

Sermon | Psalm 118

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[0 : 00] Back in late 2007, Church of the Advent was a group of men and women meeting on Friday nights in a house just across 16th Street, just down Newton.

And it was situated such that when we came out at the end of those gatherings, after we had eaten dinner together and prayed together, we would come out into the street and you could turn and you could look down the road and you could actually see the side of Canaan Baptist.

And back then, it was hard to imagine all that God might have done. We could never have imagined that, but we would sometimes look down the road and look at those stones and wonder, might we ever worship one day in that space?

And it seemed like kind of a far cry then, and yet here we are. And so if you're here for the first time just joining us, for one, well done finding it.

Since this is our first time here, it would be very understandable if some of you might have wandered around looking, but I'm glad that you found your way here. But this marks not just our first time here, but it marks an extraordinary answer to prayer.

[1 : 14] And yet again, we as a community are reminded of at least two things. One, that we are, as a church, part of a much larger body. And so when it comes to our need for space, it's a great joy when we find another church like Canaan Baptist Church, with whom we can agree on the second thing, and that is this, that God is a God who provides.

That He always provides for His people. That He has provided this space. And unlike the previous space we were in, with all of its accoutrements and all of the good things about it, I think it's pretty clear what we believe in this space.

And we're very excited about that, and very excited about this. And in fact, I hope we can get more information about all the symbolism in this cross behind me. It's actually rich with symbolism.

It's beautiful. And as we toured this space, we got to hear some of that. And so if we can get our hands on that, we'll make it available for you all as well. But we are thankful to God for Canaan Baptist Church.

We're thankful to God for their willingness to host us. And we're hopeful for all that might happen as a result of this relationship with Pastor Owens and this congregation.

[2 : 31] I can't wait for you to meet all of the folk of Canaan Baptist. And we're right now exploring ways that that might happen so that we can get to know one another better. But in light of God's provision, in light of all that we have to be thankful for, this service is a service of thanksgiving.

And as I said at the beginning of the service, it's a time to remember all that God has done. And so I can think of no more appropriate text on which to focus our attention than Psalm 118. Psalm 118 is an absolutely wonderful psalm.

For those of you keeping score at home, it was a favorite of both St. Augustine and Martin Luther. Some say it was Martin Luther's single favorite psalm. It's a psalm, as I said, of thanksgiving.

It praises God for all that He does for His people. Moreover, this psalm, if you pick this up when we read it, it's specifically written to be used in corporate worship gatherings.

And it has a structure, especially in the Hebrew, that is a liturgical structure. It's what's called an antiphonal psalm, meaning it's designed for call and response.

[3 : 37] And I think when Deborah was leading us a little while ago in the reading of this psalm, you could probably pick up on that call and response rhythm. So it's made for this setting specifically.

And it's been used for thousands of years for just that purpose. And it begins structurally with a kind of call to worship. First a call to Israel, then a call to the worship leaders, the house of Aaron, that's essentially the worship leaders.

And then a call to all who fear the Lord. And it progresses like a liturgy. And yet it all is built around this central thematic truth. Can anybody guess what the main idea of Psalm 118 is?

Just take a stab at it. This is not rhetorical. Yeah. What is it? His steadfast love endures forever.

Right? How do you know that? Because it's repeated, what, some five times throughout the psalm. Right? Psalm 136 actually repeats this same phrase 26 times. Over and over and over.

[4 : 41] His steadfast love endures forever. His steadfast love endures forever. So it's a psalm about God's love, about God's eternal love, and how that love is the most foundational, important reality there is.

And so we're going to take some time tonight just to look at that phrase. And actually all of Psalm 118 is sort of bound up in this one phrase. The steadfast love of the Lord.

His steadfast love endures forever. So we're going to look first at steadfast love. And the reason we're doing that is because a lot of times if you're anything like me, you can sort of hear these phrases.

And it's kind of the Bible language. Phrases like steadfast love in your brain can just kind of skirt over it without ever really going down into the depths of what it actually means. And so we're going to spend a little more time on steadfast love.

And then we're going to look at what it means that this love endures forever. So let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we recognize that we are here because of your steadfast love.

