

## THE GREATEST ROCK SONG EVER WRITTEN

2 Samuel 22:47-51

More than 40 years ago Steve Goodman, who wrote the song *City of New Orleans* that was a hit for Arlo Guthrie, also composed a country and western song titled *You Never Even Called Me By My Name*. It was a satirical response to the then cliquish country music industry in Nashville that had not really accepted him. He wanted David Allen Coe, a brash country outsider, to sing it. Goodman told Coe it was the perfect country song. Coe objected. He said the song didn't mention, mama, pickup trucks, trains, getting drunk or prison, so how could it be the perfect country song since those are all essential elements to country music? So Goodman wrote one more verse to add to the song. It went, "I was drunk the day mama got out of prison, and I went to pick her up in the rain. But before I could get to the station in my pickup truck she got runned over by a darned old train." At that point Coe agreed. It now was indeed the perfect country and western song.

There have been other "best" songs. In 2013 the group One Direction released *Best Song Ever* which peaked at Number 2 on the charts. Tenacious D had a humorous song titled *Tribute* that began with the words, "this is the greatest and best song in the world." Today we are going to look at another great song that was written 3000 years ago. This was a rock song. In fact, it was maybe the best rock song ever written. But I'm not talking about rock as a music genre, I mean a song about a rock. It was written by David toward the end of his life. When he wrote this he was the king. He was looking back on his life and reflecting on the many trials he had been through, recalling enemies that had tried to destroy him and marveling how God had given him victory over them all. The song also appears as Psalm 18.

As we consider this song we must remember that it is poetry. As such we must be aware that we cannot read and interpret it the same way we might interpret other forms of writing. If you read a novel you understand that it is fiction, a made-up story, and you don't take it as literal history or current events. You don't marvel that a person like Harry Potter actually lives and wish you could wield the kind of magical power he does. On the other hand, when you read the owner's manual for your car you do take it literally. When it warns you not to drive the car without

putting oil in the engine you don't ponder the meaning of that metaphor. Does oil represent the Holy Spirit? If so, this passage urges us to always be filled with the Spirit when we drive? Uh, no. You put oil in the engine or you end up with a destroyed motor. Poetry, including this song, is not like that. It is intended to express or evoke emotion. It uses imagery especially to draw out feeling.

According to Webster's Dictionary poetry is "lofty thought or impassioned feeling expressed in imaginative words." It is impassioned feeling and imagery. If you try to take it literally you make a mistake. We must understand the feeling of the author and allow the power of its imagery to evoke the corresponding emotion in our heart. Listen to what Shakespeare has Romeo say, "Soft, what light through yonder window breaks? 'Tis the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief that thou her maid art more fair than she. The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars as daylight doth a lamp. Her eye in heaven would through the airy region stream so bright that birds would sing and think it were not night."

If you interpret that literally you're going to get really confused. Romeo is looking at a window and sees the dawn through it? He thinks the sun is going to kill the moon, which is envious of the sun's brilliant light? He thinks she gives off light that is more bright and beautiful than the sun? No, this is imagery speaking of the emotion that Juliet evokes in Romeo's heart. Shakespeare could have had Romeo say, "Wow, Juliet is so hot," but somehow that doesn't come close to capturing the feeling.

If we interpret the imagery of this poetic song literally we will get a distorted view of who God is and how will work. In verse 5 David said, "The waves of death swirled around me." But then God answered his plea for help. In verse 8 he said when God acted, "The earth trembled and quaked, the foundations of the heavens shook." David didn't mean in verse 8 that the earth literally trembled and quaked. In verse 9 he wrote, "Smoke rose from his nostrils and fire came from his mouth." He didn't mean that literally. In verse 35 David wrote in tough times God made him so strong his arms could bend a bow made of bronze. He didn't claim to be Superman. David is pouring out his emotions as he reflects upon how God has worked in his life and upon the magnificent character of God. Let's look at 2 Samuel 22.

