

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Nine

PSALM 118

The Rejected Stone Becomes the Cornerstone

The meal was over. It was late, the lamps were burning low, and before the twelve men in that upper room went out into the dark, they sang. Matthew tells us in a single sentence: "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." Every household in Jerusalem was singing the same songs that night, because it was Passover, and the songs were fixed. The last of them ends with a rejected stone, a shout of "save us, we pray," and a blessing on the one who comes in the name of the LORD. Jesus sang it. Then He walked out to Gethsemane.

Psalm 118 is the last of the Hallel, the short collection of praise psalms, 113 to 118, that Israel sang at the great feasts and above all at Passover. In its own day it was a thanksgiving liturgy. A man who has come back from a fight he should not have survived walks up to the temple gates at the head of a procession and gives public thanks, and the crowd answers him line by line. It is one of the gladdest psalms in the book. It is also the psalm the crowds shouted at the triumphal entry, the psalm Jesus quoted to the chief priests three days before He died, the psalm Peter threw back in the teeth of the Sanhedrin, and the psalm standing behind one of the most important paragraphs in the New Testament about what the church of Christ actually is.

Read Psalm 118 several times this week, and read it out loud at least once. Then read Matthew 21:1 to 16 and 21:33 to 46, Mark 12:1 to 12, Luke 19:28 to 44, Acts 3 and 4, Ephesians 2:11 to 22, and 1 Peter 2:1 to 10. That is a good deal of reading. Carry one question with you through all of it: if Jesus is the stone, what are you?

First impressions

Psalm 118 carries no superscription, no author's name, and no occasion. What it carries instead is a shape. Verses 1 to 4 are a call to worship with a refrain the crowd shouts back four times. Verses 5 to 18 are one man's testimony about a deliverance. Verses 19 to 29 move to a gate, and voices start answering each other from outside and inside. Read it as a script for a service and it stops being a puzzle. Somebody is walking up to the temple with a story to tell, and the congregation is singing with him. It may well go back to David, and Israel sang it long after whoever first sang it was in the ground, because that is what songs of deliverance are for.

1. a. Read Psalm 118 through twice, once quickly and once aloud. How many different speakers or groups do you think you can hear in it? Mark the places where the voice seems to change.

- b. What surprises you most about this psalm?

His steadfast love endures forever (118:1–9)

The psalm opens and closes with the same sentence, and it is the most repeated sentence in the Old Testament: "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." The words behind "steadfast love" are the Hebrew word *hesed*, covenant loyalty, the love that keeps its promises when there is no reason left to keep them. Three groups are called on to answer it in turn: Israel, the house of Aaron, and "those who fear the LORD," which is how the Old Testament usually speaks of Gentiles who had attached themselves to the God of Israel. So before the psalm says one word about the stone, it has already opened the door to outsiders. Then in verses 5 to 9 the singer tells why he is there. He was in a tight place, he called, and God answered and set him free. And out of that comes a line the writer of Hebrews would one day quote to Christians who were worried about money and about what might be taken from them: "The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

2.
 - a. Read 118:1 to 4. Which three groups are called on to say the refrain? Who is included that you might not have expected?
 - b. Read 118:5 to 9. What did the singer do in his distress, and what did God do? Now read Hebrews 13:5 to 6, where verse 6 of the psalm is quoted. What are those Christians being told to be free of, and how is the psalm used to steady them?

Study Skill, Noticing Who Is Singing and Who Is Answering: Many psalms were written to be performed by more than one voice, and once you start listening for that, whole psalms open up. Psalm 118 is the clearest case in the book. In verses 1 to 4 a leader calls and the congregation answers. In verse 19 a voice outside the gate asks to be let in, and in verse 20 a voice inside answers. In verse 26 the priests bless the man who has come. Try marking your Bible with letters in the margin, L for leader and C for congregation, and read the psalm again. Then do the same exercise with Psalm 24:7 to 10 and Psalm 136. Learning to hear who is speaking to whom is one of the most useful habits you can build, and it will matter enormously in the very next lesson.

