

Summer in the Psalms: Exploring the “with God” Life

Psalm 118

As was pointed out during the sermon, Psalm 118 is one in which the Israelites would sing during their annual feasts (Passover, Feast of Tabernacles, etc.). It was a song they would be very familiar with, likely know by heart. Perhaps a parallel for us might be “God Bless America”, “America the Beautiful”, or the “Battle Hymn of the Republic”.

Psalm 118 was meant to bring to mind God’s historical faithfulness toward Israel, and to inspire faith and faithfulness in Israel. As they remembered God’s mighty power and goodness toward them historically, they could be confident in His continued unfailing love toward them in the present.

Verses 1 & 29 is a common refrain throughout the entire book of Psalms, and is really an overarching theme of the Bible as a whole: *“Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His love endures forever.”* We might even call it a summary statement about Scripture. If you think about it, Scripture basically fleshes out this statement.

- It describes WHO this LORD is. (The Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, who called out a particular man—Abraham—and ultimately his descendants—the nation of Israel—whom He would use to bring redemption and healing to all mankind and creation through a particular descendant—Jesus.)
- It describes WHY we should be thankful to Him (our ever-loving Provider, Father.)
- It describes HOW He is good (all His benevolent action toward humans, even though we don’t deserve it.)
- It describes His chief characteristic (never-ending, all-enduring Love).

That line, *“Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His love endures forever.”*, would be a good one to learn by heart and make into a “breath prayer”. (A breath prayer is one that can be like a mantra to center/focus ourselves on God as we move throughout the day. Having a few breath prayers handy is a good habit to be in. You can recite/pray them at a stop light, waiting in line, etc.)

In verses 2-4 we get the sense that the psalmist(s) wanted the readers/hearers/singers of this psalm to have the thought *“His love endures forever”* to be their heartbeat; to be the first thought upon waking up and the last thought upon going to sleep...and everything in between. When God’s people think of God (then and now) our first thought should be *“His love endures forever.”*

Verses 6 and 7 ties nicely into our overall theme of this series: *“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 upon my enemies.”*

Historically, Israel had a slew of enemies over the centuries; Egypt, the various tribes and nations of Canaan, later the Assyrians and Babylonians, and by the close of Scripture the

Romans. Relatively speaking, Israel only had very short times of peace. Generally speaking, there was almost always tension and conflict with somebody. So, the point is, their “enemies” were real and constant. And generally speaking, Israel was not a major military power (even in the “golden years” under David and Solomon, they were far from a “superpower”). And yet, Israel is still around today. Historically and anthropologically speaking, that is difficult to explain. But, of course, for those who believe in the God of the Bible, we understand why Israel is still around.

(***Personal side note: The church that we started in Flagstaff was called The Refuge. The reason we chose this name is because of how, and how often, the word “refuge” is found in the Psalms. Verse 8-9 are examples, *“It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.”* As we continue our series through the Psalms, take note of this word as you come across it.***)

When enemies are constant, the opportunity and temptation to fear is relentless and unceasing. So, it was a perpetual temptation for Israel to make alliances with neighboring nations as a form of protection against other neighbors. (Very typical political maneuvering in the way and style of the world.) God was constantly trying to remind them that He was their protection. They were called to operate differently than the world around them—this was one of the ways they were to be “holy”—but they preferred to follow the pattern of the world. (Are we really any different?) This is why we see the constant reminder throughout the Old Testament of recalling the events of the Exodus. Their entire existence as a nation was based on God’s action on their behalf. But they so easily forgot that. As inspiring as this Psalm is, and the rousing confidence you might think accompanied the people who sang this Psalm regularly, the reality is that they didn’t believe these words nearly as much as they should have. (Are we really any different?) While they had every reason to trust the God they sang to and about, the fact is they really didn’t. Similarly, they were nowhere near as thankful to Him as this Psalm might lead us to believe. The reality is talk is cheap...and actions speak louder than words.

From an application standpoint, we, too, need to be cautious of shallow zealousness. It is easy to sing about thankfulness and trust. But a truly thankful and trusting heart, and becoming a people who naturally have an attitude and posture of thankfulness and trust in God is very hard. But like the Israelites, we have EVERY reason to be so...even more so. And though it is hard, it is exactly what we should be striving for.

While we may not have “enemies” of the kind that Israel did. We do have an Enemy who is trying to get our attention away from God, who is trying to get us to trust anything but God. Evidently, he’s doing a pretty good job. The sheer fact that we fear on the level that we do would tend to indicate that we don’t trust God nearly as much as our Christian-y talk and activities might suggest.

There are some great lines in this Psalm: *“The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.”* (vs 14). *“I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done.”* (vs. 17) *“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* (vs 24)...along with ones

mentioned above. They accurately describe the “with God” life. But there is a difference between describing with words, and actually experiencing something. May we strive (personally and communally) toward the lofty heights of trust and thankfulness that this Psalm describes.

To conclude, Biblically speaking, one of the ways we can tell how important an Old Testament passage of Scripture is, is by how often it is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament. Psalm 118 is a frequently referred to Psalm. All four Gospel writers quote verse 26, “*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord*” as the song the people were singing as Jesus entered Jerusalem during the Triumphal Entry. Jesus Himself (thus, VERY significant) quotes verse 22, “*The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.*”, in His Parable of the Tenants (see Matthew 21, Mark 12, Luke 20) and Peter also quotes that verse in his sermon in Acts 4 as well as in his letter (see I Peter 2). One of the reasons we chose this Psalm to be included in our six-week series is because it’s an important one to be familiar with. Again, it directs our attention to God Whose ways, though very different than ours, can be trusted and Who is deserving of our gratitude.

- Q. When you think of God and what He is like, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Would your life be any different (or how would your life be different) if your first and primary thought of God was that His love endures forever?**
- Q. As you go about your days, how consciously aware are you that God is with you? Practically speaking, how does that affect you? (Or, how would your life be different if you were more consciously aware of God’s presence with you throughout the day?)**
- Q. For you, personally, what gives you confidence that God’s love endures forever? How have you seen Him work historically in your life?**
- Q. What is something you presently fear? How does/would trusting God help you deal with that fear?**
- Q. Describe a dire/desperate situation that you have experienced. Who or what do you tend to trust when your back is up against a wall?**
- Q. Who or what do you/we perceive to be your/our enemies?**
- Q. What is our real and imminent threat/danger? To what degree would you say that you live in awareness of that threat/danger? How does knowing that God is with us and for us help us deal with that?**
- Q. How do we go about cultivating true thankfulness and trust (both personally and communally)?**
- Q. What word, line, phrase or stanza stands out to you from Psalm 118 (or for that matter, any Psalm from this week in the devotional guide?)**