[5 : 53] We are able to trust that you're here with us because of your steadfast love. We're able to recognize that we're able to worship in a space like this because of the goodness and the hospitality of a church like Canaan Baptist.

And yet even that is motivated by and rooted in your steadfast love. And so Lord, as we are gathered around your word tonight, please help us, please illuminate this text.

Please teach us, not just in our minds but in our hearts, what it means that your steadfast love endures forever. And we pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. So here we are looking at this phrase that is the kind of central theme of Psalm 118 and actually many other psalms.

God's steadfast love endures forever. And so let's look at steadfast love. This phrase is repeated throughout the Old and New Testament. And we're reading from the English Standard Version translation.

But if you have another translation that you're looking at, you may see a different word in its place. It can also be translated as kindness or faithfulness or mercy or goodness or loyalty.

[7 : 11] And the reason that there are so many diverse ways of translating this is because the actual Hebrew word is very, very hard to translate. It's the word *hesed*.

And if anybody knows how to speak Hebrew, that's a horrible pronunciation. It's more like hesed, like that. But I can't do it because I'm from North Carolina. So I'm not even going to try. So from here on out, it is hesed.

And just accept that that's not the best way to say it. Hesed. And so this word hesed, there have been numerous articles and word studies, numerous dissertations, even entire books written on this single word hesed.

And that tells us two things. First of all, it's incredibly hard to translate accurately. There is no English equivalent. Second thing it tells us is this. It's enormously important.

In terms of understanding what it means to have a relationship with God, it may be one of the most important words in the Bible. And so that's why we're looking at it. But this word hesed, this concept, because it has no English equivalent, we're just going to take a stab.

[8 : 16] And this is my best attempt to convey what it means. In Psalm 118, we're going to say this, that hesed means God's loyal covenant love. God's loyal covenant love.

And I'll unpack that a little more. At the core of the Bible, there's this kind of amazing truth that's captured in the word hesed.

And here's that truth. That God, who is vastly superior to anything that he's made. Okay. Vastly beyond anything in existence.

God who doesn't need anything. Right? Unlike the Babylonian gods or the Greek gods or the Roman gods. God doesn't need anything. Moreover, God doesn't owe us anything.

He doesn't owe his creation anything. In other words, if God snapped his fingers and obliterated everything, he would be perfectly just in doing so. He's not beholden to us in any way.

[9 : 14] Hard to get our minds around that. Nevertheless, it's true. And yet a God like that, looking at a world like ours and people like us, nevertheless chooses to bind himself to his people.

Covenant. Bind himself to his people by making this promise. That he will bless them. That he will provide for them. That he will seek their good. And see them flourish.

No matter what. Now imagine God making a promise like that. He binds himself to his people. To do them good. And to bless them.

And to see that they flourish. And so it's because of that that the psalmist who is reflecting on this. The whole psalm is about this idea. The psalmist in verse 6 can say, The Lord is on my side.

I will not fear. Now that's been used and abused by everybody. Right? By football players and politicians and everybody in between. Right? God's on my side. No, God's on my side.

[10 : 14] Right? The person who belongs to the Lord can legitimately say that. And it's a way of saying this. That God is for me. God is for you.

God is for us. God isn't sitting there with his arms crossed, tapping his foot. Frustrated, angry. Kind of getting over his, you know, just kind of being sick of it all.

God is for you. And because he's bound himself to us in covenant. Then he glorifies himself by being true to that promise. The Lord is on my side.

I will not fear. What can man do to me? The Lord is on my side as my helper. I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. And by the way, what does it say God is? The Lord is on my side as my helper.

Right? Just a little side note here. A little excursus. Genesis chapter 2 is the first place we see this word show up. Right? God creates Adam. Puts him in the garden to work and to keep it. Adam's there.

[11 : 13] God looks at Adam. Looks at the masculine gender. Looks at this half of humanity and says, This is not good. It's not good. This is incomplete. It's not good that man should be alone.

This is not the fullness of humanity. This is not the fullness of what will reflect my image. Something more is needed. This man is outnumbered. This man is inadequate, insufficient for the task. Therefore, I will create a helper suitable for him.

