

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Leader's Guide, Lesson Nine

PSALM 118

The Rejected Stone Becomes the Cornerstone

Lesson at a glance

Psalm 118 is the last of the Hallel, the psalms Israel sang at the great feasts and especially at Passover, which means Jesus and the disciples almost certainly sang it together on the night He was betrayed. In its own setting it is a thanksgiving liturgy: a man who has survived what should have killed him leads a procession to the temple gates and gives public thanks while the congregation answers him line by line. The lesson walks through the psalm as the piece of worship it is, and then follows it into the New Testament in four steps: the crowds shouting verses 25 and 26 at the triumphal entry, Jesus quoting verse 22 to the chief priests at the end of the parable of the tenants, Peter quoting the same verse to the Sanhedrin in Acts 4 with one word added, and Peter's use of it in his first letter, where the rejected stone gathers living stones into a spiritual house. That last step is the destination. The class should leave understanding that the spiritual house is the Lord's church, that they are in the wall, and that no one gets to walk past this stone.

Goals for this session

First, that each person would read Psalm 118 as the worship service it was, hearing the different voices in it, rather than as a string of famous verses pulled out of context.

Second, that the class would see how one verse of one psalm runs through the Gospels, Acts, and the letters, and would learn to trace an image through the whole Bible for themselves.

Third, that everyone would understand clearly that the spiritual house of 1 Peter 2 is the church of Christ, made of people, not a building of brick and glass and not a temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem at some future date.

Fourth, that each Christian would take up their place in that building as a working stone rather than a spectator, and that anyone who has not yet been buried with Christ in baptism would be gently invited to obey the gospel.

Preparing to lead

Read Psalm 118 out loud several times, and read it once with someone else so that you actually hear the antiphonal shape of verses 1 to 4 and verses 19 to 20. Then read Matthew 21 in full, Mark 12:1 to 12,

Luke 19:28 to 44, Acts 3 and 4 straight through, Ephesians 2, and 1 Peter 2:1 to 10. The lesson quotes small pieces of a great deal of Scripture, and you will teach it far better if you have read each passage whole.

Read Isaiah 28:16, Isaiah 8:14 to 15, and Daniel 2:31 to 45. Peter has all of these in mind at once in 1 Peter 2:4 to 8, and a leader who has read them will be able to answer the question that always comes up about where the other stone quotations are from.

Pray over the names in your class. Pray especially for anyone in the room who has been discarded by people who should have valued them, because the central image of this psalm will land on them harder than on anyone else. Pray also for anyone who is a builder in your congregation, including yourself, since Jesus applied this verse to religious leaders holding the Scriptures in their hands.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

Being rejected. The stone image is comforting in the abstract and painful in particular. Somebody in your class has been passed over, let go, divorced, or written off, and this psalm will reopen it. That is not a problem to be managed; it is the reason the psalm is in the Bible. But do not turn the rejection into the point. The psalm does not say the stone was valuable all along and finally got noticed. It says, "This is the LORD's doing." Keep the weight on God's verdict rather than on the stone's hidden worth.

The exclusive claim of Acts 4:12. Question 11 puts a hard sentence in front of the class: there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. Many members have relatives, coworkers, and neighbors of other faiths or of none, and this verse costs them something. Do not soften it and do not let anyone be flippant about it. Say plainly that Peter said it under oath before a hostile court, and that the same Peter spent his life inviting people in. The right response to Acts 4:12 is not swagger; it is urgency and kindness.

The church and the building. Some congregations have deep emotional attachments to a physical building, and some have recently lost one or sold one. When you make the point that the spiritual house is people, do it without any scorn for the meetinghouse. A building is a useful tool and it is not the temple. Acts 7:48 and Acts 17:24 make the point in Scripture's own words, and it is best to let those verses make it rather than to make it yourself.

Expectations about a rebuilt temple. Some in your class have heard that a temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem and sacrifices resumed. Handle this positively and never by naming groups. The lesson does the work simply by asking what 1 Peter 2:5 and Ephesians 2:21 to 22 say is happening right now, in the present tense, to Christians who are alive. A person who sees that the temple is already being built out of living stones does not need to be argued out of anything.

The last clause of 1 Peter 2:8. Someone will notice the words "as they were destined to do" and may take them to mean God decreed that certain people would disbelieve. Read the whole verse aloud slowly: "They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do." The stumbling is the appointed consequence, and the reason given for it in the same sentence is their disobedience. God

has appointed that those who reject His Son will stumble over Him; He has not appointed who will reject Him. If the class wants more, take them to 1 Timothy 2:3 to 4, 2 Peter 3:9, and Acts 17:30, and then move on. Do not let this one clause eat the hour.

