

For Me

Psalm 118:5-9

Dr. Pierre Cannings

I. Make the Call v. 5

a. I called

i. The Lord –

1. is generally regarded as a contracted form of the divine name. In this psalm it was inspired by the formula used in Exod 15:2 at v 14.

ii. From my Distress Ps 18:6; 86:7; 120:1

1. Distress -extreme anxiety, sorrow, or pain
2. It also may refer to the strong emotional response that one experiences when pressed externally by enemies or internally by wrong decisions or passions
3. the great trials due, as the context suggests, to enemies; out of a deep experience of agony.—*I called upon Yah*], in prayer for relief

b. He Answered

i. Set me in a Large Place

1. broad place,” as “the wide, open spaces” of the desert.
2. The king bears witness before the congregation to Yahweh’s liberating help in answer to prayer in a time of military crisis. The beautiful metaphor of being given room to move and develop after the constraint of disorientation also occurs in Pss 4:2 (1); 18:20, 36 (19, 37); 31:9 (8); 119:45.
3. The Lord took him from his tight space (*mēṣar*, “distress,” but also a restricting, claustrophobic experience, as in Ps 116:3; Lam 1:3) to a broad or “spacious” place of freedom (*merḥab*, from *rḥb*, “be wide”).
4. but here it refers to Yahweh’s celestial abode. The subsequent contrast between the psalmist’s confined existence on earth and the freedom of heaven recalls the sequence of ideas in Pss 4:2, *baṣṣār hirḥabtā lī*, “in distress set me at large,” and 18:7–8.
5. Since the psalmist was in immediate danger of death (vss. 10–14, 17–18), *mēṣar* should designate a place from which he called for divine help, much as in Ps 61:3, where the poet pictures himself on the edge of the abyss. The motif of Sheol as a place of confinement (see third NOTE on Ps 88:9 on Sheol as Prison)

II. For Me vs. 6-7

a. Lord is for Me

i. For Me- Job 19:27; Ps 56:9; Heb 13:6

ii. I will not Fear

1. Fear - has a tendency to either immobilize men or seriously affect their activity. This is especially true of the spiritually uncommitted).
2. On the basis of this he reminded the people (vv. 6–9), that since **the LORD was with** him, he need not fear what others might **do to** him (cf. Heb. 13:6). And because **the LORD** was his **Helper** (cf. Ps. 27:9) he could be sure of **triumph**. Therefore the people too could be sure that **it is better to turn to the LORD than to trust in** human resources'
3. He is convinced the Lord is for him so he will not be afraid (cf. Pss 23:4; 46:1–2[2–3]). The Lord's protection amply surpasses the power of any foe because anyone who opposes him is only human (cf. Ps 56:11[12]).
4. "The fear of men diminishes in proportion to consciousness of the greatness of God." Human threats are no match for divine protection (cf. Rom 8:31).
5. Unwarranted fear may harm the efforts of the people of God. Jeremiah was warned by God not to fear the faces of his opponents (Jer 1:8) lest God allow calamity to befall him (v. 17). Similar calls to courage were given to Jeremiah's contemporary, Ezekiel, and to a great many others (Jos 1:7, 9; Ez 2:6). We realize that even godly people are tempted to fear and may be temporarily overwhelmed (Ps 55:5). So God repeatedly counsels his people not to succumb to that temptation (Is 8:12; Jn 14:1, 27). He tells them to heap their anxieties upon the God of their redemption, whose care for his sheep is infinitely great (1 Pt 5:7). Faith, then, is the indispensable antecedent of fearlessness as seen in the words of Isaiah:

iii. What can man do to me?

1. Man - Recourse to human allies and counselors comes a poor second to a practical faith in Yahweh (contrast 2 Kgs 16:5–7; Isa 7:1–13). The sequence in vv.8–9 stresses the polarity between Yahweh and human beings by indicating that no humans, not even leaders, are reliable
2. The poet sharpens the contrast between God and man by placing *yahweh* at the beginning of the verse and *'ādām* at the end.

b. The Lord is For Me at Ps 104:8.

i. Those who Help Me

1. Help – to stand by someone

2. The psalmist views the Lord's support as not just theoretical or moral but tangible and practical as the Lord is with him as his "helper" (cf. Heb 13:6).
- ii. Look with Satisfaction.
 1. Satisfaction-
 2. Those who Hate Me
 - a. Hate

