

Psalm 118 concludes the Hallel Psalms with a communal song of joyful thanksgiving. It celebrates the steadfast love of the Lord and leads the company of the redeemed in a festal processional up to the altar. The psalm drew on Moses, echoed the prophets, and inspired Jesus and the apostles. Psalm 118 uniquely defines the people of God past, present, and future. Jesus quoted the psalm to reveal his identity and the apostles quoted the psalm to define the church.

This is a psalm that gives depth and meaning to the pastor's call to worship, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 118:24 KJV). Patrick Reardon calls Psalm 118 the Sunday psalm because "it sets the tone for Sunday morning worship. . . . Sunday morning is the hour of victory." We should never tire of the great truths affirmed in this psalm because, "Every Sunday morning is the Church's jubilant celebration of the Resurrection of Christ."¹

Christians are drawn to Psalm 118 because they understand the power of its historically rooted types: Jesus is the Son of David, the people's representative, and the singular voice leading the congregation. Their antiphonal response is in sync with his proclamation. He is Israel embodied and God incarnate. He is King and Kingdom, Prophet and proclamation, Priest and sacrifice. He is the stone the builders rejected and the cornerstone upon which everything depends. He is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, who is the light of the world and the sacrifice upon the altar. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this Psalm in salvation history and in Christian worship. It is quoted extensively in the New Testament. Its liturgical significance for Israel made it a revelatory platform for Palm Sunday and Pentecost. Its theological importance gives shape to our understanding of Christ and the Church.

Call to Worship

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.*

Let Israel say:

"His love endures forever."

Let the house of Aaron say:

"His love endures forever."

Let those who fear the Lord say:

"His love endures forever."

Psalm 118:1-4

The psalmist introduces the big picture of salvation with a traditional four-fold call to worship. The first line is a sufficient summons to gather all the people of God together for worship, but the psalmist compounds the invitation by identifying separately the people of Israel, the priesthood, and finally, all those who feared the Lord. It was his way of emphasizing the importance and the inclusiveness of this special opportunity to praise the Lord (Ps 115:12-13).

¹Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 235.

No one is left out; everyone is called to praise the Lord. Nor is there any attempt to match a particular goodness with a particular segment of the congregation. All give thanks for the same fundamental relational reason: the Lord is good; his love endures forever. It is the character of God that informs this worship. Gratitude based on “What have you done for me lately?” is really not worship at all. The psalmist is not addressing a restless crowd of consumers who need their felt needs met if they are going to participate. Good worship creates a palpable sense of reverence and affection for the transcendent majesty of God. There is a place for wrestling with doubt and crises, but there is also a place for the people of God to be summoned joyfully to praise the Lord eagerly for his steadfast love.

The return of the exiles to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity may have been the occasion that inspired this psalm. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied that the day would come when the desolated towns of Judah and deserted streets of Jerusalem would be alive once again with the sounds of joy and gladness. Worshipers would bring “thank offerings to the house of the Lord, saying, ‘Give thanks to the Lord Almighty, for the Lord is good; his love endures forever’” (Jer 33:11). Psalm 118 begins and ends on this high note of praise for the steadfast love of the Lord (Ps 118:1, 29). Ezra reports that the dedication of the second temple was a joyous occasion, accompanied by a large number of sacrifices on the altar. He references the various groups identified by the psalmist, “Then the people of Israel – the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles – celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy” (Ezra 6:16). Likewise, Nehemiah’s description of the Feast of Tabernacles fits Psalm 118 well. He describes a festive family atmosphere, adding, “From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great” (Neh 8:17). Psalm 118 is well suited to these pivotal occasions because it brings together communal thanksgiving, spiritual direction, salvation history, and messianic expectation. Its complexity is compelling, heightening both intensity and insight.

Call for Deliverance

*When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;
he brought me into a spacious place.
The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?
The Lord is with me; he is my helper.
I look in triumph on my enemies.*

*It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in humans.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in princes.*

Psalm 118:5-9

The complexity of the psalm is due in part to multiple voices participating in the praise. The entire community has been summoned to praise the Lord for his steadfast love, but in this next

section a single voice shares his testimony. He personally articulates the distress of the human condition. It is as if his cry for help is the shared experience of everyone. To be hard pressed and in desperate need is never in the abstract, but always a deeply personal experience. Although this particular aspect of the psalm is not considered to be messianic, it is not difficult to see a correspondence between the psalmist's personal experience and the shared humanity of the representative Son of Man. The author of the Book of Hebrews quotes from this text, "The Lord is *my* helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (Heb 13:6; Ps 118:6,7 LXX). But before saying that he made a strong case for Jesus' identification with us in our suffering and in our sinful humanity. Jesus is our representative. He can empathize with us in our weakness because he has been "tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin" (Heb 4:15).

