

## The Tale of the Cornerstone

Psalm 118

In the preface to his German translation of this psalm, Martin Luther wrote about Psalm 118, “This is my Psalm, my chosen Psalm. I love them all; I love all holy Scripture, which is my consolation and my life. But this Psalm is nearest my heart, and I have a peculiar right to call it mine. It has saved me from many a pressing danger, from which nor emperor, nor kings, nor sages, nor saints, could have saved me. It is my friend; dearer to me than all the honours and power of the earth...But it may be objected, that this Psalm is common to all; no one has a right to call it his own. Yes; but Christ is also common to all, and yet Christ is mine. I am not jealous of my property; I would divide it with the whole world...And would to God that all men would claim the Psalm as especially theirs! It would be the most touching quarrel, the most agreeable to God—a quarrel of union and perfect charity.” When you consider that by this point in his life Martin Luther had first been investigated by church authorities for his teachings and writings, then excommunicated from the Catholic Church by the Pope, had his books burned by church authorities, then summoned by the Holy Roman Emperor to the Diet of Worms where he had been pressured to recant his teachings, then, upon his refusal to do, was put under the imperial ban, which put a target on his back for the rest of his life, it makes sense why he would be so attracted to Psalm 118. Martin Luther was a man who stood *contra mundum*, against the world, but with the confident assurance that the Lord was with him. All the powers of church and state conspired to eliminate him and stamp out the biblical gospel he proclaimed, but they could not do so, and the Reformation that swept across Europe changed the course of history.

Isn't it just like God to work that way? Don't we see so often in Scripture that God loves to do the surprising thing? He is the God who creates life in the barren womb, calling a new nation into being. He is the God who chooses the younger twin over the older. He is the God who takes the youngest, overlooked brother from caring for sheep to ruling over the nation of Israel. He is the God who raises the dead and calls into being the things that do not exist (Rom. 4:17). He is the God who declares righteous those who are *ungodly* (Rom. 4:5). Martin Luther endured a life in which the whole world stood against him, and yet he knew the love of God in Christ for him, and that was enough for him. It is enough for us too. We too stand against the world. It's tempting to think, now that we have seen a political shift in America away from the hard left progressivism of the Obama-Biden era, that perhaps our days as a minority are coming to an end, but to that I would say: not so fast. Just because we have seen a swing away from the hard left does not mean that our position in this world has changed. We are still a minority, and we will remain so throughout all the pendulum swings of American culture and politics. We thank God for every gain toward justice in our society, but we must not be naïve enough to think that our battle against the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15) will ever subside before Christ comes again.

And so we walk through this age following the Messiah who was rejected by men, but exalted to the right hand of God. Even from the moment of his birth in a backwoods town where he was laid in a feeding trough for animals, unnoticed by the world, that has been the story of Jesus. And because it is his story, it is also our story. Let us reflect on this story and our part in it as we walk through Psalm 118 today. We do not know who wrote this psalm or when. Some date it all the way back to Moses. Some would attribute it to David or one of his descendants. I lean toward the view that it was written after the exile around the time of the rebuilding of the temple. Of course, this was a time when Israel had no king, but it was written as a dramatic dialogue that includes

the voice of one who represents Israel's king. So I will simply refer to "the king" in reference to certain parts of this psalm to communicate that.

In this psalm we see the surprising work of God to deliver his king from powers of this world and establish him as the preeminent stone in a new temple. This surprising work sparks the response of joyful thanksgiving. As we reflect on the coming and redeeming work of our Messiah, may we be swept up in the wonder and joy of giving thanks to God for his marvelous, surprising work of salvation through his Son. I have three words of exhortation to share with you from this psalm, all of which are calls to thanksgiving.

First,

**1. Give thanks to the God whose covenant love never fails (vv. 1-4, 29).**

It seems that there are three voices in this psalm: the voice of a priest, the voice of a king, and the voice of the people. It seems that the priest speaks to all the worshipers at the beginning and end of the psalm with his summons to thanksgiving. Verse 1 reads, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." Verse 29 repeats the same call to thanksgiving verbatim. Verses 2-4 repeat the same call to different groups: "Let Israel say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let the house of Aaron say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let those who fear the LORD say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.'" The reference to "Israel" is a reference to the lay people of the nation of Israel. "The house of Aaron" refers to the priests among Israel. And "those who fear the LORD" seems to widen the circle to encompass the "God-fearers," meaning those not native to Israel but who have joined themselves to the worship of Israel's God. With repeated calls to bring in more and more voices, the priest extols the steadfast love of the Lord over and over and over again.