III. Take Refuge vs. 8-9

- a. Better to Take Refuge
 - i. Refuge - to cover, hide, orig. meaning to hide oneself
 1. Protection from danger or distress
 2. God is depicted numerous times as the "refuge" of his people, most often in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 7:1 [M¹T 2]; 46:1 [M²T 2]; 59:16 [M³T 17]; 94:2; Jer. 16:19). It is definite dangers, sometimes named, that cause God's people to take refuge in him. These are most often enemies (e.g., Ps. 17:7; 37:40), but also the oppression suffered by the poor (Ps. 14:6; Isa. 25:4; cf. Ruth 2:12). To seek refuge in something other than God, such as wealth, is foolhardy (Ps. 52:7 [M⁴T 9]).
- b. No trust in man
 1. Trust- reliance, security, cause for hope
 - a. the psalmist affirms that even the best human resources fall far short of what the Lord does for his people (cf. 2 Kgs 16:5–7; Isa 7:1–13). Whom we choose to trust has profound consequences.
 - b. The OT considers these sources of false security in some detail in order to show by contrast the excellence of hope in God. The list includes man (Ps 118:8
- c. Better to Take Refuge
 - i. Trust in Princes.
 1. Princes - whether king or commoner
 2. Even human princes, perhaps here referring to foreign military alliances as in Isaiah 7 (cf. the references to nations in v. 10), cannot provide the safety the Lord does. The best of human help is paltry compared to what the Lord provides, so the true source of security is the Lord alone

¹MT Masoretic Text

²MT Masoretic Text

³MT Masoretic Text

⁴MT Masoretic Text

Word Studies

Distress- extreme anxiety, sorrow, or pain⁵

It also may refer to the strong emotional response that one experiences when pressed externally by enemies or internally by wrong decisions or passions; e.g. Jacob's confrontation with Esau (Gen 32:7 [H 8]). Israel was frequently placed in sore distress by her enemies during the period of the Judges (Jud 2:15; 10:9). Even a great leader may be distressed by reaction to controversial decisions (cf. I Sam 30:6). One can be obsessed with a passion and be so bound up emotionally that he becomes ill; e.g. (Amnon's distorted desire for his sister (II Sam 13:2)⁶

Fear - Fear has a tendency to either immobilize men or seriously affect their activity. This is especially true of the spiritually uncommitted. Saul's fear of the people caused him to transgress the commandment of God (1 Sm 15:24). The parents whose blind son was miraculously healed by Jesus were afraid to support Christ because they feared the Jews (Jn 9:22). In the parable of the talents Jesus told of a man whose fear prevented him from doing his reasonable duty (Mt 25:25). Unwarranted fear may harm the efforts of the people of God. Jeremiah was warned by God not to fear the faces of his opponents (Jer 1:8) lest God allow calamity to befall him (⁷v 17). Similar calls to courage were given to Jeremiah's contemporary, Ezekiel, and to a great many others (Jos 1:7, 9; Ez 2:6). We realize that even godly people are tempted to fear and may be temporarily overwhelmed (Ps 55:5). So God repeatedly counsels his people not to succumb to that temptation (Is 8:12; Jn 14:1, 27). He tells them to heap their anxieties upon the God of their redemption, whose care for his sheep is infinitely great (1 Pt 5:7). Faith, then, is the indispensable antecedent of fearlessness as seen in the words of Isaiah: "Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee" (Is 26:3). The psalmist repeatedly stresses the role of faith in conquering fear (37:1; 46:2; 112:7).⁸

Help - to stand by someone

Trust

Refuge - to cover, hide, orig. meaning to hide oneself⁹

⁵ Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., [*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., [*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*](#) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 778–779.

⁷v verse

⁸ Stuart D. Sacks, "[Fear](#)," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 782.

⁹ Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, et al., [*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 337.

Shelter or protection from danger or distress. The main thought underlying the Hebrew terms translatable as “refuge” is security. Such words are applied in the Old Testament to places of physical shelter, as for those seeking protection from rain (Job 24:8; RS¹⁰V, KJ¹¹V “shelter”), wind (Isa. 32:2; Heb. *maḥ^abē*; RS¹²V, KJ¹³V “hiding place”), or enemy armies (14:32; Nah. 3:11). Figuratively, a strong ruler or ally could be called a “refuge” (Judg. 9:15; Isa. 30:2), as could, temporarily, false assurances (28:15).

