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*Psalms of Life, VI*  
**God My Savior, Part I**  
**Psalm 18:1-24**  
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Isn't it great to know that when we come together as a people of God, and we pray and trust and believe, that things will always work out the way we want them to. No, it doesn't always work that way, does it? For the last year, thousands of Christians literally all around the world have been praying for the safe release of Martin and Gracia Burnham. This week their ordeal came to an end, but it wasn't the way we had hoped. It wasn't the way we had prayed. When it was all said and done, Martin Burnham was dead from a gun shot; his wife wounded. Thankfully Gracia will return home to their children. But many will live with the question for months to come: God, why? Why? Where is God in those moments? With the whole world watching and with even our media very aware of the story, what a great opportunity for God to step in and to demonstrate His faithfulness. So we ask the question: God, why? Why does it end this way?

Those are questions for which we have no answers. I don't know why. But God's ways are not our ways. David knew what it meant to ask those questions. When David was just a teenage boy he was anointed by God to be the next king of Israel. It looked like for David that everything was coming together in a really remarkable way. But that would be the beginning of a nightmare. For the next decade and a half David would live like an animal, as a fugitive hiding in the mountains, because King Saul wanted him dead. David had done nothing wrong; he had simply been anointed by God. And we know for a fact that, in those times, David often cried out and asked God, "Why? Where are you? Why doesn't it seem like you listen?" He wrote those words in many psalms during that time period.

But at the end of his life, David looked back and could see things with a perspective he hadn't seen before. As he looked back he realized, *God has been faithful. God has been there for me. God has been my Savior.* Oftentimes when we look back, things are so much more clear than when we're in the middle of those trials and battles and difficult times.

David penned his thoughts at the end of his life in Psalm 18, which is also repeated almost verbatim in 2 Samuel 22. If we'll listen to what he has to say, and believe and learn, it will give us what we need to remain faithful, even in those situations and battles that don't seem to make much sense. Psalm 18 is a lengthy psalm, so we'll just get through the first half of it this week and we'll study the second half next week.

David opens with the words, "I love Thee, O LORD, my strength." We don't want to go past that too quickly, because the Hebrew word that David uses for "love" is really a very unusual word. It's a word that would often be used to describe a mother's love for her child. It's a term of great affection—a nurturing, very intimate term. But it's not often used to describe someone's love for God. So it catches our attention that, at the end of his life, David is looking back and realizing this has been a beautiful, deep, intimate, affectionate love relationship with God. So he says, "I love thee, O LORD, my strength."

Sometimes when people go through difficult times they become very aware of God and they pursue God. But when the trial passes and life gets back to normal, they go back to their old way of life and their old habits and patterns. They just live on this roller coaster throughout their life. But there are others who, when they go through difficult times, get just a taste of what it

means to know God—what it means to be intimate with God. And that taste is all they need to redirect their lives to an intimate, personal and passionate pursuit of God that will define the rest of their lives.

That was the case with David. Early in David's life he got a taste of what it means to be intimate with God—what it means to know God. And that, then, would define the rest of David's life, as he would seek after God to passionately know Him and to cultivate this love relationship with Him.

With that in mind going into verse 2, David offers a number of images to illustrate his relationship with God. They are all military metaphors, probably coming out of that decade and a half when David was fleeing for his life because Saul wanted to kill him. He lived in the hills and basically didn't know day by day if he was going to live or die. So he uses these images to say, *This is what my relationship with God has been to me.*

He opens by saying: "The LORD is my rock." That's not familiar imagery to us. What does he mean by that? Sometimes in the Old Testament a rock was the idea of a firm foundation. When you're doing hand-to-hand combat it's very important that your feet are on solid ground so that you can fight the fight. Sometimes a rock is referring to that. Other times it's referring to a hiding place. Imagine the mountains and this huge rock. It's kind of like what's going on in Afghanistan today. It provides a place where people can hide and seek refuge.

But more times than not, when the Old Testament refers to the concept of a rock, it's referring to a place of refuge that offers shade and often offers water or an oasis. As a matter of fact, oftentimes when we read about the rock, it talks about hiding in the shadow of the rock. It means getting in behind these big rocks and finding shade, sometimes shade all the way through the heat of the day. And because of that shade, it offers a place where the water would pool and it would be an oasis. Often the expression you find in the Old Testament is "hiding in the shadow of the rock in a dry and thirsty land." It's putting all those things together; and that's probably what David is referring to here. When he was out fleeing from King Saul, he found a place of refuge—an oasis—in his relationship with God.