Now, if you read Psalm 118, that should lead us to understand that when God talks about Eve as being a helper, that does not mean what we often think it means, and that is some kind of personal assistant.

Right? The word azar, helper, actually means something akin to divine reinforcements. It's a military term. Right? And the sense in Psalm 118 is this.

God is my helper, and without God, I have no hope. I have no hope. I'm outnumbered. I'm surrounded. I'm flanked. My vulnerabilities are exposed.

[12 : 20] They're being exploited. I have no hope unless God sends divine reinforcements. The Lord is on my side as my helper. I shall look in triumph on those who hate me, those who seek to do me harm.

And I think some, I bring that up because I think sometimes we, maybe the ways we misunderstand helper in Genesis 2 connect with the ways we maybe misunderstand helper in Psalm 118.

In other words, we can sometimes think of God as a kind of administrative assistant, a kind of divine gopher, you know, a kind of, hey, if you could take care of this, that would be great. I'm going to focus on this, and if you could just work this out, that would be great.

Let me know how it turns out. As though God somehow reports to us and says, what else do you want me to do, you know? Not so. Divine reinforcements. God is my helper. He's for me.

So God has said His loyal covenant love means that He's for us always. He's always seeking our good for those who belong to Him. And so it's worth pausing before we move to the next part of this phrase and ask, so what?

[13 : 23] And there are a lot of implications that we could draw out from just this concept of hesed, but I just want to give you a couple. The first implication is this, that once God sets His love on you, once God sets His love on you, nothing, nobody, nothing in existence can separate you from that love.

Nothing. Right? So some of you maybe come from a background where you, maybe you grew up in a believing family or you grew up in the church and you were very involved and you considered yourself a follower of Jesus.

And then maybe you left. And maybe you haven't been to church for years and years and years and maybe you just wandered in and this is your first time back. Or maybe like a good number of people at Advent, you're sort of kind of figuring out what you believe at this stage of your life.

You sort of grew up with this, but you're trying to figure out kind of where you are now. Or maybe you have a friend like this. Or maybe you know somebody who was a strong follower of Jesus, they were in the church, and now they're totally gone.

They're totally, you know, living a completely different life. If this is true, if God's hesed is what we've just said it is by looking at this psalm, if that's true, it means that you can leave the church, you can leave your social group, leave all your Christian friends.

[14 : 49] You can leave your town, you can leave your city, you can leave the country, you can leave your whole identity, you can leave an entire way of life, you can leave an entire belief system and you can completely reinvent yourself with a new name and a new identity and a new place with an entirely new belief system and an entirely new way of life, an entirely new set of morals and ethics, an entire new source of hope that you have placed everything on, and you can leave all of that.

And you can never, ever, ever leave the love of God. You will never escape it. And there's an amazing place in Psalm 23, 6, where the psalmist declares that the Lord's goodness and hesed will pursue him all the days of his life.

God will pursue you. And it will haunt you. It will haunt and tug at the edges of your thoughts.

It will tug at the corners of your heart. It will haunt your reflections. It will whisper to you. And you'll never be content.

Because God will pursue you and pursue you and pursue you. Because he's chosen to set his love on you, and not even you, not even you, can separate yourself from that.

[16 : 07] So that's the first thing it means. The second reflection, or the second implication, of God's hesed, his covenant love, is this, that we should never, ever, ever build our lives on human love.

We should never build our lives on human love, because only God's love is steadfast enough to bear the weight of a human life.

Only God's love is strong enough to bear the weight of a human life. So, verse 8 in Psalm 118 says, it's better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It's better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

And I bring this up because I think all too often, if you're anything like me, all too often we are tempted to compromise our relationship with the Lord for the sake of human love.

Right? We're willing to compromise our relationship with the Lord for the sake of being included in a social group, or being accepted by certain friends, or being approved of in a work setting.

[17 : 11] Now, we don't do it kind of black and white, but we'll sort of downplay and minimize. Oh, you know, I'm not that kind of Christian. I'm not going to... And it's easy to say that, because there are a lot of things that Christians are known for, a lot of things that Christians do that are embarrassing, and we want to distance ourselves as far as possible.