"Steadfast love" is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which refers to God's covenantal love. There are two characteristics of the covenantal love of the Lord that I find striking. One is that it is love that arises from his sovereign grace alone. God is not obligated to enter into covenant with anyone, so when he makes a covenant with his people, he does so freely. Israel did not merit God's love for them. He elected them as his people by sovereign grace. A second characteristic of God's covenantal love is that it never fails. It endures forever, through all the ups and downs of history, through all the sufferings and opposition we endure, through all the triumphs and failures of our lives. Neither life nor death, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39). That is steadfast love that endures forever. And that is a reason to give thanks.

The story of God's anointed king that is recounted in this psalm is the story of God's steadfast love in action. It is a love that embraces us by God's free, sovereign grace alone, and a love that will never fail us, no matter what happens to us in this world. So now we have heard the call to thanksgiving. Let us walk through the story told in this psalm.

The second section of the psalm summons us to

**2. Give thanks to the God who delivered his Son from death (vv. 5-18).**

The voice of the king summarizes his account in verse 5: "Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free." Though he had been in dire straits, in a

situation that was hopeless, his cry to the Lord was answered. Verses 6-18 then tell us how this happened.

I see a three-part movement in verses 6-18. First, verses 6-9 speak of the king's covenantal relationship with God. Verses 6-7 read, "The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me." Paul seems to echo this psalm in Romans 8:31 when he says, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" Well, the whole world can be against us, Paul! But of course, we know his point: who can *overcome* us? With God on our side, no one can. The king speaks as one who knows that God is for him, and because that is so, all the threats of man mean absolutely nothing.

My two favorite words in the Christmas story from Luke 2 are found in verse 11: "For *unto you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Those two words "unto you," echoing Isaiah 9:6, tell us that the Incarnation was not an abstract event. It had a purpose, and that purpose was to reach out to us in love so that we might be God's new covenant people, forgiven of our sins, given new hearts, and welcomed forever into the presence of God. The Incarnation is oriented to the cross and has no meaning apart from it. The cross where Jesus Christ hung for six hours is forever a testimony to the truth that God is for us, that he is not just God, but *our* God. Therefore, what can man do to us? If God would give his Son over to death for us, then what makes us think all the combined powers of this world could ever have the ability to tear us away from him? And that is why, as verses 8-9 tell us, "It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes."

It is in the context of that covenant relationship that the king endured a particular experience of overwhelming opposition, and that story is told in verses 10-13. Note the repetition and crescendo of the threat against him and the Lord's deliverance of him in vv. 10-12: "All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! They surrounded me like bees; they went out like a flame of fire among thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!" When I was a kid I once accidentally stirred up a yellow jacket nest while playing at my grandparents' house. I felt the attack of just a handful of yellow jackets, and for a young child it was terrifying. To be fair, it would probably still be terrifying to me today. But thankfully, I have never experienced an attack from an entire swarm of bees. I can only imagine how terrifying that would be. The nations who came against the king were like a swarm of bees: they were so numerous and overwhelming that there was no way, humanly speaking, that he could escape from them, anymore than you could swat away every individual bee in a swarming horde of them. And yet, "they went out like a fire among thorns." Like a flame that suddenly rages and then just as quickly burns up its fuel, their threat was extinguished. In the name of the Lord, meaning by his divine power, the king cut them off. Verse 13 sums up the incident, "I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me." This moment when the whole world stood against him was almost the king's undoing. But at the moment of deepest darkness, the power of the Lord came to deliver him, showing the steadfast love of the Lord in action.