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Psalm 118 aloud antiphonally, with you reading the leader's lines and the class reading the refrain in verses 1 to 4 and 29. Doing it is worth more than explaining it.

Five minutes: warm-up. Ask the class to name something thrown out or written off that turned out to be the most valuable thing in the room.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 5 (the stone and whose doing it was), 9 (the parable of the tenants and Jesus quoting the psalm to the builders), 10 (Peter before the Sanhedrin and the word he adds), and 13 (the titles of the church and the spiritual house). If time runs out, protect 10 and 13. Question 8b, the psalm sung on the night of the betrayal, should at least be read aloud even if it is not discussed.

Notes on key questions

Question 2. The three groups in verses 1 to 4 are Israel, the house of Aaron, and "those who fear the LORD." That last phrase is the Old Testament's usual way of speaking of Gentiles who had attached themselves to the God of Israel (compare Acts 10:2 and 13:16, where Luke uses the same expression). It is worth pointing out that the psalm has already made room for outsiders before it ever gets to the stone, because that is where 1 Peter 2:10 will end up. On verses 5 to 9: the singer called, God answered and set him free, and the conclusion he draws is not that his enemies were weak but that it is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man or in princes. Hebrews 13:5 to 6 quotes verse 6 to Christians who are being told to keep their lives free from the love of money and to be content, because God has said He will never leave them. The logic is worth naming: contentment rests on the presence of God, and the presence of God makes human threats survivable.

Question 5. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" is literally "has become the head of the corner" in Hebrew. The cornerstone was the block that tied two walls together and set the line for every course above it, so a wrong stone in that position ruined the whole building. Whatever the original singer had in mind, whether himself, a king his people had written off, or the little despised

nation of Israel among the empires, verse 23 is where he puts the emphasis: "This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." Make sure the class sees that the verse is about God's verdict overturning the builders' verdict, not about a stone that was secretly wonderful. On verse 24, "This is the day that the LORD has made": in context this is the day of the deliverance and the thanksgiving procession, not a general remark about waking up in a good mood. Recovering the original sense makes the verse larger, not smaller. On why a psalm about being surrounded suddenly turns to masonry, let the class work at it; the honest answer is that the singer is reaching for a picture of reversal, and God gave him one that would fit His Son.

Question 6. "Save us, we pray" in verse 25 is hoshi'ah-nna in Hebrew, which comes into Greek and then into English as "Hosanna." Originally it is a cry for help. By the first century it had become a shout of acclamation, roughly the way "hallelujah" functions for us. Both senses are present at the triumphal entry, and that is exactly the tension of the scene: the crowd is praising and asking to be rescued at the same time, and they mostly wanted rescuing from Rome. Verse 26, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD," was in its own setting a priestly blessing on the worshiper arriving at the gates. Note for yourself, and mention if it fits, that Jesus quotes verse 26 back at Jerusalem in Matthew 23:39 and Luke 13:35.

Question 8. Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26 both record that they sang a hymn before going out to the Mount of Olives. Later Jewish sources describe the Hallel, Psalms 113 to 118, as the psalms sung at the Passover meal, with the second portion sung after the meal. We cannot prove from Scripture alone which psalm they sang, and you should say so honestly, but the case is strong and it is worth pausing on. Read Psalm 118:17 to 18 aloud and then ask what "I shall not die, but I shall live" would have meant in the mouth of Jesus that night. Then read verse 22 the same way. Do not over-dramatize; just read it and let the room be quiet for a moment.

Question 9. In the parable of the tenants the owner is God, the vineyard is Israel (Isaiah 5:1 to 7 stands behind it), the tenants are the leaders entrusted with the nation, the servants are the prophets, and the son is Jesus. Matthew 21:45 says the chief priests and Pharisees knew exactly who He meant. The added line in Matthew 21:44 and Luke 20:18 draws on Isaiah 8:14 to 15 and Daniel 2:34 to 35: the one who falls on the stone is broken, and the one the stone falls on is crushed. The warning is that this stone cannot be neutral ground. On Matthew 21:43, the kingdom being given to "a people producing its fruits" is not about one nation replacing another by race; it is about the kingdom passing to those who bear fruit, which the New Testament identifies as the church made of Jew and Gentile together (Ephesians 2:11 to 22; 1 Peter 2:9 to 10). Head off any suggestion that God is finished with Jewish people as individuals; Romans 11:1 to 5 and 11:23 say the opposite, and the door stands open on the same terms as it does for everyone.

