

psalm 18

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Meditation 1-- Psalm 18.¹⁻² (introductory)

¹For the director. Belonging to YHWH's servant, Dāwid, who addressed the words of the following song to YHWH at a time that YHWH delivered him from the grasp of all his enemies, including the power of Še'ôl and he said, ^{2/1}I adore You, YHWH, my strength.

In the Hebrew text, verses 1-2 represent a superscript to Psalm 18.¹ I have said little about the superscripts that accompany previous psalms--all of the previous psalms but psalms 1, 2, and 10 possessing a superscript.² Most of the superscripts seem administrative, some perhaps provide direction on performance. Up to this point, only the superscripts of Psalms 3 and 7 have, like this psalm, offered a suggested historical setting for the psalm.

Scholars and interested readers have approached the proposed historical settings in the superscripts differently. Some believe that the superscripts indicate that the Psalm was actually written in light of the proposed event, and that the event should guide one's interpretation of the entire Psalm. Others feel that the superscripts were not original, but added later. Both positions have their strengths and weaknesses. I tend to side with the latter position that the superscripts were added later. I rarely use them to interpret any psalm so headed.

In addition to my general reluctance to utilize any superscript as a cipher for interpreting any psalm, I find other reasons to be skeptical about this Psalm's superscript. First, there is no compelling reason for connecting the psalm with the events surrounding the conflict between David and Saul. Even the psalm's presence in 2 Samuel 22 seems contrived and certainly misplaced. Without the superscript, it is doubtful that one would read the psalm and connect it with that conflict.

Second is the issue of translation. The superscript, as it reads in the KJV, claims that the psalm was written "in the day that the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the power of *Saul*." This is in line with the Masoretic text as we have it today, specifically its vowel pointing of Š'ôl. As opposed to this translation, I translate, "at a time that YHWH delivered him from the grasp of all his enemies, including the power of Še'ôl." The translation "Še'ôl" rather than "Saul," is the result of changing vowels without any alteration to the consonantal text--remembering that for many centuries the text existed without vowels.

In reading Psalm 18 independent of the superscript or its contrived location in Samuel, one would never think of Saul as the enemy discussed in the psalm. However, one would absolutely think of death and Še'ôl as the threat the Psalmist faced. It is most certainly from Še'ôl's power that God delivers the Psalmist--the suggestion that it was death at the hands of Saul is not, in my view, persuasive. Thus, if the superscript is to be kept and utilized for interpretive purposes, it makes more sense to understand the enemy of the superscript as Še'ôl rather than Saul. Indeed, the enemy that threatens the Psalmist and from which he is delivered is so obviously Še'ôl that the superscript is superfluous. At least, that is how I see it.

¹ Many translations, including the KJV, do not versify the superscripts as does the Hebrew text. Thus, when there is a superscript, as here, Hebrew and the KJV versification often do not agree. The versification found in my translation represents the Hebrew verse followed by the KJV (for example, 3/2). In addition to this explanation of versification, I should note that, contrary to many, I take verse 2/1 as part of the superscript.

² One would not expect a superscript at the head of psalm 10 if, as we propose, it was originally part of Psalm 9.

In previous psalms and, indeed, in many, many more to follow, the Psalmist finds himself under a variety of threats. These threats bring him to call upon God for His help and deliverance. Many a psalm contains praise of God as He responds to the pleas, and delivers the Psalmist. This psalm's superscript (and the psalm itself) informs us that God has already delivered the Psalmist. Because of this deliverance, the Psalmist "adores" God and looks to Him for strength in whatever challenges he may face.

I too adore God. I adore Him for what He has done and meant in my life. Just as with the Book of Mormon figure, Lehi, there is a sense in which He "hath redeemed my soul from hell,"³ or from Še'ôl--death and hell.

But, more than this, I adore my God for who and what He is, in and of Himself. Even if He did not act in my life, I would find His character worthy of adoration. He is magnificent. And, as the Psalmist will later exclaim, "His character alone is excellent."⁴

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: May 30, 2025)

³ 2 Nephi 1.¹⁵

⁴ Psalm 148.¹³

Meditation 2-- Psalm 18.^{3-4 (2-3)} (part 1)

Invocation and confession of trust in YHWH

^{3/2}YHWH is my hiding place, my stronghold, and my means of escape.

He is my God, my mountain retreat, the One to whom I look for protection.

He is my shield, the power that protects me, my impregnable fortress.

^{4/3}Because He is praiseworthy, I call to YHWH,
and am protected from my enemies (author's translation).

Throughout the Book of Psalms, we are faced with prayers, pleas offered during times of need and stress. If we consider the sixteen psalms that have preceded this one (remembering that we read Psalms 9 and 10 as one psalm), the Psalmist is in direct difficulty in Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9/10, 11, 13, and 17. He is in indirect difficulty in Psalms 12, 14, and 16. Because Psalms 1 and 2 serve an introductory role to the entire Book and are not prayers addressed to God, we can eliminate them in this survey. Thus, we are left with twelve psalms offered while the Psalmist is in the midst of stress.

Psalm 18 is very different. In this psalm the Psalmist is not presently suffering the stress about which he speaks. Rather, he calls to mind stresses suffered in the past. We will have to wait and see what form and level of stress the Psalmist recalls in this psalm. We will wait until we have finished commenting on this Psalm before discussing whether it is related to the stresses found in the previous psalms, and if so, how.