Then I see verses 14-18 speaking of the aftermath of the king's deliverance, which is characterized by praise of the Lord for his salvation. Verses 14-16 speak of the songs of praise

sung by the king and his army in the wake of their victory: “The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous; ‘The right hand of the LORD does valiantly, the right hand of the LORD exalts, the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!’” There are strong echoes here of Moses’ song of deliverance in Exodus 15, celebrating Israel’s deliverance from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea. Psalm 118:14 is a verbatim quote from Exodus 15:2, and Psalm 118:15-16 speak of the power of God’s right hand, which echoes Exodus 15:6. Just as Israel had been delivered from Egypt by supernatural acts of God’s power, so does the king attribute his victory in battle to the supernatural, mighty power of God that has come to his aid.

Then verse 17 shows the entire life of the king oriented to the praise of the Lord from henceforth: “I shall not die, but shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.” In other words, the reason I remain on this earth is to give praise to God for what he has done. What a powerful reminder to us all that we do not exist for ourselves, but to glorify God with our entire lives. Our whole existence should be one of continuous gratitude for the salvation of the Lord.

Then verse 18 introduces a new twist into the narrative as the king looks back over his experience: “The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death.” Though it was the nations who united in rebellion against him, the king views their actions as God’s severe, yet fatherly discipline for his good. Commenting on this verse, Charles Spurgeon wrote, “There is always a merciful limit to the scourging of the sons of God. Forty stripes save one were all that an Israelite might receive, and the Lord will never allow that one, that killing stroke, to fall upon his children.” The king celebrates the fact that he has suffered greatly, but all within the loving hands of his Father, and he has not been handed over to death. Even his enemies’ worst attacks have been purposed by God for his good.

When I read this psalm, I want to know what historical event it refers to. Some aspects of it would fit the story of Moses and/or Israel at the time of the exodus, when the Lord delivered them from certain death as they faced the Red Sea on one side and the army of Pharaoh on the other. Some aspects of it would fit David, either before he became king when he fled from Saul’s persecution or after he became king, when he faced enemies on all sides and then from within his own household. Or you could imagine the speaker representing Israel the nation after they returned from exile when the Lord turned the heart of the Persian king Cyrus to allow them to return to their land and to fund the rebuilding of their temple out of his royal treasury. But God has not seen fit to tell us exactly what event this is. And maybe that’s the point. Maybe this psalm is not the recounting of one particular event so much as it is a celebration of a pattern of events that collectively point us to something greater to come. We don’t know who wrote the psalm or when, but we know that it is quoted at least eight times in the New Testament in reference to Jesus. God wants us to see that the fulfillment of this pattern of deliverance from overwhelming odds comes to its culmination in Christ. For Jesus Christ did not just narrowly escape death, as did Moses, David, and Israel. He actually went through death. His lifeless corpse, devoid of breath, devoid of a pulse, devoid of any brain activity, was laid in a tomb and sat there from a Friday night to a Sunday morning. And then God raised him to life again, triumphing over the last and greatest enemy. And because what is true of Jesus Christ is true of his people, we are sharers in his deliverance from death. Jesus is not only our Savior, but he is also the paradigm of our salvation. He saves us from death because God first saved him from it.

And in that salvation we have become sharers by faith. There is no more fitting response to this glorious truth than to overflow with thanksgiving.

But the story of this king is not over. There is more to come after his deliverance from death, and that brings us to a third word of exhortation:

### **3. Give thanks to the God who has exalted his Son as King (vv. 19-28).**

It is at this point in the psalm that I see a third voice introduced in dialogue with the other two. We heard from the priest in verses 1-4, then the king in verses 5-18, and in this section we hear from a group of people, similar to the “chorus” in a Greek play. They seem to speak on behalf of the people of Israel as a whole. The king, having been victorious in battle against his enemies, now comes to the temple and says in verse 19, “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.” The king desires access to the presence of God, where he may draw near to worship the God who has delivered him. The granting of the king access to the temple would further show God’s favor upon him and God’s endorsement of his reign as king. In response to the king’s request, the chorus says in verse 20, “This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.” I am reminded here of Psalm 15, which begins, “Who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks the truth in his heart” (Ps. 15:1).

