

Hesed Forever:
An Exegesis of Psalm 118

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Introduction

What the Psalm Teaches

“Love never fails,” says Paul in 1 Cor. 13:8. He could say this reflecting upon millennia of Judah’s experience of the faithfulness of Jehovah. Paul says in the negative what David says in the positive. Despite many trials and many sins, Jehovah remained faithful to His covenant. Jehovah signaled His favor by granting many deliverances despite many sins, and by providing David as a King. In Psalm 118 there is promise made of a greater deliverance and an even greater King, in which the covenant purposes of Jehovah would be realized in a manner beyond the comprehension of the Israelites who sang this psalm. This psalm will uncover the everlasting love of God as demonstrated to David in Psalm 118, and as demonstrated in David’s greater son. From this will come every reason to praise Him for His everlasting love.

Method

The paper will begin with a translation of the psalm. This will be followed with a high-level overview of the teaching of the psalm itself. These doctrines will be proven later in the work. Next will be presented an argument for Davidic authorship. From here the paper will explain the historical and covenantal context of the psalm. Following this will be a section-by-section analysis of the psalm. In this part there will be discussion of any significant verbal, grammar, or textual issues. Once this is done the paper will conclude with the psalm’s applicatory significance.

Translation

Praise Jehovah, for He is good;
For His love endures forever.
Say, O Israel,
that His love endures forever.
Say, O house of Aaron,
That His love endures forever.
Say, O you who fear God,
That His love endures forever.

From distress I called Jah;
From a wide place has heard Jah.
Jehovah is with me, I will not fear;
What can man do to me?
Jehovah is my help,
And I will look *down* on my enemies.
Better to shelter in Jehovah,
Than to trust in men.
Better to shelter in Jehovah,
Than to trust in nobles.

All the nations surrounded me;
In the name of Jehovah, them will I destroy.
Oh they surrounded me, *yes* they surrounded me;
In the name of Jehovah, them will I destroy.
They surrounded me like hornets, they die like burning thorns.
In the name of Jehovah, them will I destroy.
You drove me *down* that I might fall;
But Jehovah helped me.
My strength and song is Jah,
And He is my salvation.

The voice rejoicing and salvation is in the tents of the righteous;
The right hand of the Lord acts *in* power.
The right hand of the Lord is exalted;
The right hand of the Lord acts in power.
I will not die; *No*, I will live,
And I will record the acts of Jah.
Oh, severely chasten me did Jah;
Yet He did not give me to the grave.

Open to me the gates of the righteous;
I will go through—I will praise Jah!
This is the gate of Jehovah;
The righteous ones go into it.

I will praise you, because you have heard me;
And you have become to me salvation.

The stone rejected by the builders,
Has become the cornerstone.
From Jehovah is this;
It is wondrous in our eyes!
This is the day Jehovah made;
We will rejoice and be glad in it!

Oh, Jehovah, save!
Oh Jehovah, prosper!
Blessed is He who comes in the name of Jehovah;
We have blessed you from the house of Jehovah.
God is Jehovah, and He gave light to us.
Bind the sacrifice by cords to the horns of the altar.

You are God, and I will praise you;
My God, I will exalt you.

Praise Jehovah, for He is good;
For His love endures forever.

The Teaching of the Psalm

The theology of the psalm is this: The “I Am” is forever and unfailingly good, and He demonstrates this goodness in His love. Jehovah proves His love by delivering His people from their enemies, and by giving them a king and a sacrifice.

The psalmist’s plights concretely illustrate Jehovah’s love to David. He sets David in hardships to set David free. David then learns that Jehovah is more reliable than any mighty man. The troubles may be overwhelming when on every side one sees enemies; but no matter the troubles—Jehovah delivers. Just as Pharoah and his hornets surrounded and pursued the Israelites only to be destroyed, Jehovah delivers David. The king then sings with Moses that Jehovah had become his salvation.

Jehovah's deliverance means Jehovah's praise, because He glorifies Himself by His acts of power. Although God destroys the wicked and chastises the righteous, God graciously lets the righteous live to tell about it.

The psalm foretells a king who will enter the gates of righteousness, with people who will follow. However, Jehovah shocks by making one to be king who men rejected. To this king the people cry for deliverance. He comes with Jehovah's authority and Jehovah's blessing. He also comes as Jehovah's sacrifice, by which the people are delivered from Satan.

As Jehovah is faithful to deliver, to provide a king, and to provide a sacrifice, David exalts the name of Jehovah. By these Jehovah proves He is good, and His love endures forever.

Davidic Authorship

There is no Hebrew superscription attributing the psalm to David, nor one in the Septuagint¹ or the Latin Vulgate.² The *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* provides no alternate manuscript readings which include any kind of superscription.³ However, there is broad consensus that David wrote this psalm.

First, Jewish scholars regard David as the author. Rabbi Radak is cited as seeing the psalm about David's victory over Saul.⁴ Many Reformed theologians also ascribe authorship to

¹ Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, ed., *The Septuagint Version: Greek* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1851), 117:1. Logos edition. All references are to this version unless otherwise noted.

² Michael Tweedale, ed., *Biblia Sacra Juxta Vulgatam Clementinam* (London, 2005), 117:1. Logos edition. All references are to this version unless otherwise noted.

³ H. Bardtke, R. Kittel, and H.P. Ruger, eds., "Psalmי תהלים," in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977), 118:1. All references are to this version unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tehillim: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, ed. Rabbi Nosson Scherman and trans. Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd, 1995), 1403.

David. John Calvin believed it was penned by David after obtaining his royal power.⁵ William Plumer notes that several commentators hold a view like Calvin's. He cites several Reformed authors who believe that David wrote this psalm, including Calvin, Piscator, Venema, Phillips, Poole, Henry, Edwards, and Clarke. He notes Clarke's comments that Psalm 118 has David's spirit, and it possesses David's grand and noble style.⁶

However, some disagree. Martin Rozenberg, though taking no position, states that some rabbis believe that Ps. 118:22 refers to the rebuilding of the Temple.⁷ Clarke (per Plumer) acknowledges that some say it is better fitted to post-exilic circumstances. Hengstenberg and Alexander believe the psalm is post-exilic. However, according to Plumer, it is difficult to apply the circumstances to any king after David, or to the post-exilic period.⁸ Although there is not a perfect established consensus, this paper will look at the psalm from the perspective as being penned by David. The reasons follow in the next section.

Context of the Psalm

Within Biblical History

Within the Life of David

When in life did David write this psalm? Following Calvin and Plumer in the previous section, there is good argument that the psalm was penned after David's ascendancy but before

⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. VI: Psalms 93-150*, trans. Rev. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2009), 376.

⁶ William S. Plumer, D.D., LL. D, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (Chelsea, MI: Sheridan Books, Inc., 1975), 1009.

⁷ Martin S. Rozenberg and Bernard M. Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation and Commentary* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1999), 746.

⁸ Plumer, *Psalms*, 1009.

his fall. It is a joyful psalm, vividly retelling Jehovah's deliverance, like a victory song for soldiers marching off the field of battle.

One might argue that although David did commit various sins before and during his reign, he says in v. 18 "The Lord has chastened me severely, But He has not given me over to death;"⁹ perhaps then, the psalm was penned after his adultery? In reply to this, hardly any sin before David's adultery drew such severe chastisement from God. Rather, Saul's persecution itself was a chastening; not to punish a sin committed, but to train David to trust in Jehovah. David is here like Christ, who exercised obedience in the gymnasium of suffering (Heb. 5:8). Furthermore, there's no Biblical events after the sin with Bathsheba which would correspond with the spirit of the psalm. The whole tone of 2 Samuel 1 to 10 is near-constant ascendancy and triumph; but after 2 Samuel 11 David's victories look more like narrow escapes, and they are often bittersweet.¹⁰ This seems to confirm Calvin's assessment that the psalm was penned around the time of David's coming to power.

Within Israel's Political History

The psalm is at the outset of the monarchial period. The age of the judges—of whom Samuel was last—had recently passed, and Israel is now experiencing the reign of its second monarch. This is fulfillment of Jehovah's promise to provide a monarch when Israel was settled (Dt. 7:14-20). The bringing of a king is a sign of God prospering the nation. The people had just endured the sad experience of taking on a king according to their own wishes, who is "like all the

⁹ New King James Version. All English scripture quotations are NKJV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ There is a source for this sentence, but it is irrecoverable at this point.

nations” per 1 Sam. 8:5, and it was a burden to them. However, David was a man of God’s choosing (1 Sam. 13:14, 16:1, 3), and the experience under his reign would be different.

