

He Who Comes in the Name of the LORD

Psalm 118:19-29

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on April 10, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ **Today is Palm Sunday, which, in the Christian calendar, marks the start of Holy Week.** Today we commemorate Jesus's triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. We're told that Jews from all over Palestine were gathering in the holy city for the Passover feast. This included a large group from the region of Galilee where Jesus had developed a following.
 - This event is recorded in all four gospels and similarly described as a boisterous welcome. It was the kind of welcome you'd expect to give to a visiting dignitary, especially to a king or queen. **Jesus was receiving a royal welcome.** And that did not escape the attention of the religious leaders of the day. And they didn't like it.
 - So throughout that week that openly challenged him and secretly plotted against him. And by that Friday, after midnight, they arrested Jesus in a garden. They put him through a hasty religious trial in the middle of the night. And by noontime on that fateful Friday, they crucified him on a Roman cross.

- ❖ So it's fair to say that the joy and celebration that took place on Palm Sunday was premature. The people gave Jesus a royal welcome expecting a coronation service. Thinking he was about to receive his crown. **What they hadn't expected was the cross that comes before the crown.** They were unprepared for the agony that precedes his royal ascension.
 - **What would've helped is if they had paid closer attention to the lyrics of the song they were singing.** We're told that, on that first Palm Sunday, the people crowded around the city gates were shouting as Jesus drew near. But they weren't just shouting random words and phrases. They were shouting out stanzas from Psalm 118. "*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" (Mk 11:9)
 - Those are phrases pulled directly out of this morning's passage. **So, by Jesus's day, Psalm 118 was a song that carried messianic overtones.** Meaning the people of God assumed this psalm proclaimed the coming of Israel's Messiah. But had they paid closer attention, perhaps they would've realized their confusion as to what this messianic figure had come to do.

- ❖ So that's what we'll try to do this morning. This Palm Sunday, we're going to try something different. Instead of studying the typical Palm Sunday story from one of the Gospel accounts, we're going to study the song behind the story. **I found it interesting to learn that Psalm 118 has been sung in very different time periods, on very different occasions, for very different purposes.** Now I know you're used to being told that good students of the Bible try to understand a passage in its original context and focus on its original meaning to its original audience. And yes, that goes for most passages in Scripture. But remember that psalms are songs, and songs can be sung on different occasions for different purposes.
 - **The same song can be used to celebrate or commemorate different things on different occasions.** For example, I'm sure you've heard *Canon in D* at a wedding, but you just as well can hear it played at a funeral. Every New Year someone's playing *Auld Lang Syne*, but maybe you've also heard it at a farewell party or a graduation party. That's the beauty of music. Songs have a range of meaning and can be used differently on different occasions. That would be true for individual psalms.

- ❖ So as we study this psalm behind Palm Sunday, **I'd like to consider four different occasions in which this psalm has been sung and incorporated into the worship life of God's people.** We'll consider how Psalm 118 was sung as (1) the individual's song of thanksgiving, (2) the community's song of festive praise, (3) the people's song of messianic hope, (4) the church's song of gospel gratitude.

The Individual's Song of Thanksgiving

- ❖ Let's begin by exploring the original context behind the composition of Psalm 118. It's important to note upfront that no one really knows its origin. **What we do know is that all the individual psalms were written, by different authors, sometime before the final compilation of these 150 songs into the Book of Psalms.** And whoever edited and compiled these psalms didn't group them chronologically or by author. The organization is more thematic, or they're grouped based on how they've been utilized within Israel's liturgical tradition. The most obvious is the way in which Psalms is divided into five books, which many think was intended to reflect the five books of the Torah.
 - But having said that – even though we can't know with certainty the original context when Psalm 118 was composed – we can still infer some things from the text. **And taken as a whole, we can infer that Psalm 118 was utilized as the individual worshipper's song of thanksgiving.**
- ❖ It's often identified as a **psalm of thanksgiving** based on the way it begins and ends with the same lyrics, which are all about giving thanks to our good God. Look at vv1 and 29, "*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!*"
 - Now based on its content, this psalm could've been composed after some victory that Israel experienced in battle. There are references to being in distress and being surrounded by opposing nations (v5, 10-12). **Perhaps it was meant to be sung after the LORD provided victory, and now the king of Israel is leading worshippers to the temple to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving (v19).** And there, at the gates of the temple, the king and the worshipping procession are greeted by the priests who pronounce blessings upon them. "*We bless you from the house of the LORD.*" (v26)
- ❖ Notice how most of the psalm is written in the first person singular, and then there's a sudden shift to the first person plural in v25. **All that to say that this song was most likely adapted to be used by individual worshippers as a song of thanksgiving, but one that was to be sung in a corporate setting with other worshippers around you.**
 - Some theorize that, like one of the Songs of Ascent (Ps 120-134), this psalm could've been sung by worshippers as they ascended the Temple Mount. And as they passed the gates of the temple courts, v19 would be ringing in the air, "*Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.*"

- ❖ So in this case, the gates of righteousness are a reference to the temple gates. V20 goes on to say, “*This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.*” **In this context, it likely had something to do with the presence of Levitical gatekeepers who would stand at the entrance of the temple gates.** Who were responsible to protect the holiness of the temple grounds. Who would be checking to make sure every worshipper entering was ceremonially clean. In that sense, they were considered righteous.