The king, having entered the temple, now worships the Lord there in verse 21: “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation,” and then the chorus responds again in verses 22-24. In verse 22 they say about the king, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” The image here is of professional builders surveying stones to determine which ones are suitable for building. Coming upon one stone in particular, they throw it out, saying it is not fit. That very stone, rejected by the professionals, has now become the cornerstone of a new temple. The cornerstone is a stone that is laid first at the corner of a building’s foundation. It sets the trajectory for two walls of the building, and thus for the whole structure. Jesus Christ is identified as the cornerstone of God’s new temple in Ephesians 2:20, but he was not recognized as such by the rulers of the Sanhedrin, by Herod, or by Pilate. He was rejected by the powers of this world, but exalted by God to the place of highest honor. And the magnificent temple in Jerusalem was brought down by the Romans in 70 AD because God was already building a new temple in the church of Jesus Christ. We who are in Christ are living stones, each one another piece of his new temple, the holy dwelling place of his Spirit (1 Pet. 2:4-5).

Reflecting on the surprising ways of God, the chorus continues in verses 23-24, “This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Be honest: you have heard that song “This is the day, this is the day, that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made” your whole life sung by people who annoy you by waking you up early. Now, there is nothing wrong with recognizing every new sunrise as a gift from the Lord to rejoice in. In fact, that’s a good thing to do. But that’s not what this verse is about. The “day” in verse 24 is not one more sunrise, or one more 24-hour period. It is a reference to a time when God has accomplished a great reversal. In this “day” of his saving work, God has delivered his king, who stood against the united powers of this world, and has exalted him to preeminence over his kingdom. Let us rejoice and be glad in what the Lord has done, for it is marvelous in our eyes.

I see a dialogue shift in verses 25-27. We have just seen the king speak and the chorus answer. Now I see the chorus speak as the voice of the people, and then the priest answers, then they respond again. The people first offer this prayer to God in verse 25: "Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!" This verse is alluded to by the cry of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" that the crowds shouted when Jesus entered triumphantly into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:9, 15; Mark 11:9-10; John 12:13). It is a prayer for the Lord's blessing on the kingdom ruled over by this triumphant one who has now come to God's temple. Then the priest answers them with a word of blessing on both the king and the whole congregation. In verse 26, the voice of the priest says, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!" That's the king who spoke in verses 5-19. Then he says, "We bless you from the house of the LORD." The "you" there is plural, indicating that the priestly blessing is granted to both the king and the people in response to their prayer.

In Matthew 21:9 we read that the crowds shouted the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" on the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but just two chapters later, Jesus spoke these words: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt. 23:37-39). Right after speaking these words, Jesus left the temple and would never return. He explained to his disciples that not one stone would be left on another, because he would shortly be rejected by the builders, but laid as the Cornerstone of God's new temple. And one day, the words "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" will welcome him again, this time into the fullness of his kingdom.

The people speak one last time in verse 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!" This festal procession was to end with a sacrifice and presumably a fellowship meal between God and his people. And then the king once more declares his thanksgiving to the Lord in verse 28: "You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you."

And so, Psalm 118 tells the story of a kingly figure opposed by the collective powers of this world, yet delivered from death by the power of God. Then he returns to Jerusalem, where he is welcomed into the temple to worship the Lord, and the people celebrate in wonder the salvation the Lord has brought to their king and their nation. This story is framed by calls to thanksgiving for the steadfast love of the Lord.

Over the centuries, a tradition developed among the Jews of singing Psalms 113-118 (called the "Egyptian Hallel") at the time of the celebration of the Passover. According to tradition, Psalms 113-116 were sung before the meal, and Psalms 117-118 were sung at the conclusion of it. In Matthew 26:30, after Jesus shared his last supper with the disciples, we read these words: "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." In all likelihood, the hymn that they sang was Psalm 118, which means that only hours after they had sung the words, "Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!" they saw Jesus arrested, bound, and hauled away to be tried by a kangaroo court and then executed on a Roman cross as a sacrifice

for our sins. They watched Scripture's fulfillment come to pass in real time. And then the following Sunday they saw him again, with new life in his once lifeless body, with breath in his lungs, his heart beating again, explaining to them that he had been granted all authority in heaven and on earth, and thus God's long-awaited kingdom had been inaugurated. Just when it seemed all had been lost, God did the surprising thing once again and laid the Cornerstone of his new temple, and he has been building on it with living stones ever since. This is the Lord's doing, and may it be marvelous in our eyes. Amen.