

God's People And Their Service

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[0 : 00] Let's turn now to the book of Psalms, to Psalm 118, Psalm 118, and you'll find that on page 544.

Actually, the text is just across in verse 27, where we read the words, God is the Lord, and he has given us light.

Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise you. You are my God, and I will exalt you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy, that is, his steadfast love, his chesed, his mercy endures forever.

Verse 27 then. God is the Lord, and he has given us light. Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.

[1 : 17] Now, earlier on today, we thought about forsaking all and following Christ. And we saw that the disciples had, of course, by the grace of God, done this.

They had weighed things properly, and they had committed to the Lord Jesus Christ in a wholehearted way. And this, in a sense, is a follow-up to what we thought about earlier on, because it's about God's people and their service.

If you were to give this sermon a title, that's what it would be, God's people and their service. Now, we remarked earlier on that, when we read in Haggai, that the people had returned, a remnant of the people, about 42,000, had returned from Babylon.

And they were thankful to God. They were full of praise for the Lord. For his everlasting mercy to his people. And this psalm contains references to that.

Although we call this very much a messianic psalm, as well as that, it is a psalm that marks God's mercy to his people, both to the spiritual leaders and also to the people themselves.

[2 : 49] You read there at the beginning. Let Israel now say his mercy, his steadfast love endures forever. Let the house of Aaron now say his mercy endures forever.

Let those who fear the Lord, the people of God, say his mercy endures forever. And writers, expositors of the Bible, of the book of Psalms, see this psalm as a psalm that was written after the Jews returned from captivity.

And I go along with that view of things. And we find in the psalm these expressions of joy and gladness because God delivered his people according to his word.

And the psalm writer talks about the Lord as one he gladly serves. Despite all the opposition of the enemies, he talks about parts of this.

Verse 10, All nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I will destroy them. And so on. They were delivered. God delivered them according to his promise and brought them back into the land.

[4 : 09] And it's clear that they were brought back in order to serve the Lord in the situation that they had been taken out of all these decades before.

And they're glad to be part of a rebuild of the work of God among them. And so the verse itself reminds us that the Lord's people, we refer to the Lord's people as the Christian church.

In the Christian church we have privileges. But privilege brings duty. And duty makes us think about service to the Lord.

And the text puts before us this very thing. It takes the privileges, the deliverances by God, the salvation of God given to us in the Messiah, but it focuses too on our duty in that light.

We're, as somebody said, in fact I think it's the title of a book, saved to serve. The Lord's people are saved to serve.

[5 : 27] Not to serve themselves as they once did, but to serve him in newness of life. Remember, we're told by the apostle, we're not our own any longer.

If we're Christ's, we have been bought with a price in order to live to the praise and in the service of our great Redeemer.

And there are two things that arise in the text that I want to focus on. First of all, obviously, light has been imparted to God's people.

You see it there. God is the Lord and he has given us light. And then the second thing we look at is that light is imparted for service.

God is the Lord and he has given us light. Now, this is an interesting turn of phrase, he has given us light, because there's a play here on God making his way known to the people, on God leading his people, and on God instructing them in their hearts to giving us spiritual understanding.

[6 : 53] And the first thing I want to highlight here is that this expression, he has given us light, takes us back to when God delivered the people from the land of Egypt, how he went before them in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

He went before them as the mighty God. And there in the passage, notice it just doesn't say, God has given us light, or the Lord has given us light.

It says, God is the Lord and he has given us light. And the turn of phrase, God is the Lord, reminds us of the mightiness of God.

God is the one who has given us this light on the way. That was true when he took Israel out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and he led them, giving them light on the way.

The emphasis here is on God himself as the one who has done this, as the one himself who is totally and utterly sufficient in himself and for himself.

[8 : 24] I've heard it, and I've heard it over the years. Sometimes evangelists speak in language that is simply not theologically right, it's not biblically true.

They talk to people about believing in Jesus and believing God wants you, God needs you, you see, and they go too far. They speak about God as if God is in the position that he needs man. And God doesn't need man. God is self-sufficient. God in himself needs no one. And he doesn't need anything. What God does rather is he reaches out to sinful mankind and he brings them into a relationship with himself so that they are privileged to belong to him and to serve him.

So it's important for us when we think about God in this way, God, the mighty one, is the Lord. He stoops down, if you like.

He comes down to us. He doesn't need to. He didn't need to do that to Israel. But he chose to do that. He doesn't need man or man's labor.

[9 : 42] Those of you who remember Milton's poem on his blindness, he says that very thing. God does not need man's labor. He doesn't need it.

And yet God in his wonderful mercy, in his covenant love, has given light to his people. But he has given light to them that they may labor, that they may work for him.

He has given it. God is the Lord. He is the mighty one. And he has given us light. Now, as I said a moment ago, the figure that's behind this, he has given us light, comes from the book of Exodus, chapter 13 and verse 21, when the Lord went before his people, when he led them out of Egypt, to give them light, both in the pillar.

Remember how it is said that he was light to his people and darkness to their enemies. When Pharaoh went back on his word and decided, I'm not letting them go after all.

I'm going after them. And the picture here is that the cloud stood between Pharaoh's charioteers and Israel.

[11 : 08] God gave them light forward and darkness back on their enemies. And so, what we have here is how he led them.

