

3. Luke followed his account of Peter's temple sermon with a brief summary of its effect on those present (4:1-4). As at Pentecost, the Spirit moved upon many hearts to bring them to faith in their Messiah; by the end of that day, and perhaps only a matter of weeks after Pentecost, the Jerusalem Church had grown to around five thousand adult male believers (4:4). Luke mentioned only men, not because there were no women or children in the believing community, but because it was common practice to reckon a group by its male members. (It may be noted that this way of reckoning the fledgling Church is reminiscent of Moses' counting of God's covenant household at the time of the Exodus; ref. Exodus 12:37. While Luke doesn't make this connection, the Scripture at least suggests it by treating the Church's emergence as a "second exodus.")

Many were added to the Church that day, but Peter's sermon also provoked a negative response. This response is prominent in Luke's summary because it is the focal point of the larger passage (4:1-3). While to some the fragrance of Christ in His gospel is the aroma of life, to many others it is the stench of death; some believed Peter's message, but others rose up against it and the One it proclaimed. Thus that episode in Solomon's portico marked a crucial turning point in the Church's history by initiating Israel's formal opposition to it. From that time forward, Jewish hostility and persecution were to be a fact of life for the Christian community, first in Palestine, but then throughout the Roman Empire. As it had been with their Lord from the beginning of His ministry, so it would be with His servants (cf. Luke 4:14-30; John 15:12-25).

- a. In identifying that opposition, Luke specifically mentioned the *priests*, the *Sadducees*, and the *captain of the temple guard*. Together these represented the ruling authority in Israel: The Sadducees epitomized rabbinical (teaching) authority; the priests, religious authority; the temple guard, civil authority. The latter amounted to a police force whose role was maintaining security for the temple and its operations. These individuals had no direct religious function, and yet were drawn from the Levites in keeping with the Mosaic Code (ref. Numbers 3:1-13); regardless of their specific duties, everyone who served Yahweh in connection with His sanctuary was to be a member of the tribe of Levi.

Though Israel was a vassal state under Roman dominion, its internal civil structure continued to be theocratic: In principle at least, Yahweh was king in Israel and His rule was administered through those He appointed. In the absence of a Davidic king, human governance was accomplished through the religious leadership associated primarily with Israel's priesthood. In the second temple period following the Judean recovery from exile, this commingling of religious and political authority led to an arrangement in which wealth and power were localized in the religious elite. (So the Jewish high court presiding in Jerusalem – the *Sanhedrin* – was comprised of members of Israel's priestly and scholarly class (including Sadducees) and presided over by the designated high priest.)

The implication of this is that religious opposition to Christ's Church amounted to *state* opposition. Drawing the ire of Israel's religious establishment likely meant arrest and imprisonment and trial before a presiding tribunal (4:5ff).

- b. After identifying the objectors, Luke noted the two primary matters to which they objected (4:1-2). The first was more general, namely Peter and John's audacity in presuming to teach the people. At that time in Israel's history, formal instruction was done on the temple premises, but only by authorized teachers. Peter and John had no credentials or authorization to teach, and their impudence was heightened by the fact that they dared to instruct the crowd inside the temple property (4:13).

The second objection was doctrinal, being directed at Peter's proclamation of Jesus' resurrection. This was especially troubling to the Sadducees who denied the existence of an afterlife, and therefore any notion of resurrection from the dead. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus observed: "*The doctrine of the Sadducees is that the soul and body perish together; the law is all that they are concerned to observe*" (ref. Matthew 22:23-33). It is the emphasis on Jesus' resurrection in the Church's gospel message that explains the prominence of Sadducee opposition in the book of Acts (cf. 5:12-17, 23:1-8).

4. The priests and Sadducees were outraged by what they were hearing, and, determined to put a stop to this pernicious teaching, they instructed the captain of the temple guard to have his cohort arrest Peter and John and hold them over for interrogation. The next day Sanhedrin members convened to examine them, and Luke notably records their central question as being the same one implied by the crowd's speculation the day before: "*By what power, or in what name, have you done this?*" (4:5-7; cf. 3:11-12).
5. The Council's question reiterated the crowd's concern, and Peter gave them the same answer: The authority and power for restoring the lame man belonged to "*Jesus Christ the Nazarene.*" Standing before the rulers and scholars of Israel and ascribing to Jesus the title of *Christ* (Messiah) was provocative enough, but Peter went further by declaring their opposition to God Himself: This man whom they had rejected and executed as a blasphemer was raised and glorified by the very One they claimed to serve (4:8-10).

