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Psalms 18:4–12, NLT.

- ⁴ *The ropes of death entangled me;
floods of destruction swept over me.*
- ⁵ *The grave wrapped its ropes around me;
death laid a trap in my path.*
- ⁶ *But in my distress I cried out to the LORD;
yes, I prayed to my God for help.
He heard me from his sanctuary;
my cry to him reached his ears.*
- ⁷ *Then the earth quaked and trembled.
The foundations of the mountains shook;
they quaked because of his anger.*
- ⁸ *Smoke poured from his nostrils;
fierce flames leaped from his mouth.
Glowing coals blazed forth from him.*
- ⁹ *He opened the heavens and came down;
dark storm clouds were beneath his feet.*
- ¹⁰ *Mounted on a mighty angelic being, he flew,
soaring on the wings of the wind.*
- ¹¹ *He shrouded himself in darkness,
veiling his approach with dark rain clouds.*
- ¹² *Thick clouds shielded the brightness around him
and rained down hail and burning coals.*

Hail and burning coals.

Psalms 18 is traditionally attributed to King David. As always, we don't know if he truly authored this psalm. But it does, in a very poetic way, describe what he has gone through as the King of Israel, and it echoes verses from 2nd Samuel. David is

near the end of his kingship, and he is thinking back on things that happened during his reign. This is how the Psalm begins; it tells us precisely what the Psalm is about:

¹ I love you, LORD;

you are my strength.

² The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my savior;

my God is my rock, in whom I find protection.

He is my shield, the power that saves me,

and my place of safety.

³ I called on the LORD, who is worthy of praise,

and he saved me from my enemies.

King David is telling us about the power, the loyalty, and the protection of God.

God, he reminds us, has guided him through trouble many, many times. God has

given him strength as a warrior and as a king. Notice the words that we just heard

– rock, fortress, savior, shield. These are words that we read repeatedly in both

the Old and the New Testament, describing the attributes of God. Then comes the

passage that we're concerned with today, verses 4 to 12. I have abbreviated it:

⁴ The ropes of death entangled me;

floods of destruction swept over me.

⁵ The grave wrapped around me;

death laid a trap in my path.

⁶ In my distress I cried out to the LORD;

My cry to him reached his ears.

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dark storm clouds were beneath his feet.*

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We see that God has always answered when David cried out, that God, one way or another, has always seen David through even the most deadly times. Consider the words that David (or perhaps our pseudo-David) uses to describe the force with which God has protected David from brutal enemies: the earth quaked and trembled, and mountains shook, and smoke and flames came from God's mouth. God opened the Heavens up, and "*Thick clouds shielded the brightness around him and rained down hail and burning coals.*" Consider something from Exodus, Chapter 9, and I have heavily edited this, to make it shorter. First, for context, we are in a part of the Exodus story, with the Israelites still slaves in Egypt, that stretches from Chapter 7 to 12. There is a cosmic contest going on, between the Pharaoh and God. Moses is serving as God's representative on Earth. Moses first performs some miracles, but they don't convince the Pharaoh of the power of God, and he will not free the People of God. So, God, through Moses, sends a series of plagues: the Nile River turns to blood; frogs come from the river and invade people's homes, clothing, everything; the dust of the Earth turns to lice or gnats; countless flies descend on Egypt, and cover Egyptians and their land, but not on the

Israelites and the land where they live; Egyptian livestock die, while Israelite livestock do not die; the Egyptians, who are big on personal cleanliness and hygiene, become covered with boils and sores; gigantic hail falls from the sky and turns to lightning and fire; countless locusts come from the sky; there are three days of complete darkness. Then Moses warns the Pharaoh of the last plague, the death of all firstborn children. But the Pharaoh does not listen, and Egyptian firstborn do indeed die. In sum, God shows his power over the Egyptians, as well as his determination to protect his people from evil.

Our passage, from Chapter 9, concerns the hail, lightning, and fire that descends on Egypt. A hailstorm of unprecedented violence strikes Egypt. Some of the Pharaoh's servants heed the warning; they bring their animals and family members indoors to protect them. The storm comes in the period of February to March, when the barley and flax crops are maturing in Egypt; these crops are critical for survival. Here is my heavily edited version of verses 13 to 26:

¹³ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh. Tell him, 'This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so they can worship me. ¹⁴ If you don't, I will send more plagues on you and your officials and your people. Then you will know that there is no one like me in all the earth. Tomorrow at this time I will send a hailstorm more devastating than any in all the history of Egypt. Any person or animal left outside will die when the hail falls.' ²² Then the LORD said to Moses, "Lift your hand toward the sky so hail may fall on the people, the livestock, and all the plants throughout the land of Egypt." ²³ So Moses lifted his staff toward the sky, and the LORD sent thunder and

hail, and lightning flashed toward the earth. The LORD sent a tremendous hailstorm against all the land of Egypt. ²⁴ Never in all the history of Egypt had there been a storm like that, with such devastating hail and continuous lightning. ²⁵ It left all of Egypt in ruins. The hail struck down everything in the open field—people, animals, and plants alike. Even the trees were destroyed. ²⁶ The only place without hail was the region of Goshen, where the people of Israel lived.