As I have remarked on a number of occasions, I am unceasingly confounded by my LDS culture's strange disinterest, if not outright antipathy for the Book of Psalms--a Book that, for me, is as powerful and moving as any found in scripture--indeed a Book only surpassed by the New Testament Gospels when it comes to its insights into the character of God and His relationship to humanity.

Perhaps the culture's ignorance and antipathy can be mostly credited to the fact that tradition has ascribed to David--a man for whom the culture has, once more, some antipathy--a huge influence in the composition and collection of the psalms, an influence that, I believe, tradition drastically overestimates (to say nothing of the LDS culture's inflated estimation of its understanding of how things work in the great beyond, e.g., in relation to David's eternal status).

Based upon a number of conversations and discussion with others over the years, there seems to be a second reason for the culture's disinterest, if not antipathy, toward the Psalms. This reason can be found in my opening paragraph of this meditation. The Psalmist, many have complained to me, is needy; seemingly constantly in trouble and incessantly complaining.

This has always struck me as odd, since those who make such complaints assume, I guess, that they are not in constant trouble and that when in trouble they do not complain. I challenge you, dear reader, to attend a few LDS sacrament services, especially those we call "testimony meeting," and not find a string of complaints/ confessions about the trouble and turmoil individuals are facing. Perhaps such confession/ testimonies get a pass because they are often accompanied with expressions of trust in God. But, if anyone ever expressed trust in God in the midst of trouble and turmoil, it is the Psalmist.

Anyway, as I contemplate the frequent complaining about the Psalmist's frequent stresses, troubles, and turmoils, I can't help reflect upon the LDS Hymnal. Perhaps we do not actually hear or feel the words we sing (a sad commentary, if true), for the hymnal is jam packed with confession/ complaint about innumerable stresses, troubles, and turmoil, often, just like the Psalms, accompanied by confessions of

trust in God.

I could fill pages listing the confessions/ complaints that we make in our worship services week after week as we sing from the hymnal. The neediness we express through our hymns is extensive and intense. Here is a sampling.¹

Through the hymns, we confess/ complain about “days of trouble and gloom,” “days of mortal strife;” the “darkness of the world,” the “dark world of strife,” the “weary world,” “the awful gloom,” “mists of darkness,” “clouds of darkness,” “misty vapors,” “nature’s universal blackness,” “seasons of distress and grief,” the “world of toil and strife,” “worldwide commotion,” “a world of care,” “the storm of life,” “life’s tempestuous sea,” and “treacherous shoal,” “billows of despair,” “life’s perils,” “the shackles of the earth,” “deathly danger.” We confess and complain about our “toilsome way,” “our anxious load,” our “burdens,” our “grief distressing,” our “accents of sorrow and mourning,” our “anguish,” our “outward ills,” our “broken heart,” our “wounded heart,” our “sad and troubled heart,” our “timid heart,” our “aching heart,” our “bitter tears,” our “tearful eyes,” our “fainting soul,” our “erring soul,” our “sinking soul,” our “helpless soul,” the “surges of our soul,” “our defenseless head,” our “dying faith,” our “painful tribulation” our “deep’ning trials,” our “battle with temptation,” our “earth stains,” our “inward foes.”

Then too, we are “strangers on earth,” “strangers in sin,” “by sin oppressed,” “straying,” “apt to go astray,” “in the darkness... gone astray,” “rebellious and proud,” “careworn and fainting,” “heavy laden,” “disconsolate,” “desolate,” “sad and lone,” “weak,” “depressed,” “weary,” “far from home,” “cast upon the rocky shore,” “amidst a thousand snares.” We “search in weakness,” and “languish.”

We are, the hymnist laments, ‘in peril every hour.’

So, I don’t know, but maybe we shouldn’t complain about the Psalmist always complaining about his troubles. Of course, our hymns, like our testimonies are often accompanied by expressions of trust and reliance on God. But, as we have said, the Psalmist rarely utters complaint unaccompanied with powerful and confident expressions of trust and reliance on God. This is certainly true in these two initial verses of Psalm 18. It is upon the Psalmist expression of trust and reliance on God found in these two verses that we turn in our next meditation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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¹ Referencing each of these is too cumbersome and space consuming for this simple meditation. But the reader is welcome to open up the Hymnal and begin surveying the hymns to identify the location of these confessions/ complaints.

Meditation 3-- Psalm 18.^{3-4 (2-3)} (part 2)

Invocation and confession of trust in YHWH

^{3/2}YHWH is my hiding place, my stronghold, and my means of escape.

He is my God, my mountain retreat, the One to whom I look for protection.

He is my shield, the power that protects me, my impregnable fortress.

^{4/3}Because He is praiseworthy, I call to YHWH,
and am protected from my enemies (author's translation).

Over the past three years, and still to this day, we have witnessed horrific and inhuman scenes and heard horrific and inhuman stories of suffering and death due to Russia's violent and criminal war of aggression against Ukraine. Few countries have endured more frequent violent, militarized intrusions across its borders and into its territories than Ukraine. But the land that is today called Israel is one place on earth that can, blow for blow, match Ukraine when it comes to invasion. That area, both before and since Israel came on the scene, has for millennia been subject to one invading army after another. It is quite possible that this area holds the world record for being invaded by armies--an "honor" no nation or people wishes to have.