## GOD IS ALIVE

Verse 47 says the Lord lives. This is a controversial assertion today. Perhaps the most fundamental question of life for every human being is whether God lives. Is there actually a Creator of all that we see? Or is this God, as some claim, nothing but the creation of human imagination, superstition and wishful thinking? Laurie responded to a friend's Facebook comments about the current political situation by saying it is good that we can trust God. She was surprised when someone she didn't even know commented with a venomous screed ridiculing her for believing in her imaginary, invisible friend and telling her she needs to grow up. Does God really live? In David's day the existence of gods was pretty much assumed. But David was making the point that in contrast to the imaginary gods of the cultures around him, the God of Israel, the God he had trusted all his life, is very much real. He is not a figment of someone's imagination. He is not mere superstition. He is alive and present in our world.

David makes the assertion in this song that this living God had actually rescued him on multiple occasions. The real, living God had intervened in human history on his behalf. Notice verses 5-6. "The waves of death swirled about me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me." Most of us have had an experience that gives us a sense of the imagery David is using there. A couple of years ago we were on Maui with all our kids. A hurricane went by the islands. It didn't much affect the weather except to block the trades so it was pretty hot and humid, but it stirred up some big surf. At the end of one day we were all down on the beach, where there was basically just a large shore break. Michael, Toby and I went for a swim and had a blast diving through and getting tossed around by the powerful waves. However, when one really big wave came along I did what you are supposed to do to get through it and that's dive underneath it. I dove underneath, but this thing was so powerful it grabbed me and took me along for a brief but wild ride. It is more than a little disconcerting when you realize you aren't in control. That wave had me and there was nothing I could do about it. It tumbled me over, and try as I might to fight it I was completely at its mercy. I had that brief disturbing thought that I was helpless and that this could turn out bad. It eventually banged me down on the sand and departed without me, much to my relief. That's how David felt when events in his life were completely out of his control. He was being thrown

around like a rag doll and was helpless, overwhelmed by the torrents of destruction. But God came to his rescue.

David said he called out to the Lord, the God of Israel, and he heard his cry. David claims in this Psalm that God is very much alive, quite real, and that he is active in this world. In those terrifying times when David was helpless and without hope God had rescued him. In this song David explains how he has seen the living, real God working in his life.

### ***God is the rock***

This is really the theme of this song. It starts in verse 2, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer.” He repeats that God is his rock in verse 3, then says it again in verse 32 and twice in verse 47.

The English word “rock” is interesting because it has several very different meanings. It is what our little granddaughter, Ella, does when she sits in her miniature rocking chair. It is a music genre. It is a hard natural object that comes in many different sizes. The Hebrew word translated “rock” doesn’t mean a rock like you would pick up at the beach. This is a rock like a crag. It’s a rock the way Half Dome up in Yosemite is a rock. The point is that God is absolutely solid, something you can stand on or anchor your life to without fear that it is going to shift, fall away or crumble. This is a rock you can shelter under when the storms of life hit.

In 1 Samuel 23 David and his men were hiding out in a wilderness area, but some local Israelis ratted him out to Saul. Saul came looking for him. David and his men were on one side of a crag with no place to go and Saul’s men were just on the other side. It looked like this time David’s luck had run out. He was trapped with no way of escape and Saul had superior forces, all set to wipe David out. Just as the clock ticked down to zero and time ran out for David a messenger came to Saul and told him the Philistines were invading in force. Saul had to abandon his pursuit of David to go fight the Philistines. After that they called that particular rocky peak Sela Hammalekoth, which means “rock of parting” or “rock of slipping away.” I

would call it Slippery Rock. The point is it was famous for another narrow escape for David that he didn't engineer. He was out of options and ideas, but God saved him. God saw to it that the Philistines attacked at just the right time to divert Saul. God delivered David. David learned from that incident that God was his Rocky Mountain on which he could stand firm and secure.

David could think back over his life and see that time and time again God had acted on his behalf. He called him to be the king when he was a nobody, he gave him a world altering upset victory over Goliath when nobody gave him a chance to win, he protected him from Saul over and over again, at times in ways that were riotously funny. David could recall how several times he forgot that God was his rock and he tried to save himself with his own wily schemes. Those schemes were as successful as the plots of Wile E. Coyote's attempts to get the Roadrunner, except they weren't funny because they ended with innocent people dying. David had learned through both triumph and failure that God was his rock, his deliverer.