The exodus happened approximately 400 years earlier. The nation has gone from slavery to an established kingdom. It has received many mercies, forsaken them, and been restored many times over. The majority of necessary conquests for establishment in Canaan are now past, although there are still enemies on all sides. By this time there is the Law, the history of Genesis and the judges, but only a small selection of composed psalms, and none of the major or minor prophets. God’s stated dwelling place is still the tabernacle, and not the Temple.

Within Covenantal History

There are five prior covenants upon which David’s time are built: The Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace, the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, and the Mosaic Covenant. Jehovah declared war on the serpent in Genesis 3 and made a promise of salvation by the seed of the woman. This seed would be conqueror of Satan and his kingdom. In the meantime, Jehovah would bring fallen men back to His own side, while leaving others as the seed of the serpent. In the Noahic Covenant Jehovah had covenanted for the natural order to be sustained so that the promised seed would come. In the Abrahamic Covenant the line of the woman was focused through Abraham. In the Mosaic Covenant Jehovah would establish a particular line of Abraham—the seed of Jacob—as a constituted nation. The next phase would be to bring the people to the promised home land and to give them a king.

The Davidic Covenant is likely yet to come as of the time this psalm was penned. However, this psalm bears relationship to that covenant. The establishment of David as king is a milestone in historically solidifying the coming of Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, who by His

blood would establish the New Covenant. This would be the covenant to stand in place from now until Christ's second coming. In this context, the psalm blesses Jehovah for the Son of David who is covenanted to come.

Division into Sections

There are hardly any internal markers within the original Hebrew to help determine how to split out the psalm. This paper, consulting the divisions in the Logos editions of the ESV, NASB, and NKJV, will divide up the psalm as follows. This will also serve for the major section divisions in the exegetical section.

Introduction

- **Section 1** – v. 1-4 – The verses are united by the theme of the everlasting love of Jehovah.

Jehovah Delivers

- **Section 2** – v. 5-9 – The verses are united by Jehovah's deliverance from distressing troubles. While there can be reason to treat v. 8-9 as a distinct section, the inclusion of v. 8-9 creates a capstone of praise to Jehovah for His faithfulness. This is the author's own preferential treatment.
- **Section 3** – v. 10-14 – This section uses vivid imagery to describe the intensity of David's peril, and it caps off with praising the Lord for being David's salvation.
- **Section 4** – v. 15-18 – David praises Jehovah in exalted language for His deliverance. The content of this section may be an argument why v. 14 belongs to this section rather than v. 10-14.

Jehovah's King Comes

- **Section 5** – v. 19-21 – This begins the establishment of the kingship. Here he enters the gates to take on the kingship. While v. 21 could possibly be its own unit, it follows 19-20 thematically as vocalized praise to Jehovah for at last bringing a king.
- **Section 6** – v. 22-24 – The significance of the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone is immensely significant. The events of v. 22-23 are the reasons for the establishment of the day in v. 24, and so these verses remain tied together.
- **Section 7** – v. 25-27 – In this section the people call upon the king to do his saving work. It culminates in the binding of the sacrifice to the altar, which is how the saving work was ultimately accomplished.

Final Praise

- **Section 8** – v. 28-29 – A concluding praise of Jehovah.

Section by Section Analysis

Explanations

This part of the paper will exegete each section of the psalm. Here will be analyzed words, grammar, literary matters, any relevant textual issues, etc. The significance of each verse and section to both biblical and systematic theological matters will also appear in these sections.

Section 1 (v. 1-4) – Praising Jehovah’s Eternal Goodness

Verse 1

The Theme of Psalm 118

Verse 1 is the theme verse of the psalm, as this exact verse begins and ends Psalm 118. This makes all which comes between v. 1 and 29 to be an expansion and demonstration of the Lord’s everlasting love. Therefore, it is important to comprehensively understand the terms of this verse before diving into the rest of the psalm. For this reason, this section will be one of the longer sections of this work.

Call to Action: To Thank, Praise, or Confess?

Psalm 118 begins with a command: הוֹדוּ. However, here is the first difficulty. The verb הוֹדוּ even within the NKJV’s rendition of Psalm 118 is translated inconsistently as either “thank” or “praise.”¹¹ In the ESV it is more consistently “to thank.” In the NASB and NIV it is more consistently translated “to thank.” The Vulgate and the Septuagint translate הוֹדוּ as “confiteor” and “ἐξομολογέω,” both meaning “to confess.”¹² Which is it? In this instance, there is something of all these translations in this word.

The *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* only lists one meaning for הוֹדוּ, “to praise.”¹³ According to the *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament*, the root idea of הוֹדוּ is to confess or to acknowledge. In context, it is an acknowledgement of who God is and

¹¹ In v. 19, 21, and 28 it is translated “to praise,” but in v. 1 and 29 it is “to thank.”

¹² Vulg. and LXX, Ps. 117:1.

¹³ William L. Holladay, ed. “Yādāh,” in *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.). Logos edition. Will be referenced as HALOT.

what He has done. *TWBOT* cites Westermann's *The Praise of God in the Psalms* that יָדָה is never used in the Old Testament for thanks between men; that is more likely expressed by the word כָּרָה. The *TWBOT* continues, however, that thanks may perhaps be expressed by the act of confessing and acknowledging God's works.¹⁴ One should consult their own experience: Is it possible to truly praise someone for doing good to them, without having a thankful heart? Doesn't thankfulness presuppose a specific, known benefit?

Might there be a contextual reason to decide which one? Psalm 118 is largely addressed to an audience besides Jehovah (with a few exceptions), seeing that Jehovah is addressed several times in third person. In this case the word "thank" may not be appropriate. "Praise" or "confess" can be a better fit. For a contemporary translation, "confess" has a connotation of making known a wrong done, and not a proclamation of what one believes. For this reason, "praise" is the best translation for a modern ear. However, this paper will tend to the use of "confess" in its more original sense as best bringing out the meaning of יָדָה.

Now one must ask, why does the psalm begin with an imperative? The psalmist expects there will be a particular response—the acknowledgment of the greatness of God and of His works. The praise of Jehovah is a natural and appropriate response for receiving blessing. The psalms tell in other places about making known the character and works of God (Ps. 9:1, 9:11, 51:12-13, 73:28). Jas. 5:13 also says, "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms." One has a duty to make known the good name and works of God.

¹⁴ R. Laird Harris et al., eds., "Yādāh," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press), 364. Will be referenced as *TWBOT*.

Confess Jehovah: Why?

The first reason to confess Jehovah is in His name, יְהוָה. This is the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה. The name means many things. It first means that God “is.” He can never be “is not,” and cannot be more or less than He is. This means He is eternal and unchangeable. Also, God “is,” in that He is original being, while all others have a derived or granted being. If all things have a derived existence, then He upholds all such things by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3). This means all things are impotent unless He grants power. This means His enemies are likewise impotent. Put all this together, and one sees that God is all-sufficient for deliverance.

יְהוָה is also significant as the covenant name for God. Gamble notes that in Genesis 1, when God is creating the world, Moses uses אֱלֹהִים, a name referring to His majesty and power; but he shifts to יְהוָה in 2:4 when coming to the relationship between God and man.¹⁵ Therefore, when Psalm 118 refers to יְהוָה, it stands on the covenant relationship between Jehovah and David.

Another passage bears on how one understands the name of Jehovah, and that is Exodus 6:3. Here, God tells Moses that the fathers did not know Him by this name. However, Gamble notes that Eve did know the name יְהוָה, but in the dialogue with the serpent she did not use it.¹⁶ This means that the name was known before Exodus 3:14, as Bavinck notes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. However, Bavinck states that there is a reason for this: the name יְהוָה takes on a new significance when revealed to Moses and to the enslaved Israelites. The name assures the people

¹⁵ Gamble, Richard C. Lecture delivered at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary on September 7, 2023.

¹⁶ Gamble, September 7, 2023. She did know the covenant name, as she uses it in Genesis 4:1 when she says קַיִי אֵשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה.

of God's faithfulness and unchangeableness. However, he was not known by that name prior because not enough time had elapsed to maximally demonstrate that faithfulness.¹⁷

Why, then, is יהוה necessary to a proper understanding of Psalm 118? Because David's deliverance is yet another example of Jehovah remaining faithful to the covenant sworn this name. What follows now will be amplification of who this great Jehovah is.

Confess Jehovah: What?

David calls the singer to acknowledge two truths about God: כִּי־טוֹב, and כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ. The two truths belong together, and the latter is an amplification of the former. One may draw this inference from each clause beginning with the connector כִּי.

טוֹב

First of all, Jehovah is טוֹב, or good. In Genesis 1 all things that God created were called טוֹב, and nothing evil had come into the world by His own acts. James 1:17 teaches that "[e]very good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." All that is good, right, pleasant, and pure comes from a God who is not only good, but unchangeably good.

