

Psalm 118 “A Song of Thanksgiving”
Psalm 118
1 Peter 2

November 18, 2018

There are some Psalms that serve as cornerstones –
songs that summarize a whole section of the Psalter.

Psalm 118 is such a song.

 Psalms 111-117 are the “hallelujah” songs –
 The first three all begin with “hallelujah” – Praise the LORD!
 The last three all end with “hallelujah” – Praise the LORD!
 (Indeed, Psalms 113 and 117 both begin *and end* with hallelujah!)

 Psalm 118 has lots of connections to Psalms 111-117:
 The threefold pattern that we saw in Psalm 115 –
 Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the LORD.
 “His steadfast love endures forever” (from Psalm 117)
 In the midst of distress, calling on the name of the LORD (from Psalm 116).
 The LORD as my helper (from Psalm 115)
 The nations surrounded me (echoes of Psalm 114).

But there are other motifs that go further back.

 The opening line of Psalm 118 is borrowed from Psalm 107 (the first song in book 5).

Psalm 107 had encouraged us to “consider the steadfast love of the LORD.”

 And over these last dozen Psalms,
 that is precisely what we have been done.

Psalm 118 functions as the cornerstone –
wrapping up this first part of Book 5 of the Psalter.

If you look at what comes next,

 Psalm 119 – with its magnificent prayer of thanks and praise to the God who speaks!
 And then Psalms 120-134 – the songs of ascents –
 pilgrim songs for those who on the journey to Zion.

 Psalm 118 provides a cornerstone – a foundation stone –
 that sums up the first part of book 5,
 and prepares you for what comes next.

Sing Psalm 118
Read 1 Peter 2

Given that my professional training is as a historian,
 you might think this odd –
 but I had never actually read the texts
 of presidential Thanksgiving proclamations before.

But every President since Abraham Lincoln has called for a Day of Thanksgiving –
and these proclamations include a call for public worship –
public services of giving thanks to God for his kindness.

Last week in Sunday School we saw how the Westminster Confession –
encourages us to have special days of thanksgiving –
as well as special days of fasting –
and now here in the Psalms, even the nations are called on to give thanks to God
for his blessing to his people.

So I am beginning to think that I have been wrong to ignore all these presidential proclamations.
Paul tells us to honor the magistrate, and to be subject to the governing authorities.
We should do what they say – unless it goes contrary to God’s word.

So when the President tells us to gather and worship God,
we should probably do it!

The first presidential proclamation for a regular Thanksgiving Day
came in 1863 – following the Battle of Gettysburg.
I mention this because Psalm 118 has a very similar tone.
The call to thanksgiving comes in the wake of distress and trouble –
indeed, in the context of war and battle!

1. The Call to Thanksgiving (v1-4)

*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!*

Psalm 118 opens with a call to give thanks –
to confess God’s great name, Yahweh – the LORD –
because he is *good* –
for his steadfast love (his *hesed*) endures forever!

² *Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”*

³ *Let the house of Aaron say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”*

⁴ *Let those who fear the LORD say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”*

Like in Psalm 115,
this sequence, from Israel to the house of Aaron to “those who fear the LORD”
connects *us* to the history of redemption.
As we saw a couple weeks ago,
the term “God-fearer” became used for Gentiles who believed in Israel’s God.

And as we heard last week from Psalm 117,
“Praise the LORD, all nations!
Extol him, all peoples!
For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.”
The Psalmist wants the *nations* – the Gentiles – to praise the LORD
because of God’s faithfulness to Israel.

And God’s faithfulness to his people is the *reason for thanksgiving* in verses 5-18.

2. The Reason for Thanksgiving: “The LORD Is on My Side” (v5-18)

a. The LORD is For Me – Who Can Be Against Me? (v5-9)

⁵ *Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
the LORD answered me and set me free.*

⁶ *The LORD is on my side; I will not fear.
What can man do to me?*

⁷ *The LORD is on my side as my helper;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.*

Abraham Lincoln was one of the more thoughtful observers of the Civil War.

He understood better than most of the theologians of the day
how difficult it was to claim that God “is on my side.”

After all, both sides prayed to the same God.

Both sides asked him to bless their armies.

God could not give both sides what they wanted!

Psalm 118 *is* a political Psalm – it’s celebrating victory in battle –
but be careful how you apply it to modern politics!!

What gives one nation the right to say “the LORD is on my side” – more than another nation?

The Son of David could say that –

because God had actually promised David that his son would reign forever!

Think about what we have seen from Book 5 of the Psalter so far.

Our confidence – our hope – our future –

is all based on the steadfast love – the covenant loyalty – of God...

to his promises.

God is faithful to his *word* –

so if you want to say that “God is on my side” –

then you will need to find a specific promise that applies directly to *you*.

