

# *Give Thanks to the Lord*

## *Psalm 118*

By  
Dr. Dallas R. Burdette

Website: [www.freedominchrist.net](http://www.freedominchrist.net)

Psalm 118 concludes the Egyptian Hallel Psalms (113-118) sung by Jesus and His Apostles during their final Passover meal together. This psalm is as relevant today as it was three thousand years ago. We cannot read this psalm without a consciousness of thanking God for His goodness and love. This psalm begins and ends with the same admonition: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Psalm 118: 1, 29). We cannot read verses 1 and 29 of this psalm without reflection upon Psalm 117, which psalm is an excellent introduction to Psalm 118. Apparently, according to some commentators, this psalm is a psalm that the Israelites sang on their way to the Temple in a “festal procession” (118:27). The writer of this psalm reflects upon his own anguish (118:5) to God’s altar (118:27). The author of this masterpiece of poetic literature goes from distress to worship.

The psalmist grabs the attention of his readers by crying out: “**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever**” (118:1). These words made an impression upon Jeremiah (627 BC) during the reign of Zedekiah (597-586 BC), king of Judah. Jeremiah foretold the Babylonian captivity with its dire distress upon the inhabitants. Yet, he still cited Psalm 118:1 to bolster God’s love. Listen to him as he writes:

This is what the LORD says: “You say about this place, ‘It is a desolate waste, without men or animals.’ Yet in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted, inhabited by neither men nor animals, there will be heard once more <sup>11</sup> the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying, ‘**Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love endures forever.**’ For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before,” says the LORD. (Jeremiah 33:10-11)

Whatever our *Sitz-im-Laben* (life situation), we can always rely upon God’s love. Approximately five hundred and sixty years after this psalm was written, we observe Ezra citing Psalm 118:1. Pay attention to Ezra (440 BC)<sup>1</sup> as he recounts the builders laying the foundation of the second Temple following the seventy years of Babylonian captivity:

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<sup>1</sup>Ezra begins his book by giving the data concerning the events that transpired about ninety-eight years earlier during the era of Haggai (520 BC). Ezra takes up the history of Judah from 539 BC to 457 BC for an

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. <sup>11</sup> With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: “**He is good; his love to Israel endures forever.**” And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. (Ezra 3:10-11)

As we seek to unravel the heart of this psalm, we need to read the psalm as a psalm in order to grasp the intent of the author. Even though there was an initial history behind this psalm, we cannot rule out another *Sitz-im-Leben* (life setting), which setting also has messianic overtones. Scholars are not in agreement as to time of writing. Yet, this uncertainty does not take away from its use in any age. Some scholars think this psalm to be post-exilic (after the seventy years of Babylonian captivity). Others have postulated, or suggested, the idea that this psalm was written by David. We may never know the exact *Sitz-im-Leben*, but this lack of identification does not distract from the overall import of this poetic work. This psalm is written in such a way that we can apply the words to our own way of life. The biblical principles set forth in this Holy Spirit inspired piece of poetic work can be applied to Christians in any century.

To begin with, we observe that this psalm has two major sections (Psalm 118:5-18 and 19-28).<sup>2</sup> These two sections are set within a framework of praise (118:1-4 and 29):

Psalm 118:1-4

Psalm 118:29

<p><b>Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.</b> <sup>2</sup><u>Let Israel</u> <u>say:</u> “His love endures forever.” <sup>3</sup> <u>Let the house of</u> <u>Aaron say:</u> “His love endures forever.” <sup>4</sup> <u>Let those who fear</u> <u>the LORD say:</u> “His love endures forever.”</p>	<p><b>Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.</b></p>
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The introduction to this psalm begins with a threefold admonition to Israel, priests, and God-fearers. We can hardly read this admonition without recalling the words of the psalmist in 117:1-2: “Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. <sup>2</sup>For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD.”<sup>a</sup> Three times in Psalm 118:2-4, the psalmist issues his applause for God’s love: “**His love endures for ever.**” Israel, priests, and God-fearers are exhorted to give thanks for the goodness of God’s “steadfast

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additional eighty-two years. No book covers the history of Judah from 457 to 445 BC, which means that we have twelve years of history unaccounted.