The sad reality of human violence, both individual and national, comes to my mind as I read these two verses from Psalm 18. The composer of this psalm was well aware of the reality of violent incursions and of the need for refuge from aggressive militarized invasion. He used the reality of invasion and the need for refuge from it as a metaphor to express His trust in God during times of stress, including times when personal enemies attacked.

We find several examples in the Old Testament of the populace's response to invading enemy armies. Judges 6, for example, reports that because "Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD," He "delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years." Median, with help from allies, invaded and then ravished the land. As a consequence of the invasion "Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strong holds"¹ as places of escape and refuge. In a triumphal hymn commemorating Deborah's victory over Jabin, king of Hazor, the poet describes multiple and extended times of invasion and defeat when "the highways were unoccupied, and the travelers walked through byways. The inhabitants of the villages ceased."²

It was beyond common for entire villages to be abandoned with the approach of an invading army. Villagers would, of course, avoid traveling on roads where there was a chance of being confronted by hostile armed forces. Where did villagers go to seek refuge from the enemy? Most commonly, villagers went into surrounding hills where they hid in caves and on inaccessible rock cliffs. When and where necessary, they create their own hideaways in forbidding mountainous areas.

Such temporary relocation was an effective defense of, at least, one's life. In the first place, the invader was unlikely to go to the trouble of searching for refugees in such wilderness areas. It was slow, time and resource intensive work for invading forces unfamiliar with the area to look in rugged areas for refugees who knew the area. The invaders might just end up chasing their own tail. Even if they found refugees, it amounted to a few here and a few there. Hardly worth the effort. Then again, as the refugees possessed

¹ Judges 6.¹⁻²

² Judges 5.⁶⁻⁷

little of value, the return on such labors was negligible even if they managed to find and pillage. Then there was always the danger of meeting armed resistance and loosing personnel with no profit or strategic gain to show for it.

All of this would be intimately familiar to ancient people who read, sang, and prayed Psalm 18. Thus, through metaphor, the Psalmist is able to express how reliable God is and recommend to those reading, singing, and praying that they trust God. It is the Psalmist's witness that God is the safest of hiding places; that in the face of stress, including the stress caused by the hostility of others, God is like a mountain stronghold or retreat, an un-discoverable, inaccessibly high, and impregnable refuge, far from the stresses and threatening dangers. There is no enemy that can, if they can even identify them, breach God's defenses and lay hold of those hiding in Him.

Though the metaphor is different, in Jesus' likening himself to a shepherd and those who trust him and his Father to sheep, he believes and teaches the same thing as the ancient Psalmist's.

“... they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.”³

With such knowledge, one can, like the Psalmist, “call to Yahweh” and find protection from all enemies, mortal and cosmic, including that great satanic and arch enemy of humankind whose work is to bring about the destruction of life, security, and happiness.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: May 30, 2025)

³ John 10.²⁸⁻²⁹

Meditation 4-- Psalm 18.^{5-6 (4-5)} (part 1)

the psalmist's predicament and plea

^{5/4}Death's domain overwhelmed me.

Its obliterating torrents terrorized me.

^{6/5}Še'ôl's snares wrapped around me,

Death's snares confronted me (author's translation).

As we have mentioned in our second meditation on this psalm, this psalm is different than the twelve previous psalms in which the Psalmist pled for God's help while under stress (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9/10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17). In the previous psalms, the stress was current, the Psalmist suffering under them even as he pled for help. In this Psalm, the trouble is past, the Psalmist reporting how God delivered him.

In this Psalm, the source of his stress is his enemy. In this psalm, the Psalmist's enemy is, we contend, not Šā'ûl (Saul), but Še'ôl, death itself, or, in the language of Nephi, "that awful monster, death and hell."¹ For reasons that we will discuss in this and future meditations, we understand Še'ôl to be something far more than the death and dissolution of the physical body, though it is that. Še'ôl represents a threat to being, existence, and self. It always threatens one's awareness of and access to God. Še'ôl is something akin to, though not quite the same as, the Christian Hell. This assertion requires some justification, and so we will consider the idea and nature of Še'ôl in the following meditations.

Before doing so, we should note that this is not the first time the Psalmist has expressed anxiety about the threat of death. In Psalm 5, the Psalmist likened his enemies' threat to a slippery and "open grave," signifying the life-threatening nature of their attacks.² In Psalm 7, the Psalmist, with an apparent threat of death hanging over him, reminds God that "there is no awareness of You... in Še'ôl?"³ In an apparent allusion to his enemies' intentions, the Psalmist accedes to having his enemies "stomp my life into the underworld" and "establish my abode in death" if God finds him to be truly guilty of charges that his enemies have brought against him.⁴ In Psalm 13,³ the Psalmist pleads for God's help "lest I sleep death's sleep." In Psalm 16, thoughts of death and hell come to the Psalmist's mind, whether due to the threat of enemies or his own failings.

"You will not abandon me to Še'ôl.