- ❖ Now let’s look at some of the other key images and phrases in this psalm, and think about how they would’ve been understood when sung by individual worshippers as a song of thanksgiving. What about the reference to a cornerstone in v22? That’s an important image that gets repeated in Scripture. Let me read vv21-23, “²¹*I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. ²³This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*”
 - **In this case, the cornerstone is likely referring to the individual worshipper.** The one singing this psalm is thankful that the LORD has heard his prayers for deliverance and answered them – becoming his salvation. Now the builders could refer to any opponents or opposition. **The point is that he’s thankful that – no matter how much he’s been rejected by others – he has not been cast aside by God.** Instead, he’s been given an essential role in the worshipping community. Like how a cornerstone plays an essential role in the larger building. For that, he’s grateful.

- ❖ Now when it says, in v24, “*This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it,*” the day is probably just referring to the day the psalm is being sung. *That* day in the temple courts. And when it says, in v26, “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD,*” that blessing is being bestowed to the one who meets the requirements for entry into the temple – into the “*house of the LORD*”.
 - **In this case, to meet the requirements means to come to the house of the LORD – not on the basis of your own merit, not in your own name – but in the name of the LORD.** That is, you’re trusting, not in yourself, but in God to be your salvation, to be your righteousness. You’re depending, not on yourself, but in his goodness and steadfast love, which endures forever. That’s what it means to come in his name.

- ❖ Let me ask a personal question: **Have you come here this morning in his name or in your own?** Are you standing on your own merits; on your own accomplishments; on the quality of your own performance? Perhaps that’s why you feel ashamed; why you don’t feel worthy to be here; to be singing songs of praise and thanksgiving. That’s why you feel like a hypocrite.
 - **But that’s because you’re trying to come in your own inconsistent, unstable, contradictory name and reputation. Come, instead, in the name of the immutable, unchanging, unfailing LORD.** “*It is better to take refuge in the LORD.*” (v8) Because “*His steadfast love endures forever.*” (vv1, 2, 3, 4, 29).

The Community's Song of Festive Praise

- ❖ So as a song, there's good reason to think that Psalm 118 was composed in light of some military victory but then was eventually adapted and incorporated into the liturgy of temple worship as a song of thanksgiving. But as Israel's liturgical tradition grew, this psalm, in time, was incorporated into the various festivals in Israel's annual calendar. Psalm 118 would then be sung as the community's song of festive praise. This is the second occasion.
 - If you look in your study bible or a commentary, it'll tell you that Psalm 118 was the last song in a longer section of psalms called the **Egyptian Hallel** (Ps 113-118), which was sung together on great occasions within the Jewish calendar. Hallel simply means "praise". And it's called the Egyptian Hallel because it was tied to two major festivals – the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. Both of which originated in the story of the Exodus where God's delivered of his people out of Egypt.

- ❖ **Now I've noted before how the Jewish Passover meal (aka the Seder) had a customary form and ritual that is still practiced by Jewish families today.** The meal would begin with the youngest child at the table asking why this night is different from all other nights and why we eat unleavened bread. Then, the head of the family would retell the Exodus story and lead the family in singing or reciting Psalms 113-114.
 - And then after the roasted lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread were eaten, and as cups of wine are drunk – the whole family would sing or recite together Psalms 115-118. In fact, the Gospel accounts tell us that after Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover meal (aka the Last Supper), before they went to the Mount of Olives, they sang a hymn together (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). Well now we know what they sang! Jesus and his disciples sang Psalm 118 at the close of the Last Supper.

- ❖ **And not only was this psalm closely associated with Passover, it was also tied to the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths).** That was an annual festival established in Leviticus 23 (Lev 23:33-43). It was meant to commemorate Israel's deliverance from Egypt and God's preservation of them in the wilderness. So part of the feast involved building temporary wooden booths that you and your family would live in for seven days. The idea was to identify with the wilderness generation who had to live in booths for forty years.
 - Now according to rabbinic tradition (Talmud), we're told that, on Days 1-6, at a certain point in the celebration, as worshippers paraded around the altar, they would recite Psalm 118:25, "*Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!*" And as they were walking in a circle, tradition tells us that worshippers would wave branches from a myrtle, willow, or palm tree. And on the seventh and last day of the Feast, they would walk around the altar seven times repeating v25 seven times. "*Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!*"

- ❖ So within this context (occasion), vv19-20 would still have the temple gates in view. But the cornerstone, in this case, would likely shift away from the individual worshipper, and Israel herself would be viewed as the cornerstone.