That's nice, but how does that help us? Is God our rock? Or was this just something for David in the old days? The Bible insists that God is our rock too. But how are we to understand this when there have been times we've looked to God for deliverance and it seemed like he didn't show up?

First, we need to remember that God has already delivered us. There is a truth that is hard for us to keep in the front of our brains but is so very important. It is that these Old Testament stories that were grounded in physical events and spoke of physical rescue, a physical land, physical wealth and power, were intended as pictures of spiritual truth. They point to the much greater spiritual rescue, spiritual wealth and power that Jesus Christ would bring about. In the most important matter of our lives, our need for a relationship with God and hope of eternal life, God has delivered us through Jesus Christ. Colossians 1:13 says of God, "He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." Psalm 95:1 exhorts us to "shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation." God is the rock on which we stand, knowing that nothing can shake the hope, the deliverance from death and judgment we have through Jesus Christ.

I think sometimes we underplay the phenomenal impact of the fact that God has rescued us. Imagine that God delivered you from the difficulties that you have faced in this life, but did not deliver you from the dominion of darkness. You would have no relief for the guilt you feel, the guilt we all experience, you would have no connection to God, you would have no idea what is true in this world and you would have no hope in the face of death.

Second, remember that even this moment God is delivering us. We are continually being attacked by an evil, spiritual enemy who hates us with a ferocity we cannot imagine and given his way he would rip our lives apart. He would revel in tearing us limb from limb, in inflicting pain so severe on us we cannot comprehend how awful it would be. There is only one reason that has not already happened. It is that our God is delivering us. Every day of our lives our God is delivering us from the attacks from the evil one. Right this minute, even sitting in a worship service, God is delivering us from the violence of the evil one.

In the classic “You can't handle the truth” scene in the movie *A Few Good Men*, at one point Colonel Jessup defends his actions saying, “You want me on that wall; you *need* me on that wall.” While his actions could not be excused, there was truth in what he said. We are protected by people who put themselves at risk to keep us safe and protect our freedom, and the risks are very real. I am thankful for those people. But here is a far greater risk to us from a spiritual enemy that those people can do nothing to stop. But 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, God stands on that wall guarding us. In John 17:15 Jesus prayed that his Father would protect us from the evil one. Right this minute God is answering that prayer in our lives.

If God was not protecting us we would be overwhelmed with tidal waves of guilt, doubt and fear that would devastate us. Our faith would be totally shattered and we would be left utterly hopeless. We would be slaughtered by irresistible temptations that would lead to horrifying compromises. We would be subjected to agonizing pains, tragedies and losses that would make Job's life look like kindergarten. The only reason that is not our life right this minute is that God is delivering us. He is protecting us from the evil one and his hatred.

We typically have little awareness of how God has protected us from events that might have happened but didn't. I have become aware of an unpleasant and disturbing theme in my own life recently. The event that provoked this realization was when I forgot my wallet when we were on our way to the airport to get a flight to Seattle. I know, some of you remember I did this once before, and both times were in kind of stressful moments. What you may not know is that the wallet thing is more of a theme than I care to contemplate. Last year one night Laurie and I went out to dinner. When we got home I went to put my wallet and keys away as I usually do, only my wallet wasn't in my pocket. I quickly checked the car and it wasn't there either. Oh no, I realized I must have left it in the restaurant. In a near panic I called the restaurant and was both amazed and relieved when the hostess informed that they had my wallet. Then there was the time Laurie and I were at the Disneyland Resort a couple of years ago. We went on the Radiator Springs Racers ride at California Adventure, then we stopped in a store where I found a shirt I wanted to buy. I reached for my wallet, and it wasn't there. I had lost it. The Disney employee called the ride, but no wallet. They sent me to Lost and Found - where I told them I had lost my wallet. They asked for my name, and immediately they said, "Oh, yes. We have it. Someone just turned it in at Cars Land." I'm not done. A few years before that Laurie and I were on vacation on Maui. One day we went to a nice park right by a beach. We parked our car then walked through the park to the beach. We enjoyed some nice time on the beach, then later headed back to our car. As we were walking back through the park I spotted a wallet on the ground with some keys. I said, "Oh, no, look, Laurie. Some poor guy dropped his wallet and keys and has lost them." I went to get them hoping I could somehow help return them to their owner, who I figured was panicking. But when I picked them up I was stunned to discover they were my wallet and keys. Somehow I had dropped them on our way to the beach and didn't even know it. We'd hung out at the beach and the whole time my wallet and keys just lay there in the grass undisturbed, and on our way through the park we just happened to walk right by them even though we had moved quite a ways down the beach. I know, at this point you are probably thinking, "This idiot needs to get a man purse." Sadly, I'd lose that, too. The thing I realized is that in all those situations I was either incredibly lucky over and over again, or God has been delivering me repeatedly, sometimes when I wasn't even aware that I needed to be delivered.

