

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THANK GOD FOR HIS SALVATION

Psalm 118

By

Steven J. Cole

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Thank God for His Salvation
Psalm 118

Psalm 118 was Martin Luther's favorite psalm. He wrote (cited by C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* [Baker], 5:337),

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.

He put verse 17, "I will not die, but live, and tell of the works of the Lord," on a plaque on his study wall, where he could see it every day. Many Reformers had been killed. Luther was cheered by this verse, which assured him that he was perfectly safe until his work on earth was done (from Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 38:2).

There is much help in this psalm for each of us. It's not an easy psalm to outline in terms of the content. In terms of movement, it falls into two halves: From verses 1-18, the psalmist and other worshipers are on a pilgrimage toward Jerusalem for one of the great feasts. From verses 19-29, the worshipers have arrived at the temple, where their worship continues. And so it was a song for festive processional corporate worship.

We don't know who wrote the psalm or when. Scholars debate whether the first person sections are speaking of Israel in a personified sense, or whether it is a Davidic king relating his own experience of God's delivering him from violent enemies. I am inclined to the latter view. As Derek Kidner points out (*Psalms 73-150* [IVP], pp. 412-413), the psalm celebrates "a victory and vindication worthy of a king." The author speaks as a king (vv. 10ff.) and he receives a king's welcome (see, also Rikk E. Watts, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* [Baker Academic], ed. by G. K. Beale & D. A. Carson, p. 207). But anyone whom

God has saved can relate to the psalmist as he gives joyous thanks to God for His salvation.

When Jeremiah was in confinement just before the destruction of Jerusalem, the Lord gave him a prophecy, that although Jerusalem and the cities of Judah would be destroyed, He would restore His people. Yet again there would be heard in this devastated city (Jer. 33:11), "... the voice of those who say, 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting'; and of those who bring a thank offering into the house of the Lord." That prophecy cited (with slight variation) verses 1 & 29 of Psalm 118 and referred to verse 27, where people bring thank offerings.

Years later, when the Jews were returning to the land, the singers in Ezra's day sang a variation of Psalm 118:1 when the builders laid the foundation for the second temple (Ezra 3:11), "They sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, 'For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.'" Some have suggested that verse 22, about the stone which the builders rejected becoming the chief corner stone, was literally true of the corner stone of the second temple. But that is just a guess.

Also, as I mentioned when I spoke on Psalm 113, that was the first and Psalm 118 is the last of a group of psalms known as the Egyptian Hallel (Hallel means, "praise"). The Jews sang the first two of those psalms before the Passover meal and the last four after the meal. The Exodus (and Passover) pictured God's redemption of His people, not just physically from slavery, but spiritually from sin. Thus Psalm 118 is a song of thanksgiving to God for His salvation. Verse 14, "The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation," is taken from the Song of Moses, sung after the Exodus (Exod. 15:2). While the psalmist was referring to deliverance from his physical enemies, we can legitimately apply it to God's saving us from sin.

As the last song after the Passover, this would have been the last song that Jesus sang with His disciples before going out to the Garden of Gethsemane. The gospel accounts of Palm Sunday and the Passion Week cite from Psalm 118 in reference to Jesus. When He entered Jerusalem, the crowds cried out the words of verses 25-26 with regard to Jesus (Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9-10; Luke 19:39; John

12:13). ("Do save" in Hebrew is "hosanna.") Later that week, as He debated with the Jewish leaders, Jesus referred to Himself as the stone which the builders rejected, which becomes the chief corner stone (Matt. 21:42).

Peter also used Psalm 118:22 in preaching to the Jewish Sanhedrin after the resurrection. In Acts 4:11-12, after testifying that God had raised Jesus from the dead, Peter boldly proclaimed, "He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Peter also refers to this verse in 1 Peter 2:7. He goes on to speak about how we have been saved by God's mercy, "so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). That's what Psalm 118 is about, proclaiming the excellencies of God's salvation:

If you have experienced God's gracious salvation,
thank Him for it every day.

Because of its length, we can only skim the surface. We'll look at it in four sections.

1. Because salvation is our greatest need, God's lovingkindness should be our continual song of praise (118:1-4).

The opening and closing verses of the psalm are identical and state the theme, "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting." Then (as in Ps. 115:9-13), the psalmist calls upon three groups to repeat the refrain, "His lovingkindness is everlasting." *Israel* is a call to the nation as a whole to praise God for His enduring love. *The house of Aaron* calls to the priests, who served at the temple, to praise God for His everlasting love. *You who fear the Lord* zeroes in on those whose religion was not merely cultural (as Jews), nor ritualistic or routine (as the priests' religion may easily have become), but real and personal.