But at some point, are we making it clear that our relationship with God is the single most important thing there is, and that there is nothing more important? Or to what extent are we minimizing that?

Right? And this shows up in romantic relationships as well, whether you're sort of dating somebody, or sometimes this happens if you get married, and then one person comes to faith, and the other person doesn't.

Or one person... Both people used to be followers of Jesus, but then one kind of leaves it, and it happens all different kinds of ways, and maybe you're in a situation like this, and maybe you didn't choose to be there, but you just kind of find yourself in a situation like this, and you have to figure out what to do, where one of you follows Jesus, and the other one doesn't.

I'm not going to sort of point blank tell you what to do black and white, because it's up to you to make a decision. It's up to you to decide what wisdom looks like.

[18 : 19] But I will just get very pragmatic for a second and say this, that if you are in such a situation, that the point will come. It will come. At some point, you will have to decide, are you going to compromise your relationship with this person for the sake of your relationship with God, or are you going to compromise your relationship with God for the sake of this person?

At some point, you will have to decide who is number one. You can't have two top priority people in your life. That's why two people being together and sharing a faith in Jesus, that's why that works so well, is because both people decide, my spouse is not my number one.

Jesus is. When you agree on that, it works quite well. When you disagree on that, it can cause a lot of problems. At some point, you have to decide which relationship gets compromised. So your relationship with God is the most important thing there is.

All human love, even the best of it, is finite, it's imperfect, it cannot ultimately satisfy the way God's love can. So even if she is the woman of your dreams, even if he is the prince that you've been waiting for in every other way, it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

Right? This truth actually became very real for a man named George Matheson. So imagine you're George, and you're a kind of rising luminary in the Church of Scotland.

[19 : 48] You're an academic. You've written a couple of articles. People are starting to whisper about you and to say this could be one of the greatest theological minds in our day. You're engaged to be married.

Everything looks great. And then you go to the doctor and you find out that you've been having some problems and you realize that you're losing your vision. And that the clock is ticking and that you're going to lose all of your vision and go blind.

So George finds this out. George gets up the courage and he goes to his fiancée and he breaks the news to his fiancée. I'm losing my sight. I'm going to be blind. So she goes away. She thinks about it. She reflects on her life, her hopes, her dreams, all that she wants out of life.

She comes back to George and says, George, I've thought about it. I cannot face the prospect of being married to a blind husband. So she leaves.

Calls off the wedding. Now this is the late 1800s, so losing your sight back then was even a much bigger deal than it is today. You needed somebody to help you. George, I can't handle it.

[20 : 47] I'm out of here. What's George going to do? So then George's sister comes and says, it's okay, I'll take care of you. So with her help, he begins to flourish. He pulls out of academia, becomes a pastor.

Church begins to grow and thrive. Everything looks like it's going to go great until she falls in love and she gets engaged and she has to come to George and say, George, I've met this guy.

He's great. We're in love. We're getting married. I'm sorry. I can't help you anymore. So here George is, the evening before this wedding for his sister, the whole family goes out to make preparations for the wedding that's happening the next day and George finds himself sitting in his home utterly alone.

And he's sitting there in the dark facing the prospect of living the rest of his life alone. And in that moment of darkness, he writes a hymn.

It takes him five minutes and he later said that it was the only hymn he ever wrote that didn't require any editing. It just poured out of him.

[21 : 56] And here are the opening words to this hymn. O love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee. I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be.

It's a song that we sing regularly here at Church of the Advent. The point is this. Don't build your life on human love because only God's love can bear the weight of a human life.

Only God's love is strong enough, steadfast enough. God's chesed love, his loyal covenant love, is the only thing about which we can say it will never let us go.

So this is the first part of this phrase, his steadfast love, but then it continues, endures forever. forever. God's steadfast love endures forever.

So I want you to think about this for a second. How could God make such a promise? In other words, think about the world, think about you, think about the people that you know, the state of society, think about all that.

[23 : 10] Think about the fact that God knows that. God knows us better than we know ourselves. And think about God making a promise like that. Looking at people and saying, I'm going to love you and bless you and seek your good no matter what, and I'm going to do that forever.

