

Psalm Sundays

Text
Psalm 118

Topic
The congregation of Israel participates
in worship by singing antiphonally
at their celebration of Passover

Title
"I've Just Had an Antiphony"

If you have a Roman Catholic heritage, you'll know how to respond. Ready?

"The Lord be with you."

- 👤 Who said, "And also with you?"
- 👤 Who said, "And with your spirit?"

They made the change from, "And also with you," to "And with your spirit," around 2008. I'm guessing that there was, and still is, a lot of confusion in the pews:

- 👤 Lapsed Catholics who find themselves at a Mass for a funeral or a wedding are going to be confused for sure.

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- 👤 So probably were some Chreasters. They're the folks who only attended twice a year, on Christmas and Easter. (They are also called CEO's - Christmas Easter Only).

This kind of participation by the congregation is technically called either *responsorial*, or *antiphonal*:

- 👤 It's *responsorial* when each statement is followed by a response from the congregation.
- 👤 It's *antiphonal* when it is spoken or sang alternately.

I get confused on the precise use of each word. Let's just say that there is a participatory response from the congregation.

In Psalm 118 we find participatory responses for the congregation of Israel on their annual festival day, Passover.

One of the response passages is in verses two, three, and four. Someone invited a response, asking them to "now say," then three different groups in the assembly answered:

- 👤 "Let Israel now say, "His mercy *endures* forever.
- 👤 "Let the house of Aaron now say, "His mercy *endures* forever.
- 👤 "Let those who fear the LORD now say, "His mercy *endures* forever."

"His mercy *endures* forever" opens the psalm... "His mercy *endures* forever" ends the psalm (v29). We'll focus on mercy as we enjoy this psalm.

I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 "Mercy Forever" Is God's Promise To You,** and **#2 "Mercy Forever" Is God's Plan For You.**

#1 - "Mercy Forever" Is God's Promise To You (v1-13)

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There are several passages in Psalm 118 that are lifted directly from the Book of Exodus. The Israelites would recognize this immediately as a Passover song.

One scholar notes, "Verse 14 quotes Exodus 15:2, and the repeated "right hand" in verses 15-16 matches the three occurrences in Exodus 15:6 & 12. Not surprisingly in this regard, Psalm 118 concludes the Hallel (Psalms 113-118), which is used at Passover, a celebration that recalls and recounts the deliverance from Egypt."

We don't annually celebrate Passover. The apostle Paul told us that, in the Church Age, Jesus Himself is our Passover.

The Passover symbolism is fulfilled in Jesus, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.

Psa 118:1 Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for *He is good!* For His mercy *endures* forever.

This is responsive, each sentence spoken or sang by different people. The entire psalm is responsive - drawing the congregation into the celebration.

You could spend a long time thinking about how the Lord was merciful to Israel throughout their history. The Exodus could have as a sub-title, *God's Marvelous Manifold Mercies in the Wilderness*. Though the Israelites rebelled over-and-over, God preserved them in His mercy.

See how far they'd come - here they were worshipping in the Temple, keeping the Passover as prescribed, and doing it joyfully.

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BTW - God's mercy towards the nation of Israel in the past guarantees He will be merciful to them in the future. He has not, and cannot, abandon the descendants of Abraham. In the end, they will be saved.

Psa 118:2 Let Israel now say, "His mercy *endures* forever."

Psa 118:3 Let the house of Aaron now say, "His mercy *endures* forever."

Psa 118:4 Let those who fear the LORD now say, "His mercy *endures* forever."

Three groups were present: (1)Israelites by birth, (2)priests, and (3)non-Jews who feared the Lord, *i.e.*, who were believers.

Salvation was exclusively through Israel. But anyone could be saved who came to God in His prescribed way. In His mercy, God has always made a way for anyone, anywhere, to be saved.

The leader, let's call him the soloist, would sing verses five through nine:

Psa 118:5 I called on the LORD in distress; The LORD answered me *and set me* in a broad place.

Psa 118:6 The LORD *is* on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?