This, Peter's third speech, was a landmark event, for it was the first time Jesus' disciples gave formal testimony of Him before Israel's rulers. Simple, unlearned and impotent men were being required to stand and give an account to men who had the authority to take their lives, even as they had taken the life of their Master. Jesus had braced them for this day, and just as He pledged, His Spirit was strengthening Peter's resolve and giving him the words he was to speak (cf. 4:8, 13 with Matthew 10:16-20).

And this Spirit, who had previously revealed the Christ in the Law, Prophets and Writings, was again bearing that same testimony through His appointed mouthpiece – not a prophet of Israel, but an apostle of Jesus the Nazarene. The Spirit inspired the prophets of Israel and their words were recorded in the Scriptures; the apostles were moved by the Spirit to draw upon those Scriptures and interpret them in relation to Jesus and His work. The same Spirit who had testified of Christ in *promise* was now testifying of Him in *fulfillment* – a truth Peter himself came to recognize (cf. 2 Peter 1:20-21, 3:1-2 with Ephesians 2:17-22). The Spirit had given this testimony at Pentecost and in Solomon's portico, and now He was going to testify to Israel's religious elite.

- a. At Pentecost, the Spirit had moved Peter to draw upon Joel’s prophecy, the Davidic Covenant, and the Melchizedek typology; in his temple sermon, Peter referred to Moses and the Abrahamic Covenant; here the Spirit led him to another important messianic concept, namely the *stone* motif (4:11). The passage Peter cited comes from Psalm 118 – *a psalm which, in its entirety, speaks to Peter’s contention with the Council*. This is an important observation, since the tendency is to regard only the particular verse Peter mentioned as contributing to his argument. The New Testament writers, however, interacted with the Scriptures in a more organic manner: They did indeed cite or allude to brief passages, but their use and interpretation of those citations demonstrates that they were drawing upon wider, more extended meaning associated with the larger biblical storyline. So, for instance, the Hebrews writer used a messianic *enthronement* psalm (Psalm 2) to substantiate his contention regarding Jesus’ *priesthood* (Hebrews 5:1-6). He could do this, not because this particular psalm addresses the messianic priesthood, but because the broader prophetic context of the Scripture establishes the fundamental connections between Messiah’s regal and priestly roles. *Though he provided only a brief citation, this inspired author fully expected his readers to understand and draw upon the larger Old Testament storyline as God’s revelation and interpretation of His redemptive purpose in His Son.*

Peter may not have discerned it at that moment, but the Spirit recognized that all the various thematic emphases of Psalm 118 pertained in a profound way to the circumstance surrounding Peter’s speech and his intention in it.

- 1) The first is the repeated assertion of Yahweh’s goodness as evidenced in the fact that *“His lovingkindness is everlasting.”* The writer bookended the psalm with this theme, showing that the entire psalm is to be read and interpreted within this framework. And at the heart of this theme is the concept of “lovingkindness” (*hesed*) as highlighting *covenant faithfulness*. The idea isn’t that God is merely loving or kind, but that He is steadfastly devoted to His people because He is unwavering in His commitment to His covenant with them. And precisely because covenants establish and define relationships, “hesed” is a relational concept. Dumbrell observes:

*“The point has been made that the word **hesed** is not applicable to the establishment of a relationship, but reflects rather fidelity and loyalty to an existing relationship. The aim of the **hesed** exhibited is to preserve the tenor of the relationship which already exists.”* (Covenant and Creation)

In the context of Psalm 118, God’s *hesed* pertains to His covenant with Abraham’s descendents, which, at that point in salvation history, consisted of the covenant nation of Israel. From the house of Aaron (the priesthood upon which the Sinai Covenant was founded; Hebrews 7:11) to the sons of Israel and Gentile proselytes (“those who fear the Lord”), every member of Yahweh’s covenant household was to give thanks to Him in recognition that His *hesed* is everlasting (vv. 1-4; ref. also v. 29).

- 2) In the balance of the psalm, this steadfast faithfulness is the implied basis for the psalmist's (and others') confidence in making Yahweh his hope and refuge. Because of His lovingkindness toward His people, the psalmist could trust Yahweh to not only deliver him from adversity and opposition (vv. 5-9), but to grant him victory over his enemies (vv. 10-14). At the same time, the psalmist understood that the Lord's *hesed* doesn't remove all affliction and hardship from the lives of His own; what it does is assure the sufferer that his difficulties are Yahweh's fatherly discipline, not His condemnation or rejection (vv. 15-18).
- 3) The psalmist recognized that "the Lord is good" in all things and at all times, and to him the most important implication of this is that he could trust his own righteousness – the righteousness that alone enters Yahweh's presence – to Him who is faithful. This conviction reflects back on God's covenant relationship with Abraham, at the heart of which was the principle of *righteousness by faith*: The Lord Himself would secure the covenant and the blessings it promised; the heirs of the covenant were simply to consecrate themselves to Him and trust Him to fulfill His oath (cf. Genesis 15, 17 with Isaiah 51:1-2; also Micah 7:14-20; Psalm 105).
- 4) Yahweh's *hesed* insured that the sons of Abraham would enjoy the blessedness of covenant communion promised to them (Genesis 17:1-7), but this communion – as an everlasting inheritance – was to be realized in a singular son of Abraham, here identified as "*the One who comes in the name of Yahweh*" (v. 26; cf. also Matthew 21:1-11 with 23:29-39).

