

Psalm 18

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[0:00] I love you, O Lord, my strength. I love you, O Lord, my strength.

A few years ago I was travelling in New Hampshire and visited the Flume Gorge National Park. Some of you might have visited there as well. The gorge is spectacular, lots of moss, ferns, river flowing between the two.

Cliff faces. But what I remember most distinctly is when you've come down from the walk near the car park, there's a series of boulders called the Wolf's Den. And you enter the Wolf's Den and crawl through the gaps and come out on the other side near the car park.

So it was the thing to do and I joined the line and entered the Wolf's Den. But it actually turned out to be one of the most terrifying experiences of my life because about three quarters of the way through I can see the feet about ten paces away walking towards their cars.

But I was completely stuck. I couldn't get forward and I couldn't get backwards. And so of course in that kind of situation your heart starts beating faster.

[1:18] You start panicking and the worst thing to do, right, in those situations is to panic. You need to calm down and think about how can I move my arms or my legs backwards or forwards to get through this really difficult, constricting, constraining experience.

It might be that you've been stuck in an elevator and had the same kind of feelings, a difficult financial predicament, difficult relationships, or perhaps you suffer from claustrophobia and can't enter small spaces.

For many during COVID lockdowns, there were those kinds of feelings of panic, anger, claustrophobia if you weren't allowed out of your house.

In the West, we're just not used to feeling constricted or weak or controlled by a power that's greater than us.

And it's really dangerous for Christians to feel constricted like that because when we panic, we make bad decisions and fail the Lord. But Psalm 18 has some lessons, some insights for all of us, no matter our experience, no matter our present experience or our experience in the past.

[2:52] Whether you're feeling strong this morning or weak or trapped or proud, Psalm 18 is for you. How does this Psalm help us?

Well, the Psalmist is feeling stuck. The Psalmist is feeling constrained. Look at those senses, verse 3 to 6, if you've got the scriptures open in front of you.

I call upon the Lord who's worthy to be praised. I'm saved from my enemies. The cords of death encompassed me. The torrents of destruction assailed me. The cords of Sheol entangled me.

The snares of death confronted me. These are all pictures of feeling trapped. He's suffocating. He can't breathe.

There seems to be no way out of his predicament. So he just calls out to the Lord, do something. In my distress, he says, I called upon the Lord.

[4:01] To my God, I cried for help. And God hears, verse 6, from his temple, he heard my voice.

My cry to him reached his ears. The Lord might be his rock, but the Lord has ears too.

The Lord is desperate to hear us when we're in a jam. When we're feeling there's no way out. When we're stuck. When we're trapped. So how does the Lord answer his prayer?

The next 10 or so verses are cosmic in their scope. It could just say, and the Lord rescued me. But there's this massive buildup.

It's almost like God is shaking the world. It's almost like God's about to bring his people out of Egypt again. Look at the language from verse 7.

[5:09] The earth reeled and rocked. The foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked because he was angry. The world is no longer stable. Smoke went up from his nostrils, devouring

fire from his mouth.

Glowing coals flamed forth from him. Is God going to undo the world? Is God going to remake the world? He bowed the heavens and came down. Thick darkness was under his feet.

He rode on a cherub and flew. He came swiftly on the wings of the wind. He made darkneses covering his canopy around him. Thick clouds, dark with water. Then we get verses that remind us of the Exodus.

Out of the brightness before him, hailstones and coals of fire broke through. The Lord thundered in the heavens. The Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. He sent out his arrows and scattered them.

He flashed forth lightnings and routed them. The channels of the sea were seen. It's almost like the Red Sea is in focus. The foundations of the world were laid bare.

[6 : 15] Your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. God could have just rescued the psalmist in answer to his prayer.

But it seems like something cosmic is about to happen. Something that's shaking the foundations of the earth. The Lord is so angry that his believer, this man, is in danger.

And he's huffing and puffing that he might be rescued. And we get this simple response after all this noise and shaking. Verse 16. He sent from on high.

He took me. He sent from on high. He took me. He drew me out of many waters. It's almost like he didn't need the picture of the earth shaking in the meantime, right?

It could have been that we'd gone straight to verse 16. But no. God sees the danger of David, the psalmist, in such cosmic terms.

[7 : 30] Universal terms. The value of the man who's praying are in evidence.

That person is so valuable to the Lord. It's almost like their rescue is to remake the world. He sent from on high and he took me.

