**Thanksgiving for God’s great deliverance** 20/10/24 dkm am, h

Read: Psalm 118, Mark 12:1-12

Text: Psalm 118

Psalms: 98:1-3, 33:13-22, 118:19-26, 72old

The Book of Psalms sits towards the centre of our Bible, with good reason. The psalms point back to the beginning, to the creation and the Exodus, and also forward to the coming of Messiah and the end; none more so than Psalm 118. We find echoes of the Song of Moses that was sung after the Lord delivered his people from bondage in Egypt (Exod 15), and we find words taken up by Jesus and the apostles with reference to the cross and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a psalm of thanksgiving, beginning and ending with words calling us to praise the Lord for his steadfast love; ‘Oh, give thanks to the Lord for he is good! For his mercy endures forever’.

Psalm 118 is the last of the Egyptians Hallel Psalms, psalms that were sung at the Jewish Passover. This psalm was probably sung by Jesus and his disciples as they left the Upper Room the night before he was crucified (Mat 26:30). Psalm 118 is unmistakably messianic, the last of the messianic psalms. This does not mean it had no immediate reference for people participating in the Passover. It is historical as well as prophetic. Jesus clearly saw in this psalm words referring to himself, namely, ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone’ (Mark 12:10-11).

Belcher says that Psalm 118 can be seen as a prayer of Christ, with Christ as the main speaker. He continues, ‘It is enlightening to read Psalms 113-118 in the context of the Passover meal just before the crucifixion. Psalm 113 would have reminded Christ that God is the God of great reversals, who lifts up the needy. Just as God delivered his people from the Exodus and the exile, so he has the power to deliver his true Son (Psalm 114). This is made explicit in Psalms 115, which states that the dead do not praise the Lord (115:17). Psalm 116 confirms this statement by thanking the Lord for deliverance from death. The situation of distress in Psalm 118 fits Christ’s situation. He felt confined with no way of escape (118:6). Surrounded by enemies (118:7, 10-12) and pushed hard to the brink of death. He was not given over to the power of death completely but received full resurrection of life (118:17-18).’

With this brief but blessed introduction we now turn to study and meditate upon this psalm. Psalm 118 begins and ends with the call give thanks to the Lord, to the covenant God of Israel, for his unceasing love and faithfulness to his covenant. Just who issues this call is not clear. We hear various voices in this antiphonal psalm, the voice of an individual, maybe a king, as well as priests and Levites, and of people in general. The psalm begins with the Lord answering the king’s prayer; he prayed earnestly when nations surrounded him with evil intent. The second part of the psalm pictures a victory procession through the gates of the holy city or the temple, with everyone giving thanks and praise to the Lord.

**1.Call to praise**

Why do we gather together in this building every Sunday morning? Not simply because of family tradition, I hope! We gather to worship the Lord. Yes, this has been a tradition going way back to the time of Moses. The sabbath day of rest is actually a creation ordinance. The Israelites went up to the temple in Jerusalem with their animals to sacrifice at Passover and other festivals. We, in effect, celebrate Passover every week; we gather to remember our Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again for our salvation. We worship by way of thanksgiving and praise to our wonderful God and saviour. We praise the same God, so it is fitting we use the same words, words found in this psalm.

The call to praise the Lord for his love or mercy goes to all Israel, with a special focus on the house of Aaron or the priests who lead the people in worship (118:2,3). It extends beyond Israel to ‘all who fear the Lord’ (118:4). As we saw in Psalm 115, this call extends to God-fearers, to Gentiles who attached themselves to the people of the true God. These God-fearers felt the emptiness and futility of worshipping idols. They realised that such gods could not help them in the way the God of Israel did so powerfully when he brought his people out of Egypt.

**2.The Lord my help and salvation**

At the first Passover meal, the people of God, slaves in Egypt as they were at that time, began their escape from tyranny and death. Led by Moses, they came to the Red Sea. With Pharaoh and his army chasing them, they were hemmed in on both sides- until the Lord opened up the way through the sea. David was surrounded, with Saul on one side and the Philistines on the other when he cried to the Lord. Jehoshaphat was surrounded by the armies of Moab and Ammon when he cried to the Lord. The Lord told him not to be afraid. He had the singers go ahead singing, ‘Praise the Lord, for his mercy endures forever’ (2Chron 20:21). The psalmist had confidence that the Lord was on his side and would deliver him despite the distressing situation he was in. He was in a tight spot, ‘between a rock and a hard place’ as we say, but was confident the Lord would set him in a broad place (118:5).

The psalmist learned to trust in the Lord, not man (118:8). What about you? Do you fear what other people might say or do to you? We live in a society of fear-filled people, especially young people. To stop this fear our leaders are trying to control what people write and say. But if we trust in the Lord we do not fear what other people say or do to us. ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid’ is the counsel of the Scriptures (118:6, Heb 13:6). I recall using these words to comfort a Hindu convert when hostile neighbours were throwing stones on her roof. Let us not be fighting our enemies in the way they want! We must take up spiritual not carnal weapons (2Cor 10:4). Too often we put our trust in ‘princes’ or politicians rather than in the Lord (118:9). Remember, it is better to ‘trust in the Lord’ and ask him to help you.

