

"O Lord, Save Us! A Palm Sunday Sermon"

Our sermon for today is on Psalm 118, which if you haven't yet noticed, is the psalm which was taken up on the lips of the Jews and applied to Jesus during the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday. In our reading from Matthew we saw that the crowd of Jews exclaimed, "Hosanna," meaning, "save" or "save now". They exclaimed "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!" And so as we celebrate Palm Sunday today, and remember the start of what is often called the Passion Week or the Holy Week, it is quite fitting that we consider this psalm today. This psalm was in the back of the minds of those who cried out to Jesus on that Palm Sunday some 2000 years ago. And so as we look at this psalm, we'll learn a little bit more about what may have been in the mind of those Jews who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. But more importantly, as we analyze this psalm and understand its meaning, we'll see how it ultimately finds its fulfillment in Christ and the cross.

As we think about Psalm 118, it's helpful to think a little bit about the historical background of this psalm. Unfortunately, we don't know for certain the exact date of this psalm's writing or its original historical context. Yet, considering a few of the main options will help us to begin to better understand this psalm. And so regardless of its historical origin, there is a great deal that we can understand about this psalm, even without knowing with certainty all the details surrounding its original creation.

Basically, you can divide the theories of its origin into two main camps: one sees this psalm as pre-exilic, and the other as post-exilic. Of course, what I am talking about is the time of the exile of the Israelites, when they were judged by God and removed from the Promised Land, because they had failed to keep the Mosaic covenant. They were exiled to Babylon, and in the process the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. If this psalm was pre-exilic, written before the exile, it is possibly a psalm of David. There is some language in this psalm that would even suggest that it was a sort of royal thanksgiving, where a king might have led the people in thanks to God for delivering them from some foreign threat. Or this psalm might have been used by the priests, where the priest would lead the people in a psalm of thanksgiving. On the other hand, if this psalm was post-exilic, written after the people returned from exile, then one theory is that this was a psalm used to dedicate the new temple that was created to replace the old one. Some people point to verse 22 as evidence for that, pointing to the stone that the builders rejected as becoming a chief cornerstone, presumably referring to a stone in the new temple. And clearly this psalm has language about entering into the temple at Jerusalem.

Yet, regardless of when this psalm was first written, we do have good evidence that this psalm was being used in some liturgical fashion, where a leader would read some parts, and others would respond with their part. For example, verses 1-4, were probably read in such a way: the leader would declare, "Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good," and the people would respond, "For his mercy endures forever!" Also, there is good evidence from Jewish records that this psalm was used during the Passover pilgrimages to Jerusalem, where Jews would travel from various parts of the nation to return to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast together, and to come to holy temple of the Lord as one people. And so this psalm would have likely been used in some sort of corporate procession, some sort of parade, heading up through the streets and into the temple. The people would be

led toward the temple, with the leader speaking some parts of this psalm, and the people responding with other parts. This would have been all a part of the special occasion of the Passover feast. This would have all been an expression of thanksgiving and praise for God's goodness and salvation, in delivering the people from their enemies. That is clearly the tone of this Psalm, and it would definitely be fitting for the Passover, because the Passover celebrates the Israelites' deliverance from the Egyptians and their oppression.

The text itself points to this being a psalm using during the Passover pilgrimage; where the people from all over Israel would be coming to the temple at Jerusalem. Verse 27 is the clearest expression of this. It says, "bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar." The sacrifice mentioned in verse 27 is actually a specific kind of sacrifice. It's the word for a festival sacrifice, which would have been used during the three annual Jewish feasts, which includes Passover, of course. In fact this word in Hebrew most literally means "feast," but in certain contexts, it can refer to the sacrifices given at these feasts, which is the context here in verse 27. And the call in verse 27 to bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar, doesn't mean that you are to literally tie up the animals to be sacrificed to the altar. It's talking about this procession to the temple. As people are processing up to the temple, it is saying, bring the festival sacrifice! Prepare the sacrifice! Bring the feast up to the altar! And so this reference to a festival sacrifice being brought up, shows how this would have been a fitting psalm for the Passover pilgrimage.

