

o8. Psalms 16-18

Praying Psalm 16 with Jesus



¹Protect me, O GOD. I turn to you for help.

²'You are my greatest good.'

³You have put into my heart a marvellous love
for the faithful who dwell in the land.

⁴Those who run after strange gods,
multiply their sorrows.

⁵You, O GOD, are my chosen portion and my cup.
It is you yourself who are my prize.

⁶The lot marked out for me is my delight.
Welcome indeed the heritage that is mine.

⁷I thank you for all your blessings.
It is you who give me counsel.
Even at night you direct my heart.

⁸O GOD, I keep you always before me.
With you at my side I will not waver.

⁹Therefore my heart is glad.
A profound joy wells up within me.
Even my body rests secure,
for in You I place my trust.

¹⁰You do not abandon me to death.
You do not let your faithful see the grave.

¹¹You show me the path to life.
Your presence fills me with joy.

This is an exquisitely beautiful psalm, a lyrical expression of an intense religious experience, and a declaration of exclusive loyalty to GOD.

Other people enjoy the benefits of their inheritance. The psalmist, seemingly a Levite, delights in the fact that his inheritance is GOD.

His intimate communion with God more than satisfies his heart, and nothing can distract him from this.

²‘You are my greatest good.’

Jesus’ disciples came to see that they were attracted to Jesus because of the intimacy of his communion with God, ‘his greatest good.’ This communion radiated from him and embraced them.

Jesus’ public ministry began with his baptism in the Jordan where he was filled with God’s Spirit, and experienced God saying to him: ‘You are my Son. I love you. I delight in you’ (Mark 1:11).

³You have put into my heart a marvellous love
for the faithful who dwell in the land.

Jesus retired into the desert to ‘meditate’ on the significance of his Baptism experience, and from the desert he entered into his public ministry. If people were to live to the full they needed to experience the love that Jesus experienced at his baptism. They needed to hear God say to them: ‘You are my son/ my daughter. I love you. I delight in you’. God ‘put into Jesus’ heart ‘a marvellous love for all who dwell in the land.’

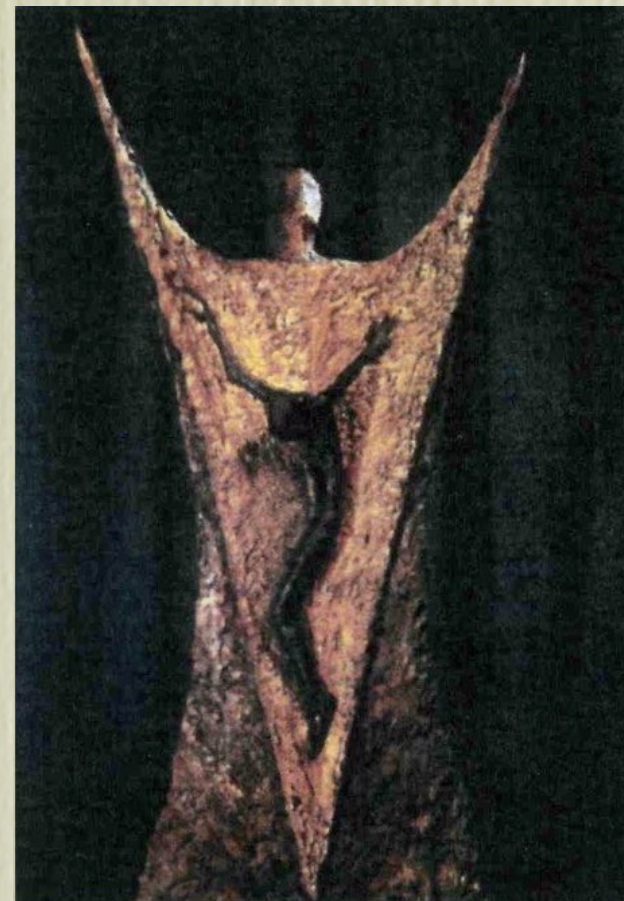
Some of Jesus' disciples witnessed something of Jesus' baptismal experience when he invited them to climb a mountain and be with him in prayer. They experienced God saying to them: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him' (Matthew 17:5).



