

HE ALONE
Psalm 18

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How big is the God that you worship?

Is He powerful enough to save?

Is He swift enough to rescue?

Can He overturn your enemies and their evil schemes?

Can He cause the earth to shake and the mountains to quake?

Does smoke blow forth from His nostrils, and fire leap from His lips when He speaks?

Can He fly upon the wings of the wind?

Quite candidly, I think if we're guilty of anything, we're guilty of being the people of a small God. We're afraid to let God be who God really is, because then He might be too big to manage, to control, to manipulate, and to re-shape into our own image.

The reality is, God is who God is, regardless of how much of Him you understand. He will not be formed, shaped, or manipulated by your hands or your head.

The God of Psalm 18 is the God of David. The God of David is a big God. A tremendous God. A fearsome God. A rescuing God. A saving God.

Let's take a look.

In Psalm 18, David has both the presence and the protection of God. We hear David cry out – sing out – as he takes comfort in the fact that God has not abandoned him in his sorrow, God has not abandoned him in his suffering – but God is present and real, his rock and his shield.

There is a companion psalm, almost the same psalm, found in 2 Samuel 22. At the end of the story of David, we read these words describing the setting for our psalm today: “And David spoke the words of this song to the Lord in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.”

God had rejected Saul, the first king that Israel had ever known. In his place, Samuel, the prophet and priest, had anointed David – a shepherd boy, one of the sons of Jesse. David, the musician.

David, the giant slayer. The logical line of succession would be for Jonathan, Saul's son, to occupy the throne. But David and Jonathan became the very best of friends, formed a covenant together, and Jonathan became David's defender – willing to give not only his friendship, but his throne to the one whom God had chosen.

When you sit as king, you become very nervous. Saul was always looking over his shoulder, although David never wronged him. David never tried to usurp Saul's authority. He was letting God work it out in God's own way and God's own time. Nonetheless, Saul was in a state of paranoia – hurling a javelin at David and hurling a javelin at his own son.

Besides, the women were won over by David and his bloody battle skills. They had a little song they sang. "Saul (meaning the king) has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." The biblical writer tells us in 1 Samuel 18:9 that Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on. It was the day that Saul got green eyes. It was the day that Saul viewed David with suspicion and jealousy. "How dare they attribute to David more battle victories than they attribute to me?"

Saul hunted David down like one hunting a partridge, says the biblical story, all the way from "here to there." In fact, once David was hiding up in the wilderness of Engedi – way up in the rocky hills where only the goats go. Saul took his men into the hills, and they came across a cave. Saul did not know it, but David was hiding deep within the recesses of the very cave that Saul had entered. And David's men urged him to kill Saul, saying, "Saul has come to kill you. God has delivered him into your hands. Now reach out and get revenge."

But David would not touch God's anointed king. He spared Saul. He carefully cut off Saul's robe to show Saul on a later occasion that he had spared Saul because Saul was the rightful king.

Upon escaping death by Saul – on one of these occasions of deliverance by the hand of God, on one of these occasions when his ragtag band of men was looking down at the polished armor of Saul's army – David begins to write Psalm 18.

I. God is worthy of praise (v. 1-3).

Look at verses 1-3

I love thee, O Lord, my strength.
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.
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised.
And I am saved from my enemies.

This magnificent hymn of praise begins with the profound statement: "I love you, O Lord." The verb for "love" here is unusual, but it indicates intimacy in his relationship with God. As you read this psalm, it becomes clear that an intimacy arose from an awareness of God's constant companionship in a series of dangerous and moral crises. God is the rock for David, the cave in which he can take refuge. "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge. I will call upon the Lord, for He is worthy to be praised."

More than once in this psalm, David is going to make clear that God is worthy of your praise.

I hope you are here this morning because God is worthy of praise. I hope you've come to worship Him. We gather together on Sundays to worship God, to focus on Him, to tell Him that He is worthy and glorious. Magnificent. Unbelievable. Powerful. Loving. Caring. He is worthy to be praised.