You will not permit Your devotee to experience the pit."⁵

Finally, in Psalm 17, the Psalmist point blank describes the intentions of his enemies: "They set their sights on casting me into the underworld."⁶

While the threat of death has been present in previous psalms, nowhere has the threat been so immediate, so intense, so alive as in Psalm 18. Indeed, while the threat of death will often raise its ugly head in the

¹ 2 Nephi 9.¹⁰. It is my view that in speaking of "that awful monster, death and hell," Nephi almost certainly has in mind that Še'ôl as envisioned in the Old Testament and the greater ancient Near Eastern world.

² See Psalm 5.⁹, unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Psalms are the author's.

³ See Psalm 6.⁵

⁴ See Psalm 7.⁵

⁵ Psalm 16.¹⁰

⁶ Psalm 17.¹¹

Book of Psalms, rarely will it be as immediate, intense, and alive as in this Psalm. Here, the Psalmist reports of having been in the very belly of the beast, solidly in “Death’s domain” where terrorizing “torrents” and constraining “snares” threaten to drown and annihilate him.

Given Še’ôl’s very immediate, intense, and alive threat in this psalm, this seems like a good time to survey the nature of Še’ôl. Because this is a meditation rather than a scholarly expose, we will do no more than sample the Psalmist’s views of Še’ôl. But it is a fascinating topic that the reader is welcome to explore more deeply on their own.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: May 30, 2025)

Meditation 5-- Psalm 18.^{5-6 (4-5)} (part 2)

the psalmist's predicament and plea
^{5/4}Death's domain overwhelmed me.
Its obliterating torrents terrorized me.
^{6/5}Še'ôl's snares wrapped around me,
Death's snares confronted me (author's translation).

Unlike previous psalms in which the Psalmist seeks God's aid in his present affliction, Psalm 18 reports his past affliction from which God has already delivered him. The affliction under which the Psalmist suffers in this psalm is Še'ôl, "that awful monster, death and hell." In this and following meditations on this passage, we will sample some of the language, imagery, and ideals that the Psalmists utilizes to describe Še'ôl. These are largely consistent with the language, imagery, and ideals of the entire ancient Near Eastern world.

The first thing we note is that even though the imagery is not used in Psalm 18, Še'ôl is often viewed as a pit. We have already quoted Psalm 6.⁵. Here, the structure of Hebrew's poetic parallelism allows us to equate Še'ôl with "the pit."

"You will not abandon me to Še'ôl.
You will not permit Your devotee to experience the pit."

In another Psalm, the Psalmist praises God because, as in Psalm 18, God rescued him after he had actually entered Še'ôl.

"YHWH, it was You that lifted me up out of še'ôl.
It was you that revived me after my descent into the pit."¹

After expressing confidence in God, the Psalmist complains in Psalm 88 of the looming threat that Še'ôl poses to him,

"I am exhausted by cataclysm,
as my life nears Še'ôl."²

He follows this up with,

"I am thought of with those who descend into the Pit.
I am as one without strength,
let go to be among the dead like those fatally wounded;
among those sleeping in the grave..."³

While "the pit" and "the grave" are sometimes, as here, mentioned in close proximity, for reasons we will discuss later we should not think of the pit only or even primarily in terms of the hole dug in dirt in which the lifeless body is buried.

¹ Psalm 30.³

² Psalm 88.³

³ Psalm 88.⁴⁻⁵

One other passage deserves mention here. In Psalm 69, the threat of Še'ôl is as immediate as it is in Psalm 18, though Še'ôl is not mentioned by name. Here too, we find the pit.

“Deliver me out of the muck
so that I don't sink.
Let me be delivered from those who hate me,
and out of the unfathomably deep waters.
Don't let the surging waters sweep over me,
or let the muddy depths engulf me,
or let the pit shut its mouth upon me.”⁴

I wanted to include this passage because of its mention of “deep” and “surging” waters. These bring us back to Psalm 18 and its terrorizing “torrents.” In addition to “the pit,” Še'ôl is imagined as being a place of deep, violent, and threatening waters. We will explore this imagery in the next meditation.

We often say that death is not to be feared. I don't know how you feel about physical death. I don't know if you fear physical death. But I do know that the death that is Še'ôl is a fearful thing. A threatening thing. A terrifying thing. The Psalmist does fear it, as well he should. There is a reason that Nephi speaks of it as “that awful monster.”

In this meditation, we have briefly discussed one aspect of Še'ôl and its fearfulness. It is imagined as a pit. It is, the Psalmist laments, “the lowest of pits,” the “very darkest and deepest” of pits.⁵ We can relate to this imagery, which was likely more than symbolic to those of the ancient Near East, including the Psalmist. We can all relate to the terror of falling into a pit, especially one that is so deep and so dark that there is no climbing out. None of us want to fall into such a pit and would go to great lengths to avoid doing so.

But, as we will see, there is no pit so deep and so dark that God cannot descend and rescue. It can sometimes be difficult to remember and even believe this. But I, for one, am grateful for the Psalmist's witness found in this and many other Psalms of God's incomparable power to deliver.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: May 30, 2025)

⁴ Psalm 69.¹⁴⁻¹⁴. Other passages in which I understand the mention of the pit as metaphor for Še'ôl are: 28.¹, 30.⁹, 40.¹, 55.²³, 140.¹⁰, and 143.⁷.