In other words, all of us need to be stirred up to give thanks to the Lord, not only when He is good *to us*, but also because "He is good" and "His lovingkindness is everlasting." Even when we go through difficult trials (vv. 5, 10-13), the Lord is good and His lovingkindness is everlasting. His very nature is good and He is espe-

cially good to His covenant people who fear Him. As Paul states (Rom. 8:35-39), there is absolutely nothing, including tribulation, persecution, or even death, which can “separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

Underlying these verses and the entire psalm is the experience of God’s salvation (the word occurs in vv. 14, 15, 21; “save” is in v. 25). If a fierce enemy is attacking you and about to prevail, you need God to save you. But such deliverance is only a picture of our spiritual condition. Because of our sin, we are all “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), under God’s condemnation (John 3:36). We are one heartbeat away from judgment and eternal punishment. And so salvation, being rescued from God’s judgment, is the greatest need of every person. When, through faith in Jesus Christ as the one who bore your punishment, God saves you, His lovingkindness should become your continual song.

2. Because we don’t naturally see that salvation is our greatest need, the Lord puts us in desperate situations so we will cry out to Him alone to save us (118:5-13).

Derek Kidner titles the first section “timeless love” and this section “timely help.” The psalmist reveals that he is in distress (v. 5). His enemies hate him (v. 7). But it’s not just an individual or a small group that is after him. The nations surround him like a swarm of bees (vv. 10-12; this indicates that a king may have written the psalm). They pushed him violently so that he was on the verge of falling (v. 13). In such conditions, “From my distress I called upon the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a large place” (v. 5). There are three lessons here:

- A. God uses trials to show us our need for Him, so that we will pray.

We pray most fervently when we go through severe trials, because it is then that we see how great our need really is. When things are going relatively smoothly, we should pray, of course. But I know that my prayers become much more focused and fervent when I’m in a difficult trial. Such prayer should be offered in faith that the Lord is able to deliver you. The psalmist refers to God as his refuge (vv. 8, 9), his help (v. 13), and his strength and salvation

(v. 14). He knew that if God did not come through, he was doomed. Out of great need, he prayed. So should we.

B. In our trials, we must not doubt that God in Christ is for us.

When fierce trials hit, the enemy always tries to get us to doubt the goodness of God: "If He is good and if He loves you, why is He permitting this trial?" But the psalmist here affirms (v. 6), "The Lord is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Again, he repeats as if to assure himself (v. 7), "The Lord is for me . . ." Similar verses are found in Psalm 56:4 & 11, as well as Hebrews 13:6. Of course, evil men can cause a lot of emotional and physical pain, including death.

But the point is, they cannot do anything that is ultimately harmful to us, because they cannot take away God's salvation. As Jesus said (Matt. 10:28), "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Paul states it wonderfully (Rom. 8:31, 32), "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"

C. Our trust must be in God alone to save us.

The psalmist cries out to the Lord and trusts in the Lord alone to save him. He specifically states that he was not trusting in man (v. 8), not even in men of influence ("princes" v. 9). He attributes his victory to "the name of the Lord" and His "right hand" (vv. 11, 12, 15, 16). He declares (v. 14) that the Lord is his strength. His trust was in God alone to save him from his enemies.

Trusting in God alone and crying out to Him in prayer are not necessarily our automatic reactions when trials hit. Often, we scramble to provide our own way out of the jam. Maybe, as an afterthought, or when all else fails, we resort to prayer. But prayer and faith should be our first response, before we do anything else.

Although there are instances where the Lord told His people not to do anything, except to watch Him deliver them (Exod. 14:13, 14; 2 Chron. 20:17), God's normal method is for us to use the means that He provides. We are to trust in Him, not in the means, but we use the means in dependence on Him. In this in-

stance, although the psalmist had men around him who helped him (v. 7) and although he had to fight the enemy, he didn't trust in his fellow soldiers or in his own military ability. His trust was not in his army, but in the Lord.

When it comes to spiritual salvation, God often uses severe trials to show you your need. Maybe it's a health issue, where you may die. Maybe it's a financial crisis, where you don't know where your next meal is coming from. But your real need is not just to get through the crisis, but to get right with God. To do that, you must see that you are a sinner, guilty before God. He sent His own Son to bear the penalty for sin that you deserve. And you must see that He offers forgiveness for your sins and eternal life when you trust in Christ alone. As Paul puts it (Eph. 2:8-9), "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

What is the result when God saves us?

3. When we experience God's salvation, He becomes our strength and our song, so that He gets all the glory (118:14-21).

In this section, the psalmist makes three points:

- A. Experiencing God's salvation fills us with joy (vv. 14-15).

"The Lord is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation. The sound of joyful shouting and salvation is in the tents of the righteous; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly." Again, verse 14 is taken from the Song of Moses (Exod. 15:2), sung by Israel after the Lord destroyed Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. All through the Old Testament, the Exodus is looked back to as the supreme example of God saving His people. When you have relied on God to save you from your sin, He becomes your salvation, and also your strength and your song. Note, also that the joyful song of salvation extends into the family of the righteous (v. 15). When a man and his family experience God's salvation, there is great joy in that home. Righteousness, which includes the fruit of the Spirit, is at the heart of a happy home life.

- B. When we experience God's salvation, He is glorified as we tell others and grow in godliness (vv. 16-18).

The psalmist exalts the Lord and His strength (His “right hand”). As a result of God’s deliverance, the psalmist vows to tell others “of the works of the Lord” (v. 17). So should we.