עוֹלָם

However, David is specific in how God demonstrates this goodness in concerns to His people. David writes, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ. In short, God's love and loyalty to His people is forever.

¹⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 144.

One should the word **לְעוֹלָם**, which is translated as “forever.” Here is proof of a Jewish concept of life after death. If this means only a prolonged period which may end, there is little reason to celebrate this love. After all, if the love will end, its present enjoyment is bittersweet. What is promised in Psalm 118 will indeed be enjoyed by believers for eternity.

לְעוֹלָם instructs for the times when God’s love does not seem evident. Whenever one goes through difficulties they should not think that God’s faithfulness has changed. The eternality of **חַסֵּד** assures one that this love is always present, even when not perceived.¹⁸

חַסֵּד

This word **חַסֵּד** is a jewel of the Hebrew language. It is a word which gets translated many ways. In the NKJV these include “lovingkindness,” (Ps. 17:7) “favor,” (Esther 2:9) “loyalty,” (2 Sam. 3:8) and “mercy” (Gen. 39:21) among others. However, seeing as there is such a diversity of translations of this word, what is its core?

The sense of **חַסֵּד** is love characterized by loyalty. *HALOT* sees **חַסֵּד** mainly (though not exclusively) in terms of obligations to one’s circle of associates.¹⁹ *TWBOT* says it does include “mutual liabilities of those... belonging to one another.” This sources notes that there are views that say that **חַסֵּד** is “fidelity to covenantal obligations real or implied.” Some views go so far to say that covenant is the basis of this love. However, this is not always the case. For example, Laban had no covenantal obligations to Abraham, and yet he deals in **חַסֵּד** with Abraham in sending out Rebekah (Gn. 24:49). Likewise, the word appears constantly in the book of Ruth, but it would destroy the spirit of the book for it to always be rooted in covenant. Notably in Ruth

¹⁸ Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 749.

¹⁹ “*Hesed*,” *HALOT*.

3:10, Ruth had no covenantal obligations to Boaz, but her preferment for Boaz was taken as חֶסֶד.

While a view of חֶסֶד does exist that it is covenantal because of its connection with suzerainty treaties, it does not follow that the covenant brings forth the חֶסֶד. *TWBOT* says that on 15 occasions חֶסֶד is paired with רַחֲמִים, (Exod. 34:6-7) חֵן, (Gen. 19:19) and תְּנָחִיָּה (Ps. 94:18-19). These evidence חֶסֶד itself to be synonymous with word for mercy and grace.²⁰

The ramifications are not light if covenant gives rise to love, rather than love giving rise to covenant. This would mean that God's love comes from an obligation to His people, but that love might not exist were it not for that covenant. That is a mighty obstacle to resting in the love of God.²¹ It is therefore significant that חֶסֶד is contained in the Divine Name in Exodus 34:6-7. Jehovah gives חֶסֶד as part of His essential glory, and not the offspring of a covenant. It is there before a covenant exists, affirming the words of John that God is love, and that love is from God (1 Jn. 4:7-8).

Furthermore, although family and society members may have obligations to one another, it is outside the spirit of the Second Great Commandment to make those obligations the foundation of love, rather than make love the foundation of one's obligation. The Samaritan probably felt no societal obligation at all to the Jew lying dead in the road, and yet he had pity (Lk. 10:33). His actions demonstrate what is plainly meant by the injunction to love one's neighbor as their own self (Lk. 10:27).

Should the word still retain a connotation of loyalty and covenant obligation in this Psalm? Yes, because the love of God for Israel is unlike His common grace love for other

²⁰ "Hesed," *TWBOT*, 305-307. Entire paragraph is from this source.

²¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 69-71, states that Thomas Boston did not favor the concept of the covenant of redemption as he understood it, as it makes it seem that God's love for the Christian only exists because Christ purchased it, rather than letting God's love be the environment in which redemption was accomplished; or perhaps, behind it all, the Father doesn't actually love His people. There is a similar problem here: if covenant is the cause of love, then one will suspect whether it is real love.

peoples. To the Israelites God has pledged Himself to be their God and to their children after Him (Gn. 17:7). Even when not mentioned, this covenant is foundational to all that ever happens in David's life. Therefore, the covenant consideration is important in discovering the nature of *חֶסֶד*. However, the covenant came about because of *חֶסֶד*; and so the covenant does not show the strength of the love, but love the strength of the covenant.

In summary, considering the attachment of *חֶסֶד* to the divine name, this is a love that births the covenants that God makes with His elect. He chooses and covenants because He loves. As it is a word that conveys a sense of family or covenanted obligation, there is present the element of loyalty.

Summary of Verse 1

Let all people confess before the world that God is good, and God has expressed this goodness in His covenanted love and loyalty to His people.

Verses 2 to 4 – A Triad of Worshippers

Verse 1 is the theme verse for the psalm, and David re-emphasizes the theme by calling upon three categories of worshippers to confess (expressed by the verbs *יאמרו־נָה* and *יאמרו־נָה*) the last clause, *כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדוֹ*. The categories are *יִשְׂרָאֵל*, *בֵּית־אֱהֱרֹן*, and *יְרֵאֵי יְהוָה*. The particle *נָה* colors David's summons with zeal and earnestness. What is the significance of each of these categories?

יִשְׂרָאֵל

For the first category, *יִשְׂרָאֵל* is the nation in the original. There had been no split in the time of David between the Judeans and the Israelites. This name represents the entirety of the

twelve tribes. However, one should remember the occasion on which the name was given. The angel gave this name to Jacob in Genesis 32:28 because, as it says, "...for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." It is a title given to a mighty conqueror. The name itself means "A Prince of El." Just as a prince conquers, so has Jacob done. And isn't this Israel's history in short form? What numerous enemies had Israel faced and overcome? The name itself reminds that the Lord had been steadfast in His love and faithfulness to them in centuries prior.

יְרֵאִי יְהוָה

Who are יְרֵאִי יְהוָה? Rozenberg commenting on Psalm 115:1, where this same triad of groups is found, asserts that these are Gentiles who had renounced paganism and embraced Adonai. For his sources he claims Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Metzudat David.²² It is a fitting line to have on the heels of Psalm 117, which called for the nations of the world to worship Jehovah.

בֵּית־אֶהְרֹן

In the middle there is בֵּית־אֶהְרֹן. The three classes form a triad, and Aaron's place in the middle is significant. It is the house of Aaron that allows both Jews and Gentiles to present their worship to God. It is Aaron who presents the sacrifices of blood to God, which sacrifices demonstrate that there is forgiveness of sins available for Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, Aaron is a type of Jesus Christ, and even receives his authority from Him. Apostolos Makrakis notes that Aaron is insufficient, but one must move from Aaron to Melchizedek, in whose line is the full remission of sins.²³ Aaron's line is a line that pays tithes to Melchizedek (Heb. 7:9), whose

²² Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 736.

²³ Apostolos Makrakis, *Commentary on the Psalms of David*, trans. D. Cummings (Chicago, IL: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society), 685.

line is the greater which blesses the lesser (7:7). In this line is Jesus Christ; and so, if one begins with Aaron and runs back up to the origin of his line, they are brought to the Mediator whose sacrifice makes possible again fellowship with God. Likewise, He is the High Priest by whom all of man's worship comes to God.

Call and Response

It is possible that verses 2-4 were meant to be sung as call and response? Rozenberg thinks so. He says that the first part of each line would be sung by either a Levite or a chorus, and the people would respond with כִּי לְעֵלָם חֲסִדֹּו.²⁴ In Ezra 3:11 there is responsive singing of Ps. 118:1. It is possible the singing is responsive here as well.

Why No כִּי־טוֹב?

Both the Septuagint and the Vulgate include כִּי־טוֹב after v. 1. The Septuagint inserts ὅτι ἀγαθὸς on each line of v. 2-4, and the Vulgate adds "Quoniam bonus" in v. 2.²⁵ There doesn't seem to be any significant textual reason for either, except maybe to create more parallel between the first line and the subsequent three lines.

The Message of v. 1-4

People should confess God's goodness, most gloriously expressed in His covenant love and loyalty which holds fast in all trials. Jehovah pledges by the sacrifices offered by the house of Aaron that both Jews and Gentiles have a way for their worship to be acceptable, and for them

²⁴ Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 736.

²⁵ LXX Ps. 117:2-4 and Vulg. Ps. 117:2.

to have fellowship with God. This means that God will deliver from distress according to His covenant.

Section 2 (v. 5-9) – Deliverance from Distress

Now that David has induced all of Israel to confess the greatness of God because of His love and covenant loyalty, David will demonstrate what God has done to make Him worthy of this praise. Here David describes the great peril he was in, and how God rescued him.