Surrounded, but not given over to death (118:10–18)

Verses 10 to 12 are almost comic in their repetition. Surrounded. Surrounded again. Surrounded on every side. Like bees. Like a fire in dry thorns, which flares up loud and hot and then is gone. Three times

the singer says the same thing: "in the name of the LORD I cut them off." Then verse 14 quotes the oldest song in the Bible. "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation" comes straight out of Exodus 15:2, sung by Moses and Israel on the far bank of the Red Sea. The man is saying that what God did at the sea, God has now done for him. Verses 17 and 18 are the hinge of the whole first half. He was disciplined severely. He was not handed over to death. And because he is alive, he has something to say: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD."

3.
 - a. Read 118:10 to 14. How many times is the singer surrounded, and what three images describe his enemies? What does he say he did each time?
 - b. Compare 118:14 with Exodus 15:2 and Isaiah 12:2. Why would a man singing about his own rescue reach for the words Israel sang at the Red Sea?
 - c. Read 118:17 to 18. What is the singer's stated reason for wanting to live? What is the difference between being disciplined severely and being given over to death?

For Further Study: Psalm 118:22 to 23 was not the only stone text in Israel's Bible. Read Isaiah 28:16 (a tested and precious cornerstone laid in Zion), Isaiah 8:14 (a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling), Zechariah 4:7 (the top stone brought out with shouting), and Daniel 2:34 to 35 and 2:44 to 45 (a stone cut out by no human hand that breaks the kingdoms of the earth and becomes a mountain filling the whole world). Write those four references in the margin of Psalm 118. Then notice, when you get to 1 Peter 2, how many of them Peter has in front of him at once.

The gate, the stone, and the day (118:19–29)

The procession has arrived. "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD." A voice answers from inside: this is the gate of the LORD, and the righteous go through it. And then, standing in that gateway, the man says the thing everyone remembers: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The Hebrew is literally "the head of the corner." Picture a building site. The masons look over a rough block, decide it is useless, and roll it off to the side. Later, when the walls need the one stone that will tie two of them together and set the line for everything above, the only block that fits is the one they threw away. Whether the singer meant himself, the despised nation of Israel, or a king his own people had written off, his point is the same and he says it in the next breath: "This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." Men decide what is worthless. God decides what is load bearing. Then comes verse 25, "Save us, we pray, O LORD," which in Hebrew is *hoshi'ah-nna*. Say it fast enough, often enough, in a crowd, and it comes out Hosanna.

4. Read 118:19 to 21. What is being asked for, and by whom? What does the answer in verse 20 say about who may go in?
5.
 - a. Read 118:22 to 24 slowly. What did the builders do with the stone, and what happened to it? Who does verse 23 say did it?
 - b. Verse 24 says "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." What day is the psalm actually talking about, and how does that change the way you have usually heard that verse?
 - c. Why do you think a psalm about being surrounded and rescued suddenly starts talking about construction work?
6.
 - a. Read 118:25 to 29. What is the crowd asking for in verse 25, and who is being blessed in verse 26?
 - b. The word behind "Save us, we pray" is the word that comes into English as "Hosanna." If you had grown up singing that line every Passover, what would you have expected it to mean?

Study Skill, Tracing a Single Image Through the Whole Bible: Pick one image and follow it from the front of your Bible to the back. The stone is a good one to learn on. Start in Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16 and Isaiah 8:14 and Daniel 2:34 to 35. Then follow it into Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10 to 11, Luke 20:17 to 18, Acts 4:11, Romans 9:32 to 33, Ephesians 2:20, and 1 Peter 2:4 to 8. Write the list somewhere you will find it again. Then ask three questions of the chain. Does the image stay the same, or does it develop? Does the New Testament use it the way the Old Testament did? And what does the last passage in the chain add that none of the earlier ones said? Working an image through the whole Bible is slow, and it will teach you more in an evening than a shelf of books will.

Hosanna at the gate

Now put Psalm 118 beside the Sunday before the crucifixion. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the crowds go ahead of Him and follow after Him shouting words they did not compose. Matthew

records, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Luke has them cry, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" Mark adds, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" That is Psalm 118:25 and 26, being sung at the top of their lungs by people who had sung it since childhood, over a man riding toward the temple gates. And a few days later, in a room with a table and a basin, the same psalm was sung again, quietly, by Jesus and the eleven, and one man who had already gone out into the dark knew exactly where the evening was going.