And as we keep looking at this psalm, we see more temple imagery that suggests a procession into the temple. Look at verse 19. It says, "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it." These gates refer to the temple gates. The verses before verse 19 would likely have been spoken during the procession up to the temple. Then verse 19 would have been the words cried out when the procession arrived at the front of the temple gates. We see more temple imagery in what follows. Verse 22 says that "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." This would have been spoken as the procession continued on into the temple. This verse envisions an important stone in the temple, once rejected, but now forming a crucial part of the temple and its beauty. Those in favor of dating this psalm as post-exilic point to the book of Ezra and to the opposition encountered in building the temple, and think this verse points to that. But regardless, this is clearly a stone in the temple that is now a reason for praise. Verse 26 also references the temple, saying, "We have blessed you from the house of the LORD." Of course, the house of the Lord is the temple in Jerusalem. The point is that there is lots of temple imagery in this psalm that is consistent with this Psalm being used in a Passover pilgrimage to the temple.

One other piece of evidence to note about this being a psalm for the Passover pilgrimage: According to the Talmud, Psalms 113-118 are all considered as part of the Hallel psalms. These were psalms of praise that were used in the Passover pilgrimage; 5 psalms in a row all ordered together, for use during Passover.

Let me make sure my point is clear. We see here festival sacrifices, temple imagery, processional language; it is ordered with other psalms for the Passover. All this makes clear that this was a psalm connected with the pilgrimage feasts of Israel, and especially the Passover. It would have been sung in a cultic, religious, setting. It would have been sung responsively with the people in a ceremonial procession up into the temple. And so regardless of the historic origin of this psalm, it had come to be used during the Passover celebration. Surely this was a psalm the people would have loved. People would have come from all over Israel for the Passover feast. This psalm would have probably been reserved for

just that occasion. And so this would have been a special psalm. Think about us and some of our songs we reserve for special occasions. We can't wait to sing them. For example, we look forward to all year to sing "Joy to the World," or "Come All Ye Faithful!" And even though we only sing those Christmas carols for just a few weeks out of the year, these are some of the hymns we remember the best, even though we may not have made much effort to memorize them. Surely that would have been the case with Israel. And this beautiful psalm would have come to a climax with the sacrifice in verse 27. As the procession came into the temple, the cry would be: Make ready the sacrifice! Bring the sacrifice! Prepare the paschal lamb! Bring on the feast!

And so this psalm was a psalm for the Passover pilgrimage. But amidst the joyous celebration and thanksgiving in this psalm, we see that it also is a psalm that speaks of opposition. This is an important element of this psalm. This psalm describes fierce opposition faced by the psalmist. Verses 5-18 especially describe this opposition. Verse 5 says, "I called on the LORD in distress." Verse 7 describes the opposition as those who *hate* the psalmist. Verse 10 identifies the opposition as the "nations"! And look at the extent of this opposition. The nations in verse 7 are described as "surrounding" the psalmist. Surrounding, like a swarm of bees. "Surrounding" - that same word is used in verses 7-10 four times. The enemy was surrounding him, overwhelming him. This "surrounding him" was so overwhelming that it causes him in verse 13 to shift from the third person to the second person. He had been describing the enemies in the third person, "they" did this, "they" did that, but as if to show how personal the threat became, in verse 13, he says, "You pushed me violently, that I might fall."

Isn't that how suffering and opposition goes? It is personal. It pushes. It threatens to make us fall. Verses 17 and 18 speak of this opposition bringing him to the very point of death. Whatever was the historical context of this psalm, this is language we can relate to. This is our experience. This is our story. This is relevant. We face trials all the time. Suffering is a reality in our life.