Verse 5

David describes himself as going from **מִצָּר** to **בְּמִרְחֶב**. Both words are articular, perhaps to draw attention to the intensity of the distress and the glory of the deliverance.

מִצָּר is a word for distress and for straits.²⁶ Jesus uses a similar word in Matthew 7:14 when he says “...narrow is the gate and difficult (τεθλιμμένη) is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” The word **θλίβω** likewise means either difficulty, or constricted circumstances.²⁷ Even the Septuagint translates this as **θλιψέως**.²⁸ It would be an apt description for David in the circumstances in which he lived, as enemies geographically surrounded the Israelites on all sides. Radak interprets this as referring to David living in restrictive caves while fleeing Saul, though afterwards coming out to open glory.²⁹ Rozenberg notes the similarity of the

²⁶ “Mēṣar,” *HALOT*.

²⁷ Walter Bauer et al., eds., “Thlibō,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

²⁸ LXX, 117:5.

²⁹ Feuer, *Tehillim*, 1403.

word מֵצָר with the name of Egypt, מִצְרַיִם, and so he refers to Egypt as a land of straits.³⁰ This word is also used in Psalm 116:3 and Lamentations 1:3 to refer to coming into a distressed situation.

The word מְרֻחָב means an open place.³¹ It's a natural contrast to a place of restriction. It also is used in Scripture to refer to a place of deliverance. It is so used in 2 Sam. 22:20, Ps. 18:19, and 31:9. It is synonymous with the idea of safety.

What then is the significance of this contrast? A restricted position means one is hemmed in and cannot act in their own defense. A constricted enemy is easier to defeat. If there is a reference to David hiding in caves, this would fit. A cave is a poor place of retreat if one is discovered. When the five kings hid in the cave of Makkedah it was easy to contain them and then to kill them (Josh. 10:16-18, 26). However, it was a remarkable change when David could freely leave his hiding place and openly take his place as king. He could walk out into the open without fear. The open place shows the mighty change of circumstances God brought about for David. The *Book of Psalms for Singing* catches the spirit of Psalm 118 when it reads, "He set me in a spacious place / a place of liberty."³²

Verse 6 and 7

When David trusts upon the Lord, he knows that he is completely safe. He is out of the reach of his enemies. They will not have victory over him—he will look upon them.

³⁰ Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 1403.

³¹ "Merḥab," *HALOT*.

³² *The Book of Psalms for Singing* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant Publications, 1998), 118C.

David by faith was able to draw great comfort from God. Francis Turretin notes that one of the fruits of real faith is comfort and consolation.³³ This was David's experience. Later on in life David would flee from his own son Absalom. Despite the persecution's chastising nature, David writes Psalm 3:5-7, "I lay down and slept; / I awoke, for the Lord sustained me. / I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people / Who have set *themselves* against me all around." Even when Jehovah disciplines in a severe manner, David feels calm and peaceful within.

Yet even if one were to die at the hand of a persecutor, Jehovah may still resurrect the body.³⁴ Saul can terrorize for only a moment, but Jehovah could undo death in a moment.

There comes in this section a reversal: rather than David's enemies triumphing over him, David (literally translated) "will look upon his enemies." The idea is that David is the last man standing after the combat is over. Just as he looked down upon Goliath's dead body, so David will look in triumph upon his enemies. Plumer quotes Fry as saying, "I shall look in triumph upon my enemies," and he quotes Patrick to the end that he may look his enemies in the face and watch them turn their backs.³⁵ One may find in other psalms as well the idea of looking in triumph upon one's enemies, such as in Ps. 37:34 and 91:3.

Verses 8 and 9

David then brings the singers to give praise to God for His deliverance. The experience taught David that to take refuge in Jehovah is far greater than putting trust in any man—even the best of men.

³³ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 563.

³⁴ Makrakis, *Psalms*, 686.

³⁵ Plumer, *Psalms*, 1010.

One should note that David does not use the same word in either verse to signify reliance. He uses the word **חָסֶה** at the beginning of each verse, which includes an idea of taking refuge. Although not always translated as “refuge” in the NKJV, it often includes the idea of refuge and safety in its use. Sometimes it is translated as refuge (Ruth 2:12, Ps. 57:1, 91:4, 141:8), and other times as taking shelter (Jdg. 9:15). For example, when David speaks of Jehovah as his shield, he says in 2 Samuel 22:3, **אֶחָסֶה בּוֹ**. Then again in Psalm 17:7 he says God is a shield to all who are **חֹסִים** in Him. The other word in Ps. 118:8 and 9, **בָּטַח**, is never translated as a refuge.

One may object and say there is an overlap of ideas in the two words, and so there may be a sense of refuge in a word that more strictly means trust. Is the difference significant? Why are two different words used, and not just either **חָסֶה** or **בָּטַח** alone? When one takes shelter it is because they are in danger and they need protection. While one may “trust” another to protect them, the term “trust” more broadly signifies reliance when one may not themselves be in danger, such as when one trusts in oppression (Ps. 62:10), the bow (Ps. 44:6), or even falsehood (Ps. Jer. 13:25). Although there is overlap in meaning between **חָסֶה** and **בָּטַח**, **חָסֶה** adds the color of taking shelter in Jehovah the strong fortress.

Section 3 – v. 10-14 – Intense Distress and Mighty Victory

This segment of verses is an amplification of verses 5-9. While v. 5-9 covers the high-level view of the struggle, this section illustrates the intensity of the conflict. Although the enemy has David overwhelmingly surrounded, and although they are fierce against him, David will destroy them because Jehovah is with him.

David refers frequently to his enemies having him surrounded, but he uses two different verb forms in alternation: סָבְבוּג and סבויג. It's a mystery what the difference is between the two, as both are qal perfect third person common plural, and yet one has a single more ך than the other. The Septuagint translates them as ἐκύκλωσάν and κυκλώσαντες; however, the only difference is that the former is indicative and the latter is participle, but both are aorist tense. The Vulgate translates the words as "circuierunt" (perfect indicative) and "circumcidantes" (present participle). Is there a difference in the Hebrew?

It is possible that סבויג is qal perfect and סָבְבוּג is piel perfect.³⁶ However, *HALOT* acknowledges only a single use of this סָבְב in the piel form, and that is in 2 Samuel 14:20 where it means something like a change of affairs (as translated in the NKJV). *TWBOT* also points out this form (סָבְבוּג) as being a qal form.³⁷

This author has found no authors except one who addresses the difference. The Masorah parva in *BHS* make no reference to it at all.³⁸ The only commentary which was found to address the difference is Feuer's work, which citing *Vilna Gaon* on Isaiah, says that סבויג refers to enemies encircling close by, while סָבְבוּג refers to enemies encircling from a distance.³⁹ However, this does not seem to help the meaning of the psalm in any way.

³⁶ If סָבְבוּג is piel, the argument would be that there is no daghesh forte in the piel form because the daghesh forte does not appear in the third common plural form of piel verbs. In piel forms the first letter may take a vocal shewa from frequent shortenings of vowels. If this is the case then it confirms the idea that the piel form (the first form of סָבְב used) amplifies the danger of David's situation. However, there are also too few piel uses to determine what then the root idea of piel would be, and how it would square with the usage in 2 Sam. 14:20 as pointed out in the body of the paper.

³⁷ "Sābab," *TWBOT*.

³⁸ *BHS*, Ps. 118:10-12.

³⁹ Feuer, *Tehillim*, 1406.

Why then would David use two different words in the same form? It is possibly because the repetition strengthens the sense of the peril that David is in, as though he is saying, “Let me tell you how utterly overpowered I was at that time!” Repetition of the exact same form could kill the sense of poetry. Perhaps too there is a multiplication of the “b/v” sound to mirror the multiplication of enemies. The repetition and lengthening of the form of סָבַב makes one feel that sense of being surrounded.

The core idea is this: There is no way David should have survived, and yet he did. In 2 Kings 19:35-36 Sennacherib brought against Hezekiah an overwhelming army of 85,000 men, yet in one night the angel of the Lord slew all but Sennacherib. David likewise was overwhelmed by his enemies, but Jehovah would overwhelm them.

בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה

It would be David who would defeat his enemies, as Jehovah trains the godly man’s hands for war (Ps. 144:1). David calls out three times בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה כִּי אֶמְלֹךְ. When David says בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה he is using the exact words he used when declaring to Goliath in whose name he is coming (1 Sam. 17:45). These are the words of authorization to carry out a purpose on God’s behalf. With Jehovah standing behind him, David will be the instrument of execution on his enemies.

