful and kind* and if you are merciful and kind, God will deal with you likewise. *God is blameless*, and if you are blameless—you will never have a reason to point the finger at God and blame Him. *God is pure*, and if you are pure, you will only see purity in God. He will show Himself pure. Some of you are devious, but **God is not devious**. There is no sin in Him. *But with the devious, He will show Himself shrewd*. God will always show you that *He is God* and that you are His creatures. However wise you think you are, He is wiser still. God will always have a better move than you have. He will always outsmart you. You will never win in any contest with God. And based upon this, David says I will humble myself before God. Will you?

The second lesson is that there is a right way to look back and involves looking back at God's mercy, God's power, and God's justice.

Now, I believe that the best way to stay in the reflective, meditative frame of mind in which this psalm was written, is to set before you a series of searching questions to probe your heart and allow the passage to answer your questions with an immediate concise statement.

a. Is there someone in church this morning who needs light? (v.28)

²⁸ For You light my lamp;
The LORD my God illumines my darkness.

b. Are you as a believer facing opposition? Are there insurmountable obstacles in your life? (v.29)

²⁹ For by You I can run upon a troop;
And by my God I can leap over a wall.

c. Do you not know which is the best way forward? (v.30a)

³⁰ As for God, His way is blameless;

d. Are you one of those people who don't know who to believe? (v.30b)

The word of the LORD is tried;

e. Do you feel threatened? (v.30c)

He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him.

f. Does everything seem out of control and uncertain everywhere? (v.31)

³¹ For who is God, but the LORD?
And who is a rock, except our God,

g. Is there someone in church saying privately to themselves, "I can't carry on!" (v.32)

³² The God who girds me with strength
And makes my way blameless?

- h. Are you saying that “everything is too much for me; I will never get on top!”? (v.33)**

³³ He makes my feet like hinds' *feet*,
And sets me upon my high places.

- i. Do you sometimes feel as if you have no more fight left in you? (v.34)**

³⁴ He trains my hands for battle,
So that my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

- j. Are things getting to you? Do you feel that you are on the verge of a breakdown? (v.35a)**

³⁵ You have also given me the shield of Your salvation,
And Your right hand upholds me;

- k. Does it feel as if sometimes you don't matter? (v.35b)**

And Your gentleness makes me great.

- l. Are you afraid as a Christian that you are going to slip off the right path? (v.36)**

³⁶ You enlarge my steps under me,
And my feet have not slipped.

- m. Does evil seem sometimes unconquerable? (vv.37-38)**

³⁷ I pursued my enemies and overtook them,
And I did not turn back until they were consumed.
³⁸ I shattered them, so that they were not able to rise;
They fell under my feet.

- n. Do you feel too weak in the battle? (vv.39-40)**

³⁹ For You have girded me with strength for battle;
You have subdued under me those who rose up against me.
⁴⁰ You have also made my enemies turn their backs to me,
And I destroyed those who hated me.

- o. Does it seem that there is no real difference between you and the unsaved? (vv.41-42)**

⁴¹ They cried for help, but there was none to save,
Even to the LORD, but He did not answer them.
⁴² Then I beat them fine as the dust before the wind;
I emptied them out as the mire of the streets.

- p. Does it look as if the wickedness all around you is working together so that in a matter of time, we will all go under? (vv.43-45)**

⁴³ You have delivered me from the contentions of the people;
You have placed me as head of the nations;
A people whom I have not known serve me.
⁴⁴ As soon as they hear, they obey me;
Foreigners submit to me.

⁴⁵ Foreigners fade away,
And come trembling out of their fortresses.

Here the Psalm shifts up to its climax!

q. Can you see this morning why your worst fears have not happened to you? (vv.46-48)

⁴⁶ The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock;
And exalted be the God of my salvation,
⁴⁷ The God who executes vengeance for me,
And subdues peoples under me.
⁴⁸ He delivers me from my enemies;
Surely You lift me above those who rise up against me;
You rescue me from the violent man.

r. Are you clear about what is expected of you by way of reaction to all this? (v.49)

⁴⁹ Therefore I will give thanks to You among the nations, O LORD,
And I will sing praises to Your name.

s. Do you understand why God acts as He does? (v.50)

⁵⁰ He gives great deliverance to His king,
And shows lovingkindness to His anointed,
To David and his descendants forever.

Can you see the overall teaching of this psalm? Brothers and sisters,

- There is **no question** to which God is not the answer.
- There is **no need** that God Himself cannot supply.
- There is **no danger** of which He Himself is not the deliverance.
- There is **no longing** that He Himself cannot satisfy.
- There is **no situation** that He cannot overcome.

David is teaching us that without God, he is nothing—do we realize this? David is reflecting upon the fact that *without God, he would have nothing*—do we recognize the same? We do if we have been listening to this psalm. David is speaking up and testifying that *without God, he would be nowhere*—and this is the teaching of the psalm. With Him, all is safe and well. **There is one great truth that this psalm underlines for us, and it is this: you have only one need in life** (some people love to write lists of what they need to do—this psalm says, “throw it away!”) and that is, to walk through life with God. That’s is the third and most significant lesson. Our greatest need in life is to walk through life with God! And for those who walk through life with God—they can look backward and forward as David did.

Conclusion:

Once again, I am privileged to speak to the unsaved. The great teaching of the Word of God is whatever you’ve done, and wherever you are this morning—you may be reconciled with God. God has never moved; you’re the one who moved. You moved when Adam sinned because you sinned in Adam’s sin. This is a fact. You sin now because you were born a sinner. God seems far away because you were born far from God.

Right and wrong, you know, but you still do the wrong because you have a nature from your parents, their parents, and their parents, going all the way back to Adam and Eve.

You are a part of a race of people whose nature, sin, and rebellion are on a collision course with God's holiness. But the great teaching of the Bible is that sinners who are rebellious by nature and choice, rebellious by nature and by practice, rebellious by nature in their thoughts, desires, attitudes, and actions...they can be reconciled to God! They can know God! They can experience God's forgiveness! They can become God's people and walk through life with God and enjoy salvation! It is through the Lord Jesus Christ!

Now come up close and listen. The man who pinned this psalm is the same man who wrote the line that we will come to in just a few chapters, *"The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not want"* (Ps.23). That Shepherd will come into the world a thousand years after the writing of that psalm, and He will say to the world, *"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep"* (John 10:11).

The punishment that should come to sinners fell upon the Lord Jesus Christ. And sinners who own up to their sins against God can know *the sweet forgiveness and mercy of God in Christ*, be brought into fellowship with God, and walk through life knowing God. This psalm can be your psalm if you come to Christ.

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