7.
 - a. Read Matthew 21:1 to 11 beside Psalm 118:25 to 27. Which lines of the psalm are the crowds shouting? What are they doing with their cloaks and with branches?
 - b. Read Luke 19:37 to 40. What do the Pharisees ask Jesus to do, and what is His answer? What does His refusal tell you about whether the crowd's words were appropriate?
 - c. Matthew 21:10 says the whole city was stirred up and asking, "Who is this?" How did the city answer its own question in verse 11? Was that answer enough?
8.
 - a. Read Matthew 26:26 to 30. What is the last thing recorded before Jesus and the disciples leave for the Mount of Olives?
 - b. If the hymn they sang was the end of the Hallel, then Psalm 118 was the last song Jesus sang before Gethsemane. Read 118:17 to 18 and 118:22 to 24 again with that in mind. What would those verses have meant in His mouth that night?

For Thought and Discussion: The same city that shouted "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" on Sunday was shouting "Crucify him" by Friday. Read Luke 19:41 to 44, where Jesus weeps over that city in the middle of His own welcome parade. What does this say about the difference between enthusiasm for Jesus and submission to Jesus? Where have you seen the difference in yourself?

The stone and the builders

Two or three days after the entry, Jesus is teaching in the temple courts, and He tells a story about a vineyard. The owner plants it, leases it to tenants, and sends servants for the fruit. The tenants beat them and kill them. Finally he sends his son, saying, "They will respect my son." They kill the son too. Then Jesus turns and quotes Psalm 118: "Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone that the

builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" He is standing in the temple, speaking to the men who ran the temple, and He calls them the builders. Matthew says they understood Him perfectly: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them." Many readers have noticed that the Hebrew word for son and the Hebrew word for stone differ by a single letter, ben and eben, so that the story of the murdered son and the verse about the discarded stone lock together like two halves of the same thing. Jesus adds one more line, drawn from Isaiah 8:14 and Daniel 2:34, and it is a warning: this stone is not neutral. You may fall on it, or it may fall on you, but no one walks past it.

9.
 - a. Read Matthew 21:33 to 46, or Mark 12:1 to 12. Who is the owner, who are the tenants, who are the servants, and who is the son?
 - b. Read Matthew 21:42 to 44 and Luke 20:17 to 18. What does Jesus say happens to the one who falls on the stone, and to the one the stone falls on? What is He warning these men about?
 - c. Matthew 21:43 says the kingdom of God will be taken away and given to "a people producing its fruits." In light of the rest of the New Testament, who are that people?

Peter before the builders (Acts 4:1–12)

Weeks later a man who had been lame from birth is healed at the temple gate, a crowd gathers, Peter preaches, and by evening he and John are in custody. The next morning they are brought before the rulers, the elders, the scribes, Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, and the whole high priestly family. These are the builders. Some of them had stood in the temple courts and heard Jesus quote Psalm 118 against them. The question is put to the two fishermen: "By what power or by what name did you do this?" And Peter, who a few weeks earlier had denied he knew the man, looks at the Sanhedrin of Israel and quotes their own hymnbook at them, with one word changed. The psalm says "the stone that the builders rejected." Peter says, "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders." Then he says the sentence that has been offending the world ever since: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

10.
 - a. Read Acts 3:1 to 10 and then Acts 4:1 to 12. What had happened, who is questioning Peter, and what exactly are they asking?
 - b. Compare Psalm 118:22 with Acts 4:11 word for word. What one word does Peter add, and what does adding it do to the men in that room?

- c. Read Acts 4:13. What did the council notice about Peter and John? What explanation did they land on?
11. Read Acts 4:12 out loud twice. State the claim in your own words, as strongly as Peter states it. Why is this the hardest sentence in the New Testament for the world we live in, and why can a Christian not quietly set it aside?

For Further Study: Read the whole of Acts 4:1 to 31 in one sitting. Notice three things. First, what the council was actually upset about (verse 2). Second, what happened to the number of believers while Peter was in jail (verse 4). Third, what the church prayed for when the two men were released (verses 24 to 31). They did not pray for the threats to stop. Compare that prayer with Psalm 2, which they quote in it, and with the way this series began.

