

Dave Johnson

Sermon: “God Alone is Your Rock” (Psalm 62)

January 22, 2012

In the late 70’s a family from our church had a recurring battle between the father and his sixteen-year-old son, who had really long hair. The son desperately wanted his driver’s license. The father agreed under one condition, that his son get a haircut—no haircut, no driver’s license. They went back and forth for weeks and finally the son felt like he had the trump card. He sauntered into the kitchen and simply said, “Dad, Jesus had long hair,” to which his dad smiled and replied, “Maybe Jesus did have long hair, but I know for sure that He did not have a driver’s license” ☺.

In the summer of 1985 one of my all-time favorite movies came out, a movie I paid to see in the theater three times: *Back to the Future*. In the classic opening scene Marty McFly, played by Michael J. Fox, has his electric guitar strapped on and turns on a massive, oversized amp up as far as it will go. With his denim jacket on (collar turned up of course—it was the mid 80’s) and wayfarer sunglasses on he strums a chord on his guitar and the overpowered amp literally explodes and launches him back through the air and he crashes into some shelves. As the camera pans in, he removes his twisted sunglasses and gasps, “Rock ‘n roll”! One of the best opening movie scenes ever—and quite influential—all my friends and I wore Levi’s denim jackets with the collars turned up and wayfarer sunglasses ☺.

Today I am not preaching on rock ‘n roll, but on the Lord being our rock. When I was in high school we actually sang a song in youth group about Jesus being the rock who rolls our blues away, but life experience has since taught me that not only was it a horrendous song, it’s not true. There are many people who believe God is their rock but who still struggle with anxiety. And yet it is comforting to know that scripture indeed clearly teaches us that the Lord is our rock.

This is a recurring theme in the Psalm appointed for today. Psalm 62 states *three* times that the Lord is our rock: in verse 2—“(God) alone is my rock and my salvation;” verse 7—“He alone is my rock and my salvation;” and verse 8—“God is my rock and my strong refuge.”

God alone is our rock.

In the Old Testament rocks were quite significant. In the wilderness during the sudden storms in the Middle East shepherds and sojourners would often nestle under a large rock for shelter. When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness they were without water at one point and Moses struck a large rock and water burst forth (Numbers 20:1-20). Sacrifices were often made on large rocks.

And in Psalm 62 the Lord is described as our *rock*. The word “rock” in Psalm 62 could also be translated as “fortress/fort.”

Speaking of forts, when I was in fifth grade my friend John from across the street and I decided it would be really cool to build a fort. So we went to a local construction site and pulled plywood, shingles, etc. from the huge scrap pile and dragged them to the woods in John's backyard; then we grabbed some tools and nails from our dads' toolboxes and built a fort. It was very small, and you couldn't stand up in it, not only because it wasn't tall enough to stand up in, but also because the nails we used to nail the shingles to the roof protruded out of the ceiling, so if you stood up there was a good chance you would end up with a nail in your head. (I guess we could have either flattened the nails or worn helmets but we didn't think of that ☺). We were really proud of our fort, and used to hang out in it, playing cards and telling off-color jokes. Unfortunately a week or so later there was a severe thunderstorm and, you guessed it, our fort collapsed because there was no foundation, we had built it on dirt. We didn't bother rebuilding the fort because our interests had already moved on to other things, like building bike ramps, but that's another story for another time...☺.

We all need a rock, a fortress in our lives from time to time. In January 1975 Bob Dylan's classic album *Blood on the Tracks* was released, an album completed during the dissolution of his first marriage, and as such it is full of pain and regret, full of longing for a rock in that painful season of his life. In the song *Shelter from the Storm* he expresses this longing. Like many of his songs, there are many verses—here are two of them:

I was in another lifetime one of toil and blood
When blackness was a virtue and the road was full of mud
I came in from the wilderness a creature void of form
“Come in” she said, “I'll give you shelter from the storm.”