He talks about the Lord being his fortress. We understand what a fortress is; we just haven't experienced that. Probably very few of us have ever been fleeing from the enemy and found refuge in a fortress. Maybe we would relate better to the idea of being outside in the winter when there's a great winter storm. Or in the summer when there's a huge storm coming. The wind is blowing and it's starting to rain and hail, and maybe there are tornadoes in the forecast. We're outside experiencing the storm, and we step inside and shut that door to the house. And from the moment that door shuts, we have this sense of refuge. The wind stops; the rain stops; and we're safe. We're dry; we're warm. That's the idea of a fortress. It was a place where, when they entered, the door could be shut and there was a sigh of relief. For a period of time they could rest and feel safe. David said that's what he experienced with God. It was a place where he could go and close the door and just sigh a sigh of relief—he was safe.

He describes God as his deliverer. When David stood before King Saul, ready to take on Goliath, he used the exact same Hebrew word when he said, "When I was a shepherd God delivered me from a lion and from a bear, and God will deliver me from this oversized Philistine." It was a word that meant God had protected him; God had kept him safe; God had given him the victory.

It says, “My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield . . .” We understand a shield. It’s a protection from the attack of the enemy—from the arrows and swords of the enemy. It’s a place where I can get behind and feel safe. “My shield and the horn of my salvation . . .” The word “horn” would be referring to the horn of an animal, such as a bull or ram. It was thought of as being symbolic of power. God was the very power of David’s salvation—the very power of his safety and refuge.

And then, finally, God is his stronghold. Typically a stronghold referred to a place, usually up on the top of a mountain, where they would create a kind of fortress. Because of the location, it was very, very safe. There was no way for that enemy to get to them. Often they would hide out in a stronghold for weeks, months, and on some occasions even for years, to protect themselves from the enemy.

So David goes through this list of images and he says, “This is what God has been to me. This describes my relationship with God. When the enemy was pressing in, when life seemed to be overwhelming, when I was really under attack, down in the trenches of life, God was for me a refuge and a rock and a fortress and a shield.” He lists these beautiful images.

People in our culture today are seeking to find escape from the struggles and the trials and the stresses of life. And they find escape in all kinds of different things. Some people find escape in drugs and alcohol. Some people find escape in seeking after pleasure, of sex and other amusements. Some people find escape just pulling back into a depression. They pull back from the world and go into their own little shell and lock the door. They just can’t cope, and that’s their way of handling it—they just withdraw. Some people try to escape in success and material things and money. It could be any number of those things.

But David says, “Where I found my escape—where I found my refuge from the storms of life—was in my relationship with God. There I found what I was looking for. I found what I needed.” And he was able to cope and endure the battles of life.

In verse 3 he says, “I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.” That’s really what he’s talking about in this psalm. He’s talking about being saved from his enemies. He’s saying that God has been his Savior. When we talk about Jesus Christ our Savior or God as our Savior, unfortunately we often just think of God as our ticket to heaven. But the concept of a Savior in the Bible goes well beyond that. It’s not just a God who is saving us from hell and taking us to heaven. It’s the God who is our Savior through the struggles and the trials and life in the trenches. He’s our refuge; He’s our protection; He’s our shield. He’s what we need to save us from the battles of this world. As a matter of fact, what David says basically implies that there will be battles. He’s not promising an absence of battles, but he’s promising a place to go in the midst of those battles. When life gets pretty hard in the trenches, David says this is where we go in order to get through it.

In verses 4-6, David then begins to describe how he felt emotionally when he was in the middle of these ordeals. He says, “The cords {*or ropes*} of death encompassed me.” It’s the idea of being tied up and wrapped up in these cords of death where he couldn’t even move. If you’ve ever been tied up from head to toe you know it’s a horrible feeling. You can’t move and you are totally helpless. He said, “That’s how I felt. I felt like I was completely tied up with these cords of death. There was no hope.”

It says in verse 4: “and the torrents of ungodliness {*or destruction*} terrified me.” He’s talking about a raging river, with a powerful current. If you’ve ever stood at the edge of a

powerful river, when that river is high, you can hear the sound of it roaring, and it's a very intimidating experience. You know that if you were to fall in, the river would take you down, because there's no way you are strong enough to swim against that current. David says, "That's what I feel like. I feel like I've fallen in the river, and the river is just sweeping me away to destruction." Again, it felt like there was no hope.

Verse 5: "The cords *{the ropes}* of Sheol *{which is the grave}* surrounded me." So the ropes are coming out of the grave and they are surrounding David and pulling him in. "The snares of death confronted me." A snare is a trap. He felt like there were these traps all around him, and if he made one wrong move he was going to get snared and would be dead. We don't think in terms of snares; maybe in modern terms we would think more of a landmine. It's the image of the ground surrounded with landmines; and if I take one step I'm going to trip one of those, and that's it. David feels like he's paralyzed—that he can't even move because of these dangers all around him.