Living stones and a spiritual house

Thirty years or so later, Peter picked up the same psalm and did something with it no one had done before. Jesus is the living stone, he writes, "rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious." So far this is Psalm 118 and Isaiah 28. Then comes the turn: "you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." The cornerstone is not standing alone in a field. He is holding up a building, and the building is made of people. Peter piles on the titles that had belonged to Israel at Sinai and hands them to the church: "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (compare Exodus 19:5 to 6). And then, quoting Hosea, he says the thing that ought to stop anyone in his tracks: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Paul says the same thing in different words. The church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:20 to 21). Notice that it is a building that grows, which is not how buildings behave, and that is exactly Paul's point. Be clear about what this house is and is not. It is not a structure of brick and glass on a street corner; Stephen and Paul both said plainly that God does not dwell in houses made by hands (Acts 7:48; 17:24). It is not a temple waiting to be rebuilt in Jerusalem at some future date; the temple God is building was already under construction when Peter wrote, and its living stones were the Christians reading his letter. The spiritual house is the Lord's church, the one body Christ purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:4 to 6). If you have been baptized into Christ, you are not a spectator at that construction site. You are in the wall. One line in this paragraph of Peter is hard, and you should meet it head on rather than slide past it. Verse 8 says that those who stumble do so "as they were destined to do." Read the whole sentence and notice

what is actually appointed. God has appointed that men who disobey the word will stumble over His Son; the verse names their disobedience as the reason. It does not say that God chose which men would disobey. Scripture says the opposite about what God desires (1 Timothy 2:3 to 4; 2 Peter 3:9; Acts 17:30).

12.
 - a. Read 1 Peter 2:4 to 8. What is Jesus called in verse 4, and what are Christians called in verse 5? What are the two Old Testament passages Peter quotes in verses 6 and 8, alongside Psalm 118:22 in verse 7?
 - b. Read verse 8 in full, including the last clause. What reason does the verse itself give for the stumbling? What has God appointed, and what has He not appointed?
13.
 - a. Read 1 Peter 2:9 to 10 and list every title given to the church. Now read Exodus 19:5 to 6. Where has Peter gotten these words, and who has them now?
 - b. Read Ephesians 2:19 to 22. What is the foundation, who is the cornerstone, and what is the building growing into? What does verse 22 say the building is for?
 - c. Peter says Christians are a holy priesthood who offer spiritual sacrifices. Read Romans 12:1, Hebrews 13:15 to 16, and Philippians 4:18. Name at least three sacrifices a Christian offers.

Optional Application: A stone that is not set into a wall holds nothing up. This week, do one thing that only makes sense if the church is a building made of people: sit with someone at services who usually sits alone, take a meal to a member who is ill, call a Christian who has stopped coming and say nothing but that you miss them. Write down the name now, and the day.

The cornerstone and you

Psalm 118 began with a man giving thanks at a gate because he had not been given over to death. It ends up describing the only man who was given over to death and came back through the gate anyway. Everything the psalm sings about, the surrounding enemies, the severe discipline, the refusal of the grave, the shout at the entrance, the stone thrown on the scrap pile and then set at the head of the corner, all of it turned out to be a description of one week in Jerusalem. And the builders were not villains from a story. They were the most religious men in the world, holding the Scriptures in their

hands, rejecting the one stone the whole building needed. That is what makes the psalm dangerous as well as glad. It is possible to be a builder and still throw away the cornerstone.

Your response

14. Where in your own life have you found yourself deciding what God should value, and been wrong? What would it look like this week to let God, rather than the builders, tell you what is load bearing?

15. 1 Peter 2:10 says, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." If you can say that sentence about yourself, write down when it became true of you and thank God for it in writing. If you have never been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3 to 4; Acts 2:38), do not let this week pass without talking to the teacher or one of the elders.

16. Write one specific step you will take in light of this lesson, and one prayer you would like the class to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask the class to name something that was thrown out, overlooked, or written off, and later turned out to be the most valuable thing in the room. Keep it light and keep it to three or four answers. Then read Psalm 118:22 to 23 aloud and move straight into the lesson.

Discussion. The hour turns on questions 5, 9, 10, and 13. Question 10b, the single word Peter adds to the psalm in Acts 4:11, is the sharpest moment in the lesson and should not be rushed. Question 13 is where the class learns what the spiritual house actually is, and if time is short, protect it above everything else. Question 8b, Psalm 118 sung on the night of the betrayal, is worth reading aloud even if you do not have time to discuss it.

Wrap-up. Close by reading Psalm 118:22 to 24 and then 1 Peter 2:9 to 10 aloud, with a pause between them. Then sing together, and tell the class that next week the psalms will take them somewhere they may not expect, into a wedding song and a sick man's prayer, and into the highest thing the New Testament ever says about the Son.