אֶמְלֹךְ

Now comes a most unique verb found nowhere else in the Old Testament in verb form. The *BHS* Masorah parva shows it occurring only three times.⁴⁰ It may be related to a verb form

⁴⁰ *BHS*, Ps. 118:10-11.

of מוּל, or “to circumcise.”⁴¹ However, it is translated in the NKJV as “to destroy.” In the Vulgate it is “ultus sum,” or “I am avenged.”

The question comes up, is there perhaps a veiled reference to circumcision in the form of this word? Might it even possibly have a double meaning of defeating the nations (גוֹיִם) by converting them? There isn’t much commentary on the use of this word. John Gill—a profound Hebraist in his day—did make a double application of this word; but instead of applying it for the conversion of the Gentiles, he applies it against the Jews. He sees this as possibly forecasting the Jews who boasted in their circumcision and yet were the enemies of Christ, and thus Christ destroyed them in his wrath.⁴²

This author’s opinion is that, if there is a reference to circumcision, it is a reference to David’s victory in 1 Samuel 18:27. David went out and he slew two hundred Philistines, and he brought back all their foreskins. What soldier not only kills two hundred men, but circumcises them when he’s done? This is a picture of the overwhelming triumph that Jehovah gave to David, and what a mighty man he was. It’s also unreasonable to apply it to conversions since the idea is that David’s enemies fall. It’s therefore truest to context to render the word in the sense of destroying his enemies, and not redeeming them. Rather, just as David had an overwhelming triumph against prior enemies, he will have similar victories again.

One should remember the political situation of David and Israel. They were surrounded by enemies, and David warred for a king who wanted to kill him. Jehovah was protecting David;

⁴¹ “Mwl,” *HALOT*. The source doesn’t give a vowel for the root word for מוּל, but only the consonants. It looks quite similar to the word for “to circumcise.”

⁴² John Gill, *Exposition of the Old & New Testaments*, Vol. 4, *Psalms to Solomon's Song* (London: Mathews & Leigh, 1810), 205.

and not only protecting David, but granting him shocking successes. David knew that Jehovah was on his side, and so he could confidently say **בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה כִּי אֶמְלֹךְ**.

סְבוּגֵי כְּבוֹרִים דַּעְכוּ קֶאֱשׁ קוֹצִים

David then describes his enemies as **כְּבוֹרִים**, a word which can be translated as bees, hornets, or wasps. These are the creatures to whom Jehovah compared the Amorites who pursued the Israelites out of the land. There are some species of bees that are known to pursue their victims for long distances and sting until they die. Like bees or hornets, enemies swarm against David with intent to kill him. Feuer's commentary notes from Maharam Arma'ah that bees sting once and they die, and thus the bees are the enemies who are willing to risk their own destruction.⁴³ Why did the Canaanites dare to resist the Israelites when they knew Israel's God overwhelmed Egypt in Destruction (Josh. 2:9-10)? Why only did the Gibeonites respond shrewdly?

What is meant by **קֶאֱשׁ קוֹצִים**? Thorns cackle when they burn, but they die out quickly. Eccl. 7:6 says, "For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, So *is* the laughter of the fool." There's noise for the moment, but then it is gone. Calvin agrees with this interpretation, and he points out that even though they may make a great stir, it quickly subsides.⁴⁴ God's enemies make a great show for a moment, but their blaze quickly passes.

⁴³ Feuer, *Tehillim*, 1406-7.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 383.

One last time David uses violent imagery to show how intent his enemies were on destruction. Literally it translates, “Pushing you have pushed me.” The enemies were bent on seeing David destroyed. However, Jehovah intervenes, and David is rescued from their fury.

The Song of the Crossing

The section concludes with a reference from a quotation of Ex. 15:2, “The Lord *is* my strength and my song, / And He has become my salvation.” David recollects Israel’s escape from Pharaoh, who pursued and surrounded with an army like hornets. Israel was constricted between the army and the sea. Pharaoh would push them that they fall. The shouts of war were like the loud crackles of the thorns in the fire. However, Jehovah intervened and rescued the Israelites. They crossed the Red Sea, and Pharaoh and his army were no more.

In the life of David is a replay of this deliverance. Here was David pursued by a royal military power. They pursued him across the wilderness like hornets intent on killing. They meant to destroy. They made great noise against David. In the end though, Jehovah delivers David out of impossible circumstances, and reveals Himself to be the salvation of David.

Section 4 – v. 15-18 – Rejoicing in Jehovah’s Might

Now that David has described the deliverances of God, he now transitions to open praise of Jehovah, as is right when one receives mercy and kindness from God.

קוֹל רִנָּה וַיִּשְׁמְעוּהָ בְּאֶהֱלֵי צַדִּיקִים

“There is rejoicing in the tents of the righteous.” That is, the households of the righteous. Even though David does not use בֵּית, the standard word for dwelling place, אֶהֱל occasionally means the same thing. For example, Ps. 83:6 refers to “the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites.” Surely by this time the Edomites were living in houses! In Psalm 84:10 the psalmist says, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.” It sometimes signifies a family group, such as the reference to the tents of Ham in Ps. 78:51. Thus the use of “tent” is roughly synonymous to the use of “house.”

Why tents? A tent is temporary. Whoever lives in a tent does not intend to stay. All who follow in the footsteps of Abraham are looking for a city different from the one they live in, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). The use of the word “tent” for established civilizations reminds man that he will not stay on earth forever. He should think about the next country he will live in. Only those who live בְּאֶהֱלֵי צַדִּיקִים can expect a permanent dwelling someday, since only for these does Jehovah go to war.

מִיַּן יְהוָה

David proceeds to praise God for His mighty power. The right hand is the sign of power. God saves by the right hand in Ps. 17:7; He exercises power by the right hand in Ex. 15:6 and 12, Dt. 33:2, and Job 40:4; He upholds by the right hand in Ps. 18:35 and 73:23. In Ps. 118:16 “The right hand of Jehovah is high above.”⁴⁵ That is, the God’s hand of power is higher and mightier than any other hand. Men and nobles and armies thus far have all been brought to their knees by God’s power, and so His right hand is exalted above all right hands.

⁴⁵ The verb is in the polel form, which corresponds to the piel.

I Shall Not Die, But Only Be Chastened

This section concludes with David's affirmation of hope: He will by no means die. He will live. Not only will he live, but He will live to declare the great works of God. This is the end to which God brought deliverance: that the world may know Jehovah's goodness and unfailing love.

David goes on to explain that he had not been sentenced to death, but he is only chastened. It is a severe chastening, for he says יִסֶּר יְהוָה; that is, "chastening you have chastened me." The combination of the infinitive absolute form with a finite verb is a Hebraic structure that conveys the intensity. The piel form of the finite verb distinguishes this as a reference to chastening as opposed to mere admonishment.⁴⁶ It has already been argued what is the nature of the chastening spoken of in this verse, as well as a case why it does not necessarily put the authorship of the Psalm in the much later part of David's kingship.

It is worth stopping and pondering. How is it that unrighteous David is privileged to live, and yet his enemies would die? There is nothing better in David than any other man. It is distinguishing mercy. God is in covenant with David, and so David will live. As severe as the discipline may ever become, even though David's enemies will remain in sheol (Ps. 9:17), David himself will not stay there (Ps. 16:10).

Section 5 – v. 19-21 – Entering the Gates

This section marks a transition in the psalm. David has just finished proclaiming how Jehovah has delivered him. Now David sings about going to take his throne.

⁴⁶ Francis Brown et al, "Yāsar," in *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Richard Whitaker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906). Logos edition.

Through the Gates to the Temple

There is some question whether the gates referred to are the gates of Jerusalem, or if they are the Temple gates. Yaavetz HaDoresh cited in Feuer's commentary says that it is entry into the gates of Jerusalem,⁴⁷ while others will say that this refers to re-entry into the Temple.⁴⁸ A glance at later parts of the psalm, comparison to another psalm, and the use of the psalm in Christ's own day, will all help answer the question.

Internally, there is a signal that the Temple is ultimately being approached, as v. 27 refers to the sacrifice being bound to the horns of the altar. The psalm indeed moves toward the Temple. At the same time, gates are associated with kingship. In Psalm 24⁴⁹ David writes about a king (not himself, but the King of Glory) entering into the gates. Where are these gates? They are per Ps. 24:3 on top of "the hill of the Lord." The hill is the place of dominion because it is an elevated place. Jerusalem rests upon Mount Zion, which signifies its importance to rulership. David in both psalms has in mind a king going into his place of rulership.

Is David in Ps. 118 speaking about himself or about Christ? At the least, he is certainly not speaking only of himself. He already spoke of the King of Glory in Ps. 24:7-10, who could not be David. Why would Ps. 118 ultimately refer to Christ as King and not David?