The psalmist could proclaim with all certainty that Yahweh had become his salvation (v. 21) because he knew He had appointed a day of salvation to be secured through an individual sent by Him. As the author and source of salvation, this One was like a cornerstone upon which the rest of a foundation and its superstructure are constructed. *But this stone – chosen and appointed by Yahweh Himself – would become the cornerstone only by being rejected by the builders.* And yet, this rejection was itself Yahweh's doing: Far from thwarting His purposes and His *hesed*, the builders' rejection of His stone was His preordained means for making this stone the "head of the corner." To the marvel of Yahweh's own and the praise of His glory, power, and goodness, the "righteousness by faith" and communion promised in the covenant were to be realized by the obstinate self-righteousness of the sons of the covenant (vv. 22-24, 27-28).

***This theme of Yahweh's stone being magnified through rejection is the heart of Psalm 118 because it is the explanation of how His hesed secures the covenant blessings for the covenant sons in spite of their unbelief and unfaithfulness.*** Without this explanation, the psalmist's unwavering confidence and exultation would be foolish and pitiful. Yahweh's covenant promises are a sure refuge and occasion of rejoicing and praise precisely because He Himself secures them.

- b. Not unexpectedly, this stone motif (and its sub-themes of rejection and exaltation) is woven into and developed throughout the Scripture. The psalmist here treated this stone as a cornerstone not connected with any particular structure; the larger prophetic witness associates this building with Yahweh's *sanctuary*.

So, in a context in which Yahweh was promising to secure the house of David in accordance with the principle of *Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:1ff), the prophet Isaiah was warned not to fall prey to the fears and doubts of the people of Judah – the fear that moved Ahaz to form an alliance with the king of Assyria. Rather than fearing men, Isaiah and his “children” – that is, those who shared his understanding and conviction – were to fear Yahweh (“the Lord of armies”), regarding Him as holy, almighty, and faithful to fulfill His promise to David (Isaiah 8:1-13).

To those who entrusted themselves to His power and *hesed*, Yahweh would prove to be a *sanctuary* – a place of refuge and communion; but to the unbelieving houses of Israel, He would become “*a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over*” (8:14-15; cf. Luke 2:34-35 and esp. 20:9-18). Their willful rejection would leave them culpable for their stumbling, and yet this response would fulfill Yahweh's determinate counsel as the psalmist indicated (ref. Romans 9:1-33; 1 Peter 2:4-8).

A stone is an appropriate messianic symbol inasmuch as it speaks to something that trips men and causes them to stumble, but it is also appropriate inasmuch as God's temple – his prototypical dwelling place – was constructed of fine cut stones (1 Kings 5:1-18; cf. 2 Chronicles 2:1-2). When an Israelite envisioned a marvelous stone structure built upon a chosen and precious cornerstone, he could not help but think of Yahweh's dwelling place. Thus the Spirit drew upon this connection when leading God's prophets to speak of His future sanctuary – His covenant household – to be constructed upon the person and work of Messiah.

This is evident in Isaiah's prophecy (ref. 28:16, where, pronouncing Ephraim's and Judah's desolation, Yahweh pledged to lay His cornerstone as the foundation for His house; cf. Ephesians 2:11-22), but also in the prophet Daniel. In Nebuchadnezzar's dream in which a stone “*cut out without hands*” smashed a great statue and then grew to become a mountain filling the whole earth (Daniel 2:31-35), Daniel interpreted the dream as depicting the future messianic kingdom. This kingdom would have a divine, albeit insignificant origin, and yet would prevail to overthrow all the world's kingdoms, growing to take into its grasp the entire earth (cf. Daniel 7:1-28 with Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-9, and Matthew 13:31-33). Viewed canonically, the stone that becomes a mountain corresponds with the imagery of the globalization of the Lord's dwelling place (ref. Revelation 21-22).

The rulers of Israel needed to understand that Yahweh would prevail to build His house upon His cornerstone; they could either embrace Him in faith and be built into that house or be crushed by Him (ref. 5:17-42): The psalmist had hinted at a unique house built upon this cornerstone; Peter explicitly declared it. The psalmist associated Yahweh's salvation in *hesed* with this cornerstone; Peter made this association absolute (4:12).