⁵ Psalm 88.⁷

Meditation 6-- Psalm 18.^{5-6 (4-5)} (part 3)

the psalmist's predicament and plea
 ^{5/4}Death's domain overwhelmed me.
 Its obliterating torrents terrorized me.
 ^{6/5}Še'ôl's snares wrapped around me,
 Death's snares confronted me (author's translation).

After expressing his undeviating trust and reliance on God in verses 3-4 (2-3), the Psalmist calls to mind troubles of his past. In verses 4-5 (3-4) of Psalm 18, the Psalmist calls to mind a time when he was overwhelmed, terrorized, entrapped, and confronted in Še'ôl's life threatening domain. In addition to his intense verbs, the Psalmist uses imagery that represents the danger and the threat of death: "obliterating torrents," and "snares."

Since this entire Psalm focuses on Še'ôl and, more specifically, on God's deliverance of the Psalmist from its power, we have paused to examine the view of Še'ôl as it is described in the Book of Psalms--a view that is consistent with those throughout the ancient Near East. Though the imagery of "the pit" is not used in Psalm 18, we explored the imagery of Še'ôl as a pit in our previous meditation. Še'ôl is imagined to be "the lowest of pits," the "very darkest and deepest" of pits.¹

The pit that is Še'ôl is not to be thought of only, or even primarily as the grave in which an individual's remains are placed. The pit that is Še'ôl is alive with dangers to the continued existence of the individual. For example, in the imagery of the pit that is Še'ôl, the pit is filled with dangerous waves and billows that threaten to drown. This Psalm mentions Še'ôl's "obliterating torrents." Dangerous, life-threatening waters are mentioned elsewhere in the Psalms. In Psalm 69, the Psalmist, we maintain, finds himself in the deep pit of Še'ôl. It is full of water that threatens drowning.

"Rescue me, 'ēlōhîm;
 for the water has risen up to my neck.
I sink into muddy depths,
 where it is impossible to stand.
I have fallen into unfathomably deep waters
 in which surging waters sweep over me...

Deliver me out of the muck
 so that I don't sink.
Let me be delivered from those who hate me,
 and out of the unfathomably deep waters.
Don't let the surging waters sweep over me,
 or let the muddy depths engulf me,
 or let the pit shut its mouth upon me."²

The waters found in this pit are much more than a few inches of water that swirl innocently around the psalmist's ankles. They are rising. They have reached the Psalmist's chin. They are in constant motion, surging back and forth, disturbing the psalmist's balance and ability to stand. Adding to the difficulty,

¹ Psalm 88.⁷

² Psalm 69.^{1-2, 14-15}

slippery mud sucks at the Psalmist's feet, drawing him down, and making even more difficult the effort of keeping his balance.

The imagery is powerful, inviting the reader to recall the terror they may have felt in a moment when they almost drowned. That terror of drowning is akin to the terror that Še'ôl produces. In a passage we have already quoted for its mention of the pit, we hear again of threatening waters.

"I am exhausted by cataclysm,
as my life nears Še'ôl.
I am thought of with those who descend into the Pit.
I am as one without strength,
let go to be among the dead like those fatally wounded;
among those sleeping in the grave
to whom you do not give thought
and who are cut off from Your power.
You have put me in the lowest of pits,
in the very darkest and deepest.
Your wrath comes down hard on me,
and You pound me down with all Your crashing waves."³

In this passage, we are faced with a paradox. On the one hand, those suffering in Še'ôl are forgotten by God and cut off from His power. On the other, the sufferer experiences God's disfavor, which is likened to crashing waves pounding us down, keeping us under water. In our next meditation, we will take up this notion of Še'ôl as a place where one is cut off from God. Before doing so, though, we might mention one other interesting Biblical parallel about the nature of Še'ôl.

We are all familiar with the story of Jonah and whale. I have my doubts about the whole whale thing, but whether one takes it literally or not,⁴ when Jonah reviews his experience, his focus is not on being eaten by a whale's gastronomic stomach acids, but with the dangers that Še'ôl posed to him.⁵

"I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me;
out of *the belly of hell* cried I, and thou heardest my voice.
For thou hadst cast me into the deep,
in the midst of the seas;
and the floods compassed me about:
all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.
Then I said, 'I am cast out of thy sight;
yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.'
The waters compassed me about, even to the soul:
the depth closed me round about,
the weeds were wrapped about my head.
I went down to the bottoms of the mountains;

³ Psalm 88.³⁻⁷

⁴ Many argue that it is literal since Jesus refers to it. However, I, like others, have been known to quote Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, without suggesting that Hamlet was a historical figure.

⁵ It is well known that some ancient Near Eastern Mythologies portrayed "chaos," which has many similarities with "hell," as a great sea monster, known as Tiamat in some Mesopotamian myths.

the earth with her bars was about me for ever:
yet hast thou a brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God.”⁶

Here, we are reminded that in addition to the pit, and life-threatening waves of water, Še’ôl is likened to a great mythic sea monster, itself representative of chaos and the dissolution of life and being.

Well, there is some powerful symbolism used to try and portray the experience that is Še’ôl, that awful monster, death and hell. In the next meditation we will move from imagery--though, again, for ancient people all of this may be more than imagery and metaphor--to the realities to which this imagery points our minds. For now, we join the Psalmist and the likes of Nephi in praising God whose power exceeds the power of that awful monster, death and hell.

