

GOD'S DELIGHT

by Steve Zeisler

I want you to read a sentence from Psalm 18:19 and reflect on it for a moment. Compare it to the language you use to speak about yourself to your own heart.

"...[God] rescued me because he delighted in me."

There are three ideas in that statement to discuss before we move into the next part of Psalm 18. First, David announces that God rescued him. Recall the context: a wilderness wanderer caught in a desert wadi during the rainy season, a flash flood bearing down on him, cords wrapped around him, feet ensnared, fearing for his life. We also noted God's coming to the rescue, flying on the wings of angels in the midst of dark clouds. This rescue took place because God was moved by the prayer of the helpless man, and placed him in an open space so the water couldn't rise above his head---delivering him from the terror of drowning.

Here, in verse 19, David draws a conclusion. Some will pray to God in desperate, foxhole situations, and then when the danger has passed they credit themselves or good luck or something else for the rescue. David doesn't do that. He asked for help from the Lord and help arrived, and so he concludes quite properly that his rescue was from the Lord.

But then David draws two other wonderful inferences from the rescue. "...He rescued me because he delighted in me." It's important to see the logic in the word "because." We do not read, "After God rescued me, after the chaos and suffering and weakness and fear were overcome, God fell in love with me." Rather, "When my life was a chaotic mess and I was desperate, God rescued me, because at that time he delighted in me." It's the wonderful announcement of Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." His love is for those who are not yet fixed, who are in need, who are calling for help.

God's delight

The other inference that David draws from the rescue has to do with what it means for God's delight to rest upon us. Delight translates a wonderful word in Hebrew, one of the love words of the Old Testament. He is saying that not only is he beloved of God, but there is a joyful element in God's love---God is attracted to him. This is not love as a judicial determination, or a covenantal responsibility. It is true that God does love us because he has committed himself to do so. But that's not what is highlighted here. David recognizes that God seeks and enjoys him. God's face brightens in a smile at the thought of his beloved. The word delight conveys the idea of joyful attraction. If we could believe of ourselves what David has announced of himself, we would never be the same. God rescues us because he is thrilled with us, he delights in our company.

Good parents love to impress their delight upon their children, don't they? They do everything they can (imperfectly, certainly, because they're human) to create in the child a sense of worth and beauty, to pass on to the child a sense of the enthusiasm they feel for her or him. A child who is loved is likely to be free, confident, and joyful. If we, imperfect as we are, want our children to know that we delight in them, how much more does God, our heavenly Father, want us to know how much he delights in us! And he intends that we be transformed by this awareness.

You've probably seen bumper stickers parents put on their cars that say, "My Child Was Student of the Month at Whatever School." (I saw an alternative version of it that said, "My Child Was Inmate of the Month at County Jail.") It may be that some parents are trying to impress the people driving behind them, but I'm convinced that most parents want their child to see the bumper sticker. It's a way for them to say, "I'm thrilled with you."

When our own children were very young, we had a favorite record of children's songs by a vocalist named Janet Smith. The title song of the record is *I Am a Delightful Child*. It's an upbeat, bouncy, funny song. I can remember our children bopping around the house to it. These are the lyrics:

Oh, I am a delightful child,
Don't you know, a delightful child.
The children follow me down the street
Just to find out how I can be so neat.
And I drive my parents wild
'Cause I'm such a delightful child.

Oh, you know the fishes leap out of the sea
Just to get a glimpse of me.
And the birds fly from all over the bay.
They want to come and sit on my head all day.
All the teachers down at my school,

They just stare and look at me and drool.
And everybody pats me on the head,
And they say, "Oh, what a lovely kid."
And it drives my parents wild
To have such a delightful child.

David concludes that God delights in him; he is a source of joy to God. And from here, David goes on to bear testimony to what happens to someone who begins to believe that of himself. What follows is not a theological argument. It's more of a prayer diary, in which David tells us what changes took place in his experience because he believed that God's rescue meant God's love. Verses 19-29:

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

The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness;
according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me.

For I have kept the ways of the Lord;
I have not done evil by turning from my God.

All his laws are before me;
I have not turned away from his decrees

I have been blameless before him
and have kept myself from sin.

The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness,
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.

To the faithful you show yourself faithful,
to the blameless you show yourself blameless,

to the pure you show yourself pure,
but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd.

You save the humble
but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.

You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning;

my God turns my darkness into light.

With your help I can advance against a troop;
with my God I can scale a wall.

Surprising self-discovery

The statement "The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness" strikes an odd note, accustomed as we are to thinking in New Testament terms. But it need not. First of all, the verbs that express God's actions in verses 20-24 do not imply that David has earned anything, that God owes him wages for his activities. That would make no sense for anyone to say. This describes God's acting on his behalf as a free choice. The term "rewarded" might better be translated "dealt bountifully with" or "blessed" or "did good to." It's as if David is keeping a journal and recording things he has discovered about himself that surprise him. He has discovered that he is making choices that he didn't used to make. He has discovered that he has love for God that he didn't used to have.

Anytime you record a testimony, you run a risk---if you talk about what God has done for you, you sound like you're bragging, or saying, "You should be just like me." But those things don't logically flow from a testimony.

The most succinct and most powerful testimony about Christ that I know of is found in John 9. Jesus gave sight to a man born blind, and the religious leaders complained. Finally the man himself spoke: "I don't know whether what you say about Jesus is true. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" He wasn't saying that everyone should experience the same thing---just that this was what happened to him.

That is what David is doing here. The man who has found out that God delights in him is becoming a different man. God will rescue us ten thousand times if we need it, but in addition he will teach us that the rescue proceeds from his love, and if we ever get hold of how much God loves us, we will not stay the same.