There may be a myriad of different reasons this morning for your presence, but the best reason I know to be here is because you want to praise God. You want to worship Him, to acknowledge Him. You want to stop your week, call time out, reorder your schedule and say, "I'm going to the house of God, to join God's people, to sing, 'He is worthy, He is wonderful, He is owed the offering of my praise.'"

He is also worthy of our gifts, our offering, our tithe. It's an act of obedience. It's an act of worship. We bring our tithe because God is worthy of the first fruits of all that we have. Tithing is worship. Withholding our gifts is refusing to worship.

Now, it's true that God deserves your praise. But I don't want you to think for a moment that you can diminish God by withholding your praise. **"A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell."** (C. S. Lewis)

God is wonderful and worthy to be praised.

II. God hears the prayers of His people (v. 4-6).

Look at verse 4-6.

The cords of death encompassed me,
And the torrents of ungodliness terrified me.
The cords of Sheol surrounded me;
The snares of death confronted me.
In 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.

The description here is as if death and the underworld had already bound David and were drawing him into a certain demise. The psalmist called upon God, and God heard him from His temple.

Not only did he cry to God, God heard. Look at the emphasis. "He heard my voice.... My cry...before Him came into His ears."

Our God is not another deaf idol carved by the hands of humanity. Rather, He hears, and He responds. Psalm 10:17 says, "Lord, you have heard the desire of the humble, you will cause your ear to hear."

God hears you. Of all the comforts you have in your Christian life, no comfort is more powerful than knowing that when you speak to God, God hears your words. God hears your prayers.

The older I get, the more I appreciate silence. Not long ago, I was seated at the back of an airplane where a very talkative man told his whole life story, from birth to the present, at the top of his lungs. Fortunately, by God's grace, I wasn't seated right next to him. His verbosity completely exhausted the back third of the cabin. Everyone who could grabbed their earphones. To top it all off, when the plane landed, he turned to the poor gentleman next to him and dared to comment, "Well, I certainly hope I haven't been talking too much." It was like being stuck in the *Airplane* movie in reality. Some people just can't pass on captive ears.

Our ears can only last so long, but God's ears gladly hear every utterance.

God, as my Father, hears me every single time I speak to Him. He's attentive. He doesn't sleep, nor slumber. He's always there, always listening, always attentive, always caring about what is going on in your life and in my life.

I don't know what you're suffering through today. I don't know if it's a hardship at work. I don't know if you're looking for employment and things are scary right now. I don't know if divorce is knocking at the door for you. I don't know if death is down the street, about to rob you of someone you love beyond measure. But I do know, as you cry out for help, God will listen to you. His ears are open. He hears the cries of his children.

Not only is God worthy of our praise,
Not only does He hear our prayers...

III. God is powerful in response (v. 7-15).

David is surrounded by the cords of death, by the powers of the netherworld. But he calls upon God, and God hears. But even more, God, who is so very powerful, responds in a big way.

The help of God for our individual needs is like the Amazon River flowing down to water a single daisy. God cares, and God responds.

Look at verses 7-15.

Then the earth shook and quaked:
And the foundations of the mountains were trembling
And were shaken, because He was angry.
Smoke went up out of His nostrils,
And fire from His mouth devoured;
Coals were kindled by it.
He bowed the heavens also, and came down
With thick darkness under His feet.
He rode upon a cherub and flew;
And He sped upon the wings of the wind.

He made darkness His hiding place, His canopy around Him,
Darkness of waters, thick clouds of the skies.
From the brightness before Him passed His thick clouds,
Hailstones and coals of fire.
The Lord also thundered in the heavens,
And the Most High uttered His voice,
Hailstones and coals of fire.
He sent out His arrows, and scattered them,
And lightning flashes in abundance, and routed them.
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.

Here we have a description of God in all of His grandeur, all of His glory, all of His splendor. It's a picture of God. It's a picture of power. It's a picture of a judge who makes right the wrong.

