

Psalms 117 and 118 Two Hallel

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Date: 19 June 2016

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[0:00] And so we're going to look at both these psalms. We're coming to the end of our series of psalms and I've looked at one, well after our introduction when we looked at the first two psalms, I've looked at one from each book and also by different authors.

Because book five of the psalms is somewhat different in character to the earlier books. It consists of psalms that are most obviously intended for public worship and singing together.

Sometimes it means they lack the intensely personal note of some of the psalms, although that's not true of 140 and indeed to some extent it's not true of 118. But they're songs of community.

They're songs that celebrate the life and worship of the Lord's chosen people. And so psalms 120 to 134, for instance, consists of the songs of ascent.

Scholars argue about exactly when they're sung, possibly by pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem or possibly by worshippers actually going up the steps of the temple. It might have been both, of course.

[1:22] But they are songs of people going up to worship the Lord in Jerusalem. The book five contains, as I said, the longest psalm, 119, which is a great acrostic teaching psalm.

Obviously we can't manage the acrostic in English. But you'll notice if you look just over to Psalm 119 that each section of it starts, all the verses start with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It also, as I said, contains the shortest psalm, which we read, 117, and some other very brief gems, such as Psalm 134.

And many of these psalms are what are known as Hallel.

And the Hallel is songs of praise, and it's not hard to guess where the name comes from. It comes from the Hebrew phrase, Hallelujah, praise the Lord.

[2:35] Psalm 117 starts explicitly with this phrase. We read another one in the prayer meeting, 143, wasn't it?

Yes, 143 is another Hallel that starts explicitly with the phrase, Hallelujah, praise the Lord. Others, like Psalm 118, don't start with quite that phrase, but something very similar.

In this case, give thanks to the Lord. And you can see what you might call the worship, the liturgical purpose in the opening verses of Psalm 118.

Perhaps the leader would sing verse 1 and the calls, and the congregation would make the responses. And it's worth pointing out here, of course, that the word love here, that is used in these opening verses, is of course the word hesed.

Anybody who's listened to Phil's preaching for long knows the word hesed. The word covenant love. The love that God has in covenant love for his people.

[3:42] It's God's steadfast love for his people. Interestingly, actually, in the original Hebrew, there's no verb. The word endures is inserted by the translators.

More literally, it's a cry. A cry of love always. It would be an accurate cry. Sorry, I think Brenda's a bit upset.

There's no word endures. That verb is inserted by the translators.

The word is actually a cry of love always. Hesed forever. And Psalm 117 verse 2 has a variation on this faithfulness always.

Again, there's no actual verb in the Hebrew there. Now, in particular, Psalms 113 to 118 form what is known as the Egyptian Hallel.

[4:50] According to Derek Kidner in his commentary anyway, no reason to doubt it. The Egyptian Hallel was actually sung at the Passover, by the Jews at the Passover, as they celebrated the Passover meal.

And the first two Psalms, 113 and 114, were sung before the meal. And the last four were sung after the meal. And it was very likely, therefore, that they would have been sung at Jesus' last supper.

And particularly when in Matthew 26 verse 13, it's also recorded in Mark, that before they went out to the Garden of Gethsemane, they sang a hymn.

It's very likely that this hymn was in fact Psalm 118. Because that would have been the last, the hymn that was sung at the end of the Passover meal. They were sung at the Passover, although only, I think one of them actually refers to the Exodus explicitly.

But Psalm 118 verse 14 is a direct quote from Exodus 15 verse 2, which is the victory song of Moses on crossing the Red Sea.

[6:04] And you'll notice that Psalm 118 verse 5 celebrates a release from slavery. Although the psalm doesn't appear to have a direct Passover reference. It's in a sense a psalm that looks forward rather than backward.

So we're going to look at these two psalms. But before we delve into 118, let's look briefly at 117, which is the shortest of the psalms.

And it's really quite a remarkable gem, I think. So it starts with the standard phrase, Hallelujah, praise the Lord.

But you'll notice here, who is this exhortation addressed? It is addressed not to the people of God in this case, unusually.

In most cases, the praise the Lord is addressed to the people of God who are addressed to praise the Lord. But this one says, Hallelujah, all you nations.

[7:08] Extol him, all you people. If they sung Psalm 115 earlier, then that is where the psalmist pour scorn on the idols of the nations and their ineffectiveness in defeating the Lord's people.

But what should the nations expect from that? Should they be expecting defeat, despair and destruction? And to some extent that comes into Psalm 118 as well.

But here, they're invited to join the victory celebration. In fact, they're told to ditch their idols and ditch all the other things they might have been trusted in.