<sup>2</sup>See Keil & Delitzsch, *Psalms*, Commentary on the Old Testament (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publisher, 1996, originally published in 1866-91), 721, This division is also set forth by David L. Cooper, *The Eternal God Revealing Himself: To Suffering Israel and to Lost Humanity* (Los Angeles, California: Biblical Research Society, 1928, 1963), 178-185.

<sup>a</sup> Hebrew *Hallelu Yah*

love” (אהבה, *hăsdw*). The word for *love* is תודה (*hě·sěd*) which word calls for thankfulness from the community of believers. Today, we, as Christians, should give thanks to God for His goodness that exhibits itself in love “in” and “through” His Son Jesus.

It appears, as stated above by some scholars, that this psalm depicts a “festive procession” led by priests and Levites who sing verses 1-19 on the way to Jerusalem to the Temple where animal sacrifices are offered to God. Verses 1-4, no doubt, were sung as they started on their journey. On the other hand, verses 5-18 were sung during the time of their journey to the Temple. Upon their arrival they sang verse 19: “Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.” After this request, it is possible that the priests and Levites sang verses 20-27:

This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter. <sup>21</sup>I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. <sup>22</sup>The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; <sup>23</sup>the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. <sup>24</sup>This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. <sup>25</sup>O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success. <sup>26</sup>Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you.<sup>a</sup> <sup>27</sup>The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up<sup>b</sup> to the horns of the altar.

Following this singing by the priest and Levites, the people sang: “You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you” (118:28). Then, all joined in together to sing about His goodness and His Love: “**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever**” (118:29).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, James L. Mays, Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation at Union Theological Seminary, in Virginia, presents a different format for this psalm.<sup>4</sup> He explains the uncertainty as to the identity of the writer and how this psalm was utilized among the Israelites. He sets forth the complexity of the psalm as he seeks to unfold its relevancy among God’s people:

The more one ponders this complex psalm, the more insistent the question about the identity of the celebrant becomes. Who is the one who comes in the name of the LORD and with a congregation of the people of the LORD, observes a thanksgiving on the day the LORD made by turning the rejected into the chief cornerstone? Attempts to answer the question in terms of the original occasion for which the psalm was composed result in a variety of answers. The psalm sketches a theological and liturgical role; it does not name a name. It is only when the psalm is read in connection with some known use that the role can be related to a name.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> The Hebrew is plural.

<sup>b</sup> Or *Bind the festal sacrifice with ropes / and take it*

<sup>3</sup>This is the outline that David Cooper (1886-1965), Founder and President, Biblical Research Society, puts forward in his excellent book *The Eternal God Revealing Himself to Suffering Israel and to Lost Humanity* (Los Angeles, California: Biblical Research Society, 1928, 1963), 178. The above outline is set forth in Cooper’s book, which outline is put forth by Keil and Delitzsch, *Psalms*, Vol., 5, Commentary on the Old Testament (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1866-91, 1996). He writes, “It is without any doubt a post-exilic song,” *Ibid.* 720. Cooper, so it seems, adheres to this date.

<sup>4</sup>James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 374.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 378.

Whatever the original historical background of the psalm or the various interpretations placed upon this marvelous work of the Holy Spirit, we are, at all times, conscious that this psalm is for the whole of God's community of believers. This psalm has given comfort to many of God's children who have undergone many trials and tribulations for their faith. Martin Luther (1483-1546), in the preface of his sixty-page exposition of this psalm,<sup>6</sup> dictated this work to Fredrick, Abbot of Saint Giles of Nuremberg.<sup>7</sup> In his preface, he pours out his soul as to the significance of this psalm in his own life. We can feel the passion as he penned the following words:

This is my own beloved psalm. Although the entire Psalter and all of Holy Scripture are dear to me as my only comfort and source of life, I fell in love with this psalm especially. Therefore I call it my own. When emperors and kings, the wise and the learned, and even saints could not aid me, this psalm proved a friend and helped me out of many great troubles. As a result, it is dearer to me than all the wealth, honor, and power of the pope, the Turk, and the emperor. I would be most unwilling to trade this psalm for all of it.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the psalms are not sung or read in many gatherings of God's people today. It is not just the psalms that are neglected; it is the whole of God's written Revelation to the community of God's family. Luther's words concerning the neglect of Scripture in his preface to Psalm 118 is worth citing. The following words lay naked the neglect of Holy Scripture in the lives of many of God's people:

The neglect of Scripture, even by spiritual leaders, is one of the greatest evils in the world. Everything else, arts or literature, is pursued and practiced day and night, and there is no end of labor and effort; but Holy Scripture is neglected as though there were no need of it. Those who condescend to read it want to absorb everything at once. There has never been an art or a book on earth that everyone has so quickly mastered as the Holy Scriptures. But its words are not, as some think, mere literature; they are the words of life, intended not for speculation and fantasy but for life and action.<sup>9</sup>

If we could only grasp the idea that Scripture is not just simply literature, but rather it is God's disclosure of Himself and His will to humanity, this vision, in and of itself, would change the moral tone of our behavior toward God and humanity. The Huguenots in France suffered untold agony and persecution for their faith in Christ.<sup>10</sup> Just a brief look at some of the individuals who suffered, we discover that they found comfort from Psalm 118. One such individual was Louis Rank who was a pastor. He was the brother of a pastor who narrowly

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<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther, "The Beautiful Confitemini" in *Luther's Works, Selected Psalms III*, vol., 14 (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 45-106.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>10</sup>They were members of the Protestant Reformed Church of France (French Calvinists) from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The hatred among the Catholics became so bitter that between August 24 and October 3 (1572), there were approximately 30,000 killed, which became known as the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre.

escaped the scaffold by flight. Rowland E. Prothero (1851-1937) wrote about Rank and his reliance upon Psalm 118:24 as he was led to his execution:

In 1745, Louis Rank, the brother of a minister who only saved himself from the scaffold by flight, a young man of twenty-five years of age, and himself a minister of the Protestant religion, was arrested at Livron. He was thrown into prison at Valence, and condemned to die at Grenoble, March 2, 1745. In vain the president of the court had offered him his life if he would abjure [renounce] his faith. He rejected all offers. His sentence was that he should be hung in the market place at Die, and that his head should be severed from his body and exposed on a gibbet<sup>11</sup> opposite the little inn at Livron, where he had been arrested. On his way to the scaffold he sang verse 24 of Psalm cxviii., [118]—

Here now is the happy day  
For which we have been  
waiting.  
Sing praises to God who gives  
us joy And pleasures  
unabating<sup>12</sup>

His voice was drowned by the roll of drums. With his eyes raised to heaven he reached the foot of the scaffold, fell on his knees in prayer, then mounted the ladder and met his death.<sup>13</sup>

Prothero relates another incident of another pastor, Francois Rochette, who was executed in 1762. According to Prothero, Rochette belonged to the last of the martyred pastors.<sup>14</sup> He writes about his tragic end with the citing of Psalm 118:24:

Petitions were presented to the Duc de Richelieu and to Marie Adelaide, Princess of France, the daughter of Louis XV, who had shown herself inclined to mercy. All was in vain. Rochette was tried at Toulouse in November 1761; in the following February the sentence of death was pronounced. He was offered his life if he would abjure [disavow] his faith. He refused, and on February 20, 1762, the sentence was executed. To the last Rochette encouraged his companions. Through the crowded streets, thronged with spectators, the car was drawn to the place of execution in the Place du Salin. Rochette mounted the scaffold with a firm step, chanting as he went, “This is the day which the Lord hath made.” Etc., Ps cxviii.24 [118:24].<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>A gibbet is an upright post with a projecting arm for hanging the bodies of executed criminals as a warning to those who refuse to conform to established authority.

<sup>12</sup>This citation appears in French. The English translation of the French is copied from James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms: Psalms 107-150, An Expositional Commentary*, vol., 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 963.

<sup>13</sup>Roland E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life* (London, Edinburgh, Dublin and New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1903), 206-207.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 208-209. For additional stories of individuals who relied upon Psalm 118 in life, see Herbert Lockyer, Sr., *Psalms: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1993), 516-534.