Jesus declared: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27).

Jesus is using the word ‘know’ in its rich biblical sense. It is not knowing about. Rather it is a knowledge that comes from intimate communion.

Even in the agony of Gethsemane, Jesus never doubted that God was his 'Abba' (Mark 14:36), and from a deep sense of being abandoned as he writhed in agony on the cross, he could still speak of God as 'My God, my God' (Mark 15:34). He never lost faith in his Father's love, and, dying, he handed over his life to God with the words: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46).



In his Gospel the Beloved Disciple wants to share with us what he learned, especially as he lay on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper (John 13:25; 21:20), and as he stood with Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross and watched how Jesus died (John 19:25-27, 37). His focus is on Jesus' divinity, that is, on the intimacy of Jesus' communion with God.



Jesus speaks of this intimate communion when he says:

‘The Father knows me and I know the Father ... The Father loves me’ (John 10:15, 17).

‘The Father and I are one’ (John 10:30).

‘The Father is in me and I am in the Father’ (John 10:38; John 14:10, 11).

‘I love the Father’ (John 14:31).

‘I came from the Father ... and I am going to the Father’ (John 16:28).

‘I am not alone; the Father is with me’ (John 16:32).

It was from his intimate communion with God that Jesus experienced the call and the grace to share with others his experience of God, so that we, too, would experience Love. His mission was to include us in the communion he has with God.

‘I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you’ (John 14:20).

‘If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home in you’ (John 14:23).

‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love’ (John 15:9).

‘As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us’ (John 17:21).

‘I revealed you to them, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them’ (John 17:26).

From God’s eternal embrace, Jesus continues to ‘give God’s Spirit without measure’ (John 3:34). As he promised: ‘When I am lifted up, I will draw everyone to myself’ (John 12:32), and so to his Father.

³You have put into my heart a marvellous love
for the faithful who dwell in the land.

The psalmist has a special love for those who are
‘consecrated’ to God, who are faithful to the covenant.
Jesus reveals God’s love for everyone, but he does
experience a special delight in the presence of those who
welcome his revelation of Love (see Luke 10:21-22).

⁴Those who run after strange gods multiply their sorrows.

In praying this psalm we are challenged to look at the 'idols' that we build in our personal and social lives. What idols are there in the culture to which we belong?

⁷It is you who give me counsel.
Even at night you direct my heart.

The psalmist feels himself more vulnerable at night to irrational feelings that well up inside him. He has learned to place his trust in God, confident that these feelings reveal the mysterious influence and inspiration of God in his life.

¹⁰You do not abandon me to death.

You do not let your faithful see the grave.

In verse 10 the Greek Septuagint replaces 'grave' with 'corruption'.

Hence the application of this verse to Jesus in the New Testament (see Acts 2:24-32 and 13:34-39). Jesus was buried (he saw the grave), but he was raised to life and hence did not experience 'corruption'.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus let us withdraw into the silence of our heart, believing that it is there that God, the Risen Jesus, and the Spirit of Love that flows between them, have chosen to make their home.

Let us allow Jesus to draw us into the intimate communion he enjoys with his Father, for this is what God wants for us. This is our birthright, our inheritance. It is in this communion that we find ourselves and 'live to the full' (John 10:10).

