

Communion Weekend

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 118 is the passage of the Bible I'd like us to reflect on just for a little while before we remember Jesus' death in communion. Psalm 118. It's a psalm that I know that many of us have sung on a regular basis. Every church has their tradition. Wherever you go in the world, every church has a slightly different tradition. And part of our tradition, at least the one that I was brought up with in the Free Church of Scotland, was to sing this psalm at communion time. And I remember often wondering, what does this have to do with communion? Always sang the psalm as the elements were brought onto the table or as people made their way to the table where there was a demarcation in the old days. And we would sing things like, I will not die but live and proclaim what the Lord has done. The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death.

Open for me the gates of righteousness. I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. I often used to wonder, what does that have to do with Jesus giving His life on the cross? And there is a sensible answer to that question. First of all, this psalm is part of a collection of psalms between Psalm 113 and 118 that is called the Hallel Psalms. And the Hallel Psalms reminisced over how God had specifically delivered His people Israel from bondage in Egypt. So, the Hallel Psalms were all about the Passover. So, they were sung at the time of the Passover. The first three, I think, were sung before the Passover, and the last three were sung after the Passover, which, of course, makes sense, doesn't it? Because when we equate, as we have every right to do, the Passover with the death of Jesus, the death of

Jesus fulfilled everything that the Passover looked forward to, then we get the connection, don't we? The Hallel Psalms, in remembering how God delivered His people from Egypt, they also looked forward to God's ultimate deliverance, His salvation, which was to come to pass in the death of Jesus Christ.

And so, there's the answer to my question. Psalm 118 has everything to do with the death of Jesus, as long as we understand it prophetically and we understand it properly. This is an example of Christ in the Psalms. I want us to think together of how we see Jesus in three particular ways.

Another thing about this Psalm, just before I go on to that, because I find it absolutely fascinating, we sing in unison, don't we? Whether it's Psalms or hymns or whatever we sing, we always sing in unison, don't we? That's our culture, that's our tradition. But it's interesting to note that in the Old Testament, when Israel sang this Psalm, the scholars tell us that they probably didn't sing it all together as one body. They would sing it in response to a soloist, and it would be sung typically as the people made their way to one of the feasts in Jerusalem, probably the most notable feast being the Passover. So, I want us to imagine the people of Israel, they're living everywhere.

[4 : 00] Some of them are living dozens of miles away, and they're having to make their way on donkeys and on foot, and they don't want to do that alone because of the danger of roads and accidents, and so they do it together. And so, this massive procession is taking place because all of the people are making their way to the Passover in Jerusalem. What are they going to do on the way? They sing a Psalm like this as they prepare their hearts and their minds. The singing of this Psalm was part of their worship, but they're traveling at the same time. They're not all gathered together in one place as we are in a nice, comfortable building. They're on the road. They're making their way. They're anticipating what lies ahead of them. But the way in which they sing this Psalm is rather interesting because it would begin by a soloist, one lone voice saying, let Israel say, and then everybody in response would come in, his steadfast love endures forever. How powerful is that? And then the soloist would say again, let the house of Aaron say. Now, the house of Aaron were the priests.

Everybody would then join in again in unison. Imagine the noise. His steadfast love endures forever. And then the soloist would once again sing. He would say, let those who fear the Lord say, again, his steadfast love endures forever. So, I think you can get the sense of how unusual, as far as we're concerned, the singing of this song wasn't unusual to them because that was the way they did it. They would probably find the way we do it unusual. But there's something in that, isn't there, that they're singing as a response to this proposition, to this challenge. Let the house of Aaron say, let those who fear the Lord say. And all the time, time after time, repeatedly, they would sing the same thing for emphasis. That's why you repeat anything, for emphasis, because their focus, their love, was this, God's love for them. His steadfast love endures forever. And the NIV is only love.

That doesn't put it strongly enough. The Hebrew word is a really important word. It's the word *cheded*, *cheded*, which talks about the immovable, steadfast love of God, the love that will not change and the love that will not let His people go. The love that has tied Him, it has bound Him in promise and in covenant to His people. It's a love that we can lay hold upon today. And it doesn't depend, like I said on Friday, it doesn't depend on our performance in the Christian life. That doesn't mean that our obedience is not important. Of course it is. I hope that this is an occasion when we go out of here with renewed obedience. And yet we come in here today and we've only one thing to lay hold of, don't we? The steadfast love of God towards sinners like ourselves.