He drew me out of many waters. He rescued 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 for the Lord, he was my support. He brought me out into a broad place. He rescued me because he delighted in me.

Do you see that really important word? He brought me out into a broad place. The psalmist has been feeling constricted.

[8 : 33] The psalmist has been feeling tied up. But now the Lord releases him and gives him a wide space to stand free in.

You know the feeling, right? It's been a tough season at work. But then your boss moves on. It's been your last exam.

And you have a really magnificent sleep in. It's been a tough season of life. But the summer's here and you can lie on the beach.

That feeling when the constrictions are past. And you can take a big, deep breath. God comes with power.

But God's power doesn't crush the psalmist. In fact, God's power makes the psalmist feel free.

God's power doesn't lead to him feeling out of control.

[9 : 40] But God's power brings to him release. God's power leads to perfect freedom.

Christianity is rescue religion. Christianity is rescue religion. I don't think most of our world understands that. Isn't that why Christ died?

To make us free? Well, Paul says it, doesn't he? In Galatians 5.1. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

I love you, O Lord, my strength. But is that how people think of your church?

It's a place where you can feel free? It's what people think of the church generally, not just this congregation. There's been such rapid change in our societies in the last 20, 30 years.

[10 : 54] 20, 30 years ago, if you'd ask the average guy on the street in Melbourne where I'm from what they think of Christian faith or Christianity, they'd probably say they're do-gooders. They'd probably say, oh, they're holier than thou.

If you ask the same guy today, what does he think of the church? He'd probably say, toxic, damaging, hurt people.

Well, the reputation of the church in the West has changed massively and quickly.

So I need to ask the question again. What do people think of your church? Do people think of your church, that's a place where I can feel free? Because I suspect they think that's a place where you'll feel constricted, oppressed.

What can you do that makes this experience of being together an experience of freedom? My brother's not a Christian.

[12:06] He's a kind of excellent pagan. And I want him, whenever we meet, to leave our conversation, our meal, our time together, feeling more free than when he was arriving.

How do I help my brother feel free? How do I help him to understand that Christian faith, being a Christian, is not about piling on the rules, but like this psalmist, taking a big, deep breath, standing in a broad place, because we're free?

How can joy replace judgmentalism in the ways that people think of me, think of us together?

But interestingly, the psalmist has been brought into a broad place in verse 19.

He's been rescued. The world has shaken. He's standing free. But the freedom doesn't equal formless independence.

[13:27] In fact, the very next verses describe not just him being allowed to do anything, but the next verses describe how his life has been in the past, how it might be in the future, how he might be focused on the Lord, not free to do what he wants, but focused on the one who's just rescued him, faithful to the one who's just rescued him, as the one who's just rescued him, has been faithful to him.

So, for example, verse 20. The Lord dealt with me according to my righteousness. The Lord, Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, has dealt with me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands.

The psalmist has been doing his darndest to obey the Lord. I've kept the ways of the Lord. I've not wickedly departed from my God. All his rules were before me, his statutes I did not put away from me.

I was blameless before him. I kept myself from my guilt. So the Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.

You'll often find this kind of language in Psalms, where the psalmist is saying they're guiltless, they're blameless. Of course, we know that David was not without sin.

[14:51] But this is a kind of standard set of sentences, a standard set of ideas, which is really the psalmist saying, God, I'm on your side. I'm on your side.

I'm focused on you. The same that the language of purity of heart in the New Testament doesn't mean you're sinless, purity of heart means you're focused, undivided in your attention.

The psalmist is saying, I'm on your side, Lord. I know that I have freedom, but I'm using my freedom to serve you. Indeed, verse 25, with the merciful, you show yourself merciful, with the blameless, you show yourself blameless, with the purified, you show yourself pure, with the crooked, you make yourself seem torturous.

You save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down. It's you who light my lamp. The Lord, my God, lightens my darkness. By you, I can run against a troop, and by my God, I can leap over a wall.

This God, his way is perfect. The word of the Lord proves true. He's a shield for all those who take refuge in him. He knows that hanging out with the Lord will mean that he becomes more and more like the Lord, actually.

[16:25] We learn in verse 30 that the Lord, his way is perfect, is blameless. And in just a few verses time, the psalmist describes himself in exactly the same way, that he's blameless too.

Hanging out with the Lord means we become like the Lord. We pick up, we copy him, even if we're unaware of doing it. The Lord is remaking this man, making him more like the Lord himself.