Psalm 16

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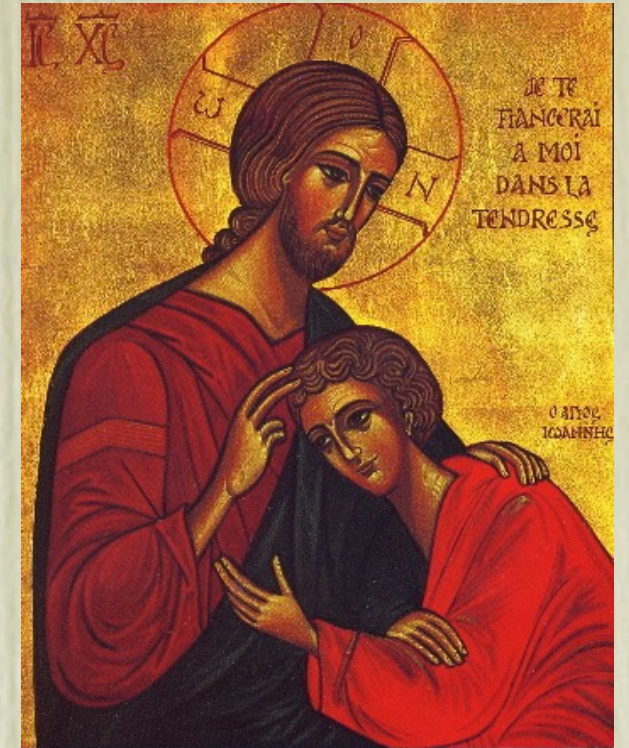
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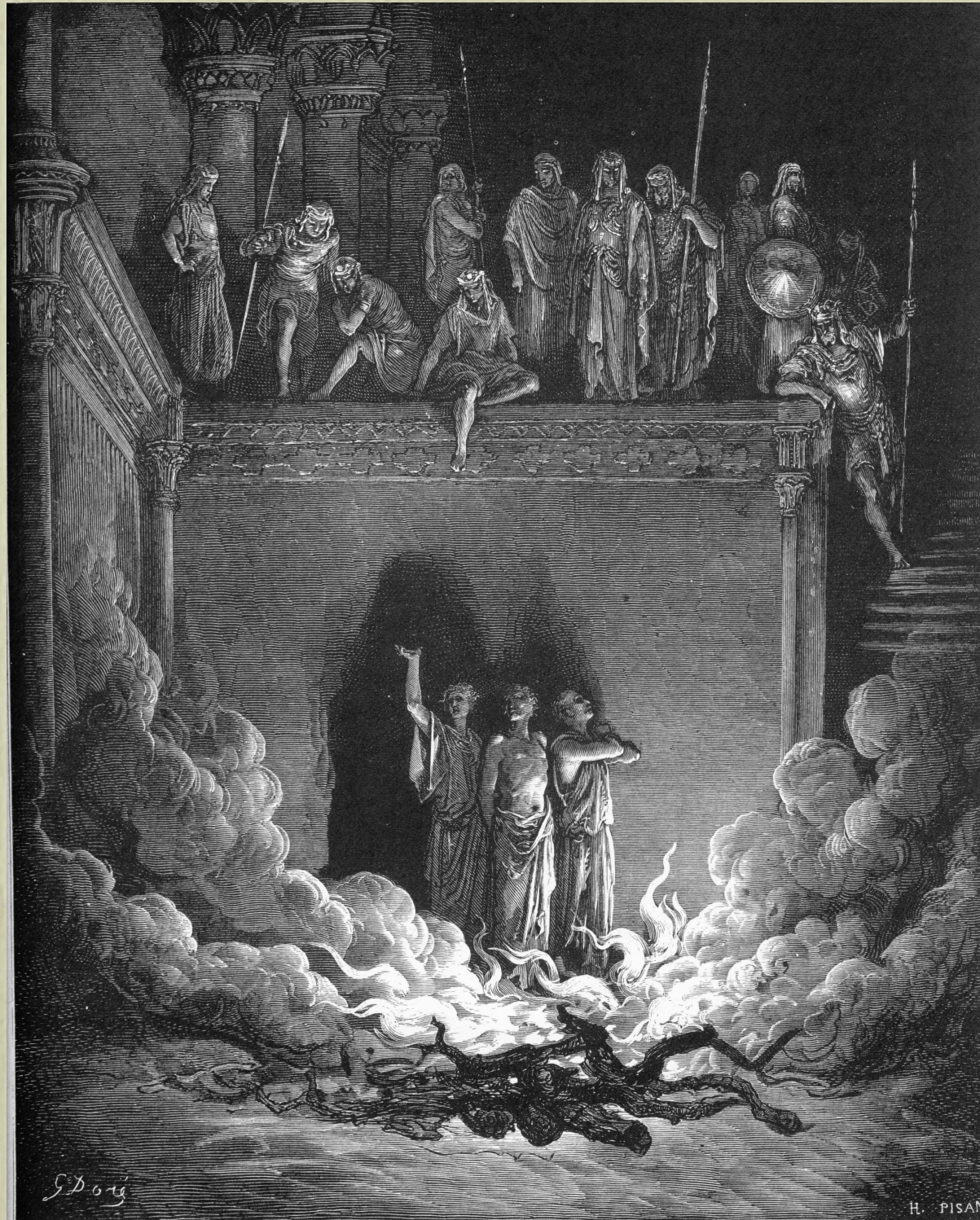
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Your presence fills me with joy.