Note also (v. 18), that although on the surface the psalmist’s troubles stem from fierce enemies trying to kill him, he attributes it ultimately to the Lord’s discipline. John Calvin notes (*Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 118:18, p. 386), “The main thing in adversity is to know that we are laid low by the hand of God, and that this is the way which he takes to prove our allegiance, to arouse us from our torpidity [sluggishness], to crucify our old man, to purge us from our filthiness, to bring us into submission and subjection to God, and to excite us to meditate on the heavenly life.” As we submit to God’s loving hand of discipline, He produces in us “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:11).

C. Only the righteous may enter into true worship with the Lord and His people (vv. 19-21).

“Open to me the gates of righteousness; I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the Lord.” The “gates of righteousness” are the gates of the temple. The joyous pilgrimage has arrived at Jerusalem. But to enter those sacred precincts, the worshiper needed to check his heart and make sure that he was right before God. Only then could he truly worship the Lord who is holy.

When we trust Christ as Savior, God clothes us with Christ’s righteousness, so that we may enter His holy presence. But, also, we must search our hearts to make sure that we are not harboring any known sin. Just before the author of Hebrews encourages us to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, he reminds us that God’s word judges the thoughts and intentions of our hearts, and that all things are open and laid bare to His eyes (Heb. 4:12-13, 16). And so as we come before the Holy One in prayer and worship, we must make sure that we come in the righteousness of Christ, with no known sin in our hearts.

Thus the psalmist has shown that because salvation is our greatest need, God’s lovingkindness should be our continual song of praise (1-4). Because we don’t naturally see that salvation is our greatest need, the Lord puts us in desperate situations so that we will cry out to Him to save us (5-13). When we experience His sal-

vation, the Lord becomes our strength and song, so that He gets the glory (14-21). Finally,

4. God's way of salvation confounds the world but causes His people to rejoice and give thanks to Him (118:22-29).

The "stone" (v. 22) may refer to Israel, whom the Babylonians rejected and despised, yet who became the nation to bring the Savior into the world. Or, it could refer to the king. David, for example, was rejected by his own brothers and hunted down by Saul. But God finally exalted him to the throne. Or, as I said, some postulate that it related to an actual stone in the second temple, at first set aside, but later laid down as the cornerstone.

Whatever the background, Jesus clearly applied the verse to Himself. He was the stone rejected by the builders (the Jewish leaders), but who became the chief corner stone (Matt. 21:42). They rejected and crucified Him, but God raised Him up and highly exalted Him, "so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow" (Phil. 2:10). God's way of salvation is a stumbling-block to the proud, but a source of great joy to God's elect (1 Cor. 1:18-31).

Note also that the rejection and exaltation of Jesus "is the Lord's doing." God is the author and initiator of our salvation (see, Isa. 53:10; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). He must give us light (v. 27) or we do not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4-6). In verse 24, the day referred to is not every day (although it is true that the Lord gives us every day), but rather the day of salvation, when the rejected stone became the chief cornerstone. Note also (v. 27b) that God's way of salvation requires the appropriate sacrifice on His altar. Jesus is God's complete and final sacrifice for our sins (Heb. 10:1-14).

Thus we should cry out to the Lord to save His people and to prosper His church (v. 25). Salvation is always individual. *You* must be able to say with the psalmist (v. 28), "You are my God, and I give thanks to You; You are my God, I extol You." And so the psalmist comes full circle (v. 29), "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting."

Conclusion

James Boice (*Psalms* [Baker], 3:963-964) tells of how three Protestant martyrs in France relied on Psalm 118 as they faced exe-

cution. Louis Rang, a Huguenot pastor, was condemned to die in Grenoble in 1745. He was offered life if he would renounce his faith, but he rejected the offer. He was led to the scaffold singing a French versification of Psalm 118:24, which might be translated, "Here now is the happy day for which we have been waiting. Sing praise to God who gives us joy and pleasures unabating."

A few weeks later, another Huguenot pastor, Jacque Roger, also strengthened himself with this verse. He was 70 years old and had escaped his enemies for nearly 40 years. He spent his last days in prison encouraging other Protestant pastors to remain true to the faith. As he was led to his execution, he also sang the same verse that Louis Rang had sung just weeks before.

The last of the Huguenot martyrs in France was Francois Rochette, who died in 1762, 17 years after Rang and Roger. He too was offered freedom if he renounced his faith. He too refused. He also mounted the scaffold singing, "Here now is the happy day for which we have been waiting."

We may or may not face martyrdom for our faith, but we all face various trials. If you have experienced God's salvation through Jesus Christ, then you should be filled with joy and thanksgiving. You should be able to say (vv. 28-29), "You are my God, and I give thanks to You; You are my God, I extol You. Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting."

Application Questions

1. If we really meditated on how great God's salvation is, wouldn't we experience less depression? Is this realistic or not?
2. How can a young person raised in a Christian home come to see his desperate need for salvation?
3. Where is the balance between trusting that the Lord will preserve you from death versus being careful about dangerous situations? Was Paul right or wrong to go to Jerusalem in spite of the Spirit's warnings (Acts 21:8-14)?
4. Since the gospel is foolishness to the perishing (1 Cor. 1:18), should we try to "package" it in a more palatable form?

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