There's freedom. It doesn't mean there's no boundaries. I heard a story of an American playground. Of course, it's always an American playground when you're preaching in Australia.

Of an American playground where they decided to remove all the fences from the perimeter of the property. So the play equipment and so on was in the middle.

The local authorities decided that if you wanted children to go up free, you had to remove the boundaries around the plot of land. No fences means more freedom, right?

[17:39] Actually, what happened when they removed the fences around the playground, the kids played more and more closely to the play equipment. It was like getting to the perimeter of the

property was actually more dangerous because you could be near the road.

Taking away the fences actually reduced the freedom. The kids used less of their space. I have no idea whether the fences were ever replaced.

But I love you, Lord, my strength. This psalm speaks about God's strength and also the strength of the psalmist.

The psalmist is feeling free, but the psalmist is also feeling strong. And you see a whole series of words and images which describe the strength that the psalmist is feeling.

For example, verse 32, the God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless. He made my feet like the feet of a deer. That's a less militaristic image.

[18 : 55] But verse 34, he trains my hands for war, my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You give me the shield of salvation. Paul picks up that language in Ephesians 6. Your right hand supported me.

Your gentleness made me great. And again, you gave me a wide place, a wide place for my steps under me and my feet did not slip.

The psalmist is feeling upright, light, running, leaping, his arms trained for war.

He's been given a shield for defence. The psalmist is speaking about his own warfare, the psalmist being David. But this is general language as well, right?

It's deliberately universal. It could apply to you and me as well. Freedom doesn't mean we should feel weak, but given freedom, we can feel strong.

[20 : 05] sometimes Christians make out like their life is so precarious they could fall off, they could stop being a Christian any day now.

You probably have the show on TV as well don't you, Ninja Warriors? Well, I think I could do a really good job on those apparatuses actually, except the one where you're holding on with your fingers and crossing the wall.

I just don't think my fingers can do that. But some Christians are like that. Every day it's almost a terror that they could fall off, that they could lose their grip, that being a Christian is a dangerous, threatening kind of life to live.

life. You might hear it in different words. Some people say, God is sovereign, we are worms, God is powerful, and make the assumption that we're kind of puppets.

That the more you praise God's power, the more you have to talk up your own weakness. it's kind of like a nil-sum game for some people. If God is powerful, the only thing you can do is say, but I'm very weak.

[21 : 38] Or God is so majestic, but I'm really like dust, I'm nothing at all. But that's not the way this psalm runs, right?

The more this psalm speaks about God's power, the more powerful the psalmist feels himself.

God's strength doesn't mean you necessarily have to feel weak.

God's strength can give you strength. It's not a nil-sum game. It's not like a, oh you probably don't use it, do you use the word seesaw?

Yeah, okay, sure, sure, sometimes I get my words confused. With a seesaw, you're either up or down. It's not like a tug of war in the Christian life that if you gain some ground, God loses ground. God gains some ground, you lose ground. It's not like in the Christian life that you have to define yourself as a victim.

[22 : 43] We can learn to feel strong. Now, I'm not saying, please don't hear me saying this, that it's okay to be a bully.

I'm not saying that you should be able to get everything you want, just push hard enough for it. I'm not saying that you are entitled to look down on those who are feeling weak.

But I am saying it's okay to face the world confidently. It's okay to believe that you're going to be a Christian for the rest of your life. It's okay to believe that God has you and he's strengthening you, he's building you up.

It's okay to believe that you will conquer your sin. It's okay to believe that you, perhaps with others around you, you can conquer evil in this world, lament it and do something about it.

It's okay to feel like you can make a difference. God is the psalmist was in the most constrained, constricted position, tied up, surrounded, caught, trapped.

[24 : 04] God rescues him but in rescuing the psalmist makes him feel strong. God rescues him but that doesn't leave the psalmist passive.

he actually makes the psalmist active, ready to work for, serve the Lord in the world.

Remember 2 Timothy 1.7 God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

or 2 Timothy 2.1 be strong in the strength that the Lord provides.

The relationship between us and God in that sense is not competitive, it's not like the more power he has the less you have, it's both and. He is one to give his strength away.

[25 : 12] It's not like you've got the choice of doing something positive about the issue you face or praying.

You can do both, right? A friend of mine, a guy suffered for a lot of years from bulimia. There aren't many guys who suffer from bulimia and we got him to see a support group, a therapist who wasn't real great.

it didn't really help him particularly so he said, I tried that, now I'm going to go back to the first project which is to pray.