Praying Psalm 17 with Jesus



¹O GOD, hear my appeal for justice.
Attend to my cry. Listen to my plea.
My lips are free of deception.

²Let my judgment come from you,
for you can see that I am upright.

³You scrutinise my heart. You probe it by night.
You will find in me no wickedness.

⁴There is no error in what I have said
about how people are behaving.

Following the instructions from your lips
I have remained vigilant.

⁵Even on steep paths I have kept my footing.
Keeping to your way, I have not strayed.

⁶I call upon you, my God;
attend to me, hear my voice.

⁷Show me your wonderful love,
you who save those who trust you.

⁸Guard me as the pupil of your eye.
Hide me in the shade of your wings
⁹from the wicked who attack me,
and hunt me down to take my life.

¹⁰They lack all feeling. Their speech is arrogant.

¹¹They track me down and hem me in.
They fix their eyes on me,
determined to strike me to the ground.

¹²They are like lions eager for prey,
like young lions lurking in ambush.

¹⁴Ensure that those you protect are saved from starving.
May their children be satisfied.
May they have more than enough for their little ones.

¹⁵As for me, I have been righteous.
I will behold your face.
When I awake, I will see you.
That is all I want.

Omitted

¹³Rise up, O GOD, confront them, overthrow them!

With your sword snatch me away from the wicked.

¹⁴Kill them, O GOD. Kill them with your own hand.

Let them not share the heritage of the living.

From the cross Jesus prayed: ‘Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34). It is understandable that, with his limited view of God, the psalmist would give expression in his prayer to verses 13-14.

Jesus could not pray this way, neither should we.

This is an appeal to GOD from a person who is suffering injustice. He asserts his innocence throughout and asks God to protect him (verses 8-9) by wiping out his enemies (verse 13-14). He is praying at night (verse 3) and concludes with a confident assertion that in the morning (verse 15), God will intervene in his favour.

Loving carries a cost ‘Leper’ (Mark 1:40-45)

‘If you want to you can make me clean’. Jesus’ immediate response is: ‘Of course I want to’.

Then Jesus embraces him and tells him to go and get a clearance from the priests to return to the community.

‘Jesus had to stay outside in places where nobody lives’.

Jesus heals a man In the synagogue on the Sabbath.

‘The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him’ (Mark 3:6).

On another Sabbath, Jesus healed a man at the pool of Beth-zatha. John writes: ‘The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath’ (John 5:16).

Nazareth synagogue.

At first they were 'amazed' at the gracious words that came from his mouth' (Luke 4:22).

But when he challenged them by speaking of God's favouring Sidon and Syria 'they were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff' (Luke 4:28-29).

When Jesus' Love brought healing, he was accused of acting with demonic power (see Matthew 12:24).

At his trial before the Jewish Council Jesus was falsely accused, condemned to death and ridiculed: 'they spat in his face and struck him' (Matthew 26:67).

They accused him to Pilate: 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king' (Luke 23:2).

Jesus knew what it was like to suffer injustice.

The psalmist claims to be innocent (see Psalm 6).

When we are falsely accused we can join Jesus in praying this psalm. He warned us that this would happen: 'Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master". If they persecuted me, they will persecute you' (John 15:20).

When the accusations have no basis we can find strength in knowing this and in Jesus' words: 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account' (Matthew 5:11).

It is harder when there is some basis for the accusations, but our behaviour is taken out of context and distorted, and we are being accused of motivation that is not true.