First of all, these are not the gates of any human city. The gate is called *הַשַּׁעַר לַיהוָה* in Ps. 118:20, "the gates of Jehovah." This implies entry into something much greater than a city built by Jebusites. We should associate "the gates of Jehovah" with "the hill of the Lord" in Psalm 24. Going from here, these gates of Ps. 24:7 and 9 are the "everlasting doors." The gates of

⁴⁷ Feuer, *Tehillim*, 1410.

⁴⁸ Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 752.

⁴⁹ Thanks to Dr. C.J. Williams for suggesting this connection.

Jerusalem were destroyed in 70 AD. Third, the gates in Ps. 118:19 are שַׁעֲרֵי צֶדֶק. If Adam and Eve could not stay in the garden after one sin, David has no right to enter the Gates of Righteousness after his many sins chronicled before his rise to power. The requisite for coming up to this place is that one have per Ps. 24:4 “clean hands and a pure heart.” Only the righteous may dwell in this city. Although the righteous ones do enter this city,⁵⁰ Psalm 24 is clear that one man in particular enters first. For all these reasons, the gates of Ps. 118:19-20 are the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem.

A final evidence of the kingship theme in Psalm 118 is this: when Christ entered Jerusalem, which would mean going in by the gates, He was greeted with the singing of Ps. 118, of which 118:26 is directly quoted by Matthew (see Mt. 21:1-9). In that event are all the marks that both Christ and the people knew this was a regal event. Christ came on a donkey, which was a sign of His kingship, and this is how the people took Him (compare Mt. 21:7 and Zech. 9:9). They also shouted “hosannah,” meaning “O please save us.” (Mt. 21:9) In the same verse they refer to him as the Son of David. By all accounts, this is fulfilled in Jesus coming into Jerusalem as a king.

However, could entry into the Temple still be part of the intended imagery in Ps. 118:19-20? Yes it may. First of all, the Temple was the center of life in Jerusalem. It is the prime place where reconciliation and fellowship between God and man took place. In that place man went to Jehovah. There is no reason to come to Jehovah’s gate unless one intends to go to Jehovah himself. Second, when Christ entered Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-9) the first recorded destination is the Temple (Mt. 21:12). Also, when Christ did enter the Heavenly Gates of Psalm 24 where does

⁵⁰ Psalm 118:20 refers to the just entering in. Here both “the just” and “enter” are plural. Christ’s people do follow Him in.

He go? He goes to the Most Holy Place in heaven (Heb. 9:12, 24).⁵¹ However it works in the heavens, Christ must “[appear] in our nature continually before the Father in heaven, in the merit of his obedience and sacrifice on earth...”⁵² The session of kingship alone is not sufficient. Just as Christ entered Jerusalem as a king, and in the same week made Himself the priestly offering, so Christ enters heaven as the king, and there presents the evidence of His priestly offering—resurrected, uncorrupted flesh. For these reasons although the initial reference of v. 19-20 is Christ’s entrance as King, it must terminate in His work as the High Priest.

Confessing God’s Salvation

In v. 21 the people praise Jehovah for His salvation. Why should this verse follow upon v. 19-20? Because the king is the savior of the people. His duty is to protect them from danger. The entrance of the king into the city is an encouragement for the people. It means they have a protector.

However, who is this king? Is it really David? Is not David the one writing the psalm? Then why does he say יְהוָה? This is a second person verb. David is eyeing another deliverer—Jehovah himself. David does not see himself as being the great deliverer of God’s people. It is the work of Jehovah. David himself needed deliverance from Saul, and he could not save himself. This further strengthens the case that it is a king other than David who goes through these gates. This fits with the spirit of the psalm, for what is it that v. 1 calls upon the people to confess? It is, that Jehovah—not David—is good, and that His love endures forever; and so, those who sing confess that Jehovah the King in Jesus Christ brings the salvation of His people.

⁵¹ Credit to Kevin Dennis for his suggestion of the connection.

⁵² William S. Young, ed., “The Larger Catechism,” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia, 1851), WLC 55. Logos edition.

Section 6 – v. 22-24 – The Stone and the Day

Jehovah brings glory to His name by demonstrating the truth of His love in the deliverance of His people. So far, the psalm has demonstrated that God is the great deliverer, and that He is the saving king. However, Jehovah undertakes to accomplish salvation in such a way that only Jehovah could do, in a way that no man would think of, by one whom no man would have chosen. One commentator points out that v. 22 is quoted by three of the Gospel authors.⁵³ It is quoted also in Acts 4:11 and 1 Pt. 2:7, and it is alluded to in Eph. 2:20. Jehovah takes the cornerstone that no one else would have used, and He makes that the foundation.

Before this psalm Jehovah had already shamed men's preferences and worked by counterintuitive methods. One other than the firstborn being chosen (Gen. 4:4-5, 25:23, 37:7-8, 49:8); an old man with his aged wife becoming the father of nations (Gen. 12:3, 18:12); or a man of slow speech becoming God's mouthpiece (Ex. 4:10). Even into the New Testament, those whom God chooses are "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble...." (1 Cor. 1:26)

When the people of Israel became sinfully worn out with Samuel they said, "Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." (1 Sam. 8:5) Indeed, the man whom the people would admire, Saul son of Kish, was more handsome and tall than any other man in Israel (9:2). However, he was a tyrant (8:10-18). The Israelites proved themselves to be poor judges on who should be king. Even Samuel was not immune to making wrong judgments on a suitable deliverer. When Samuel laid eyes on Jesse's oldest son Eliab he was confident this was God's choice. However, God had rejected Eliab (16:6-7). The one whom God chose was the one who

⁵³ Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 543.

was considered so insignificant that the family left him with the sheep rather than present him to Samuel (16:11). David himself was seen as a stone not fit for the work, and yet this would be the head of Christ's line of kings. David in his own time and way was the cornerstone of Israel and the kingship. Feuer, in line with the Targum, understands the rejected stone to be David.⁵⁴

So it is when Jesus Christ comes, He would not seem like an attractive choice for the King of Kings. Turretin points to this passage as an evidence that the Messiah would come in a state of humiliation.⁵⁵ In Isaiah 53:2 He is a "tender plant," "a root out of dry ground," with "no form or comeliness," and "no beauty that we should desire Him." The Pharisees who were masters of externals—guilty of the same error of 1 Sam. 8:5 and 16:6-7—had entirely missed that this was the cornerstone that the Father would appoint (Mt. 21:42). Kistemaker points out that the Sanhedrin are here the architects of v. 22 who rejected the stone, as Christ asserts this in Mt. 21:42, and Peter asserts the same in Acts 4.⁵⁶

This is a shocking outcome, and unexpected; not only for who the stone is, but who the blind architects are. Feuer referencing Radak says the builders are the governors and leaders of the world who don't realize that it is the Jews in their obedient service who are providing this cornerstone stability to the world.⁵⁷ Sadly, this view misses it entirely. It only proves the point though: the one whom God chose was seen by his fellow countrymen as the most unlikely choice.

⁵⁴ Feuer, *Tehillim*, 1411.

⁵⁵ Turretin, *Elenctic vol. 2*, 333.

⁵⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 154.

⁵⁷ Feuer, *Tehillim*, 1411.

Is it a Cornerstone or Cap Stone?

Although the NKJV translates Ps. 118:22 to read ראש פִּנֵּה as “cornerstone,” there is debate on the meaning. It’s hard to say since this combination of words appears nowhere else in the Hebrew scriptures. *BHS* Masorah parva indicates that לְרֹאשׁ appears 24 times in the Hebrew scriptures,⁵⁸ but none of them with פִּנֵּה affixed. Leon Morris says it may possibly be either a stone in the foundation adjoining two walls, or a stone capped onto the building, enjoining the walls and signaling completion of the building.⁵⁹ A footnote in Calvin’s commentary on Ps. 118:22 inserts that it is indeed a foundation stone and not any kind of capstone.⁶⁰ Albert Barnes asserts it is not only a cornerstone, but the most prominent of the cornerstones.⁶¹ In either case, the stone is necessary for the strength and support of the whole building. Whichever way one goes on the matter, the building cannot be without this stone. More amazingly, the stone by which Jehovah holds the building together is one which man would have not thought to have chosen.

Marvelous in Our Eyes

What is it that is marvelous? Is it the act of Jehovah, or is it the stone? It is likely a reference to the event itself.

The question comes up because the word אֶבֶן is a feminine word, and some key words in the section are feminine. For example, מִצֵּאת יְהוָה הִיטָה זֹאת. The verb and the pronoun are both

⁵⁸ BHS Ps. 118:22.

⁵⁹ Morris, *Matthew*, 543.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, 388.

