

Cliff-Edge Prayer

How to Talk with God When You Are Desperate

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I WAS PUSHED BACK AND ABOUT TO FALL

I was “pushed back and about to fall.”¹ – Though these words were penned centuries ago by a desperate Warrior-Poet, they still resonate today. It is not difficult to relate the author’s position to our own. All of us *have been, will be, or are now* in the very same peril. One translator calls it the “cliff-edge.”² What is perhaps different between the Warrior-Poet, and us, is the nature of the precipice. Our precipice may be marital collapse, career disaster, or addiction. But whatever the cliff-edge, we cannot bear to fall.

I was “pushed back and about to fall, *but Yahweh helped me.*” The addition of these five words offers an ending, a “happy” ending, but an incomplete story. Each phrase serves as a bookend. What we need is what comes in the middle. We are missing the second act. To reprise the other translation, “I was right on the cliff-edge, ready to fall, when God grabbed and held me.” One can only conclude that between the “falling” and the “holding” was an anguished prayer – and it is precisely the nature of that prayer which concerns this brief essay.

What did this Warrior-Poet say or do that attracted the hand of the Divine? Many have been on the “cliff-edge”; not all have been rescued. What happened in the middle act? *How did he pray?*

The answer is to be found as we contemplate the fuller story surrounding the text. This story is drawn from an ancient Hebrew hymnal, the 118th chapter of the *Sepher Tehillum*, the Psalms. The 118th chapter comprises the last refrain of the *Hallel*, a series of songs for Passover. It was Martin Luther’s favorite, his *beauteous confitemini*.³ It “helped him out of troubles which neither emperor nor king, nor any other man on earth could have helped him.”⁴

If you are pushed back, and about to fall, if it seems that no man on earth can (or will) help, perhaps you can find hope in the story of a desperate Warrior-Poet who moved the hand of God. His story unfolds in three “heart-moves.”

THEY SWARMED AROUND ME LIKE BEES

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Ps 118:13). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

² Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Ps 118:5-6). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress.

³ [Find translation for this](#)

⁴ Clarke, A. (1999). *Clarke’s Commentary: Psalms* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Clarke’s Commentaries (Ps 118:2). Albany, Oreg.: Ages Software.

35 Before we can reflect on the prayer of the Warrior-Poet , we must experience a deeper
36 understanding of his plight. He was utterly desperate; he was surrounded “on every side.”⁵ In
37 verse twelve, he laments, that the enemy “swarmed around me like bees.” This same metaphor
38 was used by a later poet, Homer,⁶ whose eloquence may help us to envisage the true danger:

39 . . . The following host,
40 Poured forth by thousands, darkens all the coast.
41 As from some rocky cleft the shepherd sees,
42 Clustering in heaps on heaps, the driving bees,
43 Rolling and blackening, *swarms succeeding swarms*,
44 With deeper murmurs and more hoarse alarms:
45 Dusky they spread a close embodied crowd,
46 And o'er the vale descends the living cloud.
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49 Homer's choice of the phrase “swarms succeeding swarms” captures the essence of the most
50 horrific kind of desperation. For the author of Psalms 118, and for many of us, distress may come
51 in succeeding “swarms.” Before we can recover from the last onslaught, we are assaulted by the
52 next. This succession of failures can deplete the last reserves of even the strongest. Hope can
53 give way to anguish.

54 I have tasted such anguish. In 1997, I found myself facing the bitter end of a long, painful
55 journey. Four years earlier, I had promised a group of shareholders that I would do everything
56 possible to produce a new television series. I was too green to recognize the near-impossibility of
57 my promise. Each year forty-thousand new series are proposed, but only about forty are actually
58 produced. How could I ever expect to win a place among the select forty? I had never even
59 produced a single show.

60 I was determined, but with each passing day, the stark realities of my challenge grew clearer.
61 After the usual bout with agencies (ICM, CAA, William Morris), with network executives, and
62 talent, I found myself personally and financially exhausted. I needed THE call, not the call from
63 God (I thought that God had spoken). I needed the phone call from Rysher Entertainment. I
64 needed to hear “yes.”