God can and does intervene in human events to deliver. That absolutely happened in David's life. We may not have seen him do anything as dramatic as he did for David, but likely he has worked in our lives. I know he has in mine on many occasions when he provided for us in dramatic ways when we were out of answers.

Why doesn't he always deliver us the way we want and may even ask for? It is because God is working to accomplish something greater than merely making our lives smooth and easy. David wrote in Psalm 13:1, "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" David cried out for God to deliver him and at times got nothing but stony silence. He felt like God had forgotten him. God had just left him, forgotten all about him. In retrospect as David wrote this song he could see how God had been his rock, but in the moment it felt like there was no rock. He felt all alone, abandoned and hopeless. He wondered why God didn't answer.

Sometimes when we read a passage like this we forget that it was David looking back. We forget that there were times, occasionally protracted painful periods of times, when God seemed absent. David wondered where his rock was because he didn't seem to be delivering David. I am certain he felt that way many times as Saul was hounding him, trying to hunt him down and kill him. David had not volunteered to be King Elect. God chose him and told him he was going to be the next king. Then his life spun out of control as Saul became obsessed with killing him. Days, weeks, months, years went by with David praying for God to deliver him, and nothing happened. Why would God leave him in such a terrible situation? We can't know why God does what he does, but we can see some things in David's life. It was through those experiences that God was creating a greater passion for God. Do you know what creates the most gratitude? It is when you find yourself in a hopeless situation, when you are out of options and resources and are certain that you are toast, and someone comes to your rescue. You can't even begin to express the gratitude you have for your rescuer. That happened for David many times, and that greatly deepened his love for God. It also created much greater faith. It created the kind of faith that David finally displayed in chapter 15 when he said that he was fine with whatever God chose to do with him. He trusted, and that trust came only through times when David thought he was completely abandoned and hopeless.

God also used those stories to teach us and to give David occasion to write Psalms. Where do we tend to go in the Bible when we are walking through the darkest valleys, when we feel abandoned, weak and confused? We go to the Psalms, half of which were written by David. Believers have been doing that for 3000 years. In other words, God was doing something much greater than making life easy for David. He was doing something that would impact people for thousands of years. We don't know why God chooses to work dramatically at times and other times he does not. What we can know is that he always has a good end that he is working toward.

### *God strengthens*

In verses 33-35 David wrote, "It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights. He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze." Yeah, that's just how I feel, too. God has made me so strong I feel like I could bend bronze. I'm totally secure and ready for any battle that might come my way, confident even as I face the most fearsome Goliath or opposing armies with vastly superior numbers. Uh, I don't think so. That is so not true. It was true of David. He had taken on fearsome Goliath when the bravest and strongest in Israel were shaking in their sandals and ran from him in panic. He had charged overwhelming enemy forces and had defeated them on more occasions than you could count, at times wiping them out by the hundreds. He had withstood the worst that the king of his own nation had thrown at him. He had defeated all comers.