Perhaps in their kings, as it says in Psalm 118 verse 9. So it is the nations here are exalted to praise the Lord. But why is that?

Well, verse 2 tells us. It's because of the testimony of God's people. The Lord is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. The song of victory is not an excuse in a sense as it were for people to crow over the nations.

[8:24] But rather to exalt them to trust in the living God. And surely it remains so today. It is through the testimony of God's people that the Lord is faithful.

That the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. That the people, the world, the nations will indeed turn and praise the living God.

And so at the end, Psalm 117 finishes again with that phrase. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. And then as far as we know, they would have gone straight on or shortly afterwards to sing Psalm 118 the way we did it earlier.

So let's move on to look at Psalm 118. I'm sure as we went through, you recognized phrases and bits from it. It's a much quoted psalm in the New Testament.

And you may have picked up the references to the procession of Jesus into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday, which of course was what the hymn we sung was about.

[9:34] But we'll look at it in detail. And... Oh dear. Sorry. Now somebody's ringing me now. Sorry about that.

We'll look at it in detail. Sorry. Just catch me. Yeah. Well, we're going to look at it in detail.

It divides into three main sections. And so in verses 1 to 4, we have the assembly, the address to the assembled people.

Oh dear. I think it's... Can you... Just get Brenda. I think it's the alarm.

Our alarm people are ringing again. Sorry about that. In verses 180... Yeah. So in the first part, we have the address to the people of Israel.

[10:37] From verses 5 to 27, we have the song and the parade of the hero. That's the bulk of the psalm, the main part of the psalm.

First of all, the battle song and then the victory parade. But that, of course, raises the question for us, who is the hero? And then in verses 28 to 29, we have this final song of praise.

And you'll notice, as is often the case in this psalm, the ending is the same as the first verse. The last verse is the same as the first verse. Yeah, I've just had two cancelled fame calls.

Sorry about that. Yeah, sorry about that. Right. Okay. So let's go on and look at this psalm. So we'll look first of all briefly at the assembly, verses 1 to 4.

So what do we see here? We see that the people of God are gathered together. And the leader, the worship leader, has the stage. Why are they gathered together?

[11:49] Well, we're not actually explicitly told at this stage. But we are told that this meeting is for thanking God for his steadfast love. And in a sense, the people seem to be waiting for something.

But as they're waiting, they're exhorted to praise the Lord for his steadfast love, his love that lasts forever. But then after those first four verses, it seems that somebody else stands up to speak. And the congregation falls silent. Who is this person? Well, we're about to find out. It's someone, in fact, who has won a great victory.

A hero. The central portion of the psalm is the victory speech of the hero. You'll notice that the change to the personal pronoun, I, in verse 5.

So how did the battle go? Well, he's about to tell us. So the main part of this psalm is the song and victory parade of the hero.

[13:02] Verses 5 to 27. And again, this part really divides into three sections. The first few verses we read about the preparation for the battle.

And the next verses describe the battle itself, or at least, in a sense, the heat of battle. And then, in the end, we have the victory celebration, which is in the form of a procession, as we'll see when we get to it.

So, let's look at these verses. So, first of all, in those first verses, 5 to 9, the hero tells us how he prepared for the battle.

And it didn't look very hopeful. If you look at the verses there, he was in distress. In fact, verse 5 seems to suggest that he was more or less cornered.

He was surrounded. Trapped. Perhaps the reference to kings in verse 8 and 9 is suggesting that his allies had all deserted him and run away.

[14:22] Sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it? But he would not put his trust in kings and princes, in men, because they deserted him in his hour of need. And yet, he refuses to give in to despair.

How's his preparation for the battle go? He reminds himself that the Lord is on my side. Whoever else may have abandoned him, whoever many of his allies may have run off.

Yet, the Lord is on his side. And so, in verse 7, we find that he's strengthened. And he goes out to the battle confident of victory.

And then, in verses 10 to 13, we get this description of the battle itself. Well, it's not really a description of the battle, is it?

We don't get a sort of tactical analysis or anything like that. It's really a description of the experience of battle. The fog of war, as we might say.

[15:31] His enemies pressed from all sides. They were like a swarm of bees or a wildfire. And he was pushed back, he tells us in verse 13.

He seemed to be near defeat. But that's not what happened. Instead, we get four times this repeated war cry. In the name of the Lord, I cut them off.

And it's really quite stark. In fact, you could almost say it's actually a little vulgar. The word, I cut them off, is the word used for circumcision.

And the meaning seemed to be here. That is that they were emasculated. At least, not literally, of course. Metaphorically. But his enemies were emptied of power and potency.

In the name of the Lord, I cut them off. All their power comes to nothing. And why is that? It's because of the Lord's help. And so verse 13 parallels.

