

YOU STOOP DOWN TO MAKE ME GREAT

by Steve Zeisler

The hurricane season was particularly difficult this year as a series of big storms blew north from the Caribbean and threatened various parts of the eastern seaboard. It was interesting to hear the forecasters attempt to say where the hurricane would hit land. Maybe in Florida, maybe North Carolina, or Virginia; perhaps it will veer out to sea and not come to land at all.

As these predictions were stated and revised, occasionally a television reporter would interview people evacuating the coastal regions. While I watched their activity, I realized that I wasn't making any preparations at all. I didn't board up any of my windows or pack any belongings. Someone else was going to be battered by the storm, not me.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used the imagery of storms to call people to take his words seriously. "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" (Matthew 7:24-27).

Jesus uses the construction of a house as a metaphor for creating a life and describes the consequences of not building on a solid foundation. The times we are living in are sandier than ever. The general culture has less and less to offer people as a foundation on which to build a life. There are gathering pressures and difficulties before us. We can be sure the storm will come whether we have chosen to build our lives on what is valuable and lasting and certain, or on something else. Our lives will be tested. The blowing wind, the rising water, the overwhelming test will come, and then the question will be: Were we prepared? Did we build our lives on rock or on sand?

The key to a solid foundation, Jesus says, is two-fold: Do you hear these words of mine, and do you practice them? You can't do just one. If we want to have a lasting foundation for our lives, hearing the words and practicing them are both required.

Although this message begins a study of Psalm 18, written by David, these are indeed the words of Jesus. The entire Bible is the teaching of Jesus, really. He is the Lord of all, the one by whom, and through whom and for whom everything exists. All of Scripture testifies to him, all of it has been inspired by the Spirit of God, and the primary purpose of the Spirit is to glorify the Son. So we can hear these words---the words of Psalm 18 or any other passages we study---and practice them, thereby building a firm foundation for our lives.

The strength of the psalms is that they take the human heart seriously. Psalms usually start with us. Many passages in the Bible start with God: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In Philippians 3 Paul writes about forgetting what lies behind and pressing toward the goal for the prize of the high calling---deliberately forgetting ourselves, reaching for something greater than ourselves. There are times when the Scriptures admonish us to stop reflecting and act upon what we know is right. We're propelled into action and obedience. But there are also times when it is very important to take our hearts seriously, to do some self-examination and discover truth about our souls.

All of the psalms have the quality of taking the heart seriously, but Psalm 18 is an excellent one in that respect. It has been one of my favorites for a long time. It is given prominence elsewhere in the Bible. The individual who compiled the books of 1 and 2 Samuel chose this psalm (see 2 Samuel 22) as the best of his prayer/poems

to include at the end of David's story, when his life was being summarized. Paul quotes Psalm 18 in Romans.

Psalm 18 also stands out because of the vividness of its imagery. Everything is loud and stark and bright and all of the pictures are drawn in powerful terms.

Let's look at the first three verses:

I love you, O Lord, my strength.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.

He is my shield and the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold.

I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I am saved from my enemies.

As we love and follow God, we will learn great truth about security. There are six Hebrew words in those verses which reinforce the image of God as a strong deliverer, a powerful protector, a rock that will not move. Then, with no transition whatsoever, David vividly describes a drowning man who has no rock to stand on. He is terrified and hopeless. Look at verse 4:

The cords of death entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.

The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.

Death is a torrent that is sweeping him away. He's being dragged along, wrapped in cords and can't save himself. This is just one example of the vividness of this psalm.

Returning to verses 1 through 3, let's think again about building a house---a life---on a rock foundation that will stand the test of storms. Consider the world we live in. Has there been a time in Western Culture that has been less stable at its foundation? In fact the notion of stability---the notion that there is anything that is true, lasting and secure---is under relentless attack. The very thought of security is becoming an impossibility in the world in which we live.

Even the most common definitions of human experience are up for grabs. We play God, untroubled by the snuffing out of human life in the womb, imagining ourselves to be the masters of the end of life for the elderly, acting as if we were God. We manipulate the most foundational structures of human society as if God had not spoken and no generation before ours had any insight at all. Marriage is undefined in the current age; what it means to be a father or mother is undefined for the first time in centuries. No one knows what those terms mean anymore. The political season in which we find ourselves this year is almost completely without principle in any of its arguments, isn't it? Everything is spin, polls, focus groups. There is no expectation that the promises made will be kept. Everybody knows that no one means a word of what they say. They know that we know that they don't mean it, and yet they say it anyway! It makes you wonder when the hurricane is going to land on this shore. How can we sow the wind time and again without reaping the whirlwind?