Question 10. Peter and John have been arrested after the healing of the lame man at the temple gate. The court in Acts 4:5 to 6 includes the rulers, elders, scribes, Annas, Caiaphas, and the high priestly family, that is, the men who ran the temple. Then comes the detail the question is after. Psalm 118:22 says "the stone that the builders rejected." Acts 4:11 says "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders." Peter puts the pronoun in. He is not explaining a psalm; he is charging a court with it, in the

building they administered, using a song they had sung all their lives. Note also Acts 4:13: the council recognized that these were uneducated, common men, and their explanation was that they had been with Jesus. That is a good sentence to leave hanging in the room.

Question 12. 1 Peter 2:4 to 8 has four Old Testament stones in eight verses. Verse 6 quotes Isaiah 28:16, the chosen and precious cornerstone laid in Zion. Verse 7 quotes Psalm 118:22. Verse 8 quotes Isaiah 8:14, the stone of stumbling and rock of offense. Jesus is the living stone, and Christians are living stones, which is a phrase no builder would use and no one but Peter did. On verse 8, see the note above under sensitive topics: the verse itself supplies the reason they stumble, which is that they disobey the word. Keep the class in the sentence.

Question 13. This is the heart of the lesson. In 1 Peter 2:9 the church is a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God's own possession, and every one of those titles is lifted from Exodus 19:5 to 6, where they were spoken to Israel at Sinai. Verse 10 draws on Hosea. Make the point plainly: everything Israel was called at the foot of the mountain is now said of the church. In Ephesians 2:20 to 22 the foundation is the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone is Christ Jesus Himself, and the building "grows into a holy temple in the Lord" and is "a dwelling place for God." A growing building is a deliberate mixed picture, because the material is alive. Be explicit that this house is not a physical structure and not a future temple in Jerusalem: Acts 7:48 and 17:24 say God does not dwell in houses made by hands, and the construction in 1 Peter 2:5 and Ephesians 2:22 is in the present tense about people who were already Christians. On the spiritual sacrifices, Romans 12:1 gives the body, Hebrews 13:15 to 16 gives praise and doing good and sharing, and Philippians 4:18 gives a congregation's generosity. Every member of a royal priesthood has something to offer this week.

About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in Lesson Nine. Noticing Who Is Singing and Who Is Answering teaches the class to read a psalm as a piece of worship with more than one voice in it, and Psalm 118 is the clearest example in the Psalter. Do this one out loud in class rather than describing it; assign the refrain to the group and read verses 1 to 4 and 19 to 20 antiphonally. It takes two minutes and the class will never read the psalm the same way again. It also prepares them directly for Lesson Ten, where the whole question is who is being addressed. The second skill, Tracing a Single Image Through the Whole Bible, uses the stone. If you have a few spare minutes, build the chain on a board together, in order, from Psalm 118 to 1 Peter 2, and ask the three questions in the callout. People remember a chain they built themselves.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, we thank You that Your steadfast love endures forever, and that You have never once broken faith with Your people. Thank You for the song Your Son sang on the night He was betrayed, and for the fact that He knew what it meant. Thank You that the builders' verdict was not the last word, that You

raised the stone they threw away and set Him at the head of the corner, and that this was Your doing and is marvelous in our eyes. Forgive us for the times we have decided what You should value. Build us together into Your house. Make us living stones that hold something up, and a priesthood that actually offers something. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and there is no other name. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson Ten

Next week is Psalms 45 and 102, and it is the deity-of-Christ lesson. Psalm 45 is a wedding song written for the marriage of an Israelite king, and in verse 6 it addresses him as "God," with a throne that lasts forever and a scepter of uprightness. Psalm 102 is the prayer of a man so ill and so lonely that he compares himself to a bird on a rooftop, and its closing verses praise the LORD as the Creator who remains the same when heaven and earth wear out like an old coat. Hebrews 1 takes both of them, in the middle of a chain of seven Old Testament quotations, and addresses them to the Son. Ask the class to read Psalms 45 and 102 all the way through at home, and then Hebrews 1 slowly, with a pencil, marking each quotation and where it comes from. Tell them that the question the psalm of the wedding raises, how a song written for a real king in Jerusalem can be spoken to Jesus, is the same prophecy and type question this study has been teaching them to handle since Lesson One.