More specifically, here's the question. If God is both perfectly loving and perfectly just, how does he make such a promise? Right?

Because if God acts in justice and punishes all wrongs, punishes all injustice, punishes all evil, right? Not only that which we commit against God by rejecting him and ignoring him and denying him, but all that which we commit against one another.

If God acts and punishes everything as it deserves, he can't fulfill the promise to love and to bless because we would all be eradicated. But if God continues to love us forever without bringing any justice, if God never lifts the oppressed out of their oppression, if God never liberates the captives, if God never restores justice, if God never brings peace where there's war and violence, where God never brings rescue to the poor and to the needy, if God never vindicates the orphan and the widow, if God never does these things, is that really love?

No, at that point, it becomes some sort of sappy, sort of milk-thin kind of sentimentalism. But it's not love. It has no teeth. How does God do both?

[24 : 47] You know, it had to have been a mystery for hundreds of years. You know, you can imagine sitting in church and you're a Hebrew and it's the Passover and you're reciting Psalm 118 and you're, you know, his steadfast love endures forever, his steadfast love endures forever, and you can imagine sort of doing this and you can imagine the kind of precocious 13-year-old kind of knocking his dad on the, Dad, how does God actually do that?

You know, and the dad's like, don't ask questions, just believe. You know, just say the words. But it's a good question. It's a really good question. I don't think it had an answer at the time it was written.

I don't think for hundreds of years it really had an answer because I don't think, and you can read some of the Jewish philosophers and get the sense that they really didn't have any idea how God was going to work it all out. Justice and love.

Justice and mercy. How does that hold together? It didn't make sense until Jesus came. And once Jesus came, everything began to fall into place, especially Psalm 118.

Did you know that Psalm 118 is the single most quoted psalm in the New Testament? It's the only psalm that is quoted by all four gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Both times that Jesus wept over Jerusalem, both times that Jesus wept because they rejected their God, both times he quoted Psalm 118.

[26 : 12] When Jesus came down the road to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, pilgrims gathered on both sides and they began to sing out quoting Psalm 118. When Jesus confronted the unbelieving leaders of the Jews and he told the parable of the wicked tenants and how the landowners sent messengers and then ultimately his son and the wicked tenants rejected and killed his son, he then quoted Psalm 118.

When Peter in Acts chapter 4 is brought before the authorities and he accuses the leaders of murdering the son of God. At the cornerstone, at the very center of his argument, he quotes Psalm 118.

When the author of Hebrews wanted to encourage believers in the face of persecution and imprisonment for following Jesus, he quotes Psalm 118. Right?

In Matthew chapter 26, it says at the end of the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples sing one final hymn before they stand up to go out where Jesus will shortly be arrested.

And if you know anything about the Passover celebration, all of these psalms, the Psalms 113 through 118 were sung or recited throughout the Passover ending with Psalm 118 and so they would have observed this tradition and so the final hymn that Jesus sang at the last meal that he had with his disciples before he's taken away to be crucified is Psalm 118.

[27 : 43] What does all of this tell us? Simply this, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament are all screaming, if you want to understand Jesus, you have to understand Psalm 118.

And if you want to understand Psalm 118, you have to understand Jesus. This psalm is all about him. So how does God make such a promise to love us forever if he's not only perfectly loving but also perfectly just?

The answer comes in verse 21. What does it say? He becomes our salvation. Not he brings our salvation, not he plans for our salvation, not he arranges and orchestrates and hopes our salvation goes well.

He becomes it. And you say, well, what does that mean? And Paul kind of explains that in 2 Corinthians 5. He says, for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So how does God become our salvation? Simple. He sends an innocent being, Jesus, into the world. Jesus becomes sin and is eradicated on the cross so that we, the sinners, become righteous.

[28 : 59] Jesus becomes sin so that we can become righteous. God becomes our salvation. It's an amazing truth and the impact was like a shockwave in the world.

This psalm is all about Jesus and then when you begin to read back through it, you begin to make the connections. Oh, as you read these verses, verse 17, Jesus is the one who is first able to say, I shall not die but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.