It's so hard to capture God. On the old Art Linkletter show, there was a small boy drawing a picture. Linkletter inquired, "What are you drawing?" The boy replied, "A picture of God." Linkletter told the lad that no one knows what God looks like, to which the boy confidently responded, "They will when I get through."

The scale of this scene is titanic. And God stands in strange contrast to the small human figure of the singer, of David. The theophany, this appearance of God in the story, recalls the deliverance at the Red Sea by fire and cloud, the parting of the waters. And also the phenomenon at Mount Sinai, where the earth quaked, was wrapped in smoke, and, when God descended upon it, in fire. Everything in this passage speaks of the judging God – His judgment directed against the powers of evil for the salvation of evil's victims.

Smoke, like Isaiah 6:4, dramatizes the anger of holiness to sin. The nostrils are, in Hebrew, the organ of anger. The devouring fire is synonymous with Deuteronomy 4:24 with divine jealousy and intolerance. The coals are rained down from God's chariot throne on the doomed of the city of Ezekiel (10:2).

So the list continues as the storm approaches, darkens, and finally unleashes itself. In verse 9, He sweeps the skies aside – or your translation may say, "He bowed the heavens."

The cherub (verse 10) was in attendance with God. They emphasize God's inviolable holiness, as we see them in Exodus 26 in the Holy of Holies on the mercy seat.

In the midst of this thundering, earth-shaking God, we are struck by the fact that God has a personal interest in the psalmist. In this passage God leaves his cosmic abode, or temple, to move to the place where David, His servant, the one whom He loves, is afflicted. Upon His arrival, He thunders and sends forth the lightning of His weaponry.

IV. God provides (v. 16-19).

Look at verses 16-19.

He sent from on high, He took me;
He drew me out of many waters.
He delivered me from my strong enemy,
And from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me.
They confronted me in the day of my calamity,
But the Lord was my stay.
He brought me forth also into a broad place;
He rescued me, because He delighted in me.

Given the enormity of God, it is surprising to find God responding to an individual need. But He does. He does for David, and He does for you.

We have difficulty, sickness, financial stress, hardship in every form and shape. But we know that God is with us and that ultimately, although we may despair – as the Psalmist often does – in waiting, weary from the waiting, God will deliver us in this life and in the life to come.

Look at verse 36. God delivers. “You enlarge my steps under me, and my feet have not slipped.”

I want you to take notice of verse 31. “For who is God, but the Lord? And who is a rock, except our God?”

For those of you who have come today discouraged, I ask you the question, “Who is God but Yahweh?”

For those of you who have come this morning down and depressed, I ask you the question, “Who is God but Yahweh?”

Put another way, if you cannot worship the blazing God of the Psalter, then whom can you worship?

I read an interesting comment by Miroslav Volf, of Yale University. He says there can only be one God. Playing off Pope Nicholas V of the 15th century, he said, “**To say there are several Gods implies a contradiction, since it follows there from that none of them are God, since each of them lacks supreme glory which befits only God.**” (Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, p. 53) In other words, if there is more than one God, there isn't a God, for God must be individually supreme.

Well, that's the God of the psalter. That's the God of David. That's the God of the gospel that we worship and sing praises to.

Who is God but the Lord?

I kind of get tickled when someone tells me they are an atheist. “Atheist” just means he worships himself. I’m not big enough to worship, so I need a God. I need one who is ultimate, supreme, one who is not weak and infallible as I. I need one who is worthy of praise.

Or when someone says they don’t believe in the God of scripture, and then they tell me what their God is like. They are no more swift than the idolater of the Old Testament who carves his god with his hands out of wood or stone. They simply remake God into a God they can manage and manipulate. That’s not the God of the universe.

God is God.

Who is God, but the Lord?

He is worthy of your praise. He is worthy of your worship.

And so the psalmist says, more than once, “I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised.”

Look at verse 49, “I will sing praises to Your name.”

O God, forgive us when we make you small and little, something we can manipulate, control, and transform. But instead, O God, may we let your blazing power from heaven transform us as we fall to our knees and shout “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts in all of His glory.”