## OUTLINE OF PSALM 118

As stated above, we observe that this psalm begins and ends with an imperative: “Give thanks to the LORD” (118:1, 29). After the introductory statement, the psalmist breaks out in a threefold invitation to Israel,<sup>16</sup> the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord:

Let Israel say: “His love endures forever.”<sup>3</sup> Let the house of Aaron say: “His love endures forever.”<sup>4</sup> Let those who fear the LORD say: “His love endures forever.” (118:2-4)

Because God is good and His love endures forever, he calls upon others to say, “His love endures forever.” Repetition calls attention to the faithfulness of God’s love. The worshipping community then was commanded to voice God’s love. We, today, as a worshipping community, are still commanded to voice: “His love endures forever.” The word for “love” comes from the Hebrew word **חֶסֶד** (*hě·sěd*, “steadfast love”). This word *love* calls for the entire community—Israel, the house of Aaron, and God fearers—to engage in thanksgiving for His “steadfast love.” The thought that Jesus sang this psalm with His disciples should make this psalm more precious to us, especially, when we are conscious of Calvary (John 3:16-18). Jesus and His disciples concluded their final meal together by singing: “**Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever**” (Psalm 118:1).

The words “Let Israel say” should remind us that God is interested in testimony. The psalmist speaks of *public* praise (Israel), *priestly* praise (the house of Aaron), and *personal* praise (those who fear the Lord). For the most part, this psalm is unique. In vv. 5-18, we observe that the first person pronoun “I” is employed fifteen times. The psalmist cries: “In my anguish **I** cried to the LORD, and he answered by setting me free” (118:5). Whatever the circumstances in life were of this writer, he called out to God in his time of distress and the Lord answered him. He immediately voices his dependence upon God in spite of what others may do to him. We, as children of God, need to model our reliance and confidence and trust upon God as the psalmist did in his troublesome times. Listen to him as he pours out his soul:

**The LORD is with me;** I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? **The LORD is with me;** he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies. (118:6-7)

We stand in admiration as he cries out: “The Lord is with me.” Do we, too, exhibit this kind of faith when we experience troubles in our own lives? The psalmist exhibited the same kind of faith that Paul, an Apostle of Jesus, expresses in his Epistle to the Romans:

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.<sup>34</sup> Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.<sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?<sup>36</sup> As it is written: “**For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.**”<sup>c</sup><sup>37</sup> No,

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<sup>16</sup>I am indebted to James L. Mays for his contribution to an analysis of the structure of this psalm. See James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Know Press, 1994), 373-81.

<sup>c</sup> Psalm 44:22

in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,<sup>d</sup> neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:33-39)

Once again, we observe the psalmist's reaction to his anguish—refuge in God. Pay attention to the agony of his thoughts and his answer to the outcome of his trials:

**It is better to take refuge in the LORD** than to trust in man. <sup>9</sup> **It is better to take refuge in the LORD** than to trust in princes (Psalm 118:8-9).

Just a perusal of 118:6-9 should cause us, once more, to rejoice. The thought that Jesus and His disciples sang this song as they concluded the Passover meal together (Matthew 26:30). In spite of the Crucifixion before Him, he could still sing: “The Lord is with Me” (118:6 and 7). This psalm emphasizes the need to rely upon God: “It is better to take refuge in the Lord” (118:7 and 8) than to rely upon humanity. God is faithful in all His dealings. The way of the Cross paved the way to God's glory and, at the same time, demonstrated His holiness and His justice. The Trinity mapped out the way of the Cross from eternity.<sup>17</sup> Jesus could sing this psalm with absolute trust in God the Father, even though His death was just hours away. Does our faith constrain us to give testimony to the faithfulness of God before His people and to the world? Do we trust in God? The more we trust God, the more our fears diminish as we confront individuals who do not put their trust in the Creator of the universe. Artur Weiser captures the thrust of the psalmist's trust in God with his remarks:

Genuine faith can grow only where man has completely ceased to trust in men and hanker after earthly powers and temporal means of power, only where every human support has broken down and trust in God has become the only living force. This is the spiritual atmosphere in which the courage and the clarity of such an attitude of faith can be gained and preserved.<sup>18</sup>

