

Jesus Our Psalm-Singing Worship Leader

Psalm 118:1-29; Matthew 26:30-32; Hebrews 2:10-12

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • August 26, 2018 (BSCC)

Dear Congregation of Christ: Who among you are not familiar with the chorus, “*This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*” This short song is from Psalm 118 verse 24, one verse out of 29 verses in our text. It’s always better to sing songs straight from Scripture, such as this one verse. In singing the Psalms and other songs in the Bible, we can be assured that there is no unbiblical words and thoughts in what we sing. On the other hand, when we sing hymns written by songwriters, there is no certainty that they don’t have errors, for even the most faithful and sound uninspired authors can stumble.

Today, we start using the new Trinity Psalter Hymnal, thanks to an anonymous donor from Immanuel’s URC in Salem, OR. While change is sometimes hard, I’m sure that in time we will get used to this new Psalter Hymnal.

This is the reason why I chose a psalm, Psalm 118, as our text this morning. And we will sing a metrical version of this psalm as our Hymn of Commitment. When we open the Psalter Hymnal to No. 118B, what do we see? We see eight stanzas corresponding to verses 19-29 of Psalm 118. Where then are the first 18 verses? We find them in No. 118A. Here then, we see another big difference between the familiar chorus “This is the Day,” and the two songs from the Psalter Hymnal. What is this day that the LORD has made? And why do we rejoice in this day? The chorus doesn’t answer these questions, while Nos. 118A and 118B give many answers.

Why did we also read Matthew 26:30-32? This passage is part of the night when Jesus celebrated the last Passover meal with his disciples, when he instituted the Lord’s Supper. After the meal, the text says they “*sung a hymn*” before going out the Mount of Olives. What hymn did they sing? Most likely, they sang Psalm 118, the last psalm of the Egyptian Hallel (praise). The Jews sang Psalms 113-118 to thank God for redeeming them Egyptian slavery. But they also sang these looking forward to the last Passover meal when the Messiah finally appears. For sure, Jesus led them in singing these psalms, because we read in Hebrews 2:12 that he says, “*in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.*” This is a quote from Psalm 22:22, which was written by David.

After his resurrection, Jesus tells two of his disciples that the whole Old Testament – the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets – were written about him (Luke 24:44). So Psalm 118, as all other psalms, are about him. All the New Testament writers knew this. In another example, we read that Jesus prayed aloud before he died, “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*” (Luke 23:46). Luke put the words of Psalm 31:5 as if Jesus, not David, spoke it.

Psalm 118 is long, we will divide it into three main points. Verses 1-4 and 28-29 are bookends, which are opening and closing praises to God. The main body is divided into two parts: a Song of Salvation (verses 5-18), and a Song of Worship (verses 19-27).

He Leads Us in a Song of Praise (verses 1-4 and 28-29)

In the opening and closing verses of Psalm 118, we read these words, “*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!*” This praise was first used in 1 Chronicles 16:34 when David brought back the Ark of the Covenant to the tabernacle in Jerusalem after it was captured by the Philistines. They sang the same thanksgiving song when the Ark was carried into the new temple in Jerusalem (2 Chr 5:13), and when the temple was dedicated to God by King Solomon (2 Chr 7:3). When the temple was rebuilt by the returnees from Babylon, they again sang this same refrain (Ezra 3:11a). In these first three verses in Psalm 118, “*His steadfast love endures forever,*” is used as a refrain. All of Psalm 136 also uses this as a refrain.

Who are to give thanks to God? Israel, the house of Aaron, and all those who fear the LORD. In short, all of God’s people who believe, fear and trust in him. Why are they commanded to give thanks to God? In our Belgic Confession Article 1, we read that God is “good, and the overflowing fountain of all Good. Jesus said, “*There is only one who is good,*” referring to God (Matt 19:17), because the LORD is good, the fountain of all good. James 1:17 also says, “*Every good gift and every perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of lights.*” This is why Paul says, “*We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*” (Rom 8:28). And God will only give all these good things to those whom he has called to believe in him.

God is also good to his people because his love is forever. This love is translated simply as “love” (NIV) or “steadfast love” (ESV) or “lovingkindness” (NASB) or “mercy” (KJV). It is the love that he has for Abraham, with whom he made a covenant of grace. He would give mercy and love to him and to his children. This he planned from eternity and will be forever. His covenant is steadfast because he does not change. His love is kind because it is a perfect love. Who are Abraham’s children? Galatians 3:29 tells us that all of you who are “in Christ,” those who believe in Christ, are Abraham’s children, heirs who receive all of God’s promises in his Word.

These words of praise therefore were sung by Israel during their joyful and solemn festivals and worship services in the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem. The LORD dwelt there among his chosen people whom he has saved.

He Leads Us in a Song of Salvation (verses 19-27)

The unknown psalmist has two songs in the main body: a song of salvation (vv 5-18) and a song of worship (vv 19-27). In verses 5-7, he recalls when he was in distress because all nations who hated Israel and himself surrounded him like bees ready to swarm him with their painful stings. He knew that God was rebuking him severely, even almost to death. These verses fit the life of a king like David.