Consider academia, the world of our leading universities and places of intellectual excellence. I've been reading a wonderful book of testimonies from Harvard University students and graduates and faculty articulating faith in Christ. (1) How striking it is to use the name Harvard and the God of the Bible in the same sentence. One man, John McCulloch, spoke at a commencement recently, and he made this statement: "They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to any judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please on the mere condition that we not believe them to be true." I Janis Joplin sang a song

twenty or thirty years ago with the same message: "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose. Nothing ain't worth nothing, but it's free."

Universities ought to be places that give people tools to build a foundation for a life that can withstand the storms, but the universities are destroying the tools. It is claimed that all tests of any kind are biased, that language cannot convey meaning, that logic is an illusion, traditions are dangerous, history has no objective content, social conventions are arbitrary, and even mathematics cannot be taught without a politically correct framework.

Popular culture is not only sleazy, but it is relentlessly without hope. Everything is subject to ridicule. The dominant note is depression. In the words of Dorothy Sayers: "In the world it's called tolerance, but in hell it's called despair. The sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, enjoys nothing, lives for nothing, but remains alive because there is nothing for which it would die." There is no voice offering hope of a foundation on which to build a life that will stand in a storm.

Storms occur, not just in the macro-world of the greater culture, but in the micro-world of our individual lives. I've grown to hate the word cancer. Too many people that I know and love have found their lives upended by this horrible disease. Or by the loss of a job, failure in health, the death of a loved one, and unexpected days of loneliness. So we come then to the wonderful declaration that begins Psalm 18: There is a rock, there is a foundation that can support a life. There is a word of hope, there is a secure place to which we can turn:

I love you, O Lord, my strength.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.

He is my shield and the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold.

The Hebrew word for fortress in verse 2 is the word that gave its name to perhaps the greatest natural fortress in the world, Masada. It is a rock tower that rises out of the Judean desert opposite the Dead Sea. It was there, in the first century that a handful of Jews withstood attacks from Roman legionnaires by the thousands.

Masada is a fortress, it is anchored in the bedrock. The stream is not going to wash it away, the winds are not going to blow it down. It's high enough to be above the flood. My God is Masada, the fortress, the stronghold, the high place, the bedrock foundation on which I can build my life. David uses animal figures such as the ram's horn, representing a strong device to repel attack. The same term is used for an elephant's tusk. He says, "My God is a shield" or a buckler. That word is used for a crocodile's scales which protect it from injury. This imagery is impressive, especially in a world in which no one else can justifiably speak with certainty about anything.

The writer of Hebrews explains: "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (Hebrews 6:17, 19). Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Remember he said there are two criteria: The one who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice will have a foundation that can't be destroyed by the storm. We must hear them as the psalmist recites them to us. We must hear them as we say them to ourselves. We must say them to each other and say them to a world that doesn't know them. News of an unshakable fortress needs to be declared.

But that's not all: We have to practice truth. We have to make some choices beyond just the saying of the words. It is not enough to analyze the difficulties of modern humanism, to point at its fallacies, to describe its shakiness and inadequacy. Adopting a Christian world view is not building a foundation. It's only half the job. The other half is to put the truth into practice.

Just in these first three verses of Psalm 18, David makes two statements describing practice of the truth. The

first is in verse 1, "I love you, O Lord, my strength." In verse 3, he says, "I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise." These are both action terms. I will love the one who is my strength. When I am in need, I call on him and no one else.

Of all the commandments, which is the most important? The foremost commandment, answered Jesus, is this: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). That's the act-on responsibility; love him with everything. Love him at the deepest part, your heart. Love him with all your personality, your soul. Love him with your mind. Everything you think and every analysis that you offer ought to be filled with the love of Christ.

The second action David speaks of is: "I call to him." When we are hard-pressed, how many of us call therapists, investment counselors, or friends? Our instinctive response is to call people first, to lean on human instruments for help. David is advocating that we start with God; there is no other place to turn. When we are under pressure he is the one to whom we should go.

The one who hears the words of Jesus and puts them into practice has built on a foundation that will withstand the storm. Storms cannot be avoided. Psalm 18:1-3 offers us a clear word on how to prepare for them.

I love you, O Lord, my strength.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.

He is my shield and the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold.

I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I am saved from my enemies.

1. Monroe, Kelly. *Finding God at Harvard*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996, p. 17

Catalog No. 4490
Psalm 18:1-3
First Message
Steve Zeisler
September 29, 1996

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1995 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.