And yet, verse 18, is humbling. In the midst of describing all this opposition, all the troubles this opposition has caused, the psalmist says, "The LORD has chastened me severely." The psalmist sees this opposition as a work of God's fatherly discipline in his life. If this psalm was written after the exile, this could refer to God's disciplining of the Israelites in the exile. And yet, either way, this should give us hope. If we know that God is at work in our trials and oppositions as a father to discipline us, it means that God is in control. It means that he is using even these hardships to grow us -- to draw us away from sin, and bring us closer to him. And if this opposition is ultimately an expression of God's fatherly chastisement, it means that it is *not* an expression of God's wrathful judgment. What's the difference? One is for God's children and leads to eternal life; the other is for the wicked, and leads to eternal death. We are humbled that we need God's chastening in our lives, but we are comforted that he preserves our life.

And if that doesn't comfort you enough, look at how this psalm handles this opposition. The tone of this psalm is not one of being beaten down by this opposition. Though the psalmist expresses the overwhelming nature of this opposition; though he expresses its anguish and distress; though he has spoken of the hatred of his enemies; the overall tone of this psalm is of trust and thanksgiving! This is a psalm of firm confidence in the Lord and his salvation. He has not fallen to his death and destruction, but he has tasted of the LORD who is his strength and song, his salvation and help! Though this psalm is a psalm of

opposition, the opposition is overshadowed by salvation - salvation which comes from the LORD!

Just look at all the repeated statements and words here that deal with the salvation of the Lord. They overwhelm us with the joy of salvation. They give us confidence that God is our deliverer. The four-fold "surrounding" of the enemy is overwhelmed by these repeated statements of God's mercy and might! The psalm opens and closes with thanksgiving: "Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever." It is this declaration of his enduring mercy that is again to be repeated in verses 2, 3, and 4, by various people. The repetition continues in verses 10-12, three times the psalmist declares confidently that his enemies are cut off and destroyed in the name of the Lord! In verses 15-16, three times the psalmist boldly asserts that the hand of the Lord is what gives him victory! The word salvation is repeated twice in verses 14-15, finally breaking forth in rejoicing, not only from the individual psalmist, but extending out to the "tents of the righteous", verse 15.

Look with me further at this word translated in verse 1 here as mercy, and repeated 5 times in this psalm. The word in Hebrew is *hesed*. This is very rich word. You'll see different translations try to translate it in different ways to express how wonderful of a thing this *hesed* from God is. The NKJV translates it as mercy. The NIV as love. The ESV as steadfast love. The NASB as lovingkindness. If you look this word up in a lexicon, it will mention goodness and kindness. This is an important word, and really communicates the covenant faithfulness of God which is expressed through his benevolent actions toward his people. By repeating this five times, the psalmist declares his utmost confidence in God. He is confident in his faithful goodness, kindness, love, and mercy. He trusts that God who has already acted so wonderfully to preserve his people, will continue to uphold them in all things.

And so in this psalm, we see the psalmist puts his trust in God's salvation, and then we see his salvation declared. In other words, the psalmist first declares his trust in God, then recounts his opposition, and then declares how God has saved him from his opposition. So there is a close back and forth in this psalm between trust in God's deliverance and then thankfulness to God for delivering him.

And so this psalm is a psalm of trust and thanksgiving in the Lord's salvation, a very fitting psalm for the Passover. This psalm confidently asserts that it is God who saves -- he saves the psalmist, and all the righteous, from their enemies. This psalm shows us that the right response to opposition in our lives is to trust God. It is to place our confidence in God. And it shows us the right response to God's deliverance is joy and celebration! And of course, that celebration for the Israelites, in this festival psalm would conclude with the bringing of a sacrifice as a tangible expression of their thanksgiving.

And so we've looked briefly at this psalm in its original context. What I'd like to do now is to begin to understand this psalm in relationship to Christ. Clearly this psalm looks forward to Christ. In fact, it is one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament. And so I want to look specifically today at how this psalm relates to Christ's Triumphal Entry on that first Palm Sunday and consider how Christ fulfills Psalm 118.