It's not surprising that God is love. If I went to heaven today, I would expect to find nothing but love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their perfection. What is astonishing is that this holy, separate God chooses to love me? Because I can tell you that I am not lovable in my heart.

And I'm sure that you have to say the same. Why would God choose to love somebody like me? That's the mystery and that's the wonder of the gospel. That's what we call God's grace. And that's what the people were singing about. His love, His steadfast love endures forever. It's that same love that we take hold of this morning and that draws us together in communion and in worship because we want to praise God, the God who loved us and gave Himself for us. Now, I want to focus particularly just for a few moments on the words that probably, and there's a little bit of speculation here, but sometimes speculation is kind of interesting. We don't want to do it too much, but sometimes speculation, we're still with the crowd, aren't we? We're walking with the crowd and they're making their way to Jerusalem and they've reached the gate of Jerusalem. And the scholars, once again, they tell me that verse 19 would be sung as they approach the gate of Jerusalem.

[9 : 11] And here's what they would sing, open for me the gates of righteousness. And then the priests apparently, the priests of course were the go-betweens, the people whose job it was to mediate between God and Israel. They would sing, this is the gate of God, the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter.

And then all of the people would sing verse 21, I will give you thanks for you have answered me and have become my salvation. The first thing I want to think about is the gate, the gate.

And then moving through the psalm, verse 22, we come to something else. There's another focal point, which is this time the stone. And here's what the people would sing, the stone that the builders rejected has become the capstone. Again, everybody would join in, the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes. So that's the second thing I want us to think about, the stone.

Then lastly, I want us to think about the last part of the psalm, which is we're going to call the sacrifice, the sacrifice, because that's what it is about. Verse 27, with bows in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar. Now, I'll try and explain what that means or how that can be translated later that focuses on the sacrifice. Each of these three words focus on Jesus Christ. The gate, the stone, the sacrifice. Jesus is the gate, Jesus is the stone, and Jesus is the sacrifice.

Let's look together then for a few moments on how Jesus fulfills all of these objects, all of these focal points in this latter part of the psalm. Like I said, the people would reach the gate of Jerusalem and it was symbolic of entering into the presence of God, because you remember that in the Old Testament, the whole point of Jerusalem and the temple in Jerusalem was that that was the location where God chose to dwell amongst His people. And so, for the procession, for this great crowd of people entering into Jerusalem symbolically meant for them coming into the presence of God, and yet the gate was closed, which is the message all the way through the Old Testament, isn't it? All the way from the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve, they chose to go their own way and sin against God, God evicted them from the Garden of Eden and banished them from ever coming back. Access to God was from then on denied. And in many senses, that is the message of the Old Testament, access denied. Access back to the fellowship of God which Adam and Eve enjoyed at the very beginning in perfect bliss when God created the world, but it was denied because of their sin. They became separated from God. Death came into the world. And yet, God persisted with humankind. He chose a people for Himself in Abraham and Abraham's family. And in time, if we fast forward to the time of Moses, He ordered Moses, He commanded Moses to build a place where, once again, He would be located, the tabernacle. But, remember though, the whole thing about the tabernacle was that while God's glory dwelt in the most holy place, access was denied. The curtain, the veil prevented anyone from getting through to the presence of God, the near presence, the Shekinah glory of God. That was an important message. It was a reminder that they were sinners and God was holy. And yet, the anomaly was that God still chose to dwell amongst His people because He loved them. And He chose to guide them and take care of them and to fulfill His promise to them, to give them a land that they would enjoy and where they could praise Him and worship Him as their God. And the same is true with the temple. When God was the of Israel out of Egypt and they all gathered around Zion, He told Moses to come up, but the people must not access was denied. It was the same with the temple. Same message. Access is denied. And here are the people in Psalm 118 and they are saying, open for us the gate of righteousness. They're asking God if there's a way in which they can enter into His presence. And the answer is, yes, there is. This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter. The gate was opened when Jesus came into the world to take our nature to Himself and to bear our guilt, to take our guilt upon Himself, thereby opening the door.

