

FEARSOME SAVIOR

by Steve Zeisler

The book of James gives a succinct summary of the human predicament in chapter 4 verse 2: "You do not have, because you do not ask God." The context of this verse is struggle, failure, out-of-control passions and interpersonal conflicts. James says we're in the mess we're in because we don't ask God for what we need. The question this raises is, why don't we ask God? Why don't we instinctively turn to him for blessing and help?

The simple reason many of us don't ask is that we don't know him well enough to know whether he would respond. Some are concerned that his response might be worse than the problem. Dealing with God raises issues of fear and uncertainty, so too often we try to deny that we have problems, or we try to fix them ourselves; we do anything but seek him. But asking for help is the wisest choice we can make. Psalm 18 can encourage us in that direction.

As I've mentioned before, we are meant to see the vivid images in this poem. The first image we considered was a rocky fortress, which David would have been familiar with during his exile in the Sinai desert. The second image, also a desert picture, was a wadi or watercourse that was dry most of the year, but became a torrent during the rainy season. That's where we left our hero in the last of these studies.

These pictures aren't drawn for us to think about deserts and water and rocks. They are drawn for us to understand what's going on inside us. I spent a few hours last week being afraid again for the future of my children. Some among us have desperate fears, the kind that never leave them even for a moment. Such fear becomes like a wall of rushing water.

Others live with rejection that they have internalized as self-hatred. Shame can pull our heads under water. But the question is, do we appeal to God for help? That appeal is what we're going to read of now.

Psalm 18:5-19:

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

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

From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears.

The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry.

Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it.

He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet.

He mounted the cherubim and flew;
he soared on the wings of the wind.

He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him---
the dark rain clouds of the sky.

Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced,
with hailstones and bolts of lightning.

The Lord thundered from heaven;
the voice of the Most High resounded.

He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies,
great bolts of lightning and routed them.

The valleys of the sea were exposed
and the foundations of the earth laid bare

at your rebuke, O Lord,
at the blast of breath from your nostrils.

He reached down from on high and took hold of me;
he drew me out of deep waters.

He rescued me from my powerful enemy,
from my foes, who were too strong for me.

They confronted me in the day of my disaster,
but the Lord was my support.

He brought me out into a spacious place;
he rescued me because he delighted in me.

Some would say that the imagery of this psalm is unenlightened. They complain about people like us who try to take the Bible seriously, who assume that it says what it intends to say, and that what it intends to say is helpful. They often point to passages like this and say, "How silly and backward! You've got God with his nostrils flared and blowing out smoke, throwing lightning bolts. There are too many masculine pronouns here, too much warlike language. These images are difficult, and they are sometimes rejected because they are politically incorrect.

I'm convinced that what this passage is teaching is the best possible news. But it isn't because David thought that God flew around on cherubim in storms, throwing lightning bolts. David didn't understand God to be some sort of deity with a capricious temper. David understood, as did all the Old Testament saints, that God could not be represented by an idol. They knew he was spirit.

Let's think therefore about what is being presented us here in this image of an angry, aggressive, angel-riding God in the midst of a storm, darkness his canopy, hailstones before him, the seas splitting at the breath of his nostrils, and so on. We can gather up the thinking in this around three statements. The first is in verse 6: "...He heard my voice...." This profound description of God's arising, going, and acting begins with one drowning man's cry for help, with the bleat of a sheep, if you will. The second statement is in verse 7: "The earth trembled and the mountains shook...because he was angry." What are we to learn from considering the anger of God? The third is in verse 9: "He parted the heavens and came down...." What will we learn from seeing God act on his anger?

God hears our cry for help

"In my distress I called to the Lord;
I cried to my God for help."

David repeats himself in these two lines, but in the first he refers to "the Lord," and in the second he refers to "my God." There is an element of faith in praying that the Lord, whoever and wherever he is, might act. But additionally David is able to call him "my God," someone he knows personally. That little bit of faith is really all that's required. Prayer doesn't require theologically profound language. Merely calling for help to the One you believe will hear you sets in motion an extraordinary series of events, as we see here.