The psalmist is brought by the Lord "into a spacious place." He is set freedom from the caged confines of sin and death. He is no longer bound by fear. He is no longer intimidated by those who hate him. He says with David, ". . . In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?" (Ps 56:11). This grace-based courage and resilience parallels the Christian's experience. Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

This section ends with a reaffirmation of trust in the Lord, but it is unclear whether the psalmist is speaking or the congregation is vocalizing its agreement. Israel had a long history of turning away from the Lord to trust in foreign powers, even as Christians today are tempted to trust in worldly sources of power and security. But here the psalmist and the congregation are in agreement: "Everyone is a liar" (Ps 116:11); humans are untrustworthy. Put your hope in God. "It is better to take refuge in the Lord" (Ps 118:8).

God's Salvation Praised

*All the nations surrounded me,
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
They surrounded me on every side,
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
They swarmed around me like bees,
but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns;
in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
I was pushed back and about to fall,
but the Lord helped me.
The Lord is my strength [song] and my defense;
he has become my salvation.*

*Shouts for joy and victory
resounds in the tents of the righteous:
"The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!"*

*The Lord's right hand is lifted high;
the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!"*

*I will not die but live,
and will proclaim what the Lord has done.
The Lord has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.
Open for me the gate of the Lord.
through which the righteous may enter.
I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.*

Psalm 118:10-21

Whether it was the exodus Israelites or the exiles from Babylon, Israel felt her beleaguered and vulnerable status among powerful nations like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. As the people's representative the psalmist describes what this was like. They were like a besieged city, encircled by armies that on an imperial whim could swoop down and annihilate them. The returning exiles from Persia under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra must have felt this way. The psalmist's expressed sentiment is shared by the Church today. God's elect exiles are chosen outsiders. They are resident aliens in their home culture because of their faith in Christ and their commitment "to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against the soul" (1 Pet 2:11).

The psalmist personalizes a desperate situation. It is as if he inadvertently disturbed a bee hive and a swarm of angry bees attacks him. Or, it is like being pushed the edge of a cliff and he is about to fall. He gives a four-fold description of Israel's life or death crisis, but each time he quickly turns to the Lord's supernatural deliverance. He describes this redemptive reversal with an unusual verb, which he repeats three times: "But in the name of the Lord I cut them down" (Ps 118:10,11,12). This word choice may be theologically significant. It literally means, "I circumcise them."² The Greek translators did not know what to make of this unusual word choice. From the context they interpreted "fend off" or "ward off," which has led to a range of militaristic descriptions of defeat.³ But what if the "cutting" the psalmist has in mind has more to do with the supernatural work of the Lord to circumcise the heart (Deut 30:6), radically reversing perspectives of Israel's enemies.

On Pentecost, Peter confronted the crowd saying, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." Luke describes the impact of Peter's message: "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, everyone of

² Ross, Psalms, 449. "If we retain the meaning 'I cut them off,' the psalmist would then be saying something like this: he (i.e., the nation under his leadership) was surrounded by enemies (more powerful nations) and almost perished, but that the Lord ended that crisis with a great victory which he describes with the word 'circumcised' and not one of the many verbs for military victory; he did not have the literal sense in mind, but rather the significance of circumcision, circumcision of the heart (Deut 30:6), meaning that by supernatural intervention that changed their minds with regard to Israel the nation was able to gain freedom."

³ Goldingay, Psalms, 358, "in Yhwh's name I indeed withered them." Kidner, Psalms, 414, "I will drive them back." Peterson, The Message, 676, "in God's name I rubbed their faces in the dirt."

you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:36-38). It is intriguing to think that the language of circumcision used in Psalm 118 has typological significance fulfilled at Pentecost. The gospel conquers not with the weapons of the world but in the name Christ.

The fourth description of deliverance takes a verse from Moses’ victory song, “The Lord is my strength and my defense [song]; he has become my salvation” (Exod 15:2). Whatever stigma or discouragement was felt by a beleaguered and despised people is now past history. “Shouts of joy and victory” replace the cry for help and the moan of the refugee. The congregation lifts its voice in praise for the mighty things accomplished by the Lord’s strong right hand. The chorus repeats three times its praise for the Lord’s right hand and its mighty deeds for emphasis.

As the thanksgiving processional nears the gates of the Lord, the psalmist proclaims on behalf of the people and in the confidence of the Lord’s strength, “I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done.” The psalmist’s statement recalls Psalm 115:17, “It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to the place of silence; it is we who extol the Lord, both now and forevermore.” The psalmist’s enduring confidence lies not in himself, for as he says, “The Lord has chastened me severely.” He speaks here for himself and for his people. The favor of the Lord rests on mercy, not merit. The reason he and his people have not been given over to death lies in the redemptive mercy of the Lord.