[16:34] Verse 7. The hero had gone into battle relying on the Lord's help. And in the fierce conflict, we find he was not disappointed.

He had gone into battle relying on the Lord's help. And the Lord did indeed help him. And so in the name of the Lord, he was victorious. And then battle over.

The hero leads the people in songs of celebration in verses 14 to 16. You'll notice in verse 15, it refers to tents.

So perhaps it's the army camp where the celebration commences. That would seem to make sense. And as I said when I read it, the NRV is slightly misleading.

Because actually the same noun is used in verses 14 and 15. It's the Lord has become salvation. The songs of salvation in the camp.

[17:38] And what's this word? The word of course is, in Hebrew, is Yeshua. In our usual English pronunciation, of course, we pronounce it.

It's the name Joshua. Or in Greek, of course, it's the name Jesus. The name the hero called on was the Lord.

The Lord's covenant name, Yahweh. Which means I am. But that name was associated with the deliverance of the people under Moses. And so we're actually told in verse 14.

That now Yahweh has become Yeshua. The Lord has become my salvation. Verse 14. The hand of the Lord has been extended in salvation.

Verses 15 and 16. So, after the battle, there is songs of salvation in the camp. But then they move off. Back towards the city.

[18:39] For their parade. So now it's time for the victory parade. And as the army approaches the home. A cry goes up, verse 19.

Open the gate. But for the hero, this is more than just a homecoming. Because he has come from a much gloomier gate.

The gate of Sheol, of hell. The very gate of death itself. As he hints at in verses 17 and 18. And yet he's returned to tell the tale.

Verse 17. And so the city of God, as it were, had been shut up tight. It was on a war footing. But now the hero can call for the gate to be opened.

But that's not to say that anyone can come in. This is the gate of the Lord's city. And we're reminded that only the righteous can enter. And of course you, this reference is picked up.

[19:43] As I'm sure you're aware. In Revelation chapter 21. Which gives us a bit more detail. Revelation 21, 25 to 27. Says the following. Referring to the city of God.

And how can it be that the gates will never be shut?

The gate is shut again, as it were. The gate of the city is kept open. But only the righteous can enter. And that's because of the Lord's salvation. In fact, it's only because of the Lord's salvation.

Verse 21 that anyone can go in. But the hero has won a great victory. So he has the right to call for the gates to be opened. And in verses 22 to 27.

The celebration moves on. The parade moves on. Into the city. The one whom everyone had rejected as useless. It's obviously the hero to who is being referred to here.

[21:07] Turns out to be the true hero after all. Verse 22. The one who had seemed to be utterly defeated. Is the one who has won a great victory.

The foundation indeed of the victory. And the Lord has made it happen. And so it's a time for celebration. Interestingly, the prayer for help is repeated in verse 25.

And it seems that it had already been answered. So one may wonder why it's there again. We'll come back to that in a minute. Perhaps they are just reminding themselves of the prayer they made though.

But the hero, the one who comes in the name of the Lord, is already here. Verse 26. And comes to accept their blessing. Again in verse 26.

There is a problem actually over the translation of verse 27. The last part of it.

[22:04] If you've got a new international version. It translates it as with bows in hand. Join the festival procession up to the horns of the

altar. And of course this was the meaning that was taken by the Hebrews. When Jesus entered the city. The sceptor again translates it that way. The Greek translation of the Old Testament. If you have an English standard version.

Or indeed the old authorized version. It gives an alternative translation. Bind the sacrifice to the altar. The reason for the confusion.

If you're interested in such things. It's not really that important. But the reason for the confusion is that the word. That is translated the noun. Can mean a branch.

But more often it means a cord or a rope. And the verb that's used there certainly. Means to bind.

[23:11] Not to wave. And so that is why there is some confusion with the translation. But. The meaning was picked up.

The Jerusalem crowd in John 12. When it says. They took palm branches and went out to meet him. Shouting. Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel.

And so you'll note the direct quotation in that passage. From Psalm 118. Verse 26. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

And. I have to say. If binding the sacrifice. Was the accepted meaning. It does seem likely. That the New Testament. Authors would have.

Used that. Would have been an obvious reference. Perhaps. To Christ being. Bound to the cross. And they didn't. So it does seem. Likely. That at the time.

[24:10] The accepted meaning. Was that of the Septuagint. Wave. They should wave branches. But anyway. It doesn't matter too much. Because either way.

The procession. Is going to the altar. And there's going to be a sacrifice. And that's where the. Procession ends.

As you can see. At the altar. So they've marched. From the camp. The battle camp. They've opened the gates. Marched up. To the temple. And they're now.