I was burned out from exhaustion buried in the hail
Poisoned in the bushes and blown out on the trail
Hunted like a crocodile ravaged in the corn
“Come in” she said, “I'll give you shelter from the storm.”

Sometimes when we are going through a really difficult season in life, we look to ourselves to be our own shelter from the storm, to be our own rock. We try to be self-reliant or what the nineteenth German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called *Der Übermensch*, “the over-man.” It was Nietzsche who said, “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.” (Kelly Clarkson sings this in her current hit song, *What Doesn't Kill You (Stronger)*, which I must admit is very catchy with a great groove, but I digress... ☺).

Similarly, Simon and Garfunkel sing about being your own rock in their moving song entitled, appropriately enough, *I Am a Rock* (from *Sounds of Silence*, 1966):

Don't talk of love--well, I've heard the word before.
It's sleeping in my memory.
I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died.

If I never loved I never would have cried.
I am a rock, I am an island.

I have my books and my poetry to protect me;
I am shielded in my armor,
Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.
I touch no one and no one touches me.
I am a rock, I am an island.

The problem is that no matter how strong you are, eventually you will face something that is bigger than you, eventually you will find yourself the “under-man” instead of the “over-man,” eventually you will find that being your own rock or island does not work.

That is why so many people struggle with anxiety.

A couple weeks ago in an article in *The New York Times* Daniel Smith wrote the following about the prevalence of anxiety in our country:

“From a sufferer’s perspective, anxiety is always and absolutely personal. It is an experience, a coloration in the way one thinks, feels, and acts... It is undeniable that ours is an age in which an enormous and growing number of people suffer from anxiety. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders now affect 18 percent of the adult population of the United States, or about 40 million people” (Sunday, 1/8/12).

Of course, this prevalence of anxiety is nothing new.

I recently read Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s 1864 novella, *Notes from the Underground*, the ramblings of a bitter, retired, middle-aged civil servant. It is not exactly a “pick-me-up” read in the dead of winter but very insightful about the anxieties with which many of us struggle. At one point the unnamed narrator observes:

“Every man has reminiscences which he would not tell to everyone, but only to his friends. He has other matters in his mind which he would not reveal even to his friends, but only to himself, and that in secret. But there are other things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and a very decent man has a number of such things stored away in his mind.”

Trying to be our own rock may work for awhile, but it cannot last. We cannot run away from our anxiety, from what is in our minds and hearts—as singer-songwriter Bill Mallonee wrote, “The heart is the one place you must answer the phone.”

Sometimes instead of looking to ourselves to be a rock we may look to family members to be that rock for us, but that does not always work out either.

Another illustration from *The New York Times*—last month there was an article by a woman who had been disinherited by her recently deceased father. Listen to how she described this:

“No one in my family saw it coming. When it came time to deal with the will, they panicked and pretended it was missing. This was an effort, they said, to protect me. But it turns out you can’t keep a daughter from reading her father’s will. The truth came out weeks later when I got the family lawyer to email me a copy. My father had put my mother’s name on the deed to the house and made her the beneficiary of his investments, leaving the rest of his estate to my three older brothers. It was an act accomplished in a single sentence: ‘I leave no bequest to my daughter for reasons known to her’... My first response was to laugh... My second response was to cry. For weeks... I felt devastated every time I thought of being disinherited. It was like a baseball bat to the back of the neck—jarring, violent, disorienting” (Mary Beth Caschetta, *The New York Times*, 12/11/11).

When I was nine years old my grandfather came to visit. He was a big, burly man, over six feet tall. He was one of my heroes. He had served as a medic in General George Patton’s Third Army in World War II in the Battle of the Bulge. I idolized him. As a kid I struggled a lot with self-confidence and longed for his approval. During his visit I had a soccer game, and I was so excited that he was going to be there to watch. I played my guts out, but I had an off game, just didn’t play well at all in spite of my effort. At the end of the game, exhausted, I walked to the sideline and looked up to my grandfather, eagerly waiting for what he would say. He looked down at me, frowned, and said five words: “Lousy game, Dave, lousy game.” Then he turned and walked to the car. I never forgot that. I remember wanting to get another chance to play for him again, hoping I would play better the next time, but next time never came.