⁸Guard me as the pupil of your eye.
Hide me in the shade of your wings

God was thought of as invisibly present on the throne of the ark of the covenant in the inner sanctuary of the temple. The throne (the 'cover' or 'mercy-seat') was protected by cherubim whose wings arched over it. To be hidden in the shadow of GOD's wings is to find refuge in intimate communion with God in the sanctuary.

The image of God protecting his people with outstretched wings, as of an eagle, may also be present here: 'As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, GOD alone guided him' (Deuteronomy 32:11).

¹⁴Ensure that those you protect are saved from starving.
May their children be satisfied.
May they have more than enough for their little ones.

It is good to hear the psalmist rise above his own personal problems to pray for others who are being oppressed.

We are reminded of Jesus' words to those who arrested him:
'If you are looking for me, let these men go' (John 18:8).

¹⁵As for me, I have been righteous. I will behold your face.
When I awake, I will see you. That is all I want.

The psalmist is confident that he can sleep in peace and when he awakens to face trial, God will reveal himself and make sure that justice is done. Experiencing justice, the psalmist will behold the 'likeness' of GOD.

Verse fifteen has an even deeper meaning for us who hope to share in the risen glory of Jesus when we awake from the sleep of death.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us hear Jesus say: 'Trust in God still and trust in me' (John 14:1). When we are unjustly accused, let us pray with Jesus: 'Hide me in the shade of your wings' (verse 8). Let us pray with confidence: 'I will behold your face. When I awake I will see you' (verse 15). And let us add: 'That is all I want'.

Saint Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) expresses this beautifully:

'Let nothing trouble you.
Let nothing frighten you.
Everything passes.
God never changes.
Patience obtains all.
Whoever has God wants for nothing.
God alone is enough' (Poem 9).

Psalm 17

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Attend to my cry. Listen to my plea.
My lips are free of deception.