“I glory in plainness; I glory in truth; I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell.”⁷

“O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our bescape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit”⁸

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: May 30, 2025)

⁶ Jonah 2.²⁻⁶

⁷ 2 Nephi 33.⁶

⁸ 2 Nephi 9.¹⁰

Meditation 7-- Psalm 18.^{5-6 (4-5)} (part 4)

the psalmist's predicament and plea
^{5/4}Death's domain overwhelmed me.
Its obliterating torrents terrorized me.
^{6/5}Še'ôl's snares wrapped around me,
Death's snares confronted me (author's translation).

After expressing his complete trust and dependence on God, the Psalmist describes his terrifying experience in še'ôl. In previous meditations, we have explored some of the imagery used in the Psalms to express še'ôl's terrors. Še'ôl is imagined as an unimaginably deep pit from which there is no escape. This pit is full of deep water and pounding waves that threaten anyone coming within its domain with existential drowning and loss of being.

We mention in passing that much of this imagery is reflected in the Book of Mormon. For example, in his vision of the Tree of Life, Lehi saw a "fountain of filthy water" "the depths" of which "are the depths of hell,"¹ i.e., še'ôl. As another example, the angel that ushered Nephi through his series of revelations spoke of hell as a "great pit which hath been digged for the destruction of men."² Just as it is the Psalmist's enemies, who sometimes seem larger than life, that threaten to send him into the pit, "the devil is the preparator of" "that awful hell."³ And, of course, we have our "awful monster, death and hell"⁴ which "hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure."⁵

In addition to the imagery of še'ôl found in the Psalms, the Psalms offer direct statements about še'ôl's nature. One aspect of še'ôl nature is the absence of the divine. In Psalm 6, the Psalmist, threatened by še'ôl, complains

"In death there is no awareness of You.
Who praises You in še'ôl?"⁶

Just to be clear, those suffering in še'ôl do not fail to praise God because they refuse to acknowledge or yield to him. They do not praise God because they have no awareness of him, as the poetic parallelism suggests. God, Himself, His influence, and even thoughts of Him are absent in še'ôl.

In Psalm 88, the Psalmist, pained and exhausted, informs God in prayer that his "life has entered še'ôl."⁷ Thus, he complains,

"I am thought of with those who descend into the Pit.
I am as one without strength,
let go to be among the dead like those fatally wounded;
among those sleeping in the grave

¹ 1 Nephi 12.¹⁶

² 1 Nephi 14

³ 1 Nephi 15.³⁵

⁴ 2 Nephi 9.¹⁰

⁵ 2 Nephi 15.¹⁴

⁶ Psalm 6.⁵

⁷ Psalm 88.³

*to whom you do not give thought
and who are cut off from Your power.”*⁸

Later in this same Psalm, the Psalmist asks several related rhetorical questions.

“Can You perform any beneficial divine act for the dead;
or can the departed rise up and praise You?
Can Your unwavering devotion be recounted in the grave;
or Your fidelity be recounted in the underworld?
Can Your beneficial divine acts be known in its darkness;
or Your achievements be known in the land of forgetfulness?”⁹

The answer to each of these rhetorical questions is obviously, “no.” Those in še’ôl have no awareness of God. His presence is not known or felt there. Še’ôl is the absence of the divine.

Again, we note similar ideas in the Book of Mormon. Samuel the Lamanite spoke of “being cut off from the presence of the Lord,” and “being “considered as dead, both as to things temporal and to things spiritual.”¹⁰ He warned of a “spiritual death, yea, a second death” in which individuals were “cut off again as to things pertaining to righteousness.”¹¹

Še’ôl is a most dreadful place. The imagery of drowning, which we saw earlier to represent še’ôl’s terror, is effective in helping one understand the absolute terror that death and hell poses. However, elsewhere, the Psalmist describes the dread and terror of the place and its impacts upon him.

“My heart palpitates in my chest
as the terrors of death come crashing down on me.
A fearful trembling comes upon me
and writhing takes over me.”¹²

In the end, however, it is impossible to appreciate the terror of the place. Here is Joseph Smith’s intuition about the dreadful place.

“And the end thereof, neither the place thereof, nor their torment, no man knows; neither was it revealed, neither is, neither will be revealed unto man, except to them who are made partakers thereof; nevertheless, I, the Lord, show it by vision unto many, but straightway shut it up again; wherefore, the end, the width, the height, the depth, and the misery thereof, they understand not, neither any man except those who are ordained unto this condemnation.”¹³

All of this, I submit, is what the Psalmist is up against as Psalm 18 begins. It can justifiably be compared to what Alma the Younger experienced when he spent three days and three nights “racked, even with the pains of a damned soul” and thus wished to “become extinct.”¹⁴ What is to be done under such terrorizing

⁸ Psalm 88.⁴⁻⁵

⁹ Psalm 88.¹⁰⁻¹²

¹⁰ Helaman 14.¹⁶

¹¹ Helaman 14.¹⁸

¹² Psalm 55.⁴⁻⁵

¹³ DC 76.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁸

¹⁴ Alma 36.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

circumstances. What *can* be done? Alma prayed,

“O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.”¹⁵

So too did the Psalmist resort to prayer.

“In my distress, I called out to YHWH.
I screamed out to my God for help.”

