

Rescued by a Delighted God

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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Psalm 18:1-19

Have you ever felt trapped, hemmed in by health problems, confined by financial difficulties, surrounded by people who are out to get you, imprisoned by your own sins, like you were in a cave, filling with water and no way out, like those 12 young soccer players and their coach in Thailand? As I followed that story along with the whole world, I thought, “There’s a sermon in there somewhere.” And then I ran across Psalm 18 which is David’s story about being trapped, hemmed in, and confined. I heard the Gospel in a fresh way in verse 19. “He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.” Let’s read those first 19 verses.

After soccer practice, those 12 young players age 11-16 and their coach decided to celebrate by exploring a cave. They were looking for adventure and fun; they were led by a trusted coach; it was a well-known cave. What could wrong? A monsoon is what could go wrong. A torrential rain storm caused flood waters to rise until their way out was completely blocked. We don’t know yet why they went in so far, but before long they were trapped in complete darkness over three miles deep in what seemed like a watery grave.

They had little food, no water supplies, and the oxygen in the cave was rapidly being used up. They did their best to survive, rationing snacks they had taken along, drinking water that dripped off the walls, huddling together for warmth, meditating in the Buddhist way to keep calm. So, they survived for 17 days, but there was no way out and another monsoon was coming. It wouldn’t be long before they died. They needed to be rescued, but how could that happen?

That was David’s dilemma, too, though his cave was a bit different. He was trapped by powerful enemies, by foes who were too strong for him, even though he was a mighty warrior. He tried to fight his way out, he ran for his life, he even hid out in caves, but he was surrounded on every side. As the torrents of destruction overwhelmed him, he felt the cords of death coiling around him. He needed to be rescued, but how could that happen?

Do you know the feeling? Maybe you’ve been a victim, like David, trapped by people who mean you harm. Or maybe it was the wrong friends or even a dysfunctional family that made you feel trapped. Or maybe, like those Thai kids, you wandered into a cave, looking for a little fun, some adventure, you know, just to live a little, or to take a risk for the fun of it. Or perhaps a trusted coach, or colleague, or teacher led you the wrong way. You didn’t intend to get in this deep, but before you knew it, you were trapped in the cave of sin, and you couldn’t get out. That’s all of us. “All who commit sin,” said Jesus, “are slaves of sin.” We need to be rescued, but how can that happen?

Well, learn a lesson from David. From the dark recesses of his cave as the flood waters rose, he “cried to the Lord for help.” And, he says in verse 6, “The Lord heard my voice, my cry came before him, into his ears.” But the Lord didn’t just hear. He came to the rescue. Oh, how he came! “He parted the heavens and came down,” says verse 9. And when he came down out of heaven, it was like an earthquake. The mighty mountains trembled like frightened children. Smoke rose from his nostrils, consuming fire shot from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it, like an erupting volcano. He came down like a terrible thunderstorm. Dark clouds descended on

the earth, hailstones and bolts of lightning and crashes of thunder filled the air as the Lord soared on the wings of the wind. The valleys of the deep were exposed by the blast of his breath.

Using language from Israel's history at the Red Sea and Mount Sinai, David describes the Lord as the Warrior God. He heard David's cry for help and, says verse 16, 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." I was trapped and, says David in our text for this morning, "He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me."

Many of us would love to be rescued that way, with a smash and crash and a flash, by our Warrior God. And sometimes that happens, but it's not the usual way, not God's chosen way, not the best way. I mean, think of those kids in Thailand again. Their would-be rescuers considered a lot of alternatives but discarded the ideas because they were too dangerous or just foolish: drill down from above through a half mile of rock, except that would take too long; use explosive to widen the cave, except that might collapse the cave completely; Elon Musk offered to send in tiny submarines to extract them from their deadly plight, except the cave was too narrow.

In the end, it took human beings to rescue them. Oh yes, there was the machinery, the water pumps that kept the floodwaters down and the oxygen tanks and the electricity, all the marvels of modern science. But in the end, it was human beings who actually rescued those boys, men willing to risk their lives. Indeed, one man did lose his life trying to save theirs. It took men who walked and crawled and swam through hell to rescue those boys.

And that's exactly how God came down to rescue us from our caves of sin, the caves created for us by the sins of others and the caves we dig by our own sins. He came down not as the Divine Warrior, but as a mere Man. Think of those awesome words of I Tim. 2:5. "There is one God and one Mediator between God the whole human race, the Man Christ Jesus who gave his life as a ransom for all human beings." The Lord came down from heaven through the dark watery cave of the Virgin's womb; he entered our world not with a flash and a crash, but with the groan of a woman and the wailings of an infant. And he rescued us by crawling, walking, swimming into our caves. He risked his life to rescue us. Indeed, he gave it.