⁶¹ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the Old & New Testaments: Psalms Vol. III*, ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 173.

feminine. Later on the word נָקֵלָה is also feminine. However, it's common to refer to generic events or actions in the feminine. In Genesis 3:13 Jehovah asks Eve concerning her sin, מַה־זָּאת עָשִׂיתְּ. The pronoun is feminine, but there is no feminine word which it could be referencing. It happens again in Genesis 26:10 when Abimelech says to Abraham, מַה־זָּאת עָשִׂיתָ. Calvin takes a view that this refers to the event as well.⁶² Barnes agrees.⁶³

The Day which Jehovah has Made

What is the day which Jehovah has made?

Plumer notes two possible views. One is that it refers to the Lord's Day, to which the Sabbath was changed in commemoration of Christ; the other, that it refers to the latter day times inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ.⁶⁴ Barnes takes the view that this day is commemorated on account of a surprising and marvelous deliverance, and the Sabbath day celebrates this great deliverance in Christ.⁶⁵ Rozenberg sees it as celebration of the point at which the Jews reached the Temple Mount.⁶⁶ What is it?

One must ask, where else is Psalm 118 quoted? Peter quotes it in Acts 4:11, where he connects the rejected stone with the cornerstone. This makes for a very clear connection to the resurrection just referenced in Acts 4:10.⁶⁷ Therefore, by Peter's own connection, this is a reference to the resurrection, thus connecting it to the eighth day Sabbath itself. It may be

⁶² Calvin, *Psalms*, 389.

⁶³ Barnes, *Psalms*, 173.

⁶⁴ Plumer, *Psalms*, 1012.

⁶⁵ Barnes, *Psalms*, 174.

⁶⁶ Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 753.

⁶⁷ Suggested by Dr. Williams.

connected to the New Covenant times in that it truly is a new age with new privileges. However, the more immediate connection seems to be the day of Christ's resurrection.

How does David instruct that the singers respond? With joy and gladness. The Christian has received deliverance from the great enemy of the soul. In Genesis 3:15 God promised that Satan would receive a deadly blow to the head. The day of the resurrection was that day. It is the day on which the serpent began the process of death. Therefore, there is great reason to rejoice.

Section 7 – v. 25-27 – O Save!

All things are in place for the victory. The king has entered his kingdom, and he is headed toward the Temple. Now the people call upon him to finally deliver.

This is just how the crowds used the psalm in Mt. 21 when Christ entered Jerusalem. Although they were probably expecting deliverance from Rome, nevertheless they expected deliverance and a final defeat of their enemies. Therefore, when He entered Jerusalem they called out in Mt. 21:9 saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”

In Ps. 118:25 they call out הַצִּלֵּנוּ יְיָ. This word used in other places can mean in the sense of wanting a journey to be successful (Gn. 24:21); or wanting the Lord to make one's course successful (Gn. 24:40); or for a man to find great success (Gn. 39:2). The idea is that in what the Messiah sets out to do, it will succeed. The hope of the Judeans hinged upon Christ completing His work. They are desperate, which shows in that they cry out twice in v. 25 הַצִּלֵּנוּ יְיָ, and they conclude again with יְיָ. Everything depends on the success of this deliverer. However, much more hinged than they knew. For freedom from the devil, there must be success in the work of mediation. It is the most consequential of all warfare, and so the prayers and cries to God to succeed must ring out from the depths of the soul.

One thing the Jews knew: Jesus had come בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה, which phrase is used thrice in v. 10-12. Per the commentary on that section, this is the one sent and authorized by Jehovah to complete this saving work. What He does, He does on behalf of the Father.

However, why do people bless one who is the source of blessing? The people greet Him saying בָּרוּךְ הוּא הַבָּא. This is where an English translation may mislead. When an English speaker hears “Blessed be,” it sounds like a pronouncement or command of blessing. That is not how it is in Hebrew, as the verb is in the pual indicative, and not an imperative. No one can bless God in the sense that God can bless a man. The lesser is blessed by the greater (Heb. 7:7). To bless God means to confess and acknowledge that all blessing comes from God. It is another way to obey the imperative of Ps. 118:1, to confess that He is goodness itself. He is blessed in that He is the source of all good.

Why do they bless Him from the house of Jehovah? Plumer connects this with the Aaronic blessing of Num. 6:24-26.⁶⁸ It is a right connection. After all, who is in the center of the triad in Ps. 118:2-4? It is the house of Aaron. It is he who leads both the Jews and the Gentiles to confess that Jehovah’s love is forever. The blessing from Jehovah’s house means that this king has the full approbation of God, and those responsible for the worship of God recognize it.

Jehovah El the Light

In v. 27 David calls Jehovah as אֵל. This is a shortened form of אֱלֹהִים. It has been noted earlier that this refers to God’s powerful and terrible nature. The combination of this name with יְהוָה suggests the Covenant God as being the almighty and powerful one. He is mighty enough to keep His covenant.

⁶⁸ Plumer, *Psalms*, 1013.

It also says וַיָּאֶר לָנוּ, that He brings light. Rozenberg connects this to the Aaronic blessing in which God's favor is shown,⁶⁹ which is sensible considering the blessing that had just come from the house of the Lord. However, the one who was blessed in v. 26 is now turning around and blessing. While light comes from the priesthood, light also comes from kingship. Kings are seen as lights for the people. David in his final words says of a just king who fears God, “And *he shall be* like the light of the morning *when* the sun rises....” (2 Sam. 23:4) When David was nearly killed in combat his mighty men said to him in 2 Sam. 21:17, “You shall go out no more with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel.” Light is a source of guidance and understanding (Ps. 119:105, 130); and seeing as the king is the highest judge in any land, he must be extraordinarily wise, if not the very wisest. Are not much of the Psalms, Proverbs, and the whole of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs written by kings? These are the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Kings wrote these, because godly and competent kings like David and Solomon were great lights to their people.

Plumer sees the reference to light as a reference to the multitude of God's blessings, as well as in connection with good government. He cites the reign of the Messiah per Lk. 2:29-32.⁷⁰ In that passage Simeon acknowledges Christ in v. 32 as “a light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles / And the glory of Your people Israel.” In what form do the blessings come? They come in the form of personal knowledge of God, who is the greatest of lights. Eternal life itself is, according to Christ in John 17:3, to “know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

⁶⁹ Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 753.

⁷⁰ Plumer, *Psalms*, 1013.

Bind the Sacrifice

Now comes a passage with a surprising difference in translations. Commentaries are not always consistent on how to render this verse. The controversial word is *חַג*. According to *TWBOT* it is a “pilgrim feast” or “holiday, i.e. a day or season of religious joy.” It often refers to the Feast of Booths, to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Weeks. *TWBOT* notes that the KJV translates Ps. 118:27 as “sacrifice” on the basis that it is the only thing that would be tied to the altar, although the RSV translates it in Ps. 118:27 as “festal procession,” and the binding is merely figurative. However, in Ex. 23:18 it notes that the literal “fat of my feast” parallels “blood of my sacrifice.”⁷¹ Plumer notes that the word *חַג* gets translated many different ways, including “lamb” or “sacrifice.” He points out in Ex. 23:18 and Isa. 29:1 the word certainly means “sacrifice,” and that is the best use here.⁷² Rozenberg cites Ibn Ezra and Metzudat David as saying it means to tie the festal offering to the altar.⁷³

The passage is best explained as meaning sacrifice. For one, there is no sacrifice in the Old Testament where anything except an animal is put on the altar.⁷⁴ Second, the nature of the sacrifice is brought out by using the word *חַג*. There is to be celebration at the giving of an offering, because it is a sign that God sets man free from the guilt and power of sin. The day of Christ’s resurrection was a day in which to rejoice and be glad. Therefore, there was reason to celebrate in the Old Testament sacrifices as well.

This is the high point of Psalm 118. Here in this verse is precisely how the Messiah would bring salvation. It was not Philistines or Chaldeans or Romans that the people of God

⁷¹ “*Ḥag*,” *TWBOT*.

⁷² Plumer, *Psalms*, 1014.

⁷³ Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 753.

⁷⁴ This may be from a secondary source but it is uncertain which.

needed to be free from—it was the devil, who had a claim to man so long as the wrath of God was against man. By Christ’s sacrifice He would, according to Heb. 2:14-15, “destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”

Section 8 – v. 28-29 – Confessing the God of Covenant Love

Why does the psalm end the way it does? What does v. 28 teach?

The psalm teaches that ה', the Powerful One, is on the side of David. He will not abandon David, because El is in Covenant with David, as El-Shaddai was with Abraham and all his children (Gen. 17:1-2, 7). Because God has proven Himself faithful to David, therefore David returns the blessing to God through confession of His steadfast character and His powerful deeds. He exalts the name of Jehovah above all.