Here, we seem to have an irony, reminding us that one must not be too literal or too dogmatic about things that, in the end, we know next to nothing about. Supposedly, one cannot recall God in še’ôl. Yet the Psalmist remembers Him, addresses Him, prays to Him. Supposedly, God is absent from and ignorant of those suffering še’ôl’s terrors. Yet, the Psalmist prays expectantly.

Will God hear? Can God hear? Can God do anything for the Psalmist? Is še’ôl too deep, too dark, too violent even for Him. We don’t want to give away too much, but we are about to learn, as Jesus taught us in one of his own worst and hellish moment, that “with God all things are possible.”¹⁶

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: May 30, 2025)

¹⁵ Alma 36.¹⁸

¹⁶ Mark 14.²⁶

Meditation 8-- Psalm 18.⁷⁻¹⁶ (6-15) (part 1)

theophany: yahweh's awesome condescension

^{7/6}In my distress, I called loudly for YHWH,
and to my God, I repeatedly screamed for help.
From His temple, He heard my voice,
and my repeated screams for help reached Him, and entered His ears.

^{8/7}Hell rocked and rolled.
Its deepest places convulsed and shuddered
when God became incensed.
^{9/8}Smoke rose up from His nostrils,
and from His mouth, a consuming fire.
Lightning fired off around Him.
^{10/9}He darkened the sky and descended,
storm clouds under His feet.
^{11/10}He rode upon a *kêrûb* and flew.
He sailed upon the wings of the wind.
^{12/11}He made darkness His blanketing hiding place.
He made a watery mass of billowing storm clouds His place of concealment.
^{13/12}With bright flashes His clouds passed by,
accompanied by hail and lightning.
^{14/13}YHWH rumbled in the sky.
Elyôn made His voice heard
in hail and lightning.
^{15/14}He sent His shafts, flinging them.
He wreaked havoc with tremendous lightning.
^{16/15}The depths of the seas were revealed;
the very foundations of the world, exposed
because of Your outburst, YHWH,
because of the blast of wind from Your nose (author's translation)

The Psalmist begins this psalm with a kind of invocation in which he expresses his unwavering trust in God (3-4).¹ He follows this with a description of the past terror he faced when he entered še'ôl's domain and suffered its life threatening forces (5-6). In this reading, the Psalmist first reports how he called out to God for help and then records a theophany, an "appearance of God." Both the call and the theophany are impressive.

First for the call.

"In my distress, I called loudly for YHWH,
and to my God, I repeatedly screamed for help."

The Psalmist does more than call "*to*" God. He calls "*for*" God. The Hebrew word used (*qārâ*) is about more than addressing another. It implies need. It seeks attention. It seeks a response. We could even say it anticipates and expects a response in time of need. When we "call for" someone, we call them to our

¹ My numbering is after the Hebrew text. In Hebrew, verses 1-2 constitute a superscript.

presence, needing and expecting them. English, “summon,” could work, though modern sensibilities might find the idea of “summoning God” a bit too assertive. We could speak of the Psalmist “appealing” to God, but in our modern usage, this is not assertive enough, though the Latin from which it comes does have a very assertive feel to it.²

The Psalmist’s call for God is loud and repeated, both suggested by Hebrew, *šāwā’*, which we have translated “repeatedly screamed for help.” We might have translated “repeatedly shouted for help.” And why shouldn’t the Psalmist scream and shout? His need is urgent and tremendous. He is deep underground, in that deepest of pits called, *še’ôl*. As for God, well he dwells on high, in the heavens, high above the earth and even higher above *še’ôl*. What’s more, and worse for the Psalmist, God, as we have noted in previous meditations, pays no mind to those in *še’ôl*. So, if the Psalmist wants to get God’s attention, now is not the time for politeness or reserve. He must give it his all if he has any hope of attracting God’s attention and obtaining the gravely needed help.

As I reflect upon the Psalmist, terrorized by *še’ôl* and repeatedly screaming for help, I find my mind wandering to a garden outside Jerusalem. I find myself thinking of Jesus and the “bitter cup;” that astonishing, horrible, maddening, tormenting cup of trembling from which even the greatest of all sought deliverance. I find myself reconsidering the nature and tone of that thrice repeated prayer, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me.” Surely the Savior used more words than this. Surely, this thrice reported prayer represents the content of the prayer and the substance of its content. We might want Jesus to be controlled, calm, dignified, magisterial in this deep time of need. But, perhaps, had we been there, we might have witnessed something more akin to the Psalmist’s screams than whispered wishes.

The Psalmist’s screams for help did not go unheard.

“From His temple, He heard my voice,
and my repeated screams for help reached Him, and entered His ears.”

No matter how prohibitively deep *še’ôl* was deemed to be and no matter how unimaginably high the Psalmist thought God to be, the Psalmist faithfully reached out, screamed out to God. And God, so much more accessible and powerful than we often imagine Him to be in our lives, heard and responded to the Psalmist’s cries. We will see what that response looked like in the following meditations.

The Psalmist reminds us that not all prayer, not all addresses to Deity are created equal. Some require more concentration, more energy, more engagement than others. He reminds us that we are never so far away from God, or He from us that we cannot be heard and He cannot hear. He is more than worthy of all our hopes and capable of bringing all our righteous expectations to fruition.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: May 31, 2025)

² Latin, *appellare*, means “to accost, address, summon, name,” coming from from *ad* “to” + *pellere*, “to beat, push, drive” (See *etymonline.com*).