Let's look at some details of verses 20-24. The imagery of clean hands is used twice, once in verse 20 and once in verse 24. As I've said before, this psalm has vivid pictures throughout. Here we're being asked to imagine a person observing his hands. Looking at your hands is a wonderful way to talk about looking at your life, isn't it? Of all the parts of your body, your hands are what you can examine most easily. What David has discovered to his astonishment is that his hands are clean. But look at the difference between these two verses. Verse 20:

"...According to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me."

Verse 24:

"The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness,
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight."

It is God's cleansing that persuades David that he is a changed man. And he begins to live as a changed man of his new beliefs.

One of the most famous scenes in Shakespeare is when Lady Macbeth, tormented by memories of her murder victims, sleepwalks, trying to wash imaginary bloodstains off of her hands. She can't get them clean, although she washes and washes them. When she's asleep she can't hide her guilt.

We need the words of God to tell us what we can't see, that our lives are in his sight cleansed, valuable, upright, delightful, loved. When he says those things, we can say them of ourselves and we see our lives come in line with what he has taught us to believe.

What a changed life looks like

Let's look at three points about this self-discovery of a changed life that David is making in verses 21-23.
Verse 21:

"For I have kept the ways of the Lord;
I have not done evil by turning from my God."

He had the option, it's suggested here, of turning down a path that was contradictory to what God wanted for him, and the option of turning toward God. He chose to turn toward God, to keep God's way. First Peter 4:3-4 says, "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do---living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you." People around you see you living differently and they dismiss you as some kind of religious nut. But David is rejoicing that he doesn't live the same way he used to live. Turning toward God instead of away from him has become his delight. He is grateful, not self-impressed, astonished as anyone else that he isn't who he used to be.

Verse 22:

"All his laws are before me;
I have not turned away from his decrees."

There are some who love the wisdom of God, who love what the Bible teaches; and there are some who look for ways to avoid it, chafing at the narrowness of its teaching. As a pastor I interact with people who are burdened by their Christianity. Others can't get enough of God's word. Everything in it rings true; it persuades them, straightens them. And that's what David is saying here. The things that God has said have become his delight instead of that which irritates him and frustrates him.

Verse 23:

"I have been blameless before him
and have kept myself from sin."

In the Bible, blamelessness in human beings is never innocence, and it's certainly never perfection. Blamelessness is always forgiven-ness. The blameless person is someone who has been forgiven of the blameworthy things he has done. What David is saying is that he is blameless, meaning forgiven; and that thrills him. When someone has carried around memories of treachery and wickedness and failure, finding they are attached to him wherever he goes, for him to say, "I am blameless in his sight" represents an amazing change. "I'm not carrying that garbage anymore," is his discovery.

David's rescue taught him a lesson: "He rescued me because he delighted in me. And if I am the delight of God, then I will become a different person. It's inevitable. His truth persuades me, his nearness encourages me, his forgiveness cleanses." Over time, our journal entries change; we see ourselves differently. He doesn't just rescue us, he changes us.

A circle of persuasion

Let's see what other insights we are offered in this marvelous poem. Verse 25:

"To the faithful you show yourself faithful,
to the blameless you show yourself blameless
to the pure you show yourself pure...."

There are three phrases here that mean roughly the same thing. They are repeated for emphasis. These are describing a circle of persuasion. The sight of God's purity reinforces the experience of purity, and the experience of purity allows for greater insight into the purity of God. Greater insight into the purity of God reinforces even greater longing for purity in life. It's very much like the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount; in fact, when Jesus said that the pure in heart will see God, he may have been hearkening back to this

very verse. Jesus also said in the Beatitudes, "Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied," but the converse is also true: The one who is satisfied by the righteousness of God hungers and thirsts for more of it. The longing for it allows God to grant us more satisfaction. In the same way, to the faithful, God shows himself faithful. Our little experience of faithful choices allows insight into the faithfulness of God. And when we see more of his faithfulness, we are encouraged to be more faithful, and so on.

But then look at what else he says:

"...But to the crooked you show yourself shrewd."

When a person is defending self-centeredness and godlessness and sin and rebellion, they gaze at God and see a stony face, a hard bargainer, someone who exacts payment for debt. They see a completely different person because of what they're holding on to. To the crooked you show yourself shrewd--that's all they see. Knowing God's love makes us capable of responding to it, and responding lets us see more of what it means that he loves us.

We're given three brief illustrations of human struggle in verses 28-29. Verse 28:

"You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning;
my God turns my darkness into light."

Have you ever used darkness as a metaphor for lostness in your experience? The one who is being changed by the love of God says, "My God keeps my lamp burning, my God turns my darkness into light." That's a great picture of the saving work of Christ, vanquishing the darkness, shining the light.

Look at the second picture:

"With your help I can advance against a troop...."

The image here is of someone who will not be daunted by a tide of enemies. Instead of running in fear, he says he can advance against a troop. We begin to take territory again. Strong foes do not have the right to terrify us anymore. The person being sanctified by the love of God finds such changes taking place.

Here is the last picture in verse 29:

"...With my God I can scale a wall."

Did you ever feel as if you were in a pit, and that everywhere you turned there was a wall? The sanctifying work of God begins to take place, and you can scale the wall, you don't have to stay there. You don't have to forfeit the future. Things can be different.

We may need to be rescued ten thousand times--but God does not get tired of rescuing us. God will rescue us every time we need it. But it is also true that ultimately his rescue will teach us what it taught David. He rescues because he delights. If we ever get hold of that, changes will begin and continue. We will scale the walls, the darkness will vanish. Knowing his joyful affection makes everything different.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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