Therefore, David once more commands the singer to confess Jehovah. He is the “I Am” who over all time has proven Himself a faithful deliverer of His people, regardless how terrible the trials have become. Jehovah proved Himself good by destroying the wicked, but keeping those with whom He had made a covenant sealed in His own blood. As Jehovah had delivered from many perils and brought David out of many hopeless situations, He evidenced that the enjoyment of his יְהוָה will indeed last forever.

The Uses of Psalm 118

The exposition of Psalm 118 has demonstrated that the love of Jehovah endures forever. He demonstrates this love in deliverance from enemies, and in establishing Christ as king. How then does one apply Psalm 118 practically?

Be Grounded in the Love of Jehovah

The Christian must be grounded in the love of Jehovah. Love means that God will truly seek the good of the Christian like He does His own interest, as He has taught the church to love her neighbor as herself. (Mk. 12:31) He is eternal and unchangeable, and so His love will never change. To accommodate the Christian's weakness, Jehovah swore by a covenant (Heb. 6:17-18) to confirm to this love.

This love is the foundation for everything that Jehovah does for the believer. If the Christian is grounded in the love of God, He can be confident that even times of trials—or even chastisements for sin—everything is truly for the believer's greatest good. Because (Song 8:6) “love *is as* strong as death, Jealous *as* cruel as the grave;... a most vehement fire... Many waters cannot quench love,...,” there is no possibility that the Christian will be finally left to sin and Satan.

Covenant Hope in Clouded Times: Post-Exilic and New Covenant Significance

One must trust Jehovah even when Jehovah seems distant. Rozenberg notes on Ps. 118:1 that God is faithful to His promises even when He does not seem to be near.⁷⁵ David says in Ps. 118:18, “The Lord has chastened me severely, But He has not given me over to death.” God may seem displeased, but His covenant is not an ounce less firm. There were many times it seemed that Jehovah was not with Israel. How many Jews would have despaired of the mercy of God when Jerusalem was captured by Babylon and the people were led out for seventy years to a foreign country?

⁷⁵ Rozenberg, *Psalms*, 749.

Even in exile, God was still faithful to His promises. Jeremiah encourages the people who will go into exile (Jer. 31:20), “*Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child?* For though I spoke against Him, I earnestly will remember him still;... I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord.” He promises in v. 23-25 to bring them back from captivity and restore their previous prosperity. He even promises a covenant greater than the one they now enjoyed. This new covenant would be marked by knowledge of the forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:31-34). Even in captivity Jehovah will be faithful, and He seals this by yet another covenant.

Decades later the people come back to Judah, and they begin to lay the foundation for a new Temple (Ezra 3:8). When the foundation is laid (v. 10) the people sing (v. 11), “For *He* is good, For His mercy *endures* forever toward Israel.” The Lord truly remembered Israel decades later, and He encouraged them with the laying of the foundation of the second Temple.

The New Covenant church also needs the encouragement of the enduring mercy of the Lord. Christ did warn the disciples that they would be hated and persecuted as He was (Jn. 15:18-19). The persecutions recorded through the book of Acts were violent and everywhere present around the Mediterranean world. The generations after the apostles faced unspeakable tortures for their faith. The church would lose some of its holiness and errors would rise. Physical and spiritual enemies would surround and swarm and sting. Nevertheless Jesus, the cornerstone appointed in covenant love, says in Matt. 28:20, “I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.” Because the cornerstone is soundly in place, even if God’s face does not shine openly, salvation is sure.

Do Not Fear Enemies

The church must not fear its enemies. In Ps. 118:5-6 David stands upon the victories accomplished by Jehovah and declares, “The Lord *is* on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” In v. 10-14 he goes on to narrate a fearless battle against overwhelming enemies. He boldly declares throughout, “But in the name of the Lord I will destroy them.” David thus exhorts the singers to courage and fearlessness. Paul likewise encourages the church in Phil. 1:28 that they be “not in any way terrified by [their enemies]...”

The Christian’s grounds for fearlessness are in Jehovah. If God is omnipotent and all-knowing, if He is the eternal one, if He is the I Am, what can an enemy possibly do to the believer? If this I Am is in covenant with the church, does not that mean all the resources of divinity are in the church’s favor? Since this is true, it does not matter how great the enemies are, how many they are, nor how cruel they are: They are powerless.

Trust upon Christ the Cornerstone

One must fix their faith on Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. The cornerstone itself endures for ages, and for ages it causes the building to endure. The church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.” (Eph. 2:20) Since it is God who is the foundation, the church which is built on top of Him is guaranteed to be everlastingly stable. One may also add to this, that the stone is laid at the high cost of the blood of Christ. Grace and power meet in this stone forever laid in place.

However, there is no other foundation (1 Cor. 2:11). If anyone does not trust in Jesus Christ, He has no hope of endurance. If anyone rejects Christ, then Christ becomes to them the

“stone of stumbling” and “rock of offense.” (1 Pt. 2:8) Rather than be one’s salvation, that stone will grind them to powder (Mt. 21:44).

Do Not Be Scandalized by God’s Methods

The Jewish people were scandalized by Jesus because He did not seem like their expected Messiah. He did not come as they expected, nor did He deliver as they expected. Is it any surprise if Jehovah does not deliver in the New Covenant age in the precise ways that we would expect Him to? The church should remember that however Jehovah chooses to save, He will choose the most unlikely, the most foolish in the eyes of the world, (1 Cor. 1:27) and He will work in a way which shows that He accomplished the victory, and not any man.

Call Upon God to Save

One must continue to cry out for the final deliverance of salvation. In Psalm 118 the people pray for God to save and to prosper. They pray and call upon God even though God has already covenanted victory over their enemies. The church must still call out “Hosanna!”

In no place is this prayer answered like in the book of Revelation. In Scripture history there is the extensive account of the war between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Satan is occasionally allowed the upper hand. The book of Revelation tells that there will be one last battle, one final defeat of Satan, and one everlasting victory for the church.

Revelation 20:9-10 tells of the final surrounding: “They went up on the breadth and of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet *are*. And they will be tormented day and

night forever and ever.” After this is the final judgment (v. 11-15) where the wicked fall, never to rise. This is how Christ will everlastingly fulfill the words “But in the name of the Lord I will destroy them.”

Jehovah indeed prospers the work of salvation. Jehovah comes to live amongst His people (21:3) in the New Jerusalem. The city has no need for a Temple, and the gates are never shut (21:22-26). The King has entered Jerusalem, and He has accomplished such perfect safety that the doors remain forever open. In that place no unclean thing comes (Rev. 21:27). Canaan is fully and finally clear of all enemies. Therefore, just as the people called out “Hosannah,” the church should pray for the final victory of Christ.

End the Day on the Love of God

Psalms 118 begins and ends with Jehovah’s everlasting love. When the Christian rises in the morning, it is because Jehovah gave him another day. When the Christian makes it to their bed, it means Jehovah had been merciful throughout the day. When the Christian comes to their bed in the grave and then awakens to His face (Ps. 17:15) it means that Jehovah had been faithful in life. From beginning to end every day presents a world of new reasons to confess the everlasting God. Therefore, let Jehovah’s unfailing love be confessed at all times.

Conclusion

Jehovah's love never fails. It is the privilege and duty of all peoples—Jews and Gentiles—to confess before the world Jehovah's great love. They may do so through the Mediator Jesus Christ. Jehovah demonstrates His love by letting His people come into circumstances where none but Jehovah may deliver, and then setting them free. He proves that when He is on our side there is no need for fear. It does not matter how great, how many, how vicious the enemy—by Jehovah's power the saints will destroy their enemies. He will cause His people to rejoice in Him, as He is their salvation.

The King that Jehovah appoints will come to His city, and the righteous will come in after Him. He is not a king like man expects, and neither does the King accomplish the work like man expects. The accomplishment then proves that Jehovah has completed the work.

This man comes with the approval and blessing of Jehovah. The people know it, and so they call upon Him to save. He then saves by becoming the offering in the place of His people, freeing them from sin and death. As Jehovah has freed His people from the greatest enemy of all—sin—thus confirming the covenant He made, Jehovah proves that His love will indeed last forever.

The great works of Jehovah allow one to ground themselves in His love. The Christian may be sure that Jehovah's love is near even when all seems dark and hopeless. This love was a support to the Jews when enduring the exile, and it is a help to the church until the end of the age.

Jehovah's love means that there is nothing to fear from enemies, as Jehovah's power is devoted to help His people. It also points men to trust on Jesus Christ the cornerstone, to beware despising Him, and to avoid being scandalized by God's way of working salvation. For all of

Jehovah's great works men should praise Him. As there are not enough books in all the world to contain His deeds (Jn. 21:25), let men praise Him openly, because He has proven that His love endures forever.

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