But he testifies, “*The LORD answered me and set me free.*” Because he trusted in God and not in other powerful kings, God helped him cut them off. The LORD is his strength and salvation. This is why when he sings this song, he says, “*The LORD is my song.*” He shares his experience with the Israelites whom God delivered from their Egyptian masters. All Israel remember this great event whenever they sing this song during the Feast of Passover.

In verse 5, the king confidently says, *“The Lord is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.”* The writer of Hebrews uses this verse when he exhorts Jewish converts to not love money more than Christ and be content with what they have. Why? Because God promises, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* Because, *“The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”* (Heb 13:5-6).

While this song befits King David or another king of Israel who were in distress because of their enemies, we can also see the life of suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ in it. He was hated, despised and rejected by his own people. He was in such agony before his death that his sweat became like drops of blood. But he always trusted in his Father as his helper and salvation, even while he hung on the cross. Unlike David, God did not save him from death, but God raised him up from the dead. And even as he was hanging on the cross, he prayed for his enemies.

Jesus warns us that just as the world hated him, the world will hate all true Christians. Today, the world is fundamentally anti-Christian. We are called bigots, intolerant, ignorant, racists, homophobes, haters, and all kinds of false accusations. Liberals accuse us of using our Christianity to hate others. But be not dismayed. Do not fear. Because the Lord is on our side as our helper, what can man and kings do to us? In the end, God will deliver us from our enemies, from our distress, even from sin and death.

He Leads Us in a Song of Worship

The second song in Psalm 118 is a song of worship when worshipers make their pilgrimage into the holy city of Jerusalem and into the temple. The song starts with, *“Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD”* (v 19). The king and his subjects come to worship to thank the God of justice and righteousness for their victory and salvation, *“I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation”* (v 21).

In the next two verses, the psalmist tells of a great reversal that God has done, *“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”* The cornerstone is probably the most important stone in a building such as the temple. It could be the keystone or capstone. The builders rejected a stone that was suitable for a cornerstone, but the stone later became the cornerstone. What was despised, hated and deemed worthless became the most important stone of the building. What does this cornerstone represent? It could be Israel, a people who were slaves, weak, and oppressed by its enemies. It could be David, who was young and weak compared to his brothers, but who became the most important king of Israel. God exalts high those who are lowly, humble, insignificant and powerless.

Psalm 118 is quoted in the New Testament 12 times. Verse 22 about the cornerstone is significant. In Matthew 21:43-44, at the end of his Parable of the Tenants of the Vineyard, Jesus claims to be this cornerstone. The wicked tenants planned to kill the son of the owner, but the owner executed those tenants. Then Jesus quotes verses 22-23, claiming to be the Cornerstone who was rejected, but will in time crush his enemies. In his preaching, Peter also uses the picture in Psalm 118:22 of the rejected Cornerstone who saves his people (Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7).

Two other verses, 25 and 26, are also used extensively by the four Gospels, “*Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*” The writers quote these two verses when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time before he was crucified (Matt 21:9, 23:39; Mark 11:9-10; Luke 13:35, 19:38; John 12:13). This acclamation of God’s anointed King is about the coming Messiah, the Savior of Israel. Therefore, the four Gospel writers are proclaiming that this Jesus who came riding on a lowly donkey is the Messiah prophesied in Psalm 118.

The song of worship ends with a benediction and a sacrifice on the altar. The benediction is from Aaron’s benediction, “*The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you*” (Num 6:24). Verse 27 affirms this blessing, “*The LORD is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us.*” The offering of the sacrifice on the altar is always a time of solemn thanksgiving and rejoicing, a “festal sacrifice” or “festal procession.” The last verse is a bookend to the first “*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!*” They give thanks to the LORD for his forgiveness of sins, salvation and blessings.

Beloved friends: Today, we sang three psalms: Psalms 92, 90 and 118. We also sang two short hymns, one for the Benediction, and one for the Doxology. Do not be concerned or frustrated that the new Trinity Psalter Hymnal has many new unfamiliar songs and tunes. When we sing them, we will learn them one by one over time.

When we sing the Psalms, we sing praise and thanksgiving to God and Christ. We sing his songs of distress and lament when he suffered and died while he was on earth. But we also sing Psalms pointing forward to his marvelous resurrection from the dead, to his exaltation to his throne in heaven, and to his eternal rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

God opened the gates of righteousness to Christ, and he lived a perfectly righteous life on earth. In so doing, Christ in turn opened the gates of righteousness to all of us who believe in him. His perfect righteousness is counted to us, and we are also enabled to live righteous lives by his Spirit. He saved us from sin and eternal death under God’s wrath. He opened the gates of heaven to us, so we may dwell with God in the heavenly places forever, where there will be no more sin, suffering and death.

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