That does not feel even close to true of me. Yeah, my arms can bend wet noodles...sometimes. I wish I felt stronger. But there is something you need to remember. David is reflecting back on his life and marveling at the incredible victories God had given him. At times he felt that strength from God like when he courageously took on Goliath with no fear at all. But read his Psalms and you will find there were times when he felt he had no strength at all and didn't see how he could go on. Even in this song he spoke of times when the cords of death were wrapped around him and he felt weak and hopeless.

In other words, he saw in retrospect that God had strengthened him and enabled him to stand. In fact, God will put us in situations where our strength is completely absent, when our resources are totally spent, and depending on him is our only hope. I have now lived the large majority of my life. I have been through a number of battles and trials that I would never wish on anyone and never want to go through again. In some cases they have been things that prior to going through them I would have said, “I don’t believe I have the strength to survive that.” Here is what I can tell you. God has never failed me. He has given me the strength to stand and to fight the battle. God has done for me what he did for David, though in less spectacular fashion.

How does God strengthen us?

### *By His Grace*

In 2 Corinthians 12:9 Paul was struggling with some physical problem that he was praying for God to remove. God answered him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God told him that the solution for his weakness was God’s grace.

How does that work? In 2 Timothy 2:1 Paul told Timothy to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Timothy wasn’t feeling strong. He was dealing with opponents who were charismatic people and, in comparison, he seemed dull even to himself. He felt he was losing the battle with them and was feeling like giving up. To be strong in grace was to just be faithful to what God had given him to do, to trust that God would do with him what he wanted. The battle’s outcome wasn’t up to him, it was up to God. All that was needed from him was to be faithful. Being strong in grace is knowing at all times that what God supplies is enough and living in confidence because of that truth.

How could Timothy compete with those opponents and all their pizzazz? It didn’t matter. God’s grace would be sufficient. Timothy, God chose you and in his grace saved you. In his grace God made you who you are. So, don’t worry about who you aren’t, or who somebody else is, just focus on being faithful to be who you are. Trust that what God supplies is enough.

Recently, a member of our church was returning home on a flight and she engaged the man sitting next to her on the plane in conversation. He turned out to be Larry Osborne, who is the pastor of North Coast Church in Vista. As they talked he asked where she went to church. She told him and he said, “Oh, yeah, I know Rick. We started out in ministry at the same time.” We did. He now has a church with multiple campus sites that has so many people in it that it would be considered a big city in Mississippi. He travels around the country to speak and has published a number of successful books. And I haven’t. We did start out about the same time. We’ve known each other a long time. He’s a good guy and a godly man. His results have been rather different than mine, as in he is a nationally known leader. I’m not. We started out in very similar situations, but we’ve ended up in very different places. Being reminded of that causes me to start to go down the, “Wow, I suck” drain. That’s where I can be strengthened by the grace of God. I’m not loved by God on the basis of how dynamic or successful I am in ministry. I am loved by God because of Jesus. I am loved and valued by God just as much as Larry is. That’s grace. And it is that grace that enables me to keep on going in ministry without being so discouraged I want to just chuck it all. That’s being strengthened by the grace of God.

### *By His Training*

Our government spent a huge sum of money, literally millions of dollars, training our son-in-law, Michael, to fly fighter jets. He had to go to officer training first, then, because he is a Marine, he was trained to be a rifle platoon commander. Only then did he go through primary flight school, which is about six months. Following that he was sent to advanced flight school to learn to fly a jet, which took about 18 months. On graduating from that school he received his wings and was sent to the RAG (the replacement air group), where he learned how to fly the F-18. That took another year. In there they also sent him to SERE school where he learned survival and evasion techniques in case he ever had to bail out in enemy territory. Then he became an F-18 pilot. So that was the end of his training, right? Wrong. He was continually training as an F-18 pilot, for the only way to be prepared for actual battle was through continual training. If he stopped training his skills would begin to erode in short order.

My point here is that God makes us strong through training. He is constantly training us. How does he train us? Primarily two ways. The first is through his Word. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us the Scriptures are profitable for training in righteousness. Psalm 119:28 says, “My soul is weary, strengthen me according to your word.”

