

Crying for Refuge
Psalm 18:1-19
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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To the leader. A Psalm of David the servant of the Lord, who addressed the words of this song to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said:

¹*I love you, O Lord, my strength.*

²*The Lord is my rock, 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;
so I shall be saved from my enemies.*

⁴*The cords of death encompassed me;
the torrents of perdition assailed me;*

⁵*the cords of Sheol entangled me;
the snares of death confronted me.*

⁶*In my distress I called upon the Lord;
to my God I cried for help.*

*From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.*

⁷*Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.*

⁸*Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.*

⁹*He bowed the heavens, and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.*

¹⁰*He rode on a cherub, and flew;
he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.*

¹¹*He made darkness his covering around him,
his canopy thick clouds dark with water.*

¹²*Out of the brightness before him
there broke through his clouds
hailstones and coals of fire.*

¹³*The Lord also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice.**

¹⁴*And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.*

¹⁵*Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, O Lord,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.*

¹⁶*He reached down from on high, he took me;
he drew me out of mighty 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 support.*

¹⁹*He brought me out into a broad place;
he delivered me, because he delighted in me. (NRSV)*

We are accomplished in the art of escaping. Once I talked with a man who admitted that when he had a little free time in the evenings or on the weekends, he mostly just wanted to escape. This man worked in a fairly demanding job that required him to manage many people in such a way that the organization kept moving toward the vision it had set for itself. As often happens when people rub shoulders together, there were substantive conflicts, unfortunate misunderstandings, and occasional personality clashes in the organization that my friend managed. His job regularly stressed him.

So he escaped, or tried to. Every fall he anesthetized himself with football, every winter with basketball, and every summer with baseball, his face glued to the TV. He read John Grisham thrillers and lost himself in another world. Once a year he fled to the Caribbean for a beach vacation. He bought the Ford product cleverly called the “Escape,” as if that particular box on wheels will guarantee a getaway from the strains and stresses of life.

My friend was actually a person of deep faith. Following Jesus was central to his identity, his relationships, and his personal sense of mission. Furthermore, he was committed in principle to prayer, worship, companionship, and service to the world. You’d be hard pressed to come up with a more solid Christian.

And yet this man noticed a deep paradox running through his life: he realized that the more stress he felt, the less often he turned to God. The more he obsessed over his own problems, the less he thought about God. The more strain he experienced, the less he prayed. By his own admission, when the pressure when up, he avoided God and escaped into something else.

We are well practiced in how to escape. We may escape into three dips of Godiva chocolate ice cream, escape into a bottle of Absolut Vodka, escape away on a glossy red Kawasaki Ninja ZX 14 speeding at 85 mph down a country road, or escape into five straight hours of playing Civilization IV. Believe it or not, I have also known people to escape into a term of service with Mennonite Central Committee, or to escape by working 55- to 70-hour workweeks for their favorite church institution. Not everything we do is an escape, but nearly anything could become an escape.

To escape is to avoid. It has a transitory, almost ephemeral quality. We choose to do something that we hope will divert us for a while, but usually the diversion is brief. The escape of those three scoops of ice cream lasts only as long as it takes you to eat them—eleven minutes, maybe?

But we are not nearly so accomplished in the art of taking refuge. In biblical terms, refuge can only be found in God. This is what my fine Christian friend really wanted to do—he wanted to take refuge in God when life became stressful. Except he didn't do it. When things were tough, he realized he was in the habit of turning his face away from God and toward the TV, the beach vacation, the walled box on wheels. In his quest for true refuge, he substituted escape.

The author of Psalm 18 badly wants refuge. Indeed, his situation is so extreme, so dire, that he could very well die. Verses 4 and 5 put it in stark language: “The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of perdition assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me.” Death could happen at any moment.

It is no surprise, therefore, that this psalmist calls out to Yahweh in verse 6. For any person of faith, there is but one response to distress, and that response is to cry out to God for help. What else can you do? You are in a traffic accident that shatters your pelvis. You are freshly out of a job. A fire burns down your house. A thief steals your identity and you lose thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of dollars. You cry to God. All prayers of petition and intercession, no matter how long, fancy, or elaborate, are basically variations of a simple, one-word prayer, “Help!”

In this particular case for this particular psalmist, God heard the cry for help. Let us recognize that it does not always seem that God hears. In the book of Lamentations, for instance, people cry out to God numerous times for help; yet nowhere is that help forthcoming. God, so it seems in Lamentations, does not hear. So complete is this divine silence and divine inaction that in the last verse of the book the poet wonders whether God has “utterly rejected us” (5:22). Nonetheless, in Psalm 18 God does in fact hear. As the writer puts it in the last part of verse 6, “my cry reached” the divine “ears.”

And oh my! Does God ever hear and act in a big way! One of the most heart-pounding passages in the Old Testament follows in verses 7-15. In the fertile artistic imagination of the psalmist, this is how God acts when God so chooses. The earth reels and rocks in verse 7 as if from some nasty earthquake, because God is angry. In verse 8, the divine nose shoots out smoke, while the divine mouth spits out fire. Picture in your mind a God so mad that hot coals, flames, and smoke spew forth from the divine face. Yet that is not all. In verse 12, hailstones fall to the earth before the brightness of God's glory. In verses 13 and 14, the anger of God causes thunder

to sound and lightning to strike. And finally in verse 15, God's indignant rebuke is a blast of the breath of God's nostrils.

Why is God mad? Simple. God is angry at the psalmist's distress and suffering. Notice carefully! God is not angry at the psalmist; God is angry at the suffering that the psalmist is walking through. Yahweh rages at the source of distress. Yahweh seethes at whatever instills misery. Yahweh gets irate at that which causes the people of God to feel wretched—and it all starts when the psalmist cries out to God in distress. The distress of the psalmist stirs up the distress of God which is then seen in the distress of earth. But pay attention: nowhere in this psalm is there any violence against human beings. The wrath of God neither kills nor hurts anyone. However, the poet imagines that the wrath of God is nevertheless seen, heard, and experienced in the cosmos.

I wonder: how would you draw or paint this kind of God? When you pray, do you ever envision these kinds of extreme reactions from God? And is your theology supple enough to handle this kind of God?

At any rate, in verse 16 God saves the psalmist in the original meaning of the word "save." Maybe you've already figured out that the foundational meaning of salvation in the Old Testament is not exactly salvation from one's personal sins. No, the foundational meaning of salvation is that God acts to save from danger, from injustice, from oppression, and perhaps most preeminently of all, from enemies. This does not mean that God's people will somehow magically escape all suffering or hardship. Instead it means that God will eventually, and ultimately, save. In verses 4 and 5, this psalmist was very nearly dead, and we rightly suspect that experience included some form of suffering. Even so, God ultimately saves—which is just what we find in verse 16. Yahweh "reached down from on high," "took me," and "drew me out of" dangerous waters; and then in verse 19, set me down on "a broad place," where I can now walk securely and safely. For this psalm, that is the definition of salvation: to walk with security, and we might even say with shalom, on a broad place.

God, in other words, has brought this person to a place of refuge. We can see how grateful the psalmist is for God's act of salvific deliverance by looking at verses 1 and 2. The psalmist spills out on the page metaphor upon metaphor, image upon image, in an effort to describe how wonderful Yahweh is. Yahweh is "my strength," "my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer," "my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." Who else is like this Yahweh? Who else

hears? Who else gets mad at oppression? Who else yanks you out of the miry pit and sets your feet on shalom? Who else in the universe is able to take you from near death to new life, from distress to deliverance, from calamity to calm? Do you know anybody else who can do these things?

I think you know what the answer is.