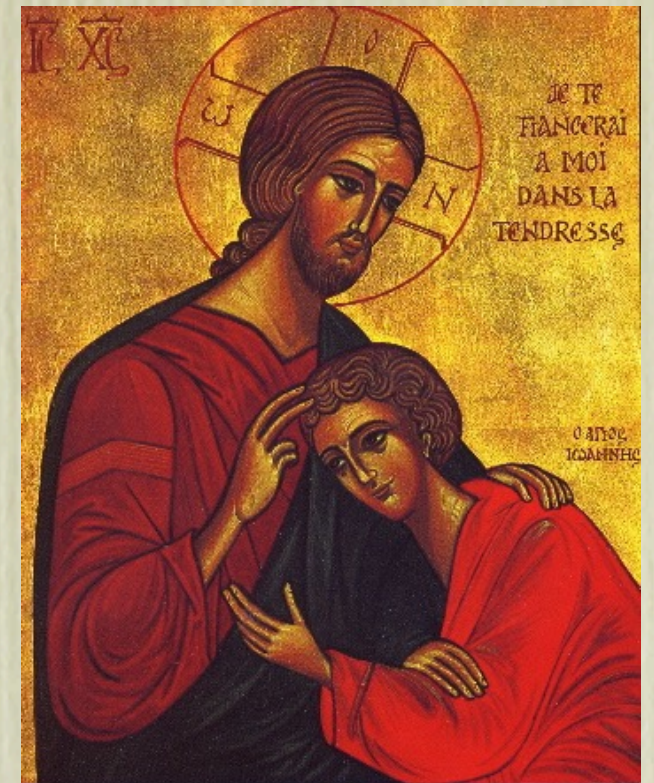
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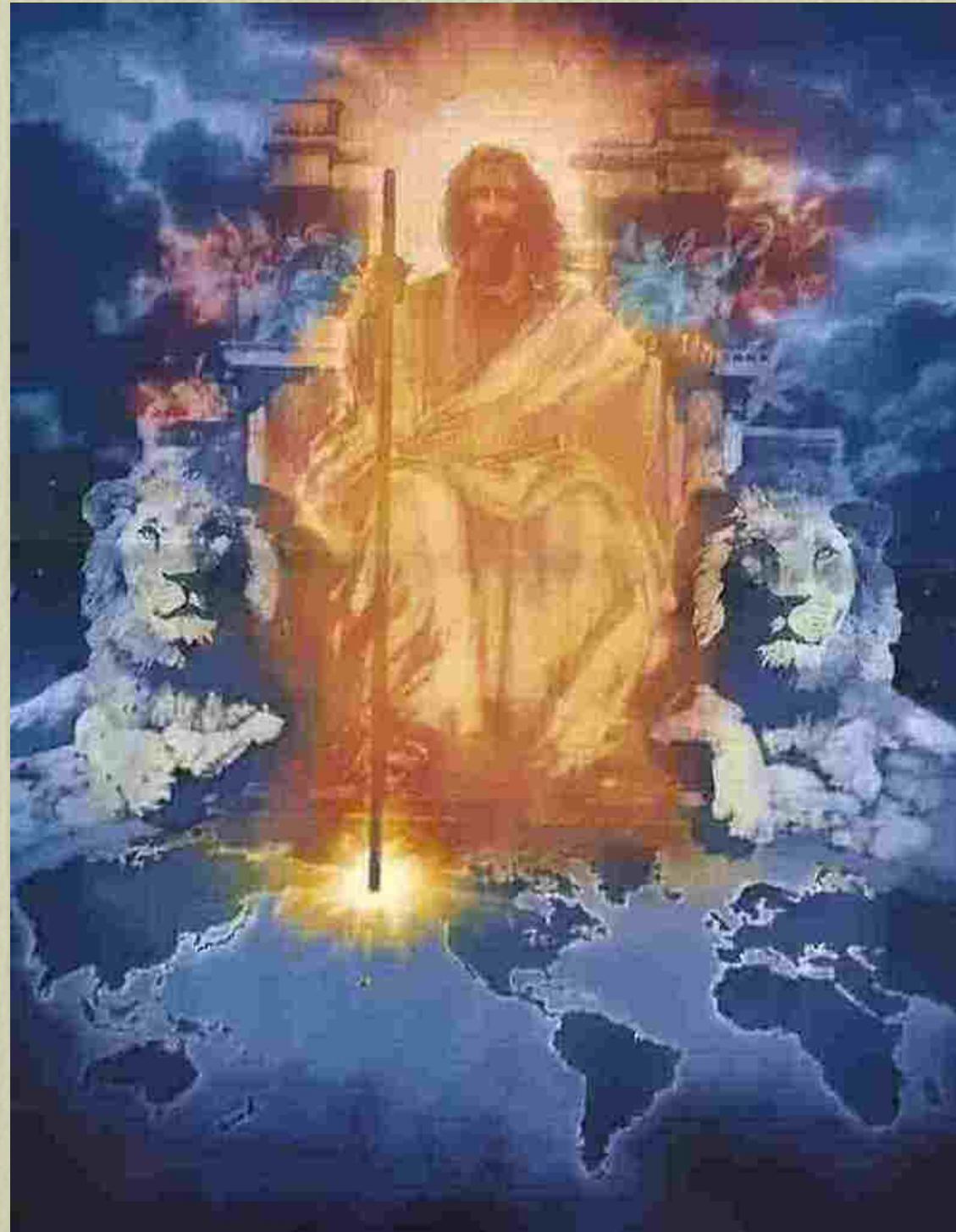
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When I awake, I will see you.
That is all I want.

Praying and reflecting on Psalm 18 with Jesus



¹I love you, O GOD, my strength,
²my rock, my fortress, my Saviour, my God,
my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold.
³I praise you. I call upon you,
and I am rescued from my enemies.

⁴The waves of Death overwhelmed me;
the torrents of destruction struck me down;
⁵the cords of the Underworld entangled me;
the nets of Death held me trapped.

⁶I called upon YOU, I cried out for help,
and my cry pierced through to your presence.

⁷Then the earth reeled and trembled;

the mountains were shaken to their foundations,
they shuddered at your terrible anger.

⁸Smoke issued from your nostrils,

a scorching fire from your mouth; and fiery rocks erupted.

⁹God, you tore open the heavens, and came down;

a black cloud under your feet.