The second way he trains us, unfortunately, is through trials. Think of trials as working out. If you want to be strong physically you have to work out. If you want to be strong spiritually you have to go through trials and have your faith made stronger.

### *By His People*

One of the ways God strengthens us is through people who encourage and support us. David experienced that from Jonathan and from his mighty men who showed great loyalty to him. We can experience that as well.

I have been surprised through the years at how often followers of Jesus don’t realize how critical others are to their strength. They almost seem to regard the body of Christ as a sort of duty or a bonus, not a necessary item. We need each other if we are to be strong. That means there is something important about us just being there for the body of Christ. Those other people in your church need you. They are looking to you to give them the encouragement and support they need to be strong, and when you sort of take that lightly and show up every now and then you are greatly weakening them.

### *By His Spirit*

There is an indefinable part of his. In Ephesians 3:16 Paul said, “I pray that out of his (God’s) glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being.” How does God do that? It’s something of a mystery, but the Spirit of Jesus will be there for you if you look to him to strengthen you. God will answer that prayer and give us the strength to do whatever he gives us to do and

enable us to persevere. He will make you strong from the inside out as you remember his love for you and look to him for strength.

## GOD SHOULD BE PRAISED

If we do not believe that God is our rock, that he is real, alive, and active in our world to deliver and strengthen us, one of two things is going to happen. One possibility is that we may continue to have some sort of religion, perhaps a smidgen of faith. We sort of give assent to the idea that there is a God out there and maybe even that he has acted to give us the hope of life after death. But that religion will not really touch our hearts. There will be little or no passion in it and it certainly will not affect our choices, values and priorities. We have a neighbor who would insist that he believes in Jesus, believes that Jesus died to save him and rose from the dead and that he has eternal life as a result. But by looking at his life, at what he pursues, at the choices he makes, at the things he lives for, the way he relates to people and what he cares about, it is apparent that you could subtract the faith in Jesus and nothing would change. He would be exactly the same if he did not believe as he is with this professed faith. The reason is that God is not his Rock. He doesn't really think that God is there to deliver him nor does he think he needs God to strengthen him. So, essentially God is mostly irrelevant to his life. He would object that this is not true, even be offended if you said it. But it is, in fact, the reality of his life. I cannot see inside him, so maybe in his inner world there is a more active faith than is evident from the outside. But I cannot help but believe if it were more alive inside there would be some evidence in his actions. I'm not judging him. That's up to God. But I do believe with little doubt that God is not his Rock, and so his religion has very little, if any, power. That will be true of all of us.

The other possibility will be even worse. It will be that we give up on faith in our Lord altogether. We won't even keep up the pretense of believing in him. I related to you the disappointing experience we had with a store where we tried to buy a dryer. They made repeated promises to us and failed at every turn. One result of our interactions with them was we ended up on their email list, so we began getting emails from them urging us to avail ourselves of their wonderful deals and their great service. I have no intention of doing business with them. I do not believe in them. They have not kept their promises. If we do not believe in God as our Rock we may well unsubscribe from him as well.

But if we do believe God is our Rock, we know that he has delivered us in the most important way possible, that he is continually delivering us from evil, and has even intervened in our lives at times, the right response is the one David had in verse 47. “The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be my God, the Rock, my Savior!” This Psalm is, in fact, all praise to God. That is what it is all about.

Praise is crucial, for it is the right response to the living God who does indeed deliver us. When someone rescues you the right response is to thank and praise them. It glorifies God when we praise him, both before other people and in the spiritual realm we cannot see.

But praise is crucial for us as well, because we have a curious tendency to forget. We forget that God is our Rock. We forget how he has already delivered us, and we even forget how he has strengthened us. Most of all, we begin to question whether we can trust him to come through the next time we are in need of deliverance.

God is our Rock. He has delivered us, is delivering us and will deliver us in the future. He strengthens us. He is real and live and faithful. He is loving and powerful. As we continually praise him we remind ourselves of these truths. And we need reminding, because we are not accomplished at living in the reality of them. We need practice. Praise is practicing these truths so they become second nature to us. So praise at all times. Let the praise of our God, our Rock, continually be on your lips.