The Book of Hebrews, written before AD 70, was written to bring encouragement to Christians undergoing persecution from the religious leaders of the nation of Judah as well as Rome. In spite of persecution, they were encouraged to remain faithful to Jesus as God's Anointed One for the salvation of both Jew and Gentile. This psalm is still appropriate in any society and in any century. It is significant that the author of Hebrews cites from Psalm 118:6 and 7 to put their trust in God:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”<sup>a</sup> <sup>6</sup> So we say with confidence, “**The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?**”<sup>b</sup> (Hebrews 13:5-6)

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<sup>d</sup> Or *nor heavenly rulers*

<sup>17</sup>For a detailed account of the Cross in eternity, see Dallas Burdette, “Jesus' View of the Cross: Slain from the Creation of the World,” in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Jesus and Our Privileges*, Vol.,1 (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 58-69.

<sup>18</sup>Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962) 726.

<sup>a</sup> Deut. 31:6

One thousand years after this psalm was written, we again find this psalm called forth by the author of Hebrews to bring comfort to those undergoing persecution. The psalmist introduces his psalm with three repetitious phrases (triplets). Again, following his cry of anguish, he uses triplets (118:10-12) before resuming his strength from his ordeal that has come from the Lord. Listen once more as he continues his source of power with triplets:

All the nations surrounded me, but **in the name of the LORD** I cut them off. <sup>11</sup>They surrounded me on every side, but **in the name of the LORD** I cut them off. <sup>12</sup>They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; **in the name of the LORD** I cut them off. (Psalm 118:10-12)

The author of this psalm uses doublets and triplets in order to emphasize his dependence upon the Lord. James L. Mays' comments are helpful in seeking to understand the triplets as well as doublets employed by the psalmist as he comes to grips with his innermost thoughts of the One who can deliver. Mays writes with plainness:

Elements of the narrative recur in verses 13 and 18. The section has three parts, each bears witness to the significance and effect of the LORD's salvation. The parts are held together by repetitions and by an interweaving of motifs. The pair of doublets in verses 6-9 contrast reliance on the LORD with either threat or help from human sources; the motif "mortals" (Hebrew man) connects the two. The name of the LORD links verse 5 to the doublets, appearing in each poetic line. The second part (vv. 10-14) begins with three similar lines, featuring the motif of "the name of the LORD." The motif identifies the real source of strength that enables the celebrant to resist the power of surrounding nations, a motif that continues the emphasis on human power in contrast to the Lord.<sup>19</sup>

The psalmist reveals his moment of weakness in verses 13-14. His encounter with tragedy almost pushed him back. He lays bare his inward thoughts when he writes: "I was pushed back and about to fall" (118:13). When he was about to go over the edge, the Lord intervened. He then cries out: "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation" (118:14). Asaph, too, expressed his doubts concerning God's concern as he penned his psalm of despair that ended in reliance upon God:

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. <sup>3</sup>For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (73:2-3).<sup>20</sup>

Again, as we examine Psalm 118, do we, too, feel our moment of weakness? Yet, like the psalmist, we come to realize that God is still God in spite of misfortune in our lives. Following his confession that God is his strength and his song and his salvation, he expresses his feelings through shouts of joy and victory (118:15). His song issues in three repetitious phrases in order to demonstrate that God is with him. Listen to the psalmist as he sings:

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<sup>b</sup> Psalm 118:6, 7

<sup>19</sup>James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 374.

<sup>20</sup>See Dallas Burdett, Chapter 6, (pp. 94-101) "From Doubt to Certainty," for an analysis of Psalm 73.

Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: “**The LORD’s right hand** has done mighty things! <sup>16</sup>**The LORD’s right hand** is lifted high; **the LORD’s right hand** has done mighty things!” (118:15-16)

Do we feel this way? Do shouts of joy and victory resound in our lives? We, too, can say that “The Lord’s right hand” is with us. It is in this vein that Paul writes to the Romans (8:33-39), as cited above. Once more, the psalmist expresses his optimism concerning life and death. His trust in God leads him to accept the belief that God will not let him die but live. The writer soars into ecstasy as he expresses his confidence in God’s providence:

I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. <sup>18</sup>The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death. (Psalm 118:17-18)

Even though today, we are about 3000 years from the original *Sitz-im-Leben* (situation in life), we can still exclaim, or cry out, the words of the psalmist in our own culture and times. Listen to Jesus as He spoke to Martha, sister of Lazarus, concerning life and death:

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup> Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup> “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ,<sup>b</sup> the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” (John 11:21-27)

Remember, this psalm (118) is the concluding psalm in the group known as the Egyptian Hallel Psalms. We cannot read this psalm without a consciousness of The Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1-18), which is also described as the Song of Moses and Miriam. Psalm 118 has parallels found in Exodus 15. For example, consider the following comments about the Lord:

Exodus 15:2

The Lord is my strength  
and my song; he has become  
my salvation.

Psalm 118:14

The Lord is my strength and  
my song; he has become my  
salvation.

Even though the next example is not verbatim, we observe a central motif, or theme, from Exodus 15, which is made use of by the psalmist.

Exodus 15:6

Your right hand, O LORD,  
was majestic in power. Your  
right hand, O LORD, shattered  
the enemy.

Psalm 118:15-16

Shouts of joy and victory  
resound in the tents of the  
righteous: “The LORD’s right  
hand has done mighty things!

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<sup>b</sup> Or *Messiah*

The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!"

Another correlation is found in the use of "my God" in both Exodus 15 and Psalm 118. Pay attention to the correspondence between the two:

Exodus 15:2

The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father God, and I will exalt him.

Psalm 118:28

You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you.

A glance reading of these two chapters unfolds a relationship between the thought patterns of Moses and the thought patterns of the psalmist in their dependence upon God. Again, even though the psalmist does not cite to-the-letter from Moses, nevertheless, we discover the same subject, or topic, that is to say, the steadfast love of God calls for loyalty and trust.

Exodus 15:13

In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.

Psalm 118:1-4, 29

Give thanks to the LORD for he is good; his love endures forever. Let Israel say: "His love endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say: "His love endures forever." Let those who fear the LORD say: "His love endures forever."

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Moses wrote the Book of Exodus in 1445 BC. Thirty-nine years later, he wrote the Book of Deuteronomy (1406 BC). Shortly before his death in 1406 BC, he wrote another song that is recorded in Deuteronomy (Chapter 32). In this chapter he foretold the day that God would bring in the Gentiles in order to provoke the Gentiles to jealousy. Moses writes:

"I will hide my face from them," he said, "and see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful. <sup>21</sup>They made me jealous by what is no god and angered me with their worthless idols. **I will make them envious by those who are not a people; I will make them angry by a nation that has no understanding.**" (Deuteronomy 32:20-21)

Deuteronomy 32:15-18 records Israel's rebellion against God's covenant stipulations. Paul, 3000 years later, applied Deuteronomy 32:21 to his own day. He writes about the reception of the Gentiles by God as foretold by Moses:

Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, "**I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.**"<sup>k</sup> (Romans 10:19)

Just a little over 1400 years later, the events foretold by Moses came to pass. Moses also writes about the utter destruction of the old covenant world of Judaism, which destruction of the kingdom of Judah came to an end in AD 70. Pay attention to the prophecy of Moses:

**It is mine to avenge; I will repay.** In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them. <sup>36</sup> **The LORD will judge his people** and have compassion on his servants when he sees their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free. (Deuteronomy 32:35-36)

Once more, how did first-century Christians understand Deuteronomy 32:35-36? Shortly before the destruction of the Holy City in AD 70, the author of the Book of Hebrews, written before AD 70, cites Deuteronomy 32:35 and 36 as about to be fulfilled:

For we know him who said, "**It is mine to avenge; I will repay,**"<sup>a</sup> and again, "**The Lord will judge his people.**"<sup>b 31</sup> It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:30-31)