At the altar. But this raises a question. For us. Doesn't it? Who is this hero?

Whose victory? What victory? Is being described here? Who is the victor?

[25:15] Perhaps it was David. Who was the psalmist writing about? Was it David? Was it Moses? Perhaps. Perhaps. In view of the. Constant references to. Joshua. To salvation.

It might have been Joshua. Perhaps it was even Hezekiah. There were many kings. Who won great victories. Although Hezekiah. Didn't actually fight his battle. So he probably couldn't really.

Have been said to cut off his enemies. It could have been various people. Couldn't it? It could have been Gideon. The psalmist could have had any one of those in mind.

But what was clear to the people at the time. was that no Old Testament hero. Fully fulfills this prophecy. The Jews themselves understood this.

And the citizens of Jerusalem. That we just read about. When they welcomed. Jesus into the city. Knew that the true Messiah. The anointed king of Israel.

[26:12] The true hero. Who comes in the name of the Lord. Was still awaited. So who is the one.

Who really opened the gate of the Lord. So that the righteous could go in. Only one person. Completely fulfills the role. Of the hero in this psalm. And that person is Jesus.

And the New Testament. Is very clear. To make this to us. Clear to us. Jesus himself. Describes himself. As the stone the builders rejected.

Direct quotation. From this psalm. It's a. On more than one occasion. It appears. And certainly. It's recorded in three gospels. In Matthew 21. 24.

In Mark 12. Verse 10. In Luke 20. Verse 17. Jesus describes himself. As the stone the builders rejected. And the apostle Peter.

[27:08] Also describes Jesus. As the stone the builders rejected. In Acts 4. 11. And in 1 Peter 2. Verses 4 and 7. This psalm fits.

Jesus perfectly. In his name. Jesus. Joshua. Salvation. And yet. There are depths to the psalm.

That the psalmist himself. And his original congregation. Could not possibly have understood. As it turned out.

In fact. The victory procession. That we have described. In John chapter 12. Actually took place. Before the final battle. And maybe that's why.

The psalm. Has that repeated prayer. In verse 118. In verse 25. Of Psalm 118. Why was this? [28:08] Well. What. The congregation at the time. Could not have realized. That the hero himself. Is also the sacrifice. On the altar. The procession.

Arrives at the altar. And that in fact. Is where the final battle. Is fought. Not against some rewarding army. Out in the countryside. But against the forces of darkness.

Within the holy city itself. And as the disciples sang Psalm 118. At that last Passover supper. As they would have done. Jesus was surely aware. That he was the one. Who was indeed about to look into the gates of death. In fact.

He wouldn't just face that gate. But he would go through it. And yet. He had the promise of that psalm. That I will not die.

[29:05] But live. And I will proclaim. What the Lord has done. The Lord has chastened me severely. But he has not given me over to death. And it was because of his resurrection.

Because of that victory. That took place. As I say. Not out in the countryside. Against some rewarding army. But. On the very cross itself. Against the.

Hosts of spiritual darkness. Where the victory. Was really won. And for that. He could say. Then. On returning from death. He can say.

Open for me. The gates of righteousness. I will enter. And give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord. Through which the righteous.

May enter. This victory of Jesus. On the cross. Is the gate of the Lord. Through which the righteous. May enter the city. It is through the Lord.

[30:03] Jesus Christ himself. The hero. Who has won. Not just a battle. In some Middle Eastern. Desert. But a battle. At the cross itself.

He is the true hero. That opened. The gate to life. Who has the right. To say. Let the gate be opened. So that by faith. We can enter. But not with.

Our own righteousness. But through his righteousness. Only the righteous. May enter. So who can go in. But we can go in. Bearing the righteousness. Of Christ. And so.

If the. People of God. At the time. Were. Exhorted. To celebrate. The victory. And praise God. Surely. Surely we should. Join far more.

In this final. Song of praise. That closes the psalm. Now we know. What the people.

[31:02] Were thanking the Lord for. They're thanking the Lord. For a great victory. Verse 28. Who is the eye. Of verse 28.

Is it the voice of the hero himself. Or we've gone back to the. Voice of the worship leader. Or is it the psalmist. Or the people singing the psalm. It doesn't really matter.

Does it. Because the corporate. Thanks of. Verses 1 to 4. Is made personal here. If we're united in Christ. Then each of us.

Can join in that song of praise. And say. You are my God. And I will give you thanks. You are my God. And I will exalt you.

And so the psalm finishes. It begins. Give thanks to the Lord. For he is good. Love ever. His love endures forever. So.

[32:00] Let's. Sing a hymn. Now. That refers to that great. Victory. Victory.