Meditation 9-- Psalm 18.⁷⁻¹⁶ (6-15) (part 2)

theophany: yahweh's awesome condescension

^{7/6}In my distress, I called loudly for YHWH,
and to my God, I repeatedly screamed for help.
From His temple, He heard my voice,
and my repeated screams for help reached Him, and entered His ears.

^{8/7}Hell rocked and rolled.
Its deepest places convulsed and shuddered
when God became incensed.
^{9/8}Smoke rose up from His nostrils,
and from His mouth, a consuming fire.
Lightning fired off around Him.
^{10/9}He darkened the sky and descended,
storm clouds under His feet.
^{11/10}He rode upon a k^crûḇ and flew.
He sailed upon the wings of the wind.
^{12/11}He made darkness His blanketing hiding place.
He made a watery mass of billowing storm clouds His place of concealment.
^{13/12}With bright flashes His clouds passed by,
accompanied by hail and lightning.
^{14/13}YHWH rumbled in the sky.
Elyōn made His voice heard
in hail and lightning.
^{15/14}He sent His shafts, flinging them.
He wreaked havoc with tremendous lightning.
^{16/15}The depths of the seas were revealed;
the very foundations of the world, exposed
because of Your outburst, YHWH,
because of the blast of wind from Your nose (author's translation)

For reasons explained in the introductory meditation to this Psalm, and against traditional translations of its superscript, I understand the Psalmist to be in š^col's deep realms and under threat of š^col's mighty and threatening powers rather than Saul's personal hostility. From š^col, the Psalmist has called out loudly, repeatedly screamed, even, for Yahweh's help.

"In my distress, I called loudly for YHWH,
and to my God, I repeatedly screamed for help."

Such loud and persistent calls for help are necessary less because God dwells far away in the heights of heaven and more because God is, as we have discussed, unaware of those in š^col and normally inaccessible to them. Additionally, the loud and persistent calls for help are indicative of the Psalmist's desperation. More importantly, such calls for God's attention and help are testament to the Psalmist deep and abiding faith in God, even in the most intense extremity.

But can the Psalmist's deep and abiding faith reach God from such depths as those in which the Psalmist finds himself? Can the Psalmist's deep and abiding faith call God down from His heights to render the needed help and deliverance?

The answer to both questions is a resounding yes. The Psalmist's pleas rise up out of šēol's unfathomable depths and ascend all the way to God who resides in heights incomprehensible.

“From His temple, He heard my voice,
and my repeated screams for help reached Him, and entered His ears.”

God's response to the Psalmist's desperate and faithful cries for help is beyond dramatic. Incensed at šēol's threatening arrogance, God swoops down from heaven as if on the winds of a massive thunderstorm. Here, He is surrounded by storm clouds, winds, thunder, lightening, and hail. The sky rumbles, as do the depths of the seas and the very foundations of the world. Sheol, hell itself, shudders, convulses, rocks, and rolls at God's appearance.

The imagery of divine beings traveling, descending, arriving, and manifesting themselves in nature's most dramatic phenomenon, including thunderstorms, is common throughout the ancient world. Such imagery is frequently found in the Bible as well. A few examples must suffice.

The Bible begins with two accounts of creation. In the first, a wind from God swoops down over a watery surface (I translate the traditional, “the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” as “a wind of/from God swooped over the water's surface”). This wind can be understood as proceeding God as He flies from heaven and approaches earth to begin His creative work—His approach of earth having much the same effect upon the air as that of a mother bird as she approaches her nest, wings flapping.¹ This wind, like the winds of Psalm 18, signify God's attentive presence and energetic labors in relation to human needs—humans needing, among other things, a home (Genesis) and deliverance from death and hell (Psalm 18).

In Exodus, God descends upon Mount Sinai, where His labor in behalf of humanity would be the bestowal of laws by which it could live happily, peacefully, and securely. Here, His descent and presence is accompanied with “thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud.” This might be understood in terms of a thunderstorm. It often is. It can also be indicative of volcanic activity, as “Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.”²

In one of the most well-known and beloved episodes of the First Testament, and one too that has commonalities with Genesis' first creation account, God acts through nature to assist Israel against its Egyptian enemies. With Israel trapped between an impassable Reed Sea and a hostile Egyptian army, “the Lord caused the sea to go back *by a strong east wind* all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.” As a result of God's labors and the wind He used, “the children of Israel went into

¹ See Genesis 1.^{2b}

² Exodus 19.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.”³

In the first example, God’s power in and over nature brought a home to humanity. In the second, God’s power in and over nature was part of God’s bestowal of joy, peace, and security through law. In the third, God’s power in and over nature brought deliverance and victory to Israel. In Psalm 18, God’s power in and over nature sent Sheol into convulsions. Will it be enough to rescue the Psalmist from the powerful hold that Sheol has on him?

We will find the Psalmist answer to this question in the next meditation. For now, we can imitate the Psalmist example of faith in God no matter the depth of our extremities.

Even so, come Lord Jesus!

(edition: june 25, 2025)

³ Exodus 14.²¹⁻²²