When did he first say that? Easter morning. Right? Jesus is the stone the builders rejected who has become the cornerstone. Verse 22, Jesus is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Verse 26, how can God make such a promise that his steadfast love would endure forever because Jesus Christ has become our salvation? So as we hold all this together, remember that this is a phrase that was repeated again and again and again.

His steadfast love endures forever. His steadfast love endures forever. If you grew up in Israelite society and you observed the Passover faithfully, by the time you were our age of most of us in this room, you had literally sung or recited these words thousands of times.

[30 : 19] So the final question is why? In other words, why do we repeat things? Right? You can't repeat everything. Why do we repeat certain things?

Right? We tend to repeat important things. Right? But why would we do that? It's because that's the best way to remember it. Right?

So when you say something again and again and again, or better yet, this is a song, if you sing something again and again and again, what happens? It becomes ingrained not only in your mind, but in your heart.

It begins to burn its way into you and it roots itself deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper until it's at the very core of you. And you would remember it maybe before you even remember your own name if you repeat it enough.

Now why is that? Why would God want us to repeat this and to memorize it until it is at the very center of our hearts? When I was a kid, my parents, they made my brother and I memorize our address and our phone number.

[31 : 27] Right? We're little kids like a lot of the kids here. And their idea was if they know nothing else, you know, and they knew me, they know I have no sense of direction, and they said, this kid's got to at least know his address.

Right? And so they made us repeat, repeat, repeat, you know, 227 Clifdale Drive, 227 Clifdale Drive, 227, and we repeated it until we knew it by heart, until we could basically pass the 3 a.m. test.

You know, where they could theoretically, I don't think they ever did this, but theoretically, they could shake us awake at 3 in the morning, what's your address? 227 Clifdale Drive, you know. And we'd go, now why did they do that?

Well, because in the event that circumstances happened such that we were totally lost, that we had no idea where we were, we didn't recognize any of our surroundings, we were totally turned around and backwards, and we didn't know what way was north and south, and we didn't recognize anything, and there was nobody around to help us, and we were totally alone, and totally apart from all that, that in that moment of panic, if we forgot everything else, we would remember our address.

227 Clifdale Drive, 227 Clifdale Drive, 227 Clifdale Drive, and we could use that to find our way home. I think in many ways, this verse is meant to do the exact same thing for us spiritually.

[32 : 46] You find yourself in a place where you are completely overwhelmed, where you're suffering, where things have gone poorly for you, where you're struggling, you get to that place where, and if you're a Christian long enough, you will get there.

It's not just certain kinds of people or people with less faith, everybody gets there. You follow Jesus long enough, you will be there. How do we know? Because Jesus was there. And if it happened to Him, it's going to happen to you.

It's going to happen to me. Many of us in this room, it has happened to us. Some of us in this room, it's happening right now. And you're in a place where it's all dark, and you're struggling, and you don't know where God is, and everything in you is saying, there is no God, this is stupid, this is foolish, or if there is a God, I don't want to know that kind of God.

How could this happen? This is awful, I can't, I don't want to have anything to do with that kind of God. He doesn't care about me, He doesn't love me, all the things that I've done, He couldn't possibly care about me. All of these voices are in your head, this cacophony of noise telling you there's no matter what, no matter what, God has abandoned you.

If there even is a God, and it's dark, and you have no idea where you are, from the depths of your heart, God's steadfast love endures forever.

[33 : 57] His steadfast love endures forever. His steadfast love endures forever. It will lead you home. If you forget everything else, and you only remember one thing, the whole gospel is bound up in these words.

His steadfast love endures forever. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, these foundational words reflect all of the beauty of the gospel, all of the beauty of your son, all of the beauty of his sacrifice, the beauty of the cross, the hope and the beauty of the resurrection, the hope of a life that goes beyond death, the hope that enables us to say with Jesus, I shall not die, but I shall live, and I shall recount the deeds of the Lord.

Lord, we ask that your Holy Spirit would now impress these words into the deepest parts of our hearts and souls, that we would be able to pass the 3 a.m. test, that when all else fails, when we've forgotten everything else, that your Holy Spirit would whisper these words to us, that your steadfast love endures forever.

We pray this in the name of your son and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.