During the "last days" of the kingdom of Judah, many prophets prophesied concerning the coming of the promised Messiah. It is significant that the author of Psalm 118 also calls attention to the coming Messiah. Is it any wonder that he writes: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever" (118:29)? Remember Jesus and His Apostles sang and reflected upon this psalm as they completed the Passover meal. One of the most outstanding verses in this psalm is verse 22. This section is one of the most breathtaking of the messianic elements in the Old Testament writings. The psalmist, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." (Psalm 118:22). Derek Kidner's (1913-2008), Old Testament scholar and ordained Anglican priest, comments are well worth citing as to the original *Sitz im Leben* and the *Sitz im Leben* in the first century:

**21-23. The chief cornerstone.** Here is the first hint that in the ring of foes (10ff.) were the *builders* themselves, the men of power in Israel. Isaiah shows them rejecting God's cornerstone in his own day for their 'refuge of lies' (Is. 28:15f), and the New testament leaves no doubt that this stone foreshadowed Christ (Mt. 21:42; Rom. 9:32f.; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet.2:6ff). God's *marvelous* vindication of Him was by the resurrection, as Peter implies in Acts 4:10f.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>k</sup> Deut. 32:21

<sup>a</sup> Deut. 32:35

<sup>b</sup> Deut. 32:36; Psalm 135:14

<sup>21</sup>Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary on Books III-V of the Psalms* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 415.

In the New Testament writings, “The stone the builders rejected” is the same One “who comes in the name of the Lord” (118:26). During Jesus’ final week, He entered Jerusalem with ecstatic crowds welcoming Him. Matthew writes about the reaction of the crowd:

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them.<sup>7</sup> They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.<sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.<sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, “Hosanna<sup>b</sup> to the Son of David!” “**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!**”<sup>c</sup> “Hosanna<sup>d</sup> in the highest!” (Matthew 21:6-9)

Mark, in his Gospel, cites Psalm 118:26 as having reference to Jesus:

Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna!<sup>a</sup>” “**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!**”<sup>b</sup> <sup>10</sup> “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest!” (Mark 11:9-10)

Both Luke (19:38) and John (12:13) call attention to the messianic character of Psalm 118:26. All four Gospels give notice to 118:26. Yet, another messianic prophecy concerning the Messiah is found in 118:22. The psalmist writes: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.” Matthew records an encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders (Matthew 21:28-46). Following a parable (The Parable of the Two Sons) against the chief priests and the Pharisees, He cites 118:22 in opposition to them. Matthew writes:

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘**The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone<sup>a</sup>; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes<sup>b</sup>?**’<sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.<sup>44</sup> He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”<sup>c</sup> <sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. <sup>46</sup> They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. (Matthew 21:42-46)

After the Crucifixion and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus, Peter and John stood before the rulers, elders, and teachers of the Law (Acts 4:5). During this confrontation, Peter addressed this crowd concerning the identity of the One whom they crucified with a reference to Psalm 118:22:

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! <sup>9</sup> If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, <sup>10</sup> then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of

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<sup>b</sup> A Hebrew expression meaning “Save!” which became an exclamation of praise; also in verse 15

<sup>c</sup> Psalm 118:26

<sup>d</sup> A Hebrew expression meaning “Save!” which became an exclamation of praise; also in verse 15

<sup>a</sup> A Hebrew expression meaning “Save!” which became an exclamation of praise; also in verse 10

<sup>b</sup> Psalm 118:25, 26

<sup>a</sup> Or *cornerstone*

<sup>b</sup> Psalm 118:22, 23

<sup>c</sup> Some manuscripts do not have verse 44.

Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. <sup>11</sup> He is **‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.’**<sup>a,b</sup> <sup>12</sup> Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:8-12)

Peter, toward the end of his earthly pilgrimage, gave another defense concerning Jesus as the coming One prophesied by the Old Testament writings. In his First Epistle that he addressed to God’s elect who were scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythynia, he focuses on numerous Old Testament citations, which citations also included Psalm 118:22. We should give careful attention as to how he established the truthfulness of Jesus as God’s Anointed One for the salvation of the world through His Atonement and Resurrection from the dead. Peter writes with intensity as he recalls this One who died for the sins of lost humanity:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—<sup>5</sup> you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For in Scripture it says: **“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”**<sup>a</sup> <sup>7</sup> Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, **“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,”**<sup>b,c</sup> <sup>8</sup> and, **“A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”**<sup>d</sup> They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. <sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:4-10)