[15 : 15] You remember what happened when Jesus died on the cross. The veil of the curtain, that magnificent, massive curtain, it was torn from top to bottom. The curtain that prevented access from the people into the near presence of God, it was torn the moment that Jesus died on the cross, thereby opening up the way whereby people like ourselves could discover fellowship with God and be reconciled to God through the death of Jesus Christ. I am the door, He said. By me, if anyone shall enter in, he shall find pasture. He shall go in and go out and find pasture. He is the gate. He is our access to God. And right now today, we have free access.

We can speak directly to God. We believe that God is in this place, meeting with us, hearing us, receiving our worship. We don't have to go through a hierarchy. We don't have to go through any kind of mediator because Jesus is our mediator. We speak directly to God. We worship God directly. That was what the Reformation rediscovered. We've been thinking about the Reformation over the last few weeks, the 500 years since Luther nailed his 95 theses. And of course, until they rediscovered that, the idea was that you had to work your way to God. The problem is that we can't. There's nothing we can do that can deserve or merit God's favor. God has done it all, and He's opened up the way in which we can directly speak to Him and be reconciled to Him. Let's make use of that. What a privilege we have today in being able to come together and worship, knowing, knowing for sure that God is receiving our worship and blessing us and thrilled with His workmanship in Christ Jesus. So, that's the first thing then, the gate opened to me, the gate of righteousness. I could say so much more, but we're going to move on to the stone, the next object in the psalm. Again, Jesus is the stone. Originally, the stone represented

Israel and how the Israelites had been rejected by their enemies, most notably the Egyptians, and then the Babylonians when they took them into captivity. The Israelites had a very painful history as they reminisced and as they looked back on their past. But they had God to thank for their deliverance on all of these occasions as they repented and as they made their way back to Him. But they could also look forward to what God was going to do. They didn't know this. They didn't realize what they were singing. There's much of the Old Testament that people wrote and sung that they didn't have much of an understanding about. We, on the other hand, in the light of the New Testament like we saw last night, we have a better understanding because we can see how psalms like this have been fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, how do I know this? How do I know that the stone referred to here in the psalm pointed forward to Jesus? Well, I go to the New Testament and Jesus Himself tells us that He fulfilled the imagery of the stone. In Matthew chapter 20, 21, He tells the story of the parable of the tenants about a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug a wine press in it, built a watchtower, and then he left it to some tenant farmers to take care of it. But they hated him.

He went away to another country and he entrusted his land to them. He sent servants and they beat them and they evicted them and they killed some. And then He sent His son, believing that they would respect His son. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, this is the heir, come, let's kill him and take his inheritance. And they killed him. And then Jesus goes back to this psalm.

He said, have you never read in the scriptures, the stone that the builders rejected has become the capstone? The Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes. In other words, He's saying that I am the stone that the builders have rejected. What's the idea here? The idea here is that houses were built in the old days, not out of bricks, but out of stone. And if you are a real expert builder, the first thing that, the first requirement was that you knew the kind of stone. You would go to the quarry and you'd be looking for the kind of stone that you would select to build the house with. And apparently they tell me it was a real skill. Not everyone could do this.

[20 : 56] You had to learn it. It took many years to learn how to spot the stone, how to be an expert in determining what kind of stone you needed to build your house with. Now, what happened when Jesus came into the world was that He, by His life and His obedience and His character and His knowledge and His extraordinary miraculous power, it was evident to everyone that He was God.

But it was particularly evident to the experts, the scribes and the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, the religious leaders of the day. They were the experts. They should have spotted Him a mile off.

They should have recognized right away that this could be no one else other than the Son of God, the Messiah. But what did they do? They rejected Him. They dismissed Him. They hated Him. They plotted His downfall.

They arranged to have Him arrested. They nailed Him to a cross. They arranged for Him to be tortured and spat upon.

And for Him to die a thousand deaths. That's what they used to call crucifixion. A thousand deaths at the hands of the Romans who they used as convenient instruments in order for them to get rid of this man that they hated. Have you ever thought of the sheer venom that there was at the cross?