Verse 6: "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." It's very important to remember this is David at the end of his life, looking back and remembering how he felt. He looks back and remembers what God has been to him. But it's also important to remember that when David was doing life in the trenches, when the fire was at its hottest level, he often didn't feel this way. He often felt like he had been abandoned by God. He often felt like God wasn't listening—that God didn't care. And in many of the psalms he wrote out of these experiences when he said: "God, I feel like you're not there. I feel like you don't care. I feel like you've abandoned me."

Sometimes when we're really doing life down in the trenches, that is how it feels. That is what the Burnhams are going to process for the next months and years: where was God in all of that? But when David is at the end of his life and looking back, he's gained some perspective. He's seeing some things he didn't see when he was in the heat of the battle, and that's what he's talking about here.

In verses 7-15, David is going to talk about how big and powerful God is, when God stirs to action because of the prayers of His children. In fact, he's going to use very powerful imagery to describe God. It's important to realize that our view of God is directly related to how much we experience God as our refuge, our fortress, our shield, our rock. If we have a little view of God we're not really going to experience much of a refuge. If we have a big view of God we will experience God as David did.

Let's imagine that there is a huge summer storm coming in. The clouds are rolling; there is thunder and lightning, and there's going to be rain and hail and maybe some tornadoes. We all flee to our places of shelter. For some of you, you flee to a cardboard box. You're going to hole up in a cardboard box and ride out the storm. For some of you, it's a trailer house on top of the hill. With the winds and the tornadoes, that's not the best place to be, but it's better than the cardboard box. But others will find a place of shelter—a storm shelter—where you know you are completely safe no matter what comes your way.

In a sense, spiritually that's how it is, depending on our view of God. If you have a low view of God you'll kind of ride out the storms in a cardboard box and you'll feel the effect of that. Or maybe a little higher view of God is like that trailer house on a hill. But to really cultivate a high view of God, and to see Him as He is, is to have a place of refuge—a place of real safety.

David is using the image of a summer thunderstorm—the type of storm where the clouds are black and rolling and just seem to come out of the sky with rain, hail, winds, lightening and thunder. David couldn't think of any scene more powerful, more awesome, than the scene of a storm crashing in. It's interesting that here we are 3,000 years later and we have nuclear warheads, cruise missiles and all this technology, yet there's still nothing really more intimidating. Life comes to halt when God brings these massive storms. We all just kind of stop, because it gets our attention.

That's what David is describing here. Verse 7: "Then the earth shook and quaked; and the foundations of the mountains were trembling and were shaken, because He was angry." It's hard to imagine anything more big and majestic than a mountain. But David is saying, "When I cried out to God, and God became angry because someone was messing with His child, God's anger caused even the mountains to shake." It's a big picture of God.

Verse 8: "Smoke went up out of His nostrils, and fire from His mouth devoured; coals were kindled by it." So often people hold a view of God that's more like the Pillsbury doughboy—a picture of this soft, mushy God of love in heaven. But this is a very different picture of God. He has smoke coming out of His nose and fire coming out of His mouth. He's like a fire-breathing dragon—it's a very intimidating picture. And this is all in response to David's prayer, because the enemy is coming in on David and God is angry with that.

Verses 9-15:

He bowed the heavens also, and came down with thick darkness under His feet. And 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. And 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 Thy rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of Thy nostrils.

This is very powerful imagery of God. It says the heavens bowed. It's the idea that heaven is up there; but when the storm comes in, it's like the heavens are bowing down to where they just about touch the earth. And these big, black clouds have the darkness that God hides in. The imagery is that God is on the backside of these clouds, on a winged horse riding the waves of the storm, just like a surfer rides a wave in the ocean. He's coming in on the wind, with fire coming out of His mouth and smoke coming out of His nostrils. The thunder booms, which is the voice of God. It says He takes these lightning bolts and puts them in His bow and shoots them across the sky like they're arrows. This is very powerful imagery of God responding to the prayer of David, because David needs help. God is angry and God is responding.

Now, again, remember that when David was in the midst of these things, he didn't always see it that way. But now he's knowing that, even though he couldn't always see it, God was at work. God was hearing and responding and taking charge in only ways He could understand. And David's picture of God is huge.

Verse 16: "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." It's a great picture of God riding the storm

like a wave, down to earth; and there's David being swept away in the torrent of that river, headed to destruction. And God comes along on His winged horse, and He just reaches into the water and scoops him out. He takes him and sets him on a safe place—He rescues him.