65 My four year tour of duty had been brutal. Like the person in the assault described by Homer, I
66 had endured “swarms succeeding swarms.” It was one disappointment after another: a deal with
67 A&E had dissolved, as had another with CBS, and then with FOX. A co-series with Don Johnson

⁵ The impact of this phrase is heightened in verse 11a by the juxtaposition of two forms of the same verb, as in Hosea 4:18, Habakkuk 1:5, and Zephaniah 2:1. The reference to the bees may be compared to Deuteronomy 1:44. The *Pual* points to the punishing power that comes upon them. They are extinguished (extinguuntur) like a fire of thorns. Cf. Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (2002). *Commentary on the Old Testament*. (5:723). Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson.

⁶ *Iliad* ii, ver. 86, Pope's Translation

68 fell apart when our show-runner left to produce the new hit *JAG*. Time was running out, and
69 Rysher was my last hope.

70 I “knew” the call would come. It had to come. I had faith. I expected a miracle. And as none
71 had yet materialized, the whole problem seemed to simplify itself. There was no more time. No
72 more partners. Thus, by process of elimination, it grew apparent that Rysher would be the
73 ordained agent of God’s rescue.

74 But Rysher did not call.

75 I waited and I waited.

76 But Rysher DID NOT call.

77 I had been on the cliff-edge; now it seemed I was falling. I had spent four gut-wrenching years
78 and a small fortune all for naught. How would I face my shareholders? How could I face myself? I
79 knew I needed to trust God more than I trusted my understanding of God. But how could I live
80 and lead, if my fundamental world-view was flawed? I thought God had led me into this venture.
81 Clearly, He had not – unless, His primary purpose was to crush me.

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84 **IN MY ANGUISH I CRIED TO YAHWEH**

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86 If there is a relationship between the story of the Warrior-Poet , the story of my television
87 series, and the story in which you are living, it is likely this: that each of us eventually finds
88 ourselves at a point of absolute despair, and that such despair can force an anguished cry for
89 help. The “anguished cry for help,” the prayer of the panic-stricken, is the “stuff of spiritual
90 breakthrough.”

91 For anguish can be the catalyst of breakthrough – it can transform the language of prayer.
92 Under “normal” conditions, our prayer is experienced as a three-voice conversation: 1) the voice
93 with which we address God, 2) the voice with which He responds (if we are able to hear Him),
94 and 3) the voice with which we evaluate the other two voices. This third voice is an obstacle to
95 earnestness.

96 We pray, “*Dear God, please forgive me,*” but while we are forming words with our tongue, we
97 are filtering them with our mind. We think, “*I’ve already asked for this a hundred times – will God
98 still listen?*” or “*Was that really sincere enough?*” or “*How can He answer me with all of the sin in
99 my life?*” We proceed as though the only voice God can hear is the one with which we are
100 addressing Him. The whole illusion is ludicrous. We fool only ourselves.

101 Honest prayer does not begin until we integrate the third voice: “*Father, I have asked you to
102 forgive me so many times, I am afraid to ask again. . . . I don’t even know how to convey my
103 heart; the words seem stilted, artificial. . . . The Enemy keeps reminding me of my faults.
104 Somehow, I am asking again, but I am afraid you are angry with me.*”

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As we integrate the third voice, we experience a deeper intimacy. The heart-impact of the Psalms, and even of the best contemporary worship art, is wrought through such integration. Hemingway said, "Write the truest sentence you know."⁷ We might substitute the word "write" with the word "pray."

While for most people, this transparency is difficult, in one situation the first and third voices are compressed if not entirely integrated. This is the very circumstance in which the Warrior-Poet found himself. The "prayer of the anguished" is a prayer of extreme intensity – an intensity that demands a ruthless, inward honesty. Such honesty can move us from what one writer calls, "wishing upwards"⁸ to searching inward. And "searching inward" is the beginning of honest, effectual prayer.⁹

This, then, was the first heart-move in the life transforming prayer of the Warrior-Poet . In his bitter, inward honesty, he discovered that a reversal of conditions must sometimes begin with a reversal of focus. His fixation on the outward problem ("they surrounded me on every side"¹⁰) was eventually turned to the realization of an inward problem. He confesses, "The LORD has chastened me severely."¹¹ In doing so, he repents. And in doing so, he acknowledges that God is not just using the man to influence the circumstances; he is using the circumstances to influence the man. The lesson is well articulated in a 20th century psalm penned by yet another desperate Warrior-Poet :

He placed thee mid this dance
Of plastic circumstance.
This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.¹²

⁷ *A Moveable Feast*

⁸ Peterson, E. H., *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*, p. 142, Harper San Francisco (1989).

