

Reflection on Psalm 118
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This week, apart from Wild Church yesterday, we have been taking a look at some of the Psalms and reflecting on their relevance to our time, considering how they speak into our relationship with God, and how we can pray with them.

We have so far looked briefly at Psalms 42 and 139 and today we will be reflecting on Psalm 118. Our overarching theme for the week is taken from v6 from Psalm 34, which we will finish with on Saturday. "This poor soul cried, and the Lord heard me and saved me from all my troubles."

First we'll begin with a hymn, not directly related to 118, but when we look at some of the themes in this rich and poetic song, we see how this hymn sits quite nicely alongside it.

*Amazing grace, How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come,
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.*

*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease
I shall possess within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.*

Psalm 118

- 1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his mercy endures for ever.
- 2 Let Israel now proclaim,
'His mercy endures for ever.'
- 3 Let the house of Aaron now proclaim,
'His mercy endures for ever.'
- 4 Let those who fear the Lord proclaim,
'His mercy endures for ever.'
- 5 In my constraint I called to the Lord;
the Lord answered and set me free.
- 6 The Lord is at my side; I will not fear;
what can flesh do to me?
- 7 With the Lord at my side as my saviour,
I shall see the downfall of my enemies.
- 8 It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to put any confidence in flesh.
- 9 It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to put any confidence in princes.
- 10 All the nations encompassed me,
but by the name of the Lord I drove them back.
- 11 They hemmed me in, they hemmed me in on every side,
but by the name of the Lord I drove them back.
- 12 They swarmed about me like bees;
they blazed like fire among thorns,
but by the name of the Lord I drove them back.
- 13 Surely, I was thrust to the brink,
but the Lord came to my help.
- 14 The Lord is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation.
- 15 Joyful shouts of salvation
sound from the tents of the righteous:
- 16 'The right hand of the Lord does mighty deeds;
the right hand of the Lord raises up;
the right hand of the Lord does mighty deeds.'
- 17 I shall not die, but live
and declare the works of the Lord.
- 18 The Lord has punished me sorely,
but he has not given me over to death.
- 19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter and give thanks to the Lord.
- 20 This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
- 21 I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
- 22 The stone which the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
- 23 This is the Lord's doing,
and it is marvellous in our eyes.

- 24 This is the day that the Lord has made;
we will rejoice and be glad in it.
- 25 Come, O Lord, and save us we pray.
Come, Lord, send us now prosperity.
- 26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord;
we bless you from the house of the Lord.
- 27 The Lord is God; he has given us light;
link the pilgrims with cords
right to the horns of the altar.
- 28 You are my God and I will thank you;
you are my God and I will exalt you.
- 29 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his mercy endures for ever.

This psalm is a song of thanksgiving. It is one of promise and affirmation. In the litany of the opening lines we hear the repetition of the line “his mercy endures for ever.” – it is our response to God’s goodness declared by the psalmist and a promise of the endurance of God’s love for us. In some translations “mercy” is replaced by “steadfast love”. The Hebrew word is *hesed* and it is familiar from Psalms 106:1; 107:1; and throughout psalm 136.

What is *hesed*? Paula Gooder tells us that: “mercy” and in other translations “steadfast love” are good translations of the word, but they do not capture the entirety of its meaning. She goes on to explain that the word *hesed* is a word that finds its roots in the covenant between God and his people. It is a word that conveys staying faithful to the promises of that covenant in everything that you are and everything that you do. So, she says, it has resonances of loyalty, of grace, of love and of kindness.

Loyalty, grace, love and kindness. Think about those words for a moment.

At this time of worldwide crisis, these are words that have been used to describe our frontline workers, particularly those in the NHS, doctors and nurses, our pharmacists and care workers - in fact all those who are sacrificially giving everything they have to care for those who are sick. We can have no idea what they are experiencing – many are having to isolate themselves from their families while they are working in our hospitals and clinics, working whilst bravely pushing aside their own fears to be there for others. With over 30,000 deaths in the UK, including at times, their own colleagues, it must be heart-breaking work.

When I was working as a volunteer chaplain in a hospital on the Isle of Wight, a colleague said to me on my first day “this is the Gospel on the frontline” I didn’t really know what she meant, but I soon found out as I was working chiefly in the cardiac unit. Patients were looking death square in the eye on a daily and sometimes hourly basis.

Our NHS workers, all of them, are reflecting something of the gospel on the frontline every minute of every day. Loyalty, grace, love and kindness.

This is a song of thanksgiving, but how can we be thinking of that you may ask, when we are amidst all this trouble? Our psalmist praises God for specific reasons throughout the song and this is typical of many of the psalms some of which may start with anger or fear, confusion toward God but ultimately come back to worshipping the Creator God and acknowledging that we cannot understand the mystery of it all. In this psalm we see praise for God's delivering acts (vv. 5b, 17), for his support (v. 7), his help (v. 13), his mighty hand (vv. 15–16), and even his forbearance (v. 18).

During this time of adversity, of pain and of loss, confusion and anxiety we are seeing examples of all of these God-like traits in our communities, our friends, our family and in ourselves as we forget our differences and reach out to others.

We are heartened by the good news stories we hear on the TV, for example, Captain Tom's epic walk that has, in turn, inspired many more to take up challenges for an increasing number of worthy causes.

This psalm is a call to the community to give thanks and to do so because God is good and because "his mercy endures forever".

We are reminded five times in this poem to respond to this mercy/ steadfast love – it is our part of the covenant, the promise, to make the relationship complete by responding with thanks, to worship God because he is good.

In v5 we are reminded that we live narrow lives and that all we need do is call to God: "In my constraint I called to the Lord; the Lord answered and set me free." It echoes our theme for this week from psalm 34 v6. And once we are set free what else can we do but be in awe of the God who freed us and have confidence, and trust in what he can deliver.

And what do we do when we are freed, we tell our story! We cannot help it – we all know of stories about how Jesus saved us....perhaps it is your story – and we always want to share it! (I challenge you this week to share something of your story with another person. It may be a family member, a neighbour or a friend. Tell them something of your story with God. Now is the time!

In this psalm, in v22 we hear how: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" and in v23 we learn what this means for us. We can understand that in choosing the stone the builders rejected, God is teaching us that our salvation is always of God's design and not of our own. This is not easy to hear – how many times do we want something to go our way, a healing to occur but we find that God has a different path or a different timeframe to what we want? We are still encouraged by the psalmist in v23 to marvel at God's works. We are constantly being invited to worship throughout this song.

We must also remember that as a new cornerstone is placed by God, everything else is built upon it – with a new cornerstone, there is always the opportunity for growth and development according to God's will.

Hold that thought – when we are back in our church and we are able to run some of our events – why not invite someone along to one of our coffee mornings, to an evening event, to a Sunday morning or a Wild Church event? Now is the time to think about how you can share something of your story with another, you may even reflect on your own story and if perhaps you've not been to church for a while or not been involved in things outside of services then invite yourself back to church in whatever capacity you are able to manage!

This isn't all that easy to manage right now, we are still waiting – but this psalm gives us courage, gives voice to our hope to look to God with confidence knowing that we will be delivered.

When we think about how we will be with our families and friends – the celebrations, the thanksgiving! We will have been brought back together safely,

I invite you to spend some time with this psalm today in thanksgiving.

This is the psalm of our time right now.