So consider the background of that first Palm Sunday when Jesus road into Jerusalem on a donkey. It was the time of Passover. People from all over Palestine were making their way to Jerusalem in a holy pilgrimage, and so was Jesus and his disciples. They too were coming into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. And here, when Jesus rides in on a donkey, the crowds gather, and he processes into

Jerusalem, a procession that would shortly lead him to the temple, where he would cleanse the temple. And it is in this procession of Jesus into the city, and ultimately into the temple, where the people pick up the words of this psalm on their lips and apply it to Jesus!

Do you see the connection with this psalm and Palm Sunday? This psalm was a psalm for the Passover. It was a psalm for those pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. And so it was a song that would have been on everyone's mind on that Palm Sunday. But what's amazing is not that this psalm would have been sung at that time. What's amazing is that they applied the words of this psalm to Jesus! And look how Jesus even pictures this pilgrim procession. Jesus is entering Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. Soon he will even be at the temple. And here the people cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!"

Do you see Psalm 118 in their cry on Palm Sunday? These words are from verses 25 and 26 from the psalm. Remember, the word "Hosanna" that they exclaimed was the Hebrew word for "save" or "save now". That is exactly what we find in verse 25 of Psalm 118 - It says, "Save now, I pray, O LORD," literally, "Hosanna, O LORD". The psalmist in verse 25 is calling the LORD God to save him!

Verse 25 is very interesting. It's interesting in the psalm, and it's interesting how the Jews pick this up and apply it to Jesus. You see, earlier I had made the point how the psalm confidently asserts God's salvation. The salvation presented in Psalm 118, is presented as a present reality - they've already been saved - with the exception of verse 25. Verse 25 instead says, "Save now, I pray, O LORD." In the midst of all the proclaimed salvation in this psalm, this verse looks forward to some future deliverance. If this psalm was written post-exile, this might be especially fitting in that even though God's people were allowed to return to the Promised Land, they were still under Persian occupation, in need of final deliverance. That is, of course, the same state of the Jewish people when Jesus arrived. They were under Roman occupation, even though they were living in the Promised Land. They lived in the kingdom land, but the kingdom, the nation of Israel as a political entity did not exist. And so the people were eagerly awaiting the Messiah, whom they hoped would restore the kingdom to Israel - and of course they were expecting this to be a political earthly kingdom.

That's why the crowds also echoed verse 26 of the psalm when they said "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" Their proclamation shows that they were hoping that Jesus was the Messiah. And indeed Jesus was, but not in the way that they thought. He was indeed the blessed one who came in the name of the Lord. He would bring salvation and deliverance to God's people. He would overcome their enemies. He would bring a restored kingdom, but a kingdom that was better than the old kingdom in the earthly Promised Land. He would bring a heavenly kingdom! Jesus was the savior and messiah, but not the kind they were thinking of. And so ironically the crowds spoke the truth here. They rightly picked up this psalm and applied it to Jesus. Yet, sadly they would soon second guess their words on Palm Sunday. In just a few days, the crowds would no longer be praising Jesus as they did during his Triumphal Entry; instead they would be crying out to crucify him!

And that is exactly how we see Jesus fulfilling this psalm on Palm Sunday: ironically. The crowds hail him as savior, though ironically he is not the savior they think he is. The irony is continued as Jesus cleanses the temple after his Triumphal Entry. Think about the Psalm. This psalm is about entering the temple with thanksgiving and rejoicing. And so what does Jesus do? He enters the temple. He enters the temple with a zealous anger. He enters the temple to cleanse it. He throws over the tables and kicks out the merchants! He despises and rejects what

has been going on in the temple! He does not look at the temple and marvel at its stones, but as he cleanses the temple, he ultimately sets forth himself as the true temple, the true "stone which the builders rejected." And of course we who know who Jesus really is, declare that this is marvelous in our eyes!