Peter testifies to what God accomplished “in” and “through” Jesus as Messiah. From the above citations, we observe that he cites from Isaiah 28:16, from Psalm 118:22, and from Isaiah 8:14-15 as having reference to the Servant Messiah. Listen to Isaiah (739 BC) as he predicts some who would trust in Him and some who would reject Him:

Isaiah 28:16

Isaiah 8:14-15

So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: **“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.”**

He will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and **a rock that makes them fall.** And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. <sup>15</sup> Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be

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<sup>a</sup> Or *cornerstone*

<sup>b</sup> Psalm 118:22

<sup>a</sup> Isaiah 28:16

<sup>b</sup> Or *cornerstone*

<sup>c</sup> Psalm 118:22

<sup>d</sup> Isaiah 8:14

snared and captured.

As we approach the end of this psalm, we recall verse 17: “I will not die but live.” Whatever the life situation was of the psalmist, we, as Christians, recall the words of Jesus:

Jesus said to her [Martha], “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;<sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”<sup>27</sup> “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ,<sup>b</sup> the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” (John 11:25-27)

Finally, we hear the psalmist crying out: “This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24). In its original setting, this may have had reference to the Sabbath. Kidner remarks:

The occasion which the psalm marked in Old Testament times was evidently a festival (*the day which the Lord has made* (24) could be a Sabbath, but the word for festal procession points to its being one of the three annual pilgrim feasts, Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles), and we can glimpse two companies at this point: one already in the Temple court, greeting another which is arriving with the king. *Blessed be he who enters* is an individual welcome, but *We bless you* is addressed to the many who are with him.<sup>22</sup>

This psalm has a long history throughout church history. We also need to reflect upon the night that Jesus and His disciples joined in the singing of the psalm. What did this psalm mean to them? What does this psalm mean to us? How has this psalm been employed down through the ages? James Mays discloses the place of this psalm in the Christian community down through the centuries. Listen to him as he gives information that makes it easier for us to realize the greatness of this psalm in our own lives:

In the church’s liturgical use of Psalm 118, “the day the LORD has made” (v. 24) has become the day of rejoicing and gladness over the resurrection of Jesus. In practice, the psalm was associated first with Sunday as the special day of the week for Christians and then, as the observance of the Christian year developed, with Easter as the special Sunday of the year. Used in this liturgical context, the psalm celebrates Easter as the day the Lord has made, and the resurrection of Jesus is hailed as the Lord’s doing, marvelous in our eyes. The salvation of Jesus from death becomes the great event by which transformations are worked in those whose lives are centered in him. Read, sung, and heard this way, the psalm becomes the language of the risen Jesus and of his community, celebrating the wonder that God himself has become our salvation through the resurrection.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting upon the last Passover meal that Jesus had with His disciples should make this psalm exceedingly precious to us. Just the thought that they sang this psalm together should

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<sup>b</sup> Or *Messiah*

<sup>22</sup>Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 415.

<sup>23</sup>James L. Mays, *Psalms*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1994), 380.

make us want to examine the import of this psalm in our own relationship to God. We cannot read this psalm without observing how it begins and ends with thanksgiving to God. This psalm was the last of the Hallel psalms (113-118). This psalm is a messianic psalm. We cannot read this poetic work without reflecting upon individual verses cited in the New Testament by Jesus, Paul, and Peter. Jesus' crucifixion was very near at hand. Yet, we know that Jesus and His band of followers sang "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; His love endures forever" (Psalm 118:1). J. Clinton McCann, Jr. concludes his study of Psalm 118 with a brief deliberation upon this most heart-touching psalm:

Regardless of the circumstances of its origin and original use, Psalm 118 became a part of the Hallel collection, which was used at Passover, a recollection of the exodus and an anticipation of God's continuing presence and ongoing help (see Commentary of Psalms 113; 114; 115; 116; 117).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *Psalms*, The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, volume 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 1155.