There are three stages to the hearing of God. First, "From his temple he heard my voice...." God is in his temple, surrounded by angelic beings, we assume (because of what it says about riding cherubim) and he becomes aware of a voice. Second, "...My cry came before him...." The actual content of the need is brought into the presence of the Lord. Third, "...My cry came...into his ears." Even if this is only a whispered call, barely articulated, filled with fear, it comes into his very ears. If we don't have what we need, it's because we don't ask, not because God doesn't listen. No voice has ever articulated a heartfelt call to God for help that God didn't hear.

Why God is angry

"The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry.

Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it."

David is saying that the earth can see what we can't see. In our sin, we don't see God's face. There reference in the Old Testament to God's passing by and covering over the one who might have otherwise seen his face so that only his retreat was observable. But the earth does see his face, and it is terrified. The earth is quaking and the mountains are trembling because they see his fury. His nostrils are flared and smoke is coming out of them. His mouth is open, roaring with angry, burning coals of fire.

If we have been taught to think of God as wrathful and furiously angry, we have probably been taught that he is angry at us. Our own fallen psychology reinforces that notion. We look in the mirror and see someone who has failed, who is less than they once were, who is losing the competition, whose body may in fact be ravaged by a disease, whose future is in doubt, who was passed over when the good people were chosen. We may see someone who is frequently overcome by rage, lust, or greed. We see someone who has had failures of courage in crisis moments. Then when we see the flared nostrils and burning speech of God, the fury that makes the earth tremble, we think of course that he is furious at us. We have no other way to think: God hates us for who we are, in addition to our already hating ourselves for who we are.

But that is not what this psalm says. We are supposed to picture God as angry, but what is he angry at? He is angry at the things that oppress us. He is angry because we have been hurt by a flood of some kind that overwhelmed us. We're not the objects of his wrath, we're the objects of his love. He loves us so much that he hates our enemies, the things that make our lives so miserable, the things that destroy us. That's what this angry face is about. No matter how angry he is, how terrible his countenance, we are to understand his anger as being directed at the things that frighten us, not at us.

Many non-Christians have come to reject the phrase, "Hate the sin and love the sinner." Too often what we mean is that we want to get ourselves off the hook and hypocritically reject the sinners for who they are. Unbelievers hear not hatred of sin but hatred of themselves.

But if we understand what this psalm is trying to teach, there's some wonderfully good news about the call to hate sin and love sinners. The reason to hate sin is because we love those who are in need. The reason God hates sin is because it destroys us. The reason he is angry is because sin is an oppression; "the wages of sin is death." Our Lord loves us too much to let us live with any kind of life-destroying experience. The reason to hate sin is precisely because God loves people so much. God loves us so much that he wants to do something

about the things that hurt us. The flesh that seems so natural and familiar to us is no longer who we are. In Christ we are new creatures. The world, the flesh, and the devil no longer have the right to control us. The old has passed away, and the new has come---and God can separate them. He can do battle with the enemies who are camped inside and destroy our souls. That's what his anger is about.

Does the response of God described here seem out of balance? An ordinary person who's managed to get himself into trouble wandering around in the desert is now about to drown. You would think that if God cared at all, he would send a lower-level functionary to help with the problem. Yet, the Lord God responds in person. His response is extravagant, out of bounds, too much. God's extravagant love is what makes the gospel such good news. We have no idea how much he loves us, how much we matter to him. We underestimate it every time. That's partly why poetry helps. It draws an outlandish picture of God's saving us to make the point.

Lastly, I would say that most of us know very well the things that we're afraid of, the forces in our life that seem too much for us, and we can give such things authority. Most of us feel as if what is destroying us is more powerful than God is. I've felt that way many times, whether it's circumstances or emotions or both. But what we're being compelled to do here is to see our fearsome Savior, the one who is riding to our rescue, as being greater than any opposition. We should be able to see him coming in power more clearly than we see the thing that is ruining us.