In the NT, we have clear teaching that those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ
are united to him –

and all that God has promised to Jesus

now has been promised to us.

So you can be certain that just as God brought Jesus through suffering and death

to everlasting life in his resurrection –
so also God will bring *you* through suffering and death,
to everlasting life in *your* resurrection!

What about the nations?

There *are* promises made to particular nations in the OT.

God promises to destroy various nations.

He also promises to bring salvation to various nations.

Egypt, Assyria, and various others

receive promises that God will have mercy on them in the future.

And that *is* what, in fact, happens.

Egypt and Assyria (modern day Iraq) wind up becoming major centers
of early Christianity!

But there is no particular promise of God that would allow a modern nation
to claim to be God's "chosen" people.

In Romans 8, Paul clearly shows that that the language of God being on 'my side'
is language that should be used of the *church* – the people of God.
If God is for us – who can be against us?!

Yes, there *are* strong political associations there.

The church stands over/against all the nations of the world –

as the *one people* who can say "The LORD is on my side."

But the church comes from every tribe and language and people and nation!

The gospel message breaks down tribal barriers – rejects nationalist rhetoric –
and sees the restoration of the unity of the human race
in the person of Jesus Christ!

How can the Psalmist say "The LORD is my side" – the LORD is *for me*?

There are some who would say,

"The question isn't whether God is on your side –
the question is whether you are on God's side!"

Sure, that's a good point.

And if you are not on God's side –

if you are not loving and serving God with all your heart –
then don't expect God to help you!

But the Psalmist *says*, "The LORD is on my side..."

so it is necessary for us to ask –

under what circumstances can *we say* "the LORD is on *my side*"?!

And verses 8-9 make clear the starting point:

⁸ *It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in man.*

⁹ *It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in princes.*

If you would have the LORD on your side,
then you must take refuge in the LORD!
You must *trust* him.

Or, as verse 5 put it,
“Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free.”

This was the pattern of Israel’s history.

It was the pattern of the book of Judges –
when Israel cried out to the LORD for deliverance,
and he sent a Judge – a Deliverer – to defeat their enemies.
And before that, when they were in Egypt, they called on the LORD (for 400 years!).
Don’t think for a moment that Psalm 118 is saying that God heard *instantly!*
In our day we have become so obsessed with instant gratification
that we need to recognize that if God takes 400 years to answer your prayer
he’s not late.
I’ll be dead then!
Sure.
And the first slaves in Egypt cried out to God –
and he heard them.
And set their great-great-great-great grandchildren free!

All the prayers and cries for Ginger’s niece Addisen –
may be answered 400 years from now,
when God gives some doctor the wisdom to treat chiari malformation better.
Sure, sometimes it happens sooner!
After all, someone else prayed for their suffering niece 400 years ago –
and that prayer may be answered today!

But whether long or short –
the LORD *heard* – he *answered me and set me free.*

When you trust in God –
when you *trust God* –
then you realize “what can man do to me?”

What is the *worst thing* that man can do to me?
Affliction, distress, trouble, death.
But the LORD is my *helper* – there’s that word again!
The helper – in Hebrew – is not an “assistant.”
You never find the word used of an inferior.

The helper is one who does what I could not possibly do for myself.

“I need *help*” doesn’t mean – “can I get a hand with this?”
“I need *help*” means – I’m in trouble,
and there is *no way* that I can get out of this mess by myself!
The helper is one who does for me what I could not possibly do for myself.

*The LORD is on my side as my helper;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.*

The picture that you are supposed to see here
is the Psalmist as a small child
facing a mighty foe –
and the mighty foe is mocking him –

think of the story of David and Goliath!

A young lad with a sling against a mighty warrior with a sword and spear.
But the LORD is on David’s side – as his helper –
as the one who does for him, what he could not do for himself.

And soon Goliath lay flat on his back with his head cut off!

Indeed, that is the picture in verses 10-13

b. Salvation Is From the LORD (v10-18)

- ¹⁰ *All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!*
¹¹ *They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!*
¹² *They surrounded me like bees;
they went out like a fire among thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!*
¹³ *I was pushed hard,^[a] so that I was falling,
but the LORD helped me.*

The “I” here is plainly designed to remind us of David.
David against Goliath – David against the Philistines.

By now I suspect that you can see where I’m going.
The Psalmist does not want *you* to think
that you can go out and single-handedly fight the nations!
You are not David!

Yes, you face Goliath.
Yes, you are surrounded by hostile nations –
surrounded by buzzing and angry bees!

Psalm 118 does not say that “if you trust God, then you can fight Goliath!!”

After all, what would have happened if someone else – besides David –
had gone out against Goliath?

Let’s even say that some young fellow from the tribe of Issachar
trusted God, believed God, and went out to face Goliath!!