[22 : 46] As you read the stories that tell us of how Jesus was tried and tortured, the hatred, they couldn't wait to get rid of Him. The sooner the better. They loathed Him.

like we were thinking about on Friday it's quite astonishing isn't it how these were the men who ought to have they ought to have known who Jesus was and yet the more they saw the more they hated and the more they determined to get rid of him Jesus was the stone that the builders rejected but that God by raising him up on the third day has made him the most important stone in the building the cornerstone or the capstone now very quickly I'm going to go on to the sacrifice because the psalm ends up with rather mysterious words a rather mysterious turn of phrase and you'll find it in verse 27 now I could talk about so many different things in the psalm but we're going to concentrate only on a select number and this is the sacrifice let's read 27 the Lord is God and he has made his light shine upon us then it says this with bows in hand join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar now the fascinating thing is that this can be translated in two ways if you're using another translation of the Bible it's likely that this will be put quite differently for example the ESV that I use it says this it says bind the festal sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar the old way of understanding this or rather the way that I have for many years understood this was that there would be an animal there would be an animal sacrifice in the crowd and that they would take the animal they would lead it up with with ropes and that they would tie the rope to the horn of the altar where the animal was going to be put to death now it could mean that but the way the NIV puts it it expresses the other translation of it which is that this was a festal procession which made its way all the way all the way to where the altar was but what if both translations are right what if the picture that's being described here is actually the picture that Jesus created when he rode on the donkey into

Jerusalem shortly before he was crucified all of a sudden this psalm comes to light where Jesus is not only part of the festal procession as he was but he was the focal point of the fresh festal procession because in the Old Testament as the people of God made their way into Jerusalem they would always have a sacrifice there was no other way to approach God than the death of the sacrifice that was true right from day one it was necessary in order for anyone to be right with God for there to be the shedding of blood God says himself without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness please remember that that's what the gospel is all about without the shedding of blood however distasteful we might find that that's the message of the gospel without the shedding of blood and the Old Testament way of expressing that was the death of an animal so the people in the psalm as they sang the psalm they would have an animal probably several animals but they would be leading these animals to the place of slaughter where they would be sacrificed because they knew that to be reconciled to God required the death of the sacrifice and they knew that nothing but the death they couldn't fall short of that and only when the animal was sacrificed either as a sin offering or as a burnt offering or as a fellowship offering only at that moment was God and his people reconciled now of course an animal could never take away sin it all pointed to the sacrifice that Jesus was one day going to make when he offered himself up for us all but when we read the account of how Jesus entered into Jerusalem and what the people sang as they welcomed him into Jerusalem they thought they were welcoming a king an earthly king but in actual fact as God was working out his plan they were welcoming the sacrifice they were singing the words of this psalm as he entered into Jerusalem bring the sacrifice with bows with a festal procession bring the sacrifice and don't stop until the sacrifice reaches the end point which for Jesus was the cross

Jesus never stopped short he could have he willingly and deliberately made his way into Jerusalem where he knew he was going to suffer the most excruciating shame and darkness and pain on our behalf and where he knew he was going to be made sin for us where the entire weight of our sin was going to be placed on him and by his sacrifice by his death on the cross our sin was going to be paid for in full and that's why we can sing give thanks to the Lord for he is good his love endures forever we are here to celebrate that love that steadfast love of God in Jesus Christ this morning as it is exhibited that's what Paul says this is where we get to see the love of God that Jesus died for sinners he died for the ungodly that's who we are so therefore let's do what Jesus commands in faith and in thankfulness and in worship and by sitting at the table and by remembering in the elements that he's given to us elements that we touch and see and taste the reality of this great sacrifice this great son of God who was willing to go all the way never stopping short until he gave his life for us as an offering the offering the once for all sacrifice by which our sin was removed let's bow our heads in prayer our father we thank you for your steadfast love that we can lay hold upon we thank you that these the symbols the elements that we are going to take and receive they speak to us of that love that love that will not let us go that love that teaches and warns and guides and instructs that love that has sent the son of God into the world to be our savior so Lord we pray that we may focus on Jesus right now and that he will be the prophet and the priest and the king in our hearts for we ask in Jesus name

Amen