¹⁰You rode on the back of a cherub

and came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.

¹¹You made darkness your covering,

wrapped in a canopy of thick black storm-clouds.

¹²Lightning announced God's presence, with hailstones and flashes of fire

¹³GOD thundered in the heavens,

the voice of the Most High resounded.

¹⁴You shot your arrows, and scattered them,
causing terror by the crashing of the lightning.

¹⁵Then the bottom of the ocean was revealed,
and the foundations of the world laid bare
at your rebuke, O GOD, at the fire issuing from your nostrils.

¹⁶You reached down from on high and held me.

¹⁷You rescued me from powerful enemies,
from those who were too strong for me.

¹⁸They came against me on a disastrous day,
but GOD sustained me,

¹⁹You sustain me and set me free. Your Love rescues me.

²⁰O GOD, you rewarded me because I was just;
repaid me because my actions were pure,

²¹because I have kept your ways,
and have not repudiated my God;

²²because I have kept before my eyes all your judgments,
and I have not set aside your statutes.

²³I kept blameless before God, and I guarded myself against all guilt.

²⁴O GOD, you recompensed me for being just,
for keeping my actions pure in your sight.

²⁵With the faithful you show your covenant love;
with the blameless you show yourself blameless;

²⁶with the pure you show yourself pure;
with the crooked you show yourself astute.

²⁷You give your saving help to the humble,
and you humble those who are proud.

²⁸It is you, O GOD, who light my lamp.
It is you who illumine my darkness.

²⁹With you I can leap into the fray,
with my God I can scale any wall.

³⁰O God, your way is perfect. Your word is true.

YOU are a shield for all who take refuge in GOD.

³¹Who is God apart from YOU? Who is the rock if not our God?

³²You gird me with strength; you guide me to achieve my goal.

³³You make my feet like those of a deer. You set me secure on the heights.

³⁴You train my hands for war and my arms to bend the heavy bow.

³⁵You have given me your saving shield,
your right hand has supported me, you have assisted me in every way.

³⁶You have widened the path for my steps,
and I have kept my footing.

³⁷I pursued the enemy and overtook them;
and did not turn back until they were annihilated.

³⁸I struck them down, so that they were not able to rise.
They fell under my feet.

³⁹For you girded me with strength for the battle;
you made my assailants fall down before me.

⁴⁰You put my enemies to flight,
and reduced to silence my adversaries.

⁴¹They cried for help, but there was no one to save them;
they cried to GOD, but there was no answer.

⁴²You crushed them fine as dust before the wind;
You trod them down like dirt in the streets.

⁴³You rescued me from the wrangling of my people.

⁴³You made me head of the nations.

A foreign people took me as their lord,
⁴⁴because of my fame they submitted to me.

Foreigners came cringing to me,
⁴⁵foreigners lost heart, and came trembling out of their strongholds.

⁴⁶GOD lives! Blessed be my rock! Be exalted, my God and Saviour!

⁴⁷God, you avenged me and subdued peoples under me,

⁴⁸you rescued me from my enemy,
you exalted me above my adversaries and rescued me from their violence.

⁴⁹For this I will extol you, O GOD, among the nations,
and sing praises to your name.

⁵⁰You show love to your anointed.

You reveal your love for David
and for his descendants for ever.

¹I love you, O GOD, my strength,

When the psalmist writes: ‘I love you’, he uses the Hebrew word *raḥam*. It is a particularly tender word for love, related to the word for a ‘womb’, and so picking up the love a mother has for the child in her womb. *raḥam* is found only 4 times in the psalms. On the other three times (Psalms 102:13, 103:13 and 116:5) it refers to the tenderness of God’s motherly love for us.

In the whole Bible, only here in Psalm 18 do we find it used of our love for God.

It fits nicely with Jesus relating to God as his Abba (‘Father’), and we are invited to join Jesus in this.

With what we know of the woman’s role in conception, today we can address God also as our Imma (‘Mother’).

Jesus invites us to see God as ‘my strength, my rock, my fortress, my Saviour, my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold’ (verse 2)

and to cry out to God in our need (verse 6, 16). God’s Love will set us free (verse 19).

