

Psalm 118 – He Has Become My Salvation

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Introduction: Psalm 110:1 & 118:22-23: Most Quoted, Why?

Psalm 118 is a wonderful, joyful, triumphant song of thanksgiving and victory. It was Martin Luther's favorite psalm. He said, "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 honors and power of the earth."

It was also evidently very dear to the New Testament authors, almost all of whom quoted Psalm 118 in their writings. A few weeks ago, when we studied Psalm 110, I told you that Psalm 110:1 was the most quoted and alluded to verse from the Psalms in the whole New Testament. Well, Psalm 118 is the most directly quoted Psalm in the New Testament, especially verses 22-23 and 25-26, being directly quoted in Matthew 21:9 & 21:42; Mark 11:9 & 12:10-11; Luke 13:35 & 20:17; John 12:13; Acts 4:11; Hebrews 13:6 & 1 Peter 2:4 & 7. In addition to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews and 1 Peter, Paul alludes to verse 22 in Ephesians 2:20 when he refers to Jesus as the chief cornerstone of the living temple of the church.

So, Psalm 118 is directly quoted or alluded to by almost every New Testament writer – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Paul and the author of Hebrews. (I'll give you bonus points if you can tell me after the worship service which New Testament authors are *not* included in this list.)

We might ask: Why were Psalm 110 and Psalm 118 so important to the New Testament writers? Well, when Jesus came, He shattered the expectations of the Jewish people regarding their Messiah. They expected the Messiah to be the Son of David who would be a divinely anointed warrior-king, like David, who would lead them to victory over their enemies. In this expectation, they were confused about who the Messiah would be and what He would do.

Psalm 110 helps clarify who Messiah is, as David himself calls Him "Lord" in verse 1: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" This verse teaches that the Messiah is not David's son but David's Lord, and so He is not the Son of David but the Son of God. His throne is not in Jerusalem but at the right hand of God the Father in heaven.

Psalm 118 clarifies how the Messiah does His work, how He wins His victory over His enemies. Specifically, verse 22 tells us that He is rejected by the builders – that is, by the leaders of God's

people – and yet is made the cornerstone of God’s house. It is in His rejection by the leadership that He is made the cornerstone. So this joyful song of thanksgiving shows us the victory of the Messiah and His triumph over His enemies, and thus our triumph through Him!

We’re going to look at this Psalm in four parts:

1. Deliverance Needed
2. The Deliverer (the LORD) Trusted for the Deliverance
3. Deliverance Given and Celebrated
4. The Deliverer Thanked and Praised

When we get to the third part, Deliverance Given and Celebrated, we’ll take a look at seven sections of Psalm 118 that have a strong double-meaning, applying to the original context of the psalm and to Christ and the church.

I. Deliverance Needed (vv. 5, 10-13)

*Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
the LORD answered me and set me free. – v. 5*

*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 fire among thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!
I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the LORD helped me. – vv. 10-13*

When Psalm 118 was originally written the deliverance the psalmist needed was from physical danger from human enemies who violently opposed him and sought his life. He was in distress. He was literally in a tight spot, between a rock and a hard place, as we might say. He was being squeezed and penned in. This is because he was surrounded by Gentiles, by hostile enemy nations. They surrounded him on every side.

We don’t know who wrote Psalm 118 or when, so we don’t know for sure what situation is being described in these verses. Most scholars think this was written by a Davidic king, perhaps by David himself (though I think that’s doubtful, because I think it was written after the Temple had been built, because of the reference to the gates of righteousness). Whatever the circumstances, the psalmist despaired of his life, being pushed hard, so that he was failing.

When I read Psalm 118, two pictures from the Bible come to mind:

- The first is when Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrian army when Hezekiah was king. Hezekiah and Isaiah cried out to the Lord for deliverance, and the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrian warriors in a single night.
- The second is when Jesus is on the cross, surrounded by the angry and mocking crowd of both Jews and Romans, having been put there by a conspiracy of betrayal, injustice and cowardice inspired by Satan in a vain attempt to destroy the Son of God.