God is depicted numerous times as the “refuge” of his people, most often in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 7:1 [M¹⁴T 2]; 46:1 [M¹⁵T 2]; 59:16 [M¹⁶T 17]; 94:2; Jer. 16:19). It is definite dangers, sometimes named, that cause God’s people to take refuge in him. These are most often enemies (e.g., Ps. 17:7; 37:40), but also the oppression suffered by the poor (Ps. 14:6; Isa. 25:4; cf. Ruth 2:12). To seek refuge in something other than God, such as wealth, is foolhardy (Ps. 52:7 [M¹⁷T 9]).¹⁸

Commentary Studies

5.a. H. Schmidt (ZA¹⁹W 40 [1922] 9–10) interpreted מצר as “prison” here and in Ps 116:3; Lam 1:3. H. S. May (“Psalm 118,” 97–106) translated it “citadel” and envisaged the setting of the psalm to be a sanctuary in the border fortress of Arad in the Negev; he took מרחב, “broad place,” as “the wide, open spaces” of the desert. For criticism, see Crüsemann, *Studien zur Formgeschichte*, 218 n. 1.

5.b. Heb. יה, “Yah,” is generally regarded as a contracted form of the divine name. In this psalm it was inspired by the formula used in Exod 15:2 at v 14.

5.c. יה במרחב עוני is more literally, “Yahweh answered me (and set me) in a broad place.” For the pregnant construction, see GK²⁰C §119gg.

¹⁰RSV Revised Standard Version

¹¹KJV King James Version

¹²RSV Revised Standard Version

¹³KJV King James Version

¹⁴MT Masoretic Text

¹⁵MT Masoretic Text

¹⁶MT Masoretic Text

¹⁷MT Masoretic Text

¹⁸Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 877.

¹⁹ZAW *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

²⁰GKC *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* ed. E. Kautsch, trans. A. E. Cowley (London/New York: OUP, 1910; repr. 1966)

6.a. Michel (*Tempora*, 241) observed that this verb and those in vv 7, 20 are modal.

7.a. LX²¹X so interpreted. For the *bet essentiae* and pl²². of majesty, see GK²³C §§119i, 124g–i; Joüo²⁴n §§133c, 136f. Assonance with the end of the line counsels against repointing to a s²⁵g. with BH²⁶S (M. Berder, “*La pierre rejetée*,” 22–23).²⁷

The king’s testimony (118:5–13). In v 5 a new voice speaks, that of the central character of the psalm. The king bears witness before the congregation to Yahweh’s liberating help in answer to prayer in a time of military crisis. The beautiful metaphor of being given room to move and develop after the constraint of disorientation also occurs in Pss 4:2 (1); 18:20, 36 (19, 37); 31:9 (8); 119:45. The king reflects on lessons learned from the experience so that the congregation may take them to heart. He gives praise for Yahweh’s powerful support and its corollary that natural human fears can give way to God-given overcoming. In vv 8–9 he puts his general reflection in wisdom terms. Recourse to human allies and counselors comes a poor second to a practical faith in Yahweh (contrast 2 Kgs 16:5–7; Isa 7:1–13). The sequence in vv 8–9 stresses the polarity between Yahweh and human beings by indicating that no humans, not even leaders, are reliable (J. Krasövec, *Merismus*, 54). The king sets in rhetorical contrast the crisis and its sequel. On the one hand, swarms of nations surrounded him and seemed likely to overwhelm him (cf. Deut 1:44). On the other hand, prayerful trust in Yahweh’s powerful $\Delta\psi$, “name,” appealed to in his cry of lament (v 5), was the secret weapon that brought him victory and quelled the affray as quickly as it takes blazing thorns to burn away (cf. 2 Sam 23:6–7; Isa 9:17 [18]; 10:17; 33:12). Without Yahweh’s aid all would have been lost.²⁸

The leader recites, in a hexastich synth²⁹. and progressive throughout, the deliverance and the victory.—5. *Out of my straits*], the great trials due, as the context suggests, to enemies; out of a deep experience of agony.—*I called upon Yah*], in prayer for relief; using the poetic abbreviation of “Yahweh.”—*answered me*] in response to the call and—*in a broad place*], pregnant, implying the vb³⁰. “set me,” in antithesis with the “straits.”—6. *Yahweh is for me*], repeated v³¹. 7a; on my side.—*I fear not*] with the best of reasons; because Yahweh so shields me, that the challenge

²¹LXX The Septuagint, Greek translation of the OT

²²pl. plural

²³GKC Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar* ed. E. Kautsch, trans. A. E. Cowley (London/New York: OUP, 1910; repr. 1966)

²⁴Joüon P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, tr. & rev. T. Muraoka

²⁵sg singular or under

²⁶BHS *Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia*, ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977)

²⁷Leslie C. Allen, [Psalms 101–150 \(Revised\)](#), vol. 21, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 161–162.