Psa 118:7 The LORD is for me among those who help me; Therefore I shall see *my desire* on those who hate me.

Time and again, after Israel rebelled, the Lord would hear their cries, and in His mercy, He would restore them. When they returned to Him, and trusted in the Lord, there was a godly confidence that victory was certain.

Israel could only be defeated by Israel. By drifting away from God, they earned His discipline.

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We, too, can be our own worst enemy, if we grow apathetic, and set ourselves adrift.

With COVID-19 still affecting churches, it is an especially dangerous time.

Psa 118:8 *It is better to trust in the LORD Than to put confidence in man.*

Psa 118:9 *It is better to trust in the LORD Than to put confidence in princes.*

Do we ever “put confidence in man?” This would be a confidence in things other than the Lord and in His wisdom where He has clearly spoken.

Sure we do. We remain in unredeemed bodies, with their propensity to sin. Our minds are not totally renewed, and we don’t always set our affections on things above.

As far as putting our confidence in man, Christians and churches often adopt worldly methods, *e.g.*, in their fund raising.

Do we ever “put confidence in princes,” *i.e.*, in government? Sure we do. The US Supreme Court recently astonished us. Those ‘princes’ ruled that the 1964 Civil Rights Act protects gay, lesbian, and transgender employees from discrimination based on sex. The ruling was 6-3, with Justice Neil Gorsuch, President Trump's first appointee to the court, writing the majority opinion. The opinion was joined by Chief Justice John Roberts and the court's four liberal justices. In an article titled, *Gorsuch vs Gorsuch*, the Wall Street Journal noted, “An alien legal being seems to have captured... Justice [Gorsuch].”

I’m pretty sure the writer meant that last comment, about the alien, as sarcasm. But I wouldn’t be so sure.

Verses ten through thirteen - also responsive:

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Psa 118:10 All nations surrounded me, But in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.

Psa 118:11 They surrounded me, Yes, they surrounded me; But in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.

Psa 118:12 They surrounded me like bees; They were quenched like a fire of thorns; For in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.

Three times the congregation exclaimed, "In the Name of the Lord I will destroy them." His "Name" isn't a magic word that defeats our foes. We don't repeat it over-and-over to get a result. We don't say "AbracaJesus."

"In the Name of the Lord" means that we have His authority. We act on His behalf.

Acting on His behalf can get us imprisoned, or martyred. *But that isn't a defeat.* It is a "W" in the cosmic struggle against God's enemies.

Can you think of a time in Israel's history that these words might describe? When "all nations" surrounded Israel.

The only one I can suggest for our consideration is in Israel's *future* history. If you approach this passage with the Great Tribulation in mind, it makes a lot of sense.

Specifically, this could depict the Second Coming, when Jesus will be "surrounded" at Armageddon, but will easily defeat the nations of the world gathered there.

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The Tribulation itself is mercy, albeit a severe mercy. By it, God offers those on earth salvation in Jesus, not willing that any should perish, but rather that they would receive eternal life.

Psa 118:13 You pushed me violently, that I might fall, But the LORD helped me.

The picture here is of someone being pushed off the edge of a cliff. No matter how violent the pushing, throughout history, Israel stands.

Do you use the expression, "push back?" It's used when you've had it with some policy or practice; you push back instead of accepting it.

The Great Tribulation is God's push back against sinners. But, always remember, it is a measured push back, because God also extends mercy to save.

#2 - "Mercy Forever" Is God's Plan For You (v14-29)

Incidentally, Psalm 118 was Martin Luther's favorite - "My own beloved psalm," as he put it. Luther considered verse seventeen to be "a masterpiece," and he asserted that "all the saints have sung this verse and will continue to sing it to the end."

If the songs we sing are any indication, the Church likes Psalm 118. Hymns, choruses, and performance songs based on it abound. You'll for sure recognize three of them: verse fourteen, verse nineteen, and verse twenty-four.

Psa 118:14 The LORD *is* my strength and song, And He has become my salvation.

