

Andy and I like to watch Netflix shows together at night when we're all winding down from the busy day. We'll usually watch one episode a night. I'm notorious for falling asleep in the middle of it, and then I have to catch up the next day. Andy never falls asleep during a show, but if he gets tired, he'll just turn it off. Sometimes, when I haven't fallen asleep and when I'm especially engaged, this frustrates me. I want to keep going to find out what happens next. I don't like to be left hanging. I have to watch the whole thing to get the full story. I can't watch just a small snippet. I feel like I'm missing out on some important details that make the outcome more meaningful.

Similarly, when we read scripture, it's hard to understand the meaning from just a few verses. Rarely can we take a few verses out of its context and get the intended depth. We can't get the whole meaning of a novel by randomly reading six sentences, and we can't grasp the whole point of a movie or TV show in six minutes. We may get a summary, but we have to read or watch the whole thing to appreciate the full meaning.

To fully understand a passage in the Bible, we don't have to read the entire Bible, but it does help to read the whole chapter or the chapter before or after. We look at other scripture that uses the same image, we explore the back story, the timeline, the historical or biblical references. The headline before a passage can be helpful as well. I tried to demonstrate these practices during this summer's sermon series in order to inspire you to read scripture further than just the literal words on the page. The six

short verses in today's lectionary reading may seem fairly straight-forward, but if we venture to read the entire chapter, we get a fuller understanding of what the psalmist is attempting to articulate.

I won't read the entire psalm this morning, but I encourage you to do that this week. After reading the entire psalm, we learn that the psalmist is in "advanced age" with "gray hair" and all (v.18). The psalmist's strength is failing and calls out to God for help, for protection, and for rescue. The psalmist recalls all the times throughout life when God has rescued, and in fact, recognizes that God has been with the psalmist even before birth.

The psalmist uses several different images to describe their lifelong relationship. First, we see that God is a refuge. A refuge has many interpretations in the Hebrew Bible: "a shelter, a dwelling place, a tent, a sanctuary."¹ A tent, not so much for me, but certainly a sanctuary or a dwelling place. God as a sanctuary or a dwelling place gives us a safe place to hide in God. When life gets tough, we have somewhere to go to hide behind God. When we dwell in God, we get distance and protection from what is causing us to seek refuge. God provides shelter for us when life is really raining down on us. When life's storms and disasters come, God is there as a safe place for refuge.

The psalmist also says God is a rock and prays for God to continue being a rock during this time in life. A rock is something "permanent, unyielding, and unchanging."² It's consistent and can stand up to life's challenges. I was driving up the 15 to Pasadena this week, and the mountains that

¹ *Disciplines* 2019, 278.

² *Feasting on the Word*, kindle location 12745.

surround certain areas on this road are breathtaking. One time, I went around a curve, and the rocky San Gabriel Mountains appeared unexpectedly. Standing strong at the edge of all the hustle and bustle below it. It was quite beautiful in itself, but more so as I thought of God as rock, surrounding us like a fortress. That's the other image the psalmist uses for God, a fortress. A fortress is a stronghold, not susceptible to outside influence. These images are common, as we have heard them used to describe God many times.

However, we should not limit our understanding of these images to only our literal interpretation. Let us dig deeper in to how the Bible has used these images in other passages. God as fortress isn't "entirely defensive, walled up and protected against the outside."³ We all know the ebb and flow of life continues even with God's protection. Outside influences do get in because we live in the world. So, perhaps God as fortress may mean more like God as "fort or fortification,"⁴ a place strategically positioned providing reinforcements against attacks. God is where we go when we need help and reinforcements.

And, in the Old Testament, God as rock has always been a symbol of God's action, not just permanence. In Deuteronomy, it was the Rock that birthed the Israelites, and in the wilderness, Moses strikes the rock with his staff to receive water to drink. The Rock poured the life-giving water. And, during Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, the Pharisees tell Jesus to make his disciples stop cheering and praising him. Jesus said, "If they were silent, then the

rocks will cry out" (Luke 19:40). God as rock is the one who moves us to action.

We may think at first that the psalmist is mixing metaphors to describe God. But, once we read the entire chapter, we see that the psalmist realizes that God has always been there in some form throughout life and will continue to be there during this time of weakness. There were times God was the rock and fortress, and there were times God was the refuge. God is not only a place to hide from the world, but one we retreat to, to re-evaluate how to move forward. God does offer protection, but only as a safeguard as we strategically position ourselves for the next step. God does not remove us from the troubles in the world, but walks with us, arm-in-arm, through them. God not only rescues people from something but delivers people to something. God rescues us by delivering us to our calling.

The psalmist shares this wisdom. From the moment we take our first breath to the moment we take our last, God is with us and is speaking into our lives. The psalmist reminds us that God has a calling on all of our lives and is always strategically positioning us to hear God's voice. The psalmist is called to proclamation – proclaiming the glory of God to others, singing God's praises. We as readers are encouraged to listen. Because Jesus is calling.

God is our refuge, our rock, and our fortress. God is all things. God is actively calling us to come for protection, for help, for strength, and we receive those things when we say "yes" to our calling. God rescues us by delivering us to our calling.

³ *Feasting on the Word*, kindle location 12745.

⁴ *Ibid.*