²⁸Leslie C. Allen, [Psalms 101–150 \(Revised\)](#), vol. 21, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 166.

²⁹synth. synthetic.

³⁰vb. verb.

³¹v. verse.

can be uttered.—*What can man do to me?*], citation from 56:12, and cited in Heb. 13:6.—7. *As my great Helper*], cf³². 54:6 in antithesis with *them that hate me*.—*Upon these last he looks*] pregnant; in triumph, as the result of the divine help, cf³³. 59:11, 92:12.—8–9. A glossator adds a pentameter couplet of gnomic experience:³⁴

B. Acknowledgment of triumph (118:5–21)

118:5–9. In summary fashion the psalmist announced that **the LORD** delivered him from distress (v. 5). On the basis of this he reminded the people (vv. 6–9), that since **the LORD** was **with** him, he need not fear what others might **do to** him (cf. Heb. 13:6). And because **the LORD** was his **Helper** (cf. Ps. 27:9) he could be sure of **triumph**. Therefore the people too could be sure that **it is better to turn to the LORD than to trust in human resources**.³⁵

118:5 This is the voice of the psalmist who now begins his song of thanksgiving, as he relates his experience of distress and deliverance by the Lord. In his time of distress, he appealed to the Lord, and the Lord answered him by liberating him. The Lord took him from his tight space (*mēšar*, “distress,” but also a restricting, claustrophobic experience, as in Ps 116:3; Lam 1:3)²⁰³⁶³ to a broad or “spacious” place of freedom (*merḥab*, from *rḥb*, “be wide”).

118:6 With a triumphant confession of trust, the psalmist articulates the confidence that prompted him to turn to the Lord in his time of distress. He is convinced the Lord is for him so he will not be afraid (cf. Pss 23:4; 46:1–2[2–3]). The Lord’s protection amply surpasses the power of any foe because anyone who opposes him is only human (cf. Ps 56:11[12]). As Weiser notes, “The fear of men diminishes in proportion to consciousness of the greatness of God.”²⁰³⁷⁴ Human threats are no match for divine protection (cf. Rom 8:31).

118:7 Verse 7 extends the thought of v. 6 in more detail. The psalmist views the Lord’s support as not just theoretical or moral but tangible and practical as the Lord is with him as his

³²cf. confer, compare.

³³cf. confer, compare.

³⁴ Charles A. Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, [*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*](#), International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1906–1907), 405.

³⁵ Allen P. Ross, “[Psalms](#),” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 878.

³⁶²⁰³ I. Swart and R. Wakely, *NIDOTTE* 3:857. The noun is related to צרר, “bind, be narrow.”

³⁷²⁰⁴ Weiser, *Psalms*, 726.

“helper” (cf. Heb 13:6).²⁰³⁸⁵ The Lord’s presence with him entails his protection for him, and because the Lord helps the psalmist, those who hate him will not defeat him.

118:8 Using two “better ... than” sayings familiar from the wisdom literature (cf. Prov 16:8, 16, 19), the psalmist affirms that even the best human resources fall far short of what the Lord does for his people (cf. 2 Kgs 16:5–7; Isa 7:1–13). Whom we choose to trust has profound consequences. There is always the temptation to trust in what other people can provide instead of trusting in the Lord, but only the Lord is worthy of one’s confidence (cf. Pss 116:11; 121:2; 146:3).²⁰³⁹⁶

118:9 Even human princes, perhaps here referring to foreign military alliances as in Isaiah 7 (cf. the references to nations in v. 10), cannot provide the safety the Lord does. The best of human help is paltry compared to what the Lord provides, so the true source of security is the Lord alone.⁴⁰

From ... from The first NOTE on Ps 55:12 cites other instances of the *min//b^e* sequence in which both prepositions denote “from.”