Each of us also faces distress and turmoil, assault and danger. Martin Luther loved this psalm because he was often in grave danger. The danger we face is not often physical, but sometimes it is more deadly for that reason. Satan is a restless, relentless enemy, one who sows doubt, spreads deception, incites division and brings destruction. He can often put us in a tight spot, where we feel surrounded and hopeless in our spirits. At these times, we must – like Hezekiah and like Jesus – look to the Lord in trust as our Deliverer.

II. Deliverer Trusted (vv. 6-9)

Where do we find confidence in the Lord in times of deep distress? The psalmist found it in knowing that God was on his side:

*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.
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. – vv. 6-9*

The repetition in these lines is clear and striking, as it is in several places throughout this psalm. When we are in distress, feeling surrounded and squeezed, we often need repeat reminders of the truth, as we rehearse God's promises and meditate on their application to us.

When Jesus was facing the agony of the cross, He went before His Father in prayer three times. Three times He pleaded, and then three times He submitted to His Father's will.

Consider the two truths that these lines drive home:

1. **The Lord is on my side:** We can have no greater comfort in the struggles, trials and temptations of life than to know that God is indeed for us, that he is on our side.
 - a. In Romans 8, Paul gives us the key to confidence in the midst of life's sufferings:

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” – Romans 8:31-32
 - b. In Hebrews 13:6, when Psalm 118 is quoted, it is in the context of having the confidence to resist temptation: *“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say,*

*“The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?” – Hebrews 13:5-6*

2. **It is better to take refuge in the Lord:** Many things in this life offer us the promise of security. For the king who wrote this psalm, the temptation was to find security in alliances with powerful nations. God always advised His people against such alliances, and when they made them, they always regretted it. We are probably most tempted to find security in our investments and savings, or perhaps in our safe neighborhoods and good schools and nice communities. Whatever human, earthly means of support, protection and security we can find, it is better to take refuge in the Lord.

Jesus knew He had no human means of security as He faced the cross. When His disciples began to fight for Him, and Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the High Priest, Jesus told him to put his sword away and he healed Malchus' ear. When Peter denied Him, Judas betrayed Him, His disciples ran from Him, His own nation's leaders conspired against Him and Pontius Pilate washed his hands of Him, Jesus trusted in the Father alone. *“Into Your hands I commit My spirit,”* He prayed as He gave up His last breath. He knew it was better to trust in the Lord, and the Lord raised Him from the dead.

III. Deliverance Given and Celebrated (vv. 10-27)

Over and over again in the Old Testament, we read stories of God delivering His people from danger, from oppression, from slavery, from conquest:

When famine was coming on the land of Canaan, God sent Joseph to Egypt as a slave, where he would rise to be the prime minister and would be in a position to rescue God's people.

When slavery and oppression crushed His people, God sent Moses, a run-away murderer, to lead His people out of bondage.

When walls stood in the way of the conquest of the Promised Land, God had His people march around Jericho and sent the walls falling.

When the Midianites swarmed into the Promised Land as thick as locusts in the days of Judges, God raised up a man who was hiding in a cave and then reduced his army from 30,000 to 300, so that God could bring the deliverance.

When a giant stood and mocked God and threatened God's people with servitude to the Philistines, God sent a shepherd boy with a sling and five stones to slay the giant and free His people.

When His people finally were taken into bondage in exile, God called a young Jewish woman to be the means their deliverance from destruction and later called a humble cupbearer to speak to the king and have His people released and returned to the Promised Land.

God repeatedly showed His faithfulness to deliver His people in unexpected ways. God's deliverance of His people is celebrated in Psalm 118. The heart of this psalm, in verses 10-27, tells of God's great deliverance and of the nation's celebration:

*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 fire among thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!
I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the LORD helped me.
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!"
I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.*

*The LORD has disciplined me severely,
but he has not given me over to death. – vv. 10-18*

*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.
I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
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. – vv. 19-24*

*Save us, we pray, O LORD!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
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! – vv. 25-27*

The double-layers of meaning in these verses are rich and wonderful. In the original context of the psalm, verses 10-18 describe the deliverance the Lord gave, while verses 19-27 describe the festival of praise and thanksgiving that followed the great deliverance. But every line also speaks to us of the ultimate deliverance the Lord has brought through Jesus Christ.