How much God cares

The third statement that helps us understand the thinking in this poem is, "He parted the heavens and came down...." God mounted the cherubim and came to the rescue. There are three things that we can say about that. First, when he decided to meet the needs of his beloved, he did it himself. Second, he did it quickly---he flew on angels, he rode the wind, he came at great speed. And third, he came powerfully. The descriptions of power here would resonate for Jews especially. The two greatest events in their history were the parting of the Red Sea to save the nation and the giving of the Law at Sinai. Both of these events are echoed in David's language. He says,

"The valleys of the sea were exposed
and the foundations of the earth laid bare
at your rebuke, O Lord,
at the blast of breath from your nostrils."

The parted sea would have reminded them of their exodus salvation. And when the Law was given at Sinai, there were earthquakes, and smoke and storm clouds covered the mountain. All that is echoed here as well, as we have seen.

I read a story about trains crossing the plains of Montana, one of which killed a grizzly cub. Since then, whenever a train approaches this location, the mother attacks the train. They don't know what to do about this immense, angry grizzly bear that furiously keeps attacking trains. They're afraid for the trains.

You've probably had fair-weather friends at some point, people who are on your side when things are going well for you, when you have a lot to offer; people who love you because they're going to receive something from you. But the one who loves you the best is the one who is there when you're hurting, who comes to your defense when you're drowning. They will attack the train for you, so to speak, if that's what it takes, because you matter so much to them. The person who loves you is the person who can get angry when you're in pain. That's really what this psalm is saying about God. Everybody else may abandon you when you're drowning, but not the Lord. Our time of need is when he comes most powerfully to our rescue. This picturesque speech is a description of how much he cares.

So why don't we feel better?

The last question to ask is, if all this rescuing is taking place, how come we don't feel better? Notice what David says about the rescue. He doesn't say that God obliterated all his problems so that they would never

recur. He doesn't say that drownings will never threaten him again. God didn't make the water or the desert go away. God lifted him up and put him in a broad place. If you're in a narrow canyon and you're drowning, it's good news to have the Lord lift you up and put you in a place where the water dissipates. But he doesn't take away the water, or transform the situation so there are no residual difficulties. That is not the kind of rescue this is.

Why not? If he is personally present, and he's the Lord of everything, why are we not more thoroughly rescued than we are? There's still mystery here, answers we don't have. Such questions are going to come up again and again.

We know that very often God is using our problems to do something in us, that what we think are enemies are not really enemies at all. When we experience pain God is often performing surgery. We can look back on things that we wanted deliverance from and realize that they were the best thing in the world for us. We also know that God's timing is often not our timing.

Think of the statement "He parted the heavens and came down." When do we see God coming to earth historically? We see it at the incarnation at Bethlehem, where the Lord himself became a human baby and everybody missed it. And we see it at the end of the age when he will come back again, splitting the heavens, to make things right. We're in between those events, yet we can still see God coming to us, changing lives, ministering to people who are hurting, and leading rebellious souls to faith in him. We see evidence all the time that he's around, but it's never predictable. We still walk by faith, not by sight.

You have probably read the parable *Footprints*. I've seen it in many places---on the walls of young people's rooms, in hospitals, on plaques belonging to people in high positions. It's a simple little story:

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you the most you would leave me."

The Lord replied, "My son, my precious child, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

The Lord comes in power to meet our needs, but we will not always see it or be sure of it in the way we would like to at the moment. There are issues of timing and what we really need that we don't understand. We are going to have to live life by faith. But this psalm is telling the truth. We have not because we ask not, and we don't ask because we don't believe that God hears our prayers, that they matter to him, that he'll respond. This psalm is a declaration that none of those objections are true. He does hear us. It does matter to him. He does do something about it. "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). We need to begin to pray believing that God, whom we cannot apprehend with our senses, cares so much that he will act on our behalf, that he will carry us when we need him to, that he will respond to our needs in ways that will surprise us.

Third Message
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