I don’t share that story to invite sympathy, because I am sure that every one of you could share similar experiences from your own life, times when the hero you thought would be a rock for you revealed that they, like you, have feet of clay. As I got older I realized that my grandfather, like many people, had a truckload of pain in his life, and that he operated out of that pain.

And many of us operate out of that same place—and that is where Psalm 62 meets us and addresses this head on, describing the fickleness of other people this way: “They bless with their lips, but in their hearts they curse” (Psalm 62:5). Today we may refer to such people as “frenemies.”

One of the most helpful parts of the book of Psalms is that it does not gloss over the reality of anxiety. In Psalm 13 the writer asks God, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I have perplexity in my mind, and grief in my heart, day after day?” (Psalm 13:1-2).

And in those seasons of anxiety we need a rock, a fort, a shelter.

And the reality is that in the long run we cannot be our own rock, and other people cannot be our rock, because we are *all* riddled with sin and anxiety.

That is why the writer of Psalm 62 emphasizes again and again: “(God) alone is my rock and my salvation... He alone is my rock and my salvation... God is my rock and my strong refuge.”

And this brings us to the good news of the gospel: Jesus is the Rock of our salvation.

Jesus, the Son of God, was no stranger to anxiety. Throughout his earthly ministry he was hounded by critics, undermined by the religious leaders, scorned by people in his hometown. In the Garden of Gethsemane hours before his suffering and death Jesus’ anxiety literally reached a fever pitch as he sweated drops of blood.

Jesus neither tried to be his own rock or island, nor acted as the “over-man.”

Jesus did not find shelter from anyone in his family or from any of the disciples or from anyone else.

Instead, in his suffering and death, Jesus became the Rock of our Salvation—and he is our fort, our shelter in the storm.

And Jesus’ death is enough.

A few months ago one of my favorite Christian writers, Brennan Manning, whose health is failing, published his final book, an honest memoir entitled *All is Grace*. Near the end he writes the following:

“My message, unchanged for more than fifty years, is this: *God loves you unconditionally, as you are and not as you should be, because nobody is as they should be.* It is the message of grace... a grace that pays the eager beaver who works all day long the same wages as the grinning drunk who shows up at ten till five... a grace that hikes up the robe and runs breakneck toward the prodigal reeking of sin and wraps him up and decides to throw a party no *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts*... This grace is indiscriminate compassion. It works without asking anything of us... Grace is sufficient even though we huff and puff with all our might to try to find something or someone it cannot cover. Grace is enough... Jesus is enough” (192-194).

Back for a moment to Bob Dylan’s song, *Shelter from the Storm*... one of the final verses is about the crucifixion:

In a little hilltop village they gambled for my clothes
I bargained for salvation and they gave me a lethal dose
I offered up my innocence and got repaid with scorn
“Come in” she said, “I’ll give you shelter from the storm.”

Jesus died on a rocky hill called Golgotha, as soldiers gambled for his clothes.

And in the same way in the Old Testament the rock in the wilderness was broken to give water to the thirsty Israelites, Jesus Christ, the Rock of our Salvation, was broken on the cross to give you the living water of eternal life.

Jesus died for the anxious, the disinherited, the isolated, the “over-man” and the “under-man.”

He died for those of you whose forts have been leveled by the storms of life, and for those of you who have been knocked off your feet by the amps of life.

Jesus’ death on the cross is the final and ultimate expression of God’s “indiscriminate compassion.”

Jesus’ death is enough.

And of course Jesus was raised on the third day—the tomb hewn out of rock could never contain the Rock of your Salvation.

And the Risen Lord Jesus freely offers you this salvation; freely offers you Himself as a rock, a fort, a shelter from the storm, an offer that, like the suffering in your life, is “always and absolutely personal.”

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus *alone* is your rock and your salvation.

“Come in” He says, “I’ll give you shelter from the storm.”

Amen.