Confinement. Being hapax legomenon, the singular form *mēṣar*, usually rendered “straits, distress,” must be defined from the over-all context of the psalm. Since the psalmist was in immediate danger of death (vss. 10–14, 17–18), *mēṣar* should designate a place from which he called for divine help, much as in Ps 61:3, where the poet pictures himself on the edge of the abyss, and in Eccles 51:9, which reads, “And I raised my voice from the City, and from the gates of Sheol my cry.” The motif of Sheol as a place of confinement (see third NOTE on Ps 88:9 on Sheol as Prison) accords with the verb *sabbūnī*, “They surrounded me.” The preformative *m*, then, expresses place, precisely as in the second-colon antonym *merḥāb*, “Broad Domain.”

answered me from. Cf. Pss 60:8 and 99:7.

the Broad Domain. In Pss 18:20 and 31:9, *merḥāb* designates the vast expanses of the nether world, but here it refers to Yahweh’s celestial abode. The subsequent contrast between the psalmist’s confined existence on earth and the freedom of heaven recalls the sequence of ideas in Pss 4:2, *baṣṣār hirḥabtā lī*, “in distress set me at large,” and 18:7–8.

Failure to recognize that both *mēṣar* and *merḥāb* are place names produced the indefensible translation of K⁴¹J, which transmutes the eight words of the Hebrew original into

³⁸²⁰⁵ The word “helper” is a participle from עזר, “to help,” a root that occurs over a hundred times, about forty of which are in declarations that God is our helper. See Pss 10:14; 27:9; 28:7; 30:10[11]; 33:20; 37:40; 40:17[18]; 46:1[2], 5[6]; 54:4[6]; 63:7[8]; 70:5[6]; 72:12; 94:17; 115:9–11; 118:7, 13; 121:2; 124:8. The root can also refer to protection (cf. Deut 33:29; Ezra 8:22) or to the help provided by an ally (1 Chr 5:20; Isa 31:2; Jer 47:4; Ezek 30:8; 32:21; Nah 3:9).

³⁹²⁰⁶ R. Moberly, *NIDOTTE* 1:645: “God is the supreme object of trust, and some of the things in which people put their trust are substitutes for God, however naturally worthy of trust they may appear to be in themselves.... The logic of biblical monotheism requires that all these things be used in the service of God and not set up as alternatives to him.”

⁴⁰ Daniel J. Estes, *Psalms 73–150*, ed. E. Ray. Clendenen, vol. 13, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2019), 390–391.

⁴¹KJ The King James, or Authorized Version of 1611

eighteen in English: “I called upon the Lord in distress: the Lord answered me, *and set me* in a large place.”

6. *Yahweh ... man*. The poet sharpens the contrast between God and man by placing *yahweh* at the beginning of the verse and *’ādām* at the end.

for me. Compare Ps 56:10, “Then will I know / that God is for me.” The ancient versions found difficult the nuance of *lī*; thus *Juxta Hebraeos* strays far afield with *Dominus meus es*, “You are my Lord.”

for me ... against me. The use of *lī* in two opposite senses effectively illustrates the aspect of Hebrew style noticed at Ps 104:8.

against me. The second NOTE on Ps 17:4 cites Ugaritic-Phoenician-Hebrew texts witnessing this nuance of *lī*.

7. *my Great Warrior*. Like Ps 54:6, *b^esōm^ekē*, “the true Sustainer,” *b^e’ōz^erāy* may be analyzed into the emphatic *beth* followed by the plural of majesty. The psalmist evidently chose the plural form *’ōz^eray*, “my Great Warrior,” to effect assonance and rhyme with second-colon *śōn^e’āy*, “my enemies.” The numerous enemies of the poet were no match for the unique and majestic God of the psalmist. The root of *’ōz^eray* occurs in Ugaritic as *’ḏr*, “lad, warrior,” discussed in NOTE on Ps 35:2.

I shall gloat over. See Ps 112:8 for this idiom and for the play on the verbs *yārē’*, “to fear,” and *rā’āh*, “to see.”

8. *in man* 9. *in princes*. As in Ps 146:3, the balance between *’ādām*, “man,” and *n^edībīm*, “princes,” may be an instance of merismus expressing “all men.” A similar usage can be found in the Phoenician Inscription of Eshmunazor, line 4, *kl mmlkt wkl ’dm*, “every king and every man,” and in U⁴²T, 51:VII:43, *umlk ublmlk*, “whether king or commoner.”⁴³

⁴²UT *Ugaritic Textbook*, 4th ed. (Rome, 1965) of C. H. Gordon’s *Ugaritic Grammar* (Rome, 1940)

⁴³ Mitchell Dahood S.J., [Psalms III: 101-150: Introduction, Translation, and Notes with an Appendix: The Grammar of the Psalter](#), vol. 17A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 156–157.