And this irony comes to a climax at the cross. Psalm 118 ends with a call for a festival sacrifice. Jesus is this sacrifice. He is this paschal lamb. Though on Palm Sunday they cried to Jesus, "Save!", "Save!", soon they would cry out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And when they cried out to crucify him, they are basically calling out the words of verse 27, "Bind the sacrifice!" Bring on the festival sacrifice! Prepare the paschal lamb! Crucify him!

And yet it is in Christ becoming the paschal lamb, it is in his sacrifice on the cross, where he brings us the deliverance promised in Psalm 118. It is on the cross where he answers the call to save. On the cross, Christ shows that all the confidence and trust placed in God in Psalm 118 was not misplaced. On the cross, God's *hesed* is demonstrated; his great mercy and lovingkindness is shown forth. His covenant faithfulness is displayed. Christ is the fulfillment of Psalm 118. He is the answer to this call to God to "save"!

Brothers and sisters, God is indeed faithful to fulfill all his promises. He is indeed fully trustworthy. Our confidence is not disappointed when we put our trust in him. And this faithfulness has been shown most wonderfully in Christ. So, if you have not trusted in Jesus Christ for your salvation from your sins, then I urge you to come to him. Believe and trust in Jesus. On the cross, he died for the sins of the world.

You see, we need to redefine our problems in life. We need to redefine our anguishes and our sorrows. Life is difficult. It's full of challenges and trials. We get pushed. At times we feel like we could fall at any moment. But we need to enlarge our perspective. Our real issue, our biggest enemy, our biggest foe in life is - guess who? It's ourselves, our sinful selves, for our sin leads to death. But on the cross, Jesus conquered sin and death. And he offers you today this victory over sin. He calls you to come to him in faith and repentance. He offers his forgiveness and he offers his transforming grace. Come to Christ today in faith. Believe and trust in him. May this be the day that the Lord has made for your salvation. May today you say of Jesus, that he is your strength and your song, your salvation, and your help. May today you pass through the gates of righteousness, not entering into a physical temple, but coming to God through Jesus Christ who declares himself to be the way, the truth, and the life.

And of course, I know that this church is full of saints who have already tasted of Christ's forgiveness. Praise the Lord! And yet this psalm has an ongoing message to you as well. This psalm reminds us that in whatever opposition we have in life, we have victory in Christ. I don't mean that life will be easy. I don't mean that you will never face opposition. I don't mean that you will never struggle with sin. We are on our own pilgrimage, to our heavenly home, to a heavenly temple, but we are not there yet. But for us, the opposition we face is the way God grows us. The psalmist mentioned in verse 18 that his enemies' assaults were used by God in fatherly discipline and chastisement. The same is true for us. If we do *not* trust in Christ, then our struggles in life, our enemies that afflict us, are but a foreshadow of God's wrathful judgment. But for us who place our hope in the Lord, the afflictions of this world are transformed by God to be used for our good. Even during the attacks of the enemy, our loving God and Father uses these to grow us and mature our faith. Though Satan and others may try to afflict us with evil, God uses it for our good. And by God's grace, he preserves until the end, when our pilgrimage is complete and we finally see the lamb that was slain face to face.

Saints of God, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. Forever! Sadly, not everyone can testify to this. Not everyone has tasted of God's saving mercy. But for us who have been saved by God, we have the great privilege to enjoy God's salvation for eternity. No matter how long you think forever is, it's longer than that. The same is true with God's mercy and kindness. No matter how great you think it is, no matter how wonderful you can imagine it, it is better than that! This is what we celebrate on Palm Sunday. We celebrate the Triumphal Entry - the triumph, the victory; Christ entered into Jerusalem and the temple, to conquer our enemies that he could show forth his unending love and mercy for all eternity. How can we not celebrate and rejoice with such good news! Amen.

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