It shows the power and wisdom of God that He can inspire a song of praise from an ancient king which speaks so clearly of His Son. It would be one thing for God to give prophecies to His people which accurately predict details of His Son's birth, life, death and resurrection. He has done so, in Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Micah 5:2, Zechariah 9:9 and other places. It's another thing for Him to arrange the events of history to foreshadow and prefigure the person and work of Christ, which He has done in the story of His people again and again. But the third level of God's sovereign preparation is found throughout the psalms, where He has inspired songs for His people to sing which anticipate the coming of Christ and His person and work to redeem His people:

1. “The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.”

This is a quote from the Song of Moses in Exodus 15, sung on the shores of the Red Sea after the drowning of Pharaoh’s army. On one level, it can simply mean that God has Himself saved and delivered us, but when we read “He has become my salvation” in the light of the cross, we know that Jesus Himself, as God in the flesh, literally became our salvation on the cross in our place.

2. The glad songs in the tent 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!”***

This can simply mean that God has shown Himself strong and mighty to save. But Jesus is God’s right hand, seated at the right hand of God. The ESV translates the second line as “the right hand of the LORD exalts,” but a better translation seems to be “the right hand of the LORD is exalted,” which makes the double-meaning application to Christ even clearer. Jesus is the exalted right hand of God, seated far above all earthly powers, and He has done valiantly in defeating sin and death.

**3. 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.***

In the original context of the psalm, this is a national celebration procession led by the king from outside Jerusalem into Jerusalem and then up to the Temple. The gates of righteousness refer to the gates of Jerusalem and the Temple, the gates the righteous pass through as they enter the city and the Temple for worship. But we can’t read these lines without seeing Jesus. He is “the gate of the LORD.” The righteous enter through Him and are saved.

So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

– John 10:7-9

- 4. *I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.***

***The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.***

***This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.***

Again, we can see these lines as a celebration of Jesus becoming our salvation when He was rejected by the builders and thus became the cornerstone. God has always worked surprising deliverances for His people through unexpected means. And no deliverance is more unexpected than the Son of God being crucified for our sins. Only the Lord could work such a marvelous deliverance in such a powerful and unexpected way

- 5. *This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.***

This was originally seen as the day of celebration, made possible by the Lord's great victory. So, in Christ, what day of celebration is made possible because of the Lord's great victory? The Lord's Day, the day of resurrection, celebrated every week by God's people all around the world.

- 6. *Save us, we pray, O LORD! – "Save us" is "Hosanna!" in Hebrew.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!***

This line can simply be a celebration of God's human means of deliverance – Moses, Joshua, David, Hezekiah, etc. These lines were used by the crowds in Jerusalem to welcome Jesus in His triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the crowds shouting these lines, which makes sense as they expected Jesus to be their Messiah and to bring them great victory over Rome. They were thinking of Him as an earthly king who could bring a military deliverance and a political salvation, like David or Hezekiah, but He was so much more. He came to bring true and eternal salvation, as the One who came in the name of the LORD, the One bearing the name of the LORD.

- 7. *Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!***

This could be translated as "Bind the sacrificial victim." In the context of the psalm, this is a sacrifice of thanksgiving for deliverance, a festal sacrifice. It's not hard to see this verse as applying to Jesus being bound to the cross, as the altar of sacrifice. We could

also apply it to the Lord's Supper, to our celebration of thanksgiving. We could even apply it to our worship and our lives:

“Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” – Hebrews 13:15

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” – Romans 12:1

IV. Deliverer Praised (vv. 1-4, 27-29)

And so we will conclude the way that Psalm 118 opens and closes. How do we respond to such salvation, such deliverance, which is marvelous in our eyes?

*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!*

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.” – vv. 1-4

*You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.*

*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever! – vv. 28-29*