Here's how Phil. 2:6-8 puts it: though he was "in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." From the wide-open spaces of heaven, God came down to the depths of hell, to the darkness of Calvary where he was nailed to the cross, trapped by his enemies and our sin, in order to save us.

"He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me." Savor those words for a moment. When we talk of salvation, we use many expressions—he gives us new birth, he forgives our sins, he adopts us into the family, he justifies us completely, he reconciles us to God, and he gives us eternal life. But here's an expression we don't use very often. Salvation brings us into a spacious place.

The Devil wants us to think that sin sets us free. If I can do what I want with whomever I want whenever I want, I'll be free. But the Bible says that sin puts in prison, narrows our lives, and threatens to drown us in a monsoon of our own desire. Jesus came to set us free from sin and its consequences, from the forces of evil that threaten to trap us. He wants us to live in a spacious place, free to roam in the fields of abundance, unhindered by enemies, able to do what God wants us to do, satisfied with life and delighted to be God's liberated children.

And consider that word “delight.” “He rescued me because he delighted in me.” Why did those rescuers go to all that trouble to rescue those boys from that cave in Thailand? Some perhaps out of a sense of duty—just doing our job. Others perhaps out of a sense of common humanity—these are fellow human beings. And maybe others out of compassion, out of the warmth of their own hearts. David knew the deep secret of God’s motive in rescuing him. It’s the same motive that moved the Triune God to rescue us—because he delighted in us. Isn’t that a great word? Not just that he loved us, though of course he did. “For God so loved the world....” But in his love, God delighted in us, like a doting father takes delight in his child. We all know that it’s possible to love someone, but not really like that person, even be disgusted by that person. Well, God in his love is delighted with us, even though we are sinners.

I’ll never forget what my mom said to me the day I left home to go to Calvin. As I got in the car, as I left my father’s house, she said, “You are the apple of your Daddy’s eye.” Now she probably said the same thing to my siblings. I’m sure he felt the same way about them. But to know that my father took delight in me, that he treasured me, that he cherished me, after all the things I had done as a typical sinful child. Well, that moved me to tears of gratitude and love. Still does.

That ought to be our response to the way God rescued us through Jesus. But we become accustomed to that old story; that’s why I’ve used the Thai cave rescue to retell the story of Jesus and his delight in us. When asked about their response to the rescue of those children, everyone replied, “Joy and relief.” I hope that’s what you feel this morning as I’ve rehearsed that old, old story in a new way. I hope you can say with David in the opening words of his rescue story, “I love you, O Lord, my strength.”

But maybe you don’t feel such joy and relief, because you still feel trapped in your cave. Maybe that’s just a feeling, and maybe its reality. It is possible to be rescued, but still suffer the lingering after-effects of being trapped in a cave. After those Thai boys were rescued, experts were concerned that they might suffer from cave disease, a lingering fungal infection that affects a person’s ability to breath. And there was deep concern about post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, which might cause flash backs, panic attacks, feelings that they were still in the cave even though they were in a spacious place.

So there can be lingering effects of sin. Even when we’ve been rescued by Jesus from sin’s guilt and punishment and power, we are still infected by sin. We don’t breathe the clear air of freedom because of ongoing effects of sin. Often a kind of spiritual PTSD keeps us living as though we are trapped even when we’ve been set free. Or maybe we’ve been rescued from the cave of our own sin, only to find ourselves in a cave created by the sin of others. Or, worst of all, maybe you haven’t been rescued at all. Perhaps, in spite of your knowledge of the story of Jesus and your belief that it is true, you have not really been rescued.

Whatever the case, if you aren’t living in a spacious place this morning, enjoying the free and abundant life Jesus gives, let me take you back to that cave in Thailand. Do you remember what those boys had to do to finally get out of their cave? Yes, they were rescued by heroic men, but those boys had a part to play in their rescue. When those rescuers finally got to the boys with their scuba gear, it wasn’t enough for the boys to listen to their rescuers and agree with what they said and practice putting on the scuba gear in the dark. Those boys had to trust their rescuers enough to go underwater with them in the dark. It took two rescuers for each boy and each boy was tethered to his rescuers. In some places the boys had to hold on to their rescuers who were holding on to them. They would not have been rescued if they didn’t trust their rescuers enough to hold on for dear life all the way to cave’s entrance.

So with Jesus. God is delighted to rescue you. He wants you to enjoy the spacious place called salvation. But you have to trust Jesus enough to hold on to him, even when it seems impossible to escape your cave, even when the darkness of your cave makes it impossible to see Jesus. Psalm 18 assures us that help is coming down from heaven. The Gospel of Jesus assures us that it's already here. The Man has come. Now, hold on to Jesus for dear life and you will be rescued by a delighted God.

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