It's kind of like you see a therapist or you pray and they're opposites and you can't do both at once. Now God's power at work in the world rescues us, intervenes makes us believers and God's power at work in the world works gradually to change us, helping us be strong to pursue a life of obedience under him.

Effectively what I've been doing today is outlining the doctrine of providence. How does God use his power in the world?

[26 : 38] that's what the doctrine of providence is all about. I love you, O Lord, my strength.

Indeed, David, in the last couple of paragraphs of the psalm, used his strength to provide leadership under God for God's kingdom.

David has fought hard against the enemies of the Lord. And we read in verse 43, you delivered me from strife with the people.

You made me head of the nations. People whom I had not known served me. As soon as they heard of me, they obeyed me. Foreigners came cringing to me.

Foreigners lost heart and came trembling out of their fortresses. The Lord lives. Blessed be my rock, he writes. David's reflecting on the strength the Lord has given him.

[27 : 48] And that strength has led David to see that his role is kind of a universal role, a cosmic role. God's making David strong, not for his own self, not just so that he can indulge his own pleasures, but God's making David strong so that he can serve the world.

There weren't many nations involved in those battles that David was fighting. But here there's a picture of a world wide turning to God and to his king.

David is made strong and he's made thereby part of a bigger story. He's strong at least in part because he's made part of God's plans for the world.

God's plans for the world to make Gentiles part of his people. The foreigners that are described here. In fact, in Romans 15.9 where Paul is speaking about the grand goal of history for Jews and Gentiles together to praise God with one voice.

Paul quotes Psalm 18 verse 49. For this I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations and sing to your name.

[29 : 25] David's strength is not for himself, it's to serve God's plans for the world, that everyone might hear of the name of Jesus and come to faith and repentance, that everyone might praise the Lord and sing to his name.

For verse 50, great salvation he brings to his king and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever more.

How does God use his power? How does God make us feel strong? He raises Christ from death.

God's power is exerted in the resurrection of Christ and we might experience that power too.

The power that raised Jesus from the dead is accessible to me according to Paul in Ephesians chapter 1. How does God use his power to make people strong?

Well, it could be like the story of William Carey. William Carey was born in England 1761, uneducated.

[30 : 45] He was a cobbler, he made shoes, but he wanted to be used of the Lord. He wanted to do evangelism, he wanted to help all the world praise the name of the Lord Jesus.

So he went to the elders of his church and told them his plan was to go to India and evangelize on the east coast. And they said to him, sit down young man, if God wants to save the heathen, he can do it very well himself.

Carey was constrained and constricted. Carey was facing much opposition, but it didn't stop him believing that God could use him powerfully.

So he and his wife sailed to India in 1773, there was a lot of bad weather on the way. They persevered and finally arrived, but even when he was there he faced many challenges.

His wife became mentally ill, very unstable. She would go around the city where they lived and tell people that her husband was cheating on her.

[32 : 05] When he was in Calcutta, the British East India Company didn't like his ministry and gave him lots of opposition because stirring up the local Hindus was not what the British government wanted.

They didn't want violent responses. He moved to Serampore in 1800 and he started teaching and continued translating the Bible which ends up becoming one of his longest lasting legacies.

He translated the scriptures into Bengali and Mahari but in a house fire all his manuscripts from the translation were lost.

uneducated opposed circumstances working against him. He might have been justified in saying God didn't want me to come to India but he knew the strength of the Lord which could make him strong.

He found strength in the Lord and from his beginnings of ministry in that part of India the Lord has raised up a mighty army of Indian Christians who can say I love you O Lord my strength.

[33 : 29] But perhaps the strangest thing about this whole psalm is this. In its entirety it appears in 2 Samuel 22.

2 Samuel 22 is Psalm 18 or Psalm 18 is 2 Samuel 22. It appears twice in the scriptures except for the opening words I love you.

David in composing this psalm the psalmist in presenting this psalm to us is not just speaking of a military victory.

It's not just speaking about the life of David is speaking about how we might know the Lord in our heart. A personal experience of the Lord is what this psalm in the end is about.

I love you O Lord my strength. No wonder David can't find enough nouns to describe his experience.

[34 : 48] My strength, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my rock, my refuge, my shield, my horn, my stronghold. He's known what it is to experience the power of the Lord and to serve the Lord with all the power that he provides.

This psalm is not a story about history or foreign battlefields. This psalm is the story of my heart and how to walk closely with the Lord.

Amen. Amen.