And I want just to remind you, and you'll find this in 1 Corinthians 10 if you want to look at it later on. We're told that Christ, that is, the Son of God before he became man, was in that pillar.

He was with the people. It was him. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that Christ was in the pillar, that he was the one who was giving them light on the way.

He turned their night into day, and he turned their enemies' day into night. He protected them.

Now, another reference here, just to underscore this, because this is something you can look at at another time and suss out. In Nehemiah chapter 9, and verse 12, there is a prayer of the Levites.

[12 : 23] And a bit of it goes like this, you led them by day with a cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the road.

In other words, he was directing them. He was looking after them. That's the most insightful piece in the prayer of the Levites, Nehemiah 9, 12.

Because, you see, it carries in it more than just, it's not just about shining, literally shining light for them. It's about illuminating them in their understanding, directing them in the way they should go. There is a spiritual, important spiritual dimension to this. In fact, in that same passage, a little later on, verse 20, we're told that his good spirit guided them.

He redeemed them with an outstretched arm and made their night of bondage vanish. And there, in the book of Nehemiah, written hundreds and hundreds of years later than the exodus from Egypt.

[13 : 45] There is a recollection of what God had done for his people. He gave them light on the way. And you see, it was just the same when they returned, again centuries later, from the Babylonian captivity, they returned after the 70-year exile to the land.

God shone upon them. The Lord gave them light. The Lord restored them to their homeland. And they had light from him on the way.

And here again, you see, there is the emphasis on giving them understanding as to what he wanted them to do. That's why we read in Haggai. Because Haggai and Zechariah, they had different roles, but basically they were there to strengthen the people in the faith to get them working in the cause. And it was Haggai, of course, who was allowed of God to say in chapter 1, verse 13, which we read, Thus says the Lord, I am with you.

chapter 2, verse 5, which we read, According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, my spirit remains among you, do not fear.

[15 : 25] And you've got a wonderful connection between what he was doing in Egypt all those centuries before and what he was doing when they returned from the Babylonian captivity and he was setting them to work and to rebuild the temple.

My spirit remains among you, do not fear. He gave them light on the way. You see, he connected in their minds what he did for them in Egypt when he brought them out with his mighty power, his outstretched arm, and how he gave them light on the way.

And he connects that with them there. Just a small remnant, relatively speaking, a small remnant, 40 odd thousand, and they were tasked with a massive rebuild, not just the temple, but the city. And they were surrounded by enemies in the land. And so, you see, he imparted light to them on the way.

He gave them an understanding in the word he spoke through his prophet on what he would have them do. And this has relevance to ourselves this day.

[16 : 55] It's the same for the Lord's people today. He gives us light on the way. He gives us an understanding of what he would have us do. He imparts by his word and spirit light on the way.

After all, if we know Christ here tonight, we have been given light. We have knowledge. We have experienced knowledge. The darkness has been removed.

And the true light shines in our heart. The light of Christ as Redeemer. And this is a lovely figure because, after and all, God himself is the author of light.

He spoke it into existence in the beginning. and he is the author of spiritual light to us and intellectual and moral and so on. He gives us light.

He makes us know the difference between right and wrong as from him. He enables us to understand spiritual things and to compare them so that we may grow by them.

[18 : 04] And the interesting thing is that there is this connection between the way he gave them light in the long ages of the Old Testament period and what he did when Christ eventually became man when he was embodied.

When the word of God, the eternal word, became flesh and dwelt among us. And the symbolism in the Old Testament of Messiah as light to his people shouldn't be overlooked.

This was moving on in the history of God's people. He was coming. And the time would come when the day spring from on high would arrive.

When the rising sun, the Lord Jesus Christ, would come to earth and shine upon the people. You remember how it was Zachariah, John the Baptist's father, spoke in these very words that Jesus was the day spring.

The rising sun from on high has visited us to give us light on the way, to guide our feet in the way of peace.

[19 : 31] And we ought again, as I say, not to miss this and to miss the impact of what it means in these words. God is the Lord and he has given us light.

And we need him to keep on giving us light, to shine in our understanding, to enable us to not only connect the scriptures together and to develop our thinking on the Lord himself, but to guide us, to direct us how we should best serve him.

And we need him to keep on giving us more light on the way. We would, we would, left to ourselves, the light we have would simply be sniffed out.

Sin's capacities in us would soon ruin us. But blessed be God, he keeps giving us light and encourages us to ask for more light on the way.

God is the Lord and he has given us light. But I said at the beginning we're saved to serve.

[20 : 50] he gives us light, he brings us into salvation in his sin and he imparts that true spiritual light of the knowledge of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

But light has been imparted for service. And that's what the second bit of the verse is all about.

Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. Now this is a familiar way of putting things when the psalm was written.

The worshipper came with his offering, his burnt offering. He came and he identified with it.

It was slaughtered, it was laid on the altar and it was consumed by the fire. Of course, as it tells us there, it was bound to the horns, the four horns on the altar.

[21 : 57] Some people think, I should say, that the picture is of the offering, be it a goat or a lamb, brought by a wee rope and just tied temporarily at the horn of the altar and then it's slaughtered.

But it seems to me and others too that it is a reference to actually putting the prepared sacrifice on the altar and then just crisscrossing it with the cord and then burning it, offering it as an offering.