In words Jesus could well have prayed as he was tried by the Jews, and the Romans, the psalmist says, ‘All nations surrounded me’- he says this four times in verse 10,11, and 12. They surrounded him like a swarm of bees. Have you ever tried escaping a swarm of bees? They come at you from all directions. But a puff of smoke stops them. The natural man relies for strength in numbers. ‘But in the name of the Lord, I will destroy them’ (118:10). Being ‘quenched like a fire of thorns’ pictures a fire that suddenly flares up but just as suddenly stops. ‘The Lord is my strength and song, and he has become my salvation’ are the exact words sung by Moses and the people as they watched Pharaoh and his army drowning in the waters of the Red Sea (118:14, Exod 15:2).

Moses’ song of victory is further reflected in the psalmist rejoicing in salvation at the hands of the Lord, the ‘right hand of the Lord’ (118:15,16, Exod 15:6,12). The Lord comes to help the righteous, the people he has chosen to bear his name. The victory he delivers is not for their glory but for his glory, which is why the people who live because he has saved them must rejoice in the Lord, and in the words of this psalm, ‘Declare the works of the Lord’ (118:17). Remember the opening words of Psalm 115: ‘Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory’. We do not remain silent when we are truly saved from sin and death.

We rightly question the person who says they are saved but rarely join with the people of God in praising him. Those who think they are saved by their own good works will praise and honour themselves rather than the Lord. Our society is full of such people, but such people do not have the assurance of help and salvation spoken of in this psalm.

The man of this psalm had a deep, personal relationship with the Lord, a relationship in which he recognised the goodness and power of God. He knew God as his Father, who may chasten or discipline him, but in the end will not abandon him to death (118:18). But wasn’t Christ given over to death? Yes, but the grave could not hold him! His body saw no decay because God raised him to life on the third day (Ps 16:10).

**3.Through the gates with thanks and praise**

The cry goes up for ‘the gates of righteousness’ to be opened as we come to the second part of this psalm. Is this a picture of a victorious king being welcomed home at the head of his army? Is the reference to the gates of the city or the gates of the temple? What we read is ‘the gate of the Lord, through which the righteous shall enter’ (118:20). ‘The festal procession in Psalm 118 fits the procession into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday’. As Jesus approached Jerusalem five days before his crucifixion, crowds shouted, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ (Mark 11:9), words that echo verses 25 and 26 of this psalm- ‘Hosanna’ is translated, ‘Save, I pray’. Jesus is the truly righteous Son of God, the King of the Jews. He alone has the right to enter the gate of the Lord.

A commitment to praise the Lord in verse 21 is followed by the same commitment in verse 28. In between we find words that Jesus takes up at the end of his parable about the tenants of the vineyard (Mark 11:10). The parable is about the owner of the vineyard sending servants to collect his share of the harvest. The tenants abused, injured and killed these servants, finally killing the only son of the owner. The Jewish leaders realised the parable was about them because they were planning to kill Jesus. This psalm, therefore, prophesies the rejection of Jesus- ‘He came to his own and his own did not receive him’ (John 1:11)- followed by his restoration, the power of the resurrection.

The cornerstone or capstone is the most important stone in a building, in this case the temple of the Lord. The Jews gloried in their earthly temple, but this would not endure. Jesus spoke of his body as the temple of God, a profound and wonderful truth spoken of here in Psalm 118. The apostle Peter reminded the Jewish leaders of this truth in Acts 4, where he declared that there is salvation in no other name (Acts 4:11,12). The apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:20 speaks of Jesus being the chief cornerstone as he describes the church as a building in which we as believers are incorporated by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1Peter 2:5,7). This was all in God’s perfect plan for our salvation, and ‘it is marvellous in our eyes’ (11:23). This exaltation after rejection, this resurrection and ascension after the humiliation of the cross, is truly the day of the Lord in which we give praise to the Lord, the day that is today.

In this psalm the day refers to the Sabbath, or to the three annual pilgrim festivals- Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. We have noted the ‘Hosanna’, followed by a blessing announced upon he who comes in the name of the Lord (118:25,26). The psalmist further declares that, ‘God is the Lord’; the almighty God of creation is also the covenant God of his people. Jesus is the true Israel, the true descendant of Abraham and David. He did not bring a sacrifice as other sons of God did when they came to the temple. Jesus entered with his own blood, having given himself as the sacrifice for our sins (Heb 9:12). ‘The horns of the altar may point to the arms of the cross’ (Kidner). ‘Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us’ (1Cor 7). He is the light of the world, the true light that gives light to our hearts and our lives (118:27, John 1:9).

The psalm concludes with the profession, ‘You are my God, and I will praise you’ (118:28). If Jesus and his disciples professed, ‘You are my God and I will praise you’ as they left the Upper Room in which the Passover was fulfilled, we should be making this profession as we celebrate the fulfilment of the Passover in the covenant that Jesus established in his own precious blood. ‘Oh, give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever’.