It is striking to realize that Jesus prayed this psalm in preparation for his passion. This very psalm may have echoed in his mind as he said to Martha at the tomb of Lazarus, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:25-26). This is not idle speculation given the fact that this is one of the psalms traditionally sung at the end of the Passover. It is a psalm that Jesus and the disciples knew well and prayed often. Even the reference to severe chastening would have found its mark in Jesus’ contemplation of the cross, knowing that he was about to be “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities,” because the Lord had “laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:5-6). Paul wrote, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

The psalmist shouts on behalf of a beleaguered people who have been redeemed by the strong right hand of the Lord, “Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord” (Ps 118:19). The request is reminiscent of the “liturgy at the gate” (Pss 15, 24). When Jesus walked through the gate on Palm Sunday he knew that he was ultimately entering the very presence of God to offer a one time atoning sacrifice for our sins (Heb 9-10). He was becoming our salvation making it possible through his righteousness for us to enter into the presence of God.

The Festal Processional

*The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;*

*the Lord has done this,
 and it is marvelous in our eyes.
 The Lord has done it this very day;
 let us rejoice today and be glad.
 Lord, save us!
 Lord, grant us success!
 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
 From the house of the Lord we bless you.
 The Lord is God,
 and he has made his light shine on us.
 With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
 up to the horns of the altar.
 You are my God, and I will praise you;
 you are my God, and I will exalt you.
 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
 his love endures forever.*

Psalm 118:22-29

The stone rejected by the builders is Israel, the beleaguered, little nation, surrounded by the superpowers of the day. Yet what the world rejected the sovereign Lord in his mercy chose. Israel is the load bearing foundation for his kingdom. This is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Abram, "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2). This is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic" (Isa 28:16).

This is where the antiphonal style of the psalm, the interplay between the voice of the psalmist and the voice of the congregation, along with the structure of the psalm, the representative role of the leader speaking on behalf of the people, reinforce the Messiah's saving relationship with Israel. The stone stands not only for Israel, but the One who comes in the name of the Lord, to bring salvation and to bless the house of the Lord.

The carefully orchestrated harmony in the psalm between Israel and her representative is missing in Jesus' use of Psalm 118 in the parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants. At the harvest, the landowner sends his servants to collect his fruit, but the tenants beat and kill his servants. Last of all, he sends his son, but the tenants throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him. Jesus says to Israel's leaders, in what must have been an exasperated tone of irony, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'" (Matthew 21:42; Ps 118:22-23). In Psalm 118, Israel is rejected by the likes of Babylon, Persia, Egypt and Samaria, but in the parable of the tenants, it is Israel's own leaders who have rejected their rightful representative, their God-Anointed Messiah. Peter makes this very point in his trial before the Sanhedrin. When he quoted Psalm 118 he declared, "*Jesus is* 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone,'" adding, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The apostles develop the typology of Psalm 118 in keeping with Jesus' own interpretation. The confession of Christ is the rock upon which the church is built (Matthew 16:18), and all who come to him, "the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Peter adds, "Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'" (1 Pet 2:4-7). Paul alludes to Psalm 118 when he refers to "Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:20-22). The often repeated call to worship, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 116:24; Isa 25:9) is embedded in a theology of salvation that depends exclusively and absolutely on the gospel of grace. Our rejoicing depends on Jesus the Rock of our salvation.

The psalmist describes the whole congregation erupting in praise, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Lord, save us!" There was a similar emotional outburst when Jesus entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover riding a donkey. Jesus intentionally identified himself with Zechariah's well-known prophecy (Zech 9:9), and the enthusiastic crowd entered into the drama. The people paved the way for Jesus with their coats and they cut down palm branches to lay on the path. They shouted, "Hosanna!" adding in their excitement, "to the Son of David" (Matthew 21:9; see Mark 11:9-10, Luke 19:38; John 12:13). This left little doubt as to Jesus' special identity and it drew the ire of some of the Pharisees in the crowd who said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" But Jesus responded, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:39-40).

Year after year Israel re-enacted this festal procession at one of the three main feasts, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. It was a joyous time of celebration and thanksgiving. They rehearsed the blessings of God and looked forward to the Son of David who set things right and bring in the kingdom. Derek Kidner writes, "What those who took part in such a ceremony could never have foreseen was that it would one day suddenly enact itself on the road to Jerusalem: unrehearsed, unliturgical and with explosive force. In that week when God's realities broke through His symbols and shadows (Heb 10:1), the horns of the altar became the arms of the cross, and the 'festival' itself found fulfillment in 'Christ our passover' (1 Cor 5:7)."⁴

⁴ Kidner, Psalms, 415.