⁹ As T.S. Eliot writes, "To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, you must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy." *Four Quartets, Quartet No. 2: East Coker*, Harvest Books (1968).

¹⁰ Verse 11

¹¹ Verse 18

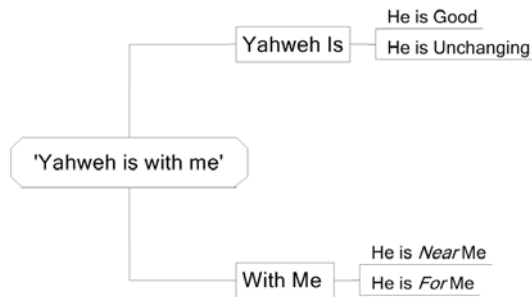
¹² Chambers, O. (1996, c1936). *Christian Disciplines : Containing the Disciplines of Divine Guidance, Suffering, Peril, Prayer, Loneliness, Patience*. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott. Oswald Chambers, educated in art and archeology, was part mystic, part theologian, and part poet (he started a society dedicated to Robert Browning). He resigned his position as the Principal of The Bible Training College in London to serve as a chaplain during World War I. He was assigned to Zeitoun in Egypt, where he died on the 15th of November in 1917. The news of his death was cabled to England, "Oswald in His presence." Though his wife preferred a simple

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YAHWEH IS WITH ME

Fyodor Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, observed, “If your prayer is sincere there will be new feeling and new meaning in it, which will give you fresh courage, and you will understand that prayer is an education.”¹³ Dostoevsky’s observation captures the essence of the heart-movements in Psalms 118. Three of the novelist’s words serve us as truth markers: “sincere,” “meaning,” and “courage.” We may connect “sincere” to the concept of integrating the third voice, and we may connect “meaning” to the concept of reversing our focus, but we have yet to discuss the connection with “courage.”

For the person who is “on the cliff-edge about to fall,” who in anguish is crying out to Yahweh, inward focus is not enough. One needs hope – hope that the inward change will be followed by an outward change. One needs Dostoevsky’s “fresh courage.” The Warrior-Poet of Psalms 118 found such courage. We may do the same by examining a pattern of truth woven into his poetry. His declaration, “Yahweh is with me” encapsulates the second heart-move of his life-transforming prayer, and it is rich with philosophic insight. The meaning must be examined in two parts.



Of **more** import is the actual essence of the concept “Yahweh is.” The Hebrew poets were not the first to pen psalms for their God. The pagan poets of ancient time penned moving passages similar, at least in form, to those of the Hebrews. An Akkadian psalm from the Ugaritica¹⁴ reads similar to the Hebrew psalms of thanksgiving.¹⁵ However, there is a distinctive difference. In keeping with the Akkadian view of God, their psalmists implore him with magic, with rituals, and with self-mutilation. Their God is dangerous, temperamental, impossible to predict.

Comment [MSOffice1]: Two items require the comparative, not superlative.

burial, the soldiers whom he served demanded that full military honors be given to their fallen comrade.

¹³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Garden City, New York: Literary Guild of America, 1949), Part II, Chapter 3. page number?

¹⁴ Cf. Ugaritica 5.162. Also see (from UGAR notes page) and link

¹⁵ Cf. Psalms 86. Q.v. Psalms 116.

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The Hebrew psalmists write of a different God. Psalms 118 is replete with an essential declaration: "That God is good; that His love endures forever." The warrior poet begins and ends his psalm emphasizing two vital elements of Yahweh's essence: 1) He is good, and 2) His love endures forever. This confession is vital. It answers and anticipates the answer to four thousand years of philosophic and theological query, establishing the conviction that God is good and that this supreme condition will not change.¹⁶

Yet this essential answer is not enough. If the Warrior-Poet is to find courage, he must answer one more question: Will this good, unchanging God rescue *him*? In his heart of hearts, he is confronted by his own unworthiness. What right does he have to expect help from a holy deity? Yahweh is able, but is He willing?

The answer is addressed in just two words, "with me." They may be interpreted in dual connotation: First, that Yahweh is *near* me. Second, that Yahweh is *for* me. The Warrior-Poet is surrounded on every side, but he is not alone. God is *near* him – and thus he experiences intimacy. The Warrior-Poet is unworthy of divine rescue, but God is *for* him – and thus he experiences grace.