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People are looking for some kind of "strength." Trouble is, they're mostly looking within themselves by listening to so-called, self-appointed experts. Self-help is an \$11B industry - mostly without regulation. Anyone can present themselves as a life-coach. Each guru attracts you with his or her particular siren-song.

All the while, God is ready to declare you righteous and give you the Holy Spirit. I won't cheapen the Gospel by calling Jesus your ultimate "life-coach," but you get the idea.

Psa 118:15 The voice of rejoicing and salvation *is* in the tents of the righteous; The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.

Psa 118:16 The right hand of the LORD is exalted; The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.

"Valiantly" could also be translated, "is victorious" (ISV). We know from the complete revelation of the Word of God that Jesus sits at God's right hand. He was victorious over Satan sin, and death. That is real "strength." The "song" is the wooing of the Holy Spirit.

Psa 118:17 I shall not die, but live, And declare the works of the LORD.

Psa 118:18 The LORD has chastened me severely, But He has not given me over to death.

Israel, as a nation, endured much disciplining by God for her many willful failures. Yet God did not destroy His chosen nation. They endured; they endure.

Psa 118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, *And* I will praise the LORD.

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Psa 118:20 This is the gate of the LORD, Through which the righteous shall enter.

Psa 118:21 I will praise You, For You have answered me, And have become my salvation.

There is a wrong way of reading this. It is not saying that you must be self-righteous to enter God's presence. You don't deserve for the gate to be opened for you. No, you enter because righteousness is given to you by believing in Jesus. He becomes your salvation when you receive Him as your Substitute on the Cross.

Charles Spurgeon put it in plain language when he said, "You stand before God as if you were Jesus, because Jesus stood before God as if He were you."

Psa 118:22 The stone *which* the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone.

Psa 118:23 This was the LORD's doing; *It is* marvelous in our eyes.

Jesus is the foundation upon which God's household of faith must be built. When He came the first time, the leaders of Israel - the "builders" - rejected Him. Today He is the foundation of the Church, built upon by the apostles and prophets of the first century. He will yet "become the chief cornerstone," as Israel is saved through the Great Tribulation.

Psa 118:24 This *is* the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it.

Psa 118:25 Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity.

Psa 118:26 Blessed *is* he who comes in the name of the LORD! We have blessed you from the house of the LORD.

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We recognize this from the description of Palm Sunday given in the Gospels. The “day” had come... But the Jews refused to recognize their Messiah, plunging them into another time of discipline.

Psa 118:27 *God is the LORD, And He has given us light; Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.*

Remember, it was Passover. The procession had arrived at the altar of sacrifice. It was time to kill the sacrificial lamb. Lamb after lamb after lamb was slain.

There are incredible estimates of how many lambs were slain annually in the Second Temple period. One site said 1 million. If they worked for ten hours, that’s 100,000 per hour. I don’t think so. But, still, multitudes of little lambies died annually, and throughout the Old Testament era. It was bloody.

Psa 118:28 *You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You.*

Once the sacrifice was complete, there was an acknowledgement of intimacy. The lamb took our place so that we could approach God as “my God.”

Mankind lost this intimacy in the Garden of Eden. God promised He would restore it. He established the temporary sacrifice of lambs until He could come and die Himself, for us. It is His plan of redemption, kept moving by God’s providence.

Psa 118:29 *Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.*

It ends where it began - with mercy. In a previous study, I challenged you to look up verses regarding mercy, and especially different types of mercy that

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are described in the Bible. God's mercy is something that is better seen, or experienced, than simply defined; one way to do that is to see it active on the pages of the Bible.

God alone is "good." Because of Jesus, He can justify the believing sinner, and remain righteous. It is an amazing plan, inspiring gratitude.

The word *endures*, in italics, isn't part of the text scholars translated from. It should read, "Mercy forever."

If you're a fan of the MCU, you remember T'Challa (the Black Panther) sending his forces into battle with the cry, "Wakanda Forever."

Jesus has sent us into the fray. Hear Him say, "Mercy Forever."