Then David says a most amazing thing at the end of verse 19. He says the reason God did all this was “because He delighted in me.” What a statement! David is saying this God of unimaginable power “did that because He loves me; because He delights in me; because He takes pleasure in me. Because I'm His child; and somebody was messing with His child and that made God angry.”

I think about that in relationship to my own kids. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for my kids. If they were in need of rescue, I would do whatever it takes. If that meant risking my own life, I wouldn't hesitate to do that for my kids, because they're my kids. I love them; I delight in them; I take pleasure in them.

It's hard for us to imagine, though, that God feels that way about us. It's just hard for us to get there. But He does. He delights in us; He loves us. He doesn't hear our prayer and say, “Oh, there goes ole' what's his name...in trouble again...I'd better bail him out.” That's not how God feels at all. He loves you. He delights in you. When He hears that prayer, it makes Him angry and He says, “Somebody is messing with my kid.” And He rides the storm cloud to the earth. He's going to rescue; He's going to deliver. Sometimes that looks differently, depending on how God does it. But David is looking back and realizing, *God is a God of action; He heard my prayer and He responded.*

God delighted in David; but David also delighted in God. Verses 20-24:

The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all His ordinances were before me, and I did not put away His statutes from me. I was also blameless with Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity. Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in His eyes.

In the New Testament in the book of Galatians, Paul says what you sow is what you reap. That's what David is saying here. David is saying, “The passion of my heart was to walk in obedience to God—to know Him, to walk in His ways, to live for Him.” That's what defined David's life. And because of that, God delighted in David. That's what He wants. David was a man after God's own heart. God loved that and God responded to that.

So many times we want to just do our own thing. And then we want God to reach down and rescue us every time we're in trouble. David is saying, “You know, that's not how it was at all. I was God's child. I loved Him. I walked in His ways. I sought after righteousness. I lived for Him. And in response to that, God delighted in me. God rescued me and God has been faithful to me.”

The only way you can experience God as a refuge, a fortress, a rock, a shield, and a hiding place is if you walk in His ways. If you have a passionate love relationship with Him, and if you live to please Him and to do His will, then you will experience God as a refuge.

We probably don't have literal armies or enemies chasing us and trying to kill us. No, for us the enemy is different than that. The enemy might be a marriage that's falling apart. It might be a son or daughter who's going astray. It might be a financial crisis. It might be something

related to your job. It might be a disease that threatens to take your life or it just won't go away. Whatever it is, that's your enemy—your battle area.

Sometimes in the trenches it doesn't feel like God is listening. It doesn't seem like God cares. God doesn't seem to be doing anything. But we need to learn from David as he looked back with that perspective from the end of his life. He realized, *God was there all the time. God was hearing. God was responding. God was moving into action. He loves me. He delights in me.* Sometimes we just have to believe that by faith.

David was experiencing God as His Savior all throughout his life. For some of you, you just need to take the very first step in experiencing God as your Savior. Like David, you have to simply say, "God, I can't do it." We can't even enter into a relationship with God apart from God's help. There's nothing we can do to eliminate our sin. That's why Jesus came and died on the cross to be our Savior. Jesus did what we couldn't do. The first step in experiencing God as my refuge, God as my Savior, is saying, "I can't do it myself. I need a Savior. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for me and trust His death for my sins." I enter in, then, to the relationship with God as my Savior. And that begins a life-long journey of cultivating a loving, passionate, intimate relationship with God.

We read David's words about his righteousness and his way of life, but we ask the question: What about Bathsheba? What about David's sin of adultery and then murdering of Bathsheba's husband? What about all that? Where does that fit into God? You know, the problem many of us have is that we tend to think our failures define our life. David was a better theologian than that. David knew that from beginning to end the passion of his heart was God. The passion of his heart was obedience. The passion of his heart was righteousness. That is how he lived his life. There was a chapter in his life that wasn't very good, where he sinned before God, and there were serious consequences to that. But that failure did not define David's life. He was a recipient of God's forgiveness and grace. What defined his life was that he was a man after God's own heart.

Some of you have a tendency, when you think about your life, to define your life by your failures. You need to define your life by your passion for God, your obedience, your desire to walk in His ways. We're not going to be perfect. But when we seek after God and we walk in His ways, we will begin to experience that God is our safe place...God is our refuge... God is our fortress, our shield. We will know what it means to experience God as our Savior.

*Father, we're thankful that when we were lost and could not save ourselves, that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. That when we trust Jesus as Savior, we enter into this beautiful love relationship where we can delight in you and you delight in us. Lord, help us to trust you in the trenches of life, when things aren't going the way that we would desire and it seems like you're not listening—that you're far away. Help us to remember the words of David and to know that you are faithful...that you are moving into action. Lord, help us to really understand what it means to know you as Savior.*