"Yahweh is with me." Out of such intimacy and grace comes fresh courage. It is a special courage commensurate with an absolute shift in dependency. I am not able, but Yahweh is both able and willing. *I will trust.* With this shift, the Warrior-Poet transcends the danger expressed by a modern psalmist who warns that the "moral sweat" pouring off our brows can "blind our eyes to the action of God in and around us."¹⁷ And with this shift, the Warrior-Poet experiences the third heart-move, crying out in defiance against his calamity:

Yahweh is with me;
I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?
Yahweh is with me. . . .

The significance of these words is found in their tense and their tone. The tone is defiant; the tense is present. Before the rescue, comes *the present tense, defiant declaration of absolute trust.* Only after this declaration of holy defiance, comes the rescue work of Yahweh. Defiance is the anti-venom for despair. One does not overcome despair with a halting effort to be "hopeful." It takes the "stronger stuff" of present tense holy defiance. It is expressed in the counter challenge of one who dares to trust in spite of the risks. It is David hurling faith at Goliath. It is Ruth refusing to abandon Naomi. It is Elijah taunting the priests of Baal.

¹⁶ This position offers a primary warrant both for the fields of metaphysics and ethics.
¹⁷ *Answering God: The Psalms as Prayer*, Eugene H. Peterson, (New York: HarperCollins, 1989)
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The tireless missionary, C.T. Studd, who at age fifty-three risked everything¹⁸ to establish a mission church in the Congo, expresses the heart-move of one who has overcome despair with a present tense, defiant declaration of absolute trust: “The God of Heaven, He will fight for us... We will a thousand times sooner die trusting only our God, than live trusting in man. And when we come to this position the battle is already won, and the end of the glorious campaign in sight. We will have the real Holiness of God, not the sickly stuff of talk and dainty words and pretty thought. . . . one of daring faith.”¹⁹

THE LORD HELPED ME

God rescued the Warrior-Poet of Psalms 118 – and God rescued me. Nearly, six months after my disappointment with Rysher Entertainment, I received an unexpected call. It was FOX Family Television: Would I consider producing a new series for their network? They were willing to contract in advance – not for the industry standard of six episodes – but rather for *twenty-two* (this was more than I had dared hope), and actor Danny Glover would serve as the series host.²⁰

It was, to me, a miracle.

Like the Psalmist, I had been “right on the cliff-edge, ready to fall, when God grabbed and held me,” and like the psalmist, between the “falling” and the “holding” was an anguished but life-transforming prayer. To examine such prayer – the prayer of the anguished – has been the point of this essay. Perhaps it will help to review, once again, the heart-moves in Psalms 118.

ONE: the Warrior-Poet, in absolute desperation, experiences integration in the voices of prayer – the voice of “address” becomes one with the voice of “evaluation.” In this way, he discovers a reversal of focus – learning that God is not just using the man to influence the circumstances; he is using the circumstances to influence the man.

TWO: This reversal prepares the Warrior-Poet for a shift in ultimate dependency. Such dependency is predicated upon the conscious decision to trust, and this trust is predicated upon two essential faith propositions: that A) God is unchanging good, that B) God is both near him and for him. The fruit of this trust is a pervasive combination of intimacy and grace.

¹⁸ Charlie Studd’s missionary venture to Africa was opposed by everyone, including the mission board, and the business leaders who had supported his previous work in India. Studd insisted that he would go with or without their help. His obedience to God resulted in a fellowship of churches that is now reputed to number more than 200,000 people.

¹⁹ See link

²⁰ I owe a special debt to the other Executive Producer of the series, Rasha Draschavitch. My deal with FOX was due, in large part, to Rasha’s absolute integrity.

223 THREE: Drawing from this intimacy and this grace, the Warrior-Poet challenges despair itself,
224 issuing a present tense, defiant declaration of absolute trust. He does not attempt to medicate
225 despair. He assaults it with the anti-venom of holy defiance, declaring ultimate victory, now, even
226 before it is evidenced.

227 The person who experiences such life-transforming prayer, discovers that God is more than
228 strength; God is song. God is more than power; God is art. He becomes more than the God we
229 need. He becomes the God we crave. It is natural, then, for spontaneous praise to demand
230 elegant expression. It is natural then for the Warrior-Poet of Psalms 118 to sing, "I will proclaim
231 what the Lord has done":

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233 I was right on the edge of the cliff-edge, ready to fall,
234 when God grabbed and held me.
235 God is my strength, He is also my song,
236 and now He has become my salvation.