Goliath would have crushed him like a bug!

Only David could defeat Goliath!

Only David was the LORD’s anointed!

He was the one that God had chosen to go out and defeat Israel’s enemies.

And so when you consider the Goliath in your life –
when you consider the enemies that surround you –
the temptations – the lures of the world, the flesh, and the devil –
remember that the Lord Jesus is your helper.

He is the one who has done what you could not do!

He is the one who destroyed the power of sin, death, and the devil –
as he struck down Goliath on the cross!

Goliath is now lying flat on his back with his head cut off!

Jesus has defeated the enemy!

And now *we* are called – with the plural voice of Psalm 118 –
to rejoice in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Notice the voice of Jesus in verse 15 –
and then the response of the righteous in verses 15-16:

¹⁴ *The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.*

¹⁵ *Glad songs of salvation
are in the tents of the righteous:*

“The right hand of the LORD does valiantly,

¹⁶ *the right hand of the LORD exalts,
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!”*

Because it is *true* that God has raised Jesus from the dead –
because the LORD has saved his Son from the grave –
therefore “Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous”!

“The right hand of the LORD does valiantly” –

We saw in Psalm 115 that the idols of the nations have eyes but do not see –
ears but do not hear – feet but do not walk.

We saw then that *God’s image* does see, does hear, does walk!

Because God created *man* – male and female – in his own image.

Our God is a God who sees and hears and walks.

Therefore his image sees and hears and walks!

Here in verses 15-16 we see another picture of this.

“The right hand of the LORD does valiantly!”

God’s right hand is his power – his strength – his mighty deeds.

And he gave us right hands so that we might also have strength and power
(we have finite strength to reflect God’s infinite strength).

[And for those of you who are left-handed,
don't worry, there are some great puns working off of this
in the book of Judges – you weren't forgotten!]

Verses 17-18 are quite striking:

¹⁷ *I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.*

¹⁸ *The LORD has disciplined me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.*

“I shall not die.”

It’s not just that I didn’t die on *that* occasion –

but “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.”

The Psalmist plainly believes God’s promises to David –
that his Son will sit on his throne forever.

What we need is a Son of David who will never die!

And that’s why the final section of this Psalm was chanted when Jesus entered Jerusalem
on Palm Sunday:

3. Christ and His People: Because He Has Saved Jesus, He Will Save Us (v19-27)

a. The Gates of Righteousness – for Jesus and for Us (v19-21)

¹⁹ *Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.*

²⁰ *This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.*

²¹ *I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.*

The Son of David comes to Jerusalem to give thanks to the LORD for his great salvation!

Wait... wait...

When this Psalm was being sung in the temple, there was no Son of David!

Right.

But God had promised.

And God is faithful.

And so for 500 years, Israel sang this song in the temple –
waiting for the day when God would do as he had promised!

That's why they sang it when Jesus came!

Because they knew this song!

They had sung it every year at the Feast!

And so, when the one who was rumored to be the Son of David came to Jerusalem

for the feast,

what else were they supposed to sing?!!

And so Jesus says,

“Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.”

It is time to give thanks to God for his mighty deeds –
for his great victory – his right hand that does valiantly!

There is a certain irony in that Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem!

After all, Jesus hasn't actually done anything yet!!

This is supposed to be the procession of the victorious king into his city –
after he has triumphed over his foes!

This is why the chief priests and the Pharisees are so upset!

To *them*, Jesus appears to be using the methods of a revolutionary –
stirring up the countryside, agitating in the villages,
then coming to Jerusalem at the feast to raise a rebellion against Rome!

But what they do not see – what they do not understand –

is that Jesus has understood Psalm 118 better than they do –
better than his disciples!

Verse 22:

b. The Cornerstone – Namely, Jesus (v22-23)

²² *The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.*^[b]

²³ *This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

The chief priests and scribes would have understood this to refer to Israel.
Israel was the stone that the builders rejected –
which now becomes the cornerstone!

But Jesus understands that *he* is Israel.
He is all that Israel was called to do and to be.

And so *in order* for him to do what *Israel* was called to do –
he must be rejected.

And so he willingly – knowingly – allows the crowds to sing Psalm 118 to him
as he enters Jerusalem –
knowing full well that this will raise the ire of the rulers against him!

When you are building with stone,
a stone that is rejected for one purpose
may indeed prove most useful in another place –
perhaps even as the keystone in an arch –
or the cornerstone in a foundation.

The term used here “the head of the corner”
could mean either a keystone or a cornerstone!

The point is that it is the most important stone –
the one that is necessary for holding the structure together.