⁶I call upon YOU, I cry out for help,
and my cry pierces through to your presence.

¹⁶You reach down from on high and hold me.

¹⁹You sustain me and set me free. Your Love rescues me.

²⁷You give your saving help to the humble,
and you humble those who are proud.

Jesus invites us: 'Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-29).

There is a connection here with Jesus' call for us to become like little children. To be humble is to know that all we are and all we have is gift. It is to know the joy of being dependent, knowing that the One on whom we ultimately depend is God, our Loving Father/Mother.

The only hope for the proud is to learn humility (see Matthew 23:12).

²⁷You give your saving help to the humble,
and you humble those who are proud.

Paul exhorts us: 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience' (Colossians 3:12).

²⁸It is you, O GOD, who light my lamp.
It is you who illumine my darkness.

This is picked up beautifully in the mantra prayed by a Hindu mystic, Yogananda, as he was dying. Speaking of his body as God's temple, and knowing his inability to minister to himself, he prays to the Risen Jesus:

‘In this your temple,
with your own hands,
light the lamp of your love.
Turn my darkness into light.
Turn my darkness into light.’

Perhaps we could make this mantra our own as we pray this psalm with Jesus.

³⁰O God, your way is perfect;
You are a shield for all who take refuge in GOD.

Jesus, like the psalmist, knows this. Let us ask to know and follow God's way, and let us pray with the prophet Samuel:

‘Speak, O GOD, your servant is listening’ (1 Samuel 3:10).

³¹Who is God apart from YOU?

Who is the rock if not our God?

We share Jesus' faith in the only true God – the God of the burning bush, the God who brought the people of Israel out of slavery and led them to the Promised Land. It is God's Love that liberates from all that holds us in slavery, for God, as Jesus said, wants everyone to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10). Jesus' mission was to set the world ablaze with the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit (see Luke 12:49).

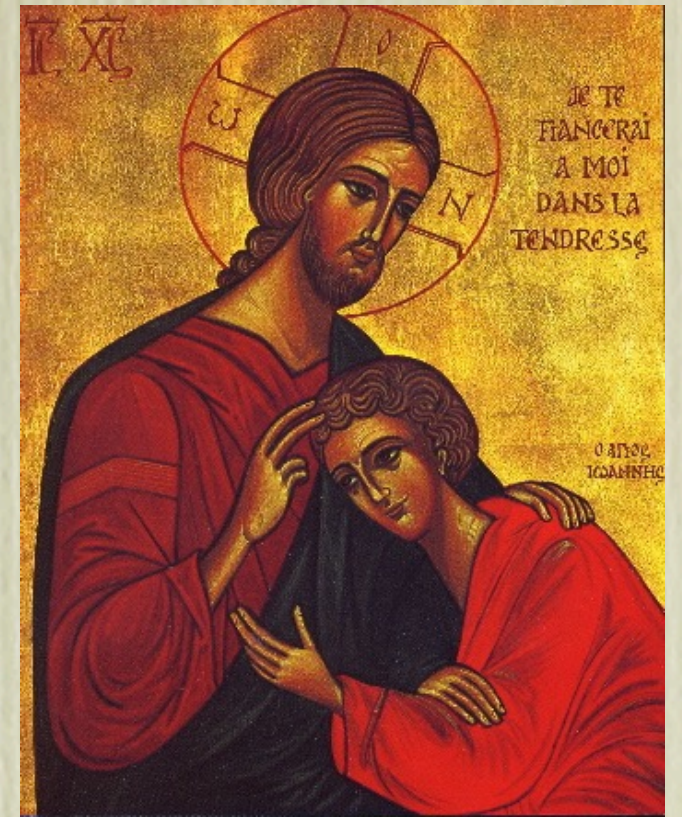
Pray that God's Loving Spirit will purify us, mind, heart and body. Jesus called his disciples to be with him and to go out on mission (Mark 3:14). As we are with Jesus in praying this psalm, let us pray to know the gift we are given to go out as missionaries of God's Love.

Psalm 18

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Michael's Mantra