

“Singing at Both Ends of the Week”

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A Reflection for Palm and Passion Sunday

Psalm 118

March 29, 2015

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His faithful love endures forever.
Let Israel say: “His faithful love endures forever.”
Let the priests, the house of Aaron, say: “His faithful love endures forever.”
Let those who revere the Lord say: “His faithful love endures forever.”

Open for me the righteous gates;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.
This is 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.

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 now!
Lord, give success now!

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 faithful love endures forever.

Psalm 118:1-4,19-29
New International Version (alt)

What a great Psalm for us to hear on Palm Sunday. This Psalm was on their lips when they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem that day. It's a royal Psalm, and they welcomed their long-awaited Messiah-King. They waved palm branches, boughs in their hands, and the Psalm talks about that. They shouted "*Hoshanna!*" It means "Save!" "Save Now!" And the Psalm talks about that. They proclaimed "*Blessed is he who comes in the Lord's name!*" That's right from the Psalm. The Psalm provided the script for their procession with Jesus that day.

Psalm 118 is the last of a group of six psalms. They are called the Hallel psalms.¹ Hallel means praise. Jews sing these Praise Psalms during great festivals. Especially Passover, when God's People celebrate that God saved them, that God freed them, that God brought Israel out from slavery. As Jesus came into the city that day, he joined other Passover pilgrims gathering for the feast of freedom. They were impatient for a new salvation, for God to come to their aid once again, finally and for good this time.

So it's no wonder they sang Psalm 118 when they saw Jesus. It's no wonder we love to join in. For we are gripped by that same desire. We are held by that same hope. *"God, do something!"* Have you ever prayed that? I mean, cried it. I mean, begged it. I mean, demanded it. *"God, do something! Save now!"* And oh, can you imagine seeing it coming, the answer to your prayers. He is coming, riding on a donkey. God's Kingdom is coming, in person, in him, to bring God's will on earth as in heaven.

II

Let me dip some more into this Psalm 118.

It starts off by repeating a phrase, four times: *"God's faithful love endures forever!"* The Hebrew love-word here is *hesed*. It means faithfulness in a relationship. *Hesed* is a covenant word. God keeps God's covenant, God's relationship with God's people. God is faithful. Even when we are letting go, God holds on.

The Psalm is a parade into the holy city. (Just like Palm Sunday.) The king starts the shouting: *"God's hesed – God's faithful love – endures forever."* He turns back to those following, the people of the covenant, God's chosen and precious Israel. *"Say it with me! 'God's faithful love endures forever.'" He looks ahead, into the city toward the Temple. "You priests up there, from the family of Aaron. You too! 'God's faithful love endures forever.'" Even bystanders, visitors, gentiles, foreigners to Israel yet not foreign to God.² "You! Yes, even you! Join in! "God's faithful love endures forever."*

We skip ahead a bit. The parade is at the city walls now. The king shouts out, *"Open the righteous gates."* And the keeper shouts back, *"This is the Lord's gate, through which the righteous—those who are right with God—may enter."* So they go in. (Just like Palm Sunday.)

Then, the king speaks to God directly. *"I will give thanks to You, for You answered me. You have become my salvation."* We skipped over part of the Psalm, where he talked about how God answered, how God saved. For him, God's faithful love is not a theory, a bit of theology learned from a sermon sometime. He knows it. He has been in the battle. He has

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallel>

² I am interpreting the phrase "those who fear the Lord" (verse 4) as referring to so-called "God-fearers," Gentiles who came to trust and honour the God of Israel, without fully converting to Judaism. See Derek Kidner's commentary on a similar phrase in Psalm 115:11 in Psalms 73-150. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, (Leicester, UK: Intervarsity, 1973), 406.

been pushed. He cried out to God. God got him out. Things were really bad. Everyone was against him. Surrounded, swarmed and stung. Teetering on the edge, ready to crumble to the ground crushed. But the Lord helped, defended, saved.

So astonishing was the reversal—thanks be to God!—it's like the chunk of rock the construction crew tossed aside as worthless, has become the cornerstone, the most important piece, which holds the whole structure together.

This Psalm 118 is about vindication by the power of God. It is good news. This is who God is. This is what God does. No wonder they sang it, then, when God's Messiah processed into the city a few days before Passover.

III

But that was not the only time they would sing Psalm 118 that week.

I'm glad.

Because yes, sometimes those who are faithful to God are vindicated, and I hope you know that. Yet other times, even the most faithful are brought low, and I think you know that. Sometimes you are in the battle, and God brings you out safely; I hope you know that. Yet other times, the battle fells you; I think you know that. Sometimes God's salvation is so clear; I hope you see that. Other times, you can't see it at all; you know.

We're on Palm Sunday, with Psalm 118! Then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday . . . Thursday. The sun falls and Passover begins. It's a family feast, and Jesus brings his people together for the great meal. They share the bread and wine, but Jesus talks about his body broken and his blood spilled. They trade banter, but Jesus speaks of betrayal. They sing hymns, psalms, the Hallel (remember), those six psalms, with Psalm 118 last.

We can sing Psalm 118 on Palm Sunday. Will we sing it on Thursday evening and into Good Friday?

Will we shout, "*Hoshanna!*" "*Save! Now!*"? Will God answer?

Will we proclaim, "*I will give thanks for You answered me; You have become my salvation?*" Can you pray that, when you know Jesus' enemies will close in, and press him, and seize him. When you know they will badger and beat him, mock and murder him?

We can sing Psalm 118 as a donkey carries Jesus into the city. Will we sing it when he is driven out by a soldier's whip, carrying a cross?

Will we sing it when the cornerstone is rejected? Tossed aside?

Will we sing it when he is led out of the city through its gates. Cheered this time? No, taunted. Honoured? No, shamed. Righteous? No, condemned.

IV

Yes. We can sing it.

And I'm glad.

We can sing Psalm 118, and its words about hope and deliverance, vindication and salvation. We can sing it when we are being brought low, and losing the battle, and don't know where to look for God's faithful love.

We can sing it, if we know to whom we are singing.

In Jesus, we see who God is, what God is like. We see God on Palm Sunday, and we see God on Good Friday. Jesus is God's faithful love in action. Jesus is God's *hesed*. Jesus keeps God's covenant, with Israel and with everyone else who is invited to join in. Jesus proves that even when we are letting go of God, even when we want nothing to do with God, even denying, betraying, condemning, rejecting and crucifying God, God keeps holding us.

Jesus is God's *hesed*. Jesus is God's righteousness, God's glory, God's honour. On Good Friday! Carrying the cross! Jesus is God's victory for us, God's salvation for us, God's rescue and redemption, God's Passover of freedom, for us. He is the rejected stone, the cornerstone.

You can sing Psalm 118, on both your "Palm Sunday" days and your "Good Friday" days.

Jesus proves it. He proves God is there, God is present, God is with you, and God is saving you, on both kinds of days.

Jesus is the Palm Sunday and Good Friday Saviour. So we can sing with him at both ends of the week. Amen.