- ❖ **That would be fitting if these feasts were being celebrated in a post-exilic context (after the Babylonian exile).** When the Jewish community would celebrate Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles and sing of the stone that the builders rejected – that “*stone*” would be Israel and the “*builders*” would be the nations, Babylon in particular. And to be lifted up as the “*cornerstone*” would be understood as an allusion to their return and to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple.
 - A post-exilic context makes a lot of sense because – if you consider the oppression they faced at the hands of the nations mentioned in vv10-13 – it’s understood in v23 to be the LORD’s doing. And in v18, it’s described as divine chastisement, “*The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death.*” **So that fits the overall message within the prophetic books that the Babylonian exile was part of God’s will for Israel.** For her discipline and chastisement.

- ❖ Now that means the “*day that the LORD has made*” – that the worshipping community should rejoice and be glad in – **would probably refer to the overall improved state of affairs now that Israel is out of exile and back in her land.**
 - But she’s still not free. Israel may not be exiled but she’s still enslaved. Under Persian control. Then, later on, under the thumb of Greece and eventually Rome. So when sung in this context, this psalm carried messianic overtones. **In other words, the worshippers looked back and were grateful for past deliverance, but they still looked forward in anticipation of a coming Deliverer to free them from political oppression.** “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!*” (v26) became an expression of hope in a messiah.

- ❖ **In fact, the waving of the branches found in the ritual celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles eventually was associated with the welcoming of messianic figures.** For example, during the intertestamental period, one of the Jewish leaders associated with Hanukkah (the holiday that celebrates a Jewish victory over their Greek oppressors) was military leader named **Simon Maccabaeus**. After he helped recapture Jerusalem, Simon and his soldiers are described as being welcomed into the city “*with praise and palm branches*” (1 Maccabees 13:51) **The point is, by New Testament times, the singing of Psalm 118 and the waving of palm branches carried strong messianic overtones.** They sent clear signals.
 - Imagine if you were blind, and you were suddenly transported into a large noisy crowd. You have no idea where you are or what’s happening around you. But suddenly that noisy crowd goes quiet and you hear the Star-Spangled Banner being played. And immediately, you know where you are and what’s happening. They’re about to play ball. Same thing if you were deaf, and you were dropped into a crowd where everyone suddenly stopped what they’re doing, stood up, and put their right hand over their heart. Immediately, you know what’s happening.

The People's Song of Messianic Hope

- ❖ I'd argue that that's what was going on in the Gospel accounts on Palm Sunday. **The welcome that Jesus received sent a clear signal that people viewed him as the Messiah.** Without having to say it outright, their song and their actions spoke volumes. So this leads us to our third point and the third occasion where Psalm 118 was sung. **Let's consider Matthew's account of this event found in Matthew 21.** We'll see how Psalm 118 has become the people's song of messianic hope.
 - Let me read out of Matthew 21 starting in v7. This is after the disciples bring to Jesus a donkey and her colt, and he rides the colt into Jerusalem, as he's welcomed with palm branches (cf. Jn 12:13). *"⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" ¹⁰And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."*
- ❖ **So compared to the original context of Psalm 118 as song of thankful praise, by Jesus's day, the people saw this messianic figure who comes in the name of the Lord – not just as a worshipper leading God's people in praise – but as a conquering king leading God's people in deliverance from their enemies.**
 - The gates of vv19-20 are more in reference to the gates of Jerusalem. The cornerstone is still viewed as Israel, but now the builders are specifically the Roman occupiers. The day that the Lord has made is the hoped-for day of deliverance from Roman rule. And as we've already seen, the phrase, *"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"*, was treated as messianic. Which explains why, in Matthew 21:9, Jesus is called the Son of David. That's a clear messianic term. He is the hope-for king who will reestablish David's forever throne.
- ❖ **So when they shout out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!", you have to understand that they're calling for political salvation.** That word Hosanna is actually a transliteration from the Hebrew, into Greek, carried over into English. We sing Hosanna in our praise songs, and we may not even know what the word means. It means "Save us, we pray!" It's from Psalm 118:25, *"Save us, we pray, O LORD!"* Hosanna, O Yahweh!
 - Well, in Matthew 21:9, when the crowd shouts Hosanna, they're hoping for deliverance from their oppressors. Political salvation. They're hopeful that Jesus will lead them, like Simon Maccabaeus, to overthrow Roman rule and win back Jerusalem for the Jewish people.
- ❖ Now it's easy for us to look down on those in the crowd that day for their inability to see Jesus for who he really is. **But we need to be more humble and try to sympathize with what they were going through.** They were dealing with a frustration and discontentment that I think all of us can relate to.