Now, remember the lines from Psalm 19, where an aging King David is remembering all that God has done to protect him from danger:

*⁹ God opened the heavens and came down;
dark storm clouds were beneath his feet.
¹² Thick clouds shielded the brightness around him
and rained down hail and burning coals.*

No one knows the precise amount of time that passed between the Exodus out of Egypt and the reign of King David, but if we trust the timeline of the Bible, it's about 400 years. Almost half a millennium. All those hundreds of years after the Exodus, when King David is reflecting on how God took care of him and repeatedly destroyed his enemies, King David, or the author of the Psalm, is quoting Exodus. The psalmist is telling us that God killed his enemies with hail and lightning, just like God killed the ancient Egyptians with hail and lightning. This is how powerful the story of Exodus was to the People of God in Egypt, then the Israelites, and then later, the Jews. Exodus is the eternal, powerful symbol of God's protective hand, of God's unfailing presence, of God's commitment to see us through every threat. David knows that his readers have been taught and appreciate the Exodus story.

Let's jump ahead another three to four hundred years, to the time of the prophet Hosea. He is the first of the so-called "minor" prophets, who are called minor because their books are so short, not because they somehow are less important or what they did was less impactful to the People of God. He began his service as a young man and his time as a prophet spanned twenty-five years. Hosea served a couple of hundred years before the Israelites were exiled into Babylon after being conquered. He lived during one of the most trying times for Israel. This was during the horrendous defeat of the Israelites by the Assyrians. While we are very familiar with the Babylonian captivity which happened hundreds of years later, the Assyrians also sent Israelites into captivity. The Israelites are going through a period of apostasy, of a complete abandonment of their commitment to, belief in, and partnership with God. In the period before the Assyrian invasion, Hosea calls upon the people of Israel to repent, to return to living the way God wanted them to live. The people do not listen. God will, as he often does in the Old Testament, use a foreign army to deliver punishment to his people. This time, it will be the Assyrians. But Hosea, that is God, tells us to accept God's punishment, to admit our wrongs, to allow God to forgive us and to renew us spiritually. Here is the beginning of Chapter 11 of Hosea:

¹ *"When Israel was a child, I loved him,*

*and I called my son out of Egypt.
2 But the more I called to him,
the farther he moved from me,
offering sacrifices to the images of Baal
and burning incense to idols.
3 I myself taught Israel how to walk,
leading him along by the hand.
But he doesn't know or even care
that it was I who took care of him.
4 I led Israel along
with my ropes of kindness and love.
I lifted the yoke from his neck,
and I myself stooped to feed him.
5 "But since my people refuse to return to me,
they will return to Egypt
and will be forced to serve Assyria.*

There it is again, another biblical author referring to the Exodus. This time, the prophet Hosea is telling the People of God – and that includes us – that long, long ago, God guided his people out of slavery in Egypt. Now, though, we are being reminded that even after all that, after the tremendous miracle of separating the Red Sea so the People of God could escape, and then allowing that sea to drown the entire Egyptian army, still, the People of God drifted away. They are worshipping pagan gods. They have forgotten all that God has done for them. And now, just as Egypt once held the People of God as slaves, the Assyrians will do the same. No matter how many hundreds of years go by, Exodus still stands out as that single, powerful symbol of God's protection. It's being used in a

negative way here, by reminding the people of their failure to remain faithful, but nonetheless, the Exodus sits in the minds of the Israelites as a singular event, never to be forgotten, and always to be associated with the love and protection of God. Exodus should serve symbolically for us, in the same fashion.

Consider the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, where John the Baptist is blessing people in the Jordan River, thereby carrying out an ancient Israelite act of purification:

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began ² just as the prophet Isaiah had written:

*“Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
and he will prepare your way.*

*³ He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming!
Clear the road for him!’ ”*

The messenger, was, of course, John the Baptist. But now look at verse 23:20 of the Book of Exodus: ²⁰ *“See, I am sending an angel before you to protect you on your journey and lead you safely to the place I have prepared for you.”* In the beginning of Mark, the author is deliberately echoing the verbiage of Exodus. Here is something important: In Hebrew, the word for angel is *malak*, and it means “messenger”. So, the two lines, are in essence, identical. The messenger John the Baptist, who is preparing us for the coming of Jesus Christ, is being compared to an angel who will guide Moses, the man who will lead the people

out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Some say that the angel referenced in Exodus 23:20 is a literal angel, while others say that it is a poetic reference to the presence of God himself. Either way, as John the Baptist is serving the people of Israel by performing ritual baptisms, he is preparing the world for Jesus, just as God made sure that Moses' path was laid before him, and that Moses would succeed. God commissions and protects both Moses and Jesus.

All of us have faced challenges and failure. When I am confronted with a long-term, ongoing task that is proving difficult, problematic, even depressing, I turn to God, and I ask for an Exodus. I tell God that just as the prophets of the Old Testament and the authors of the New Testament held up Exodus as their symbol of being rescued in the face of horrific odds, I too, look toward the faithfulness, protection, and power of God to guide me through what I am confronting. Exodus, for me, is the ultimate symbol of hope during painful times. Exodus means to me that God will get me out of the mess I am in. Please pray with me.

God, when we are faced with a long-term task that seems to be going sour, when we are on the verge of an unbearable loss, an unspeakable failure, or an unbelievable challenge, we lift up the story of Exodus. We hold it before ourselves – and we ask you to bless us with the same powerful protection and enduring guidance that you gave to Moses in the desert. Amen.