And so the people of God rejoice and sing:

c. The Day When the LORD Brings Salvation for Us (v24-25)

²⁴ *This is the day that the LORD has made;*
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This has become such a familiar line in Psalm 118 that translators are reluctant to alter it.
But the point here is *not* that the LORD has *created this day*.
But that the LORD has *acted* this day.
“This is the day that the LORD has *made things happen!*”

This is the day when the LORD has brought salvation!

Let us rejoice and be glad in it!
And then verse 25 asks God to *continue* to bring salvation:

²⁵ *Save us, we pray, O LORD!*
O LORD, we pray, give us success!

In other words,

a Day of Thanksgiving is never *just* about celebrating the past!
We are not ignorant of the continued afflictions and sufferings that we face!
Even as we give thanks to God for his great deliverance –
we still see that tomorrow we will need the steadfast love of the LORD again!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!

Perhaps in our day, when we are so guarded against “the prosperity gospel” –
we do not pray as often as we should for “success.”
But we should pray that God would prosper us –
that God would give us success in the face of our enemies –
so that all the nations would see
that when you live the way God commands,
it is *good*.

Every four years, when I teach medieval history,
I am reminded that most of our European ancestors embraced the gospel
in part because they saw the material success of “Christian Rome.”
Indeed, the same is true in many parts of Africa as well.

But it is proper for us to pray for success –
that we might flourish – together with all of our friends and neighbors
(there is no place for *selfish* prayers!!
If you are praying “O God, don’t let anyone else succeed – just me!!”
then you are *not* praying “give *us* success!”).

Because – again – this song is all about Jesus and *his kingdom*:

d. The Temple and the Festal Sacrifice – When Jesus Comes for Us (v26-27)

²⁶ *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!*

We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ *The LORD is God,*

and he has made his light to shine upon us.

Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,

up to the horns of the altar!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD –
that is clearly Jesus –
“We bless you from the house of the LORD” –
the you is plural – so this is addressed to the people of God.
The voice here is probably the voice of the priest –
after all, the priests were supposed to bless the people (Numbers 6).

So the priest blesses the Son of David – the one who comes in the name of the LORD –
and blesses the people of God – “we bless you from the house of the LORD.”

The Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6 is plainly behind Psalm 118:

“The LORD make his face to shine upon you.”

Now verse 27 says that the LORD *has made his light to shine upon us*.

So, the priest declares “Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!”

It may seem like an obscure statement –

and probably when it was first made,

it would have caused mouths to water!

Because pretty soon, we’re going to have roast beef for dinner –

as we celebrate the covenant meal of the thank offering!

But of course, for Jesus, this line would have a different meaning!

Now, it’s important to distinguish between the different offerings!

The festal sacrifice is *not* a sin offering.

It is a peace offering – a thank offering.

But in both cases the animal that is offered winds up dead.

In order for his people to rejoice and be glad in his great victory over sin and death –

Jesus must die.

Jesus fulfills *all* the offerings of the OT.

He is the burnt offering that is offered up to grant us access into the heavenlies.

He is the sin offering that is offered to atone for our sins.

He is the guilt offering that removes the curse that was upon us.

But in none of these cases did the worshipers partake of the sacrifice.

That is why the festal sacrifice was required –

the peace offering – which could only be offered *after* all the others –

because only through the burnt offering and the sin offering

could there be *peace* – shalom – with God.

And in the peace offering – and a thank offering was a particular type of peace offering –

all the worshipers would partake of the sacrifice,

thereby expressing – and experiencing –

peace with God – well-being and flourishing!

Jesus entered Jerusalem to the singing of Psalm 118

knowing full well that verse 27 would also be fulfilled that week!

That is why our Lord Jesus, on the night in which he betrayed, took bread...

and he gave thanks...

4. And So We Give Thanks (v28-29)

²⁸ *You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.*

²⁹ *Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!*

This is why the Lord's Supper has been called the *Eucharist* ever since.

Because eucharisteo is simply the Greek word for "I give thanks."

We give thanks because Jesus is our *helper* –

the one who has done what we could not do for ourselves.

We give thanks because the LORD is *good* – and his steadfast love endures forever!

He has been faithful in every generation.

He does not promise that we will never face affliction –
far from it! –

rather, he promises that he will bring us *through affliction* –
and even death itself –

to the same resurrection glory that he has given to his beloved Son.

And so it is important *for us* to tell our stories –

to encourage one another with the stories of God's faithfulness throughout our lives.

It's why we need the stories of God's faithfulness throughout history.

So this Thanksgiving, gather – and tell one another of how God has been good to you!

And *pray* for God's continued faithfulness.

Because while Jesus plainly *is* the stone that the builders rejected –

this is part of the pattern that God has demonstrated over and over again –
of using the weak, the poor, the rejected –

in order to bring about his kingdom.

And that is a reason to give thanks!

PHSS 151 – Father We Thank You