- ❖ **Right now, we're living in a day and age where many people are suspicious of authority.** People have grown pessimistic towards leaders. Whether in the church, in politics, or in the culture at large. But even with our growing skepticism towards authority, it's not like people are pining for anarchy. Most people don't want to throw off all authority. They just want good authority. We want leaders we can trust. **We would be willing to listen, willing to trust, willing to follow IF there was a good leader in place.** IF there was a rightful authority in the rightful seat. IF there was a good king on his throne.
 - I think that same sense and longing is found in the hearts of those that day among the crowd surrounding the gates of Jerusalem. **We can sympathize with them because we can relate to their discontentment.**

- ❖ But we can also see how they misunderstood the Messiah's mission. **They assumed he was going to Jerusalem to take up his crown. They had no idea he was there to take up his cross.** What they did not understand at the time is that Rome was not their biggest problem. The Roman authorities were not their biggest oppressors. **That title belonged to sin. Human sinfulness was their real problem.** Their enslavement to foreign rulers paled in comparison to their enslavement to sin.
 - **So a good king ruling over bad people would only be a partial solution.** It literally fails to get to the heart of the problem. Such a king would spend his rule merely trying to restrain evil and manage sin. God has a much better redemptive plan in mind. **He envisions a good king ruling over good people – made good from the inside out.** By the atonement of their sins and the empowerment of his Spirit. That's God's plan. And that's why Jesus entered Jerusalem ready to take up his cross before he receives his crown.

The Church's Song of Gospel Gratitude

- ❖ Now that leads us to our final point and the fourth occasion for singing Psalm 118. And that would be within the context of the church's worship of the Lord out of gratitude for his goodness and grace. Psalm 118 should be on our lips as the church's song of gospel gratitude.
 - **What that means is that Christians, from our perspective, on this side of the cross, are justified in reading Psalm 118 with a Christ-centered lens.** To read it Christologically. In fact, Psalm 118 is one of the most frequently quoted OT texts by NT authors. Because they saw the gospel connections. They recognized the various ways in which this psalm foreshadowed Christ and what he came to do.

- ❖ I still find it fascinating that Jesus and his disciples sung Psalm 118 to conclude their Passover meal. The hymn ends in v27 with instructions to, "*Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.*" **Little did the disciples know that, in a few hours, they would see their master bound and offered up on the cross as a sacrifice of atonement for their sins.**
 - In previous occasions, the rejected cornerstone was identified with the individual worshipper or corporate Israel. **But now, when the church reads this psalm, we recognize Jesus as the true Israel – rejected by man but approved by God.**

- ❖ In the Gospel accounts, we see later that week, Jesus referencing Psalm 118 once more. It was after he told the **Parable of the Tenants**, where these tenants are put in charge of their master's vineyard and one day the master's son is sent to collect some fruit. But not only do the tenants reject the son, they kill him.
 - And in **Matthew 21:42**, Jesus turns to the chief priests and Pharisees and said, *“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’’⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.’’⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.”*

- ❖ **So it’s pretty obvious that Jesus is the rejected cornerstone and the religious leaders of his day are the builders in the psalm and the tenants in the parable.** And they go on to prove it by arresting Jesus on Good Friday, trumping up false charges, bringing him before Roman authorities, calling for his death.
 - **But again, just like with the Exile, this is the LORD’s doing** (v23). He works in mysterious ways. No one predicted that he would defeat sin by putting it on the back of his sinless Son. No one guessed that he would defeat Satan by allowing the Accuser to condemn his beloved Son. No one thought that he would defeat Death by sending his Son to die for us and for our salvation.

- ❖ And, of course, Jesus didn’t stay dead. On the third day, he arose. And after forty days on earth, appearing to his disciples, he ascended on high, back to the Father. **And there, at the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem, the Risen Lord received a true Hero’s welcome.** From all the host of heaven, he heard those words sung again, *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”*
 - And to this day, he sits on his rightful throne, ruling over his people. Those who have turned from our sins and trusted in his name. **Those who are being changed by his Spirit into good people, from the inside out, being conformed to the image of our King.** And now we await the day of this Second Coming. When he comes to make all things new and bring heaven down the earth. That is our blessed hope.

- ❖ Friends, do you share in this gospel hope? **Who is Jesus to you?** Is he just a religious figure that you’ve grown up always hearing about – always believing existed? But is he just the God of your parents? The God of your spouse? The God you think could or could not be true? And if he is true, then hopefully he’ll give you some credit for at least going to church and being around Christians?
 - But that’s not how it works. God doesn’t want a hour or two of your time over the weekends. He wants your heart. Because he loves you with all his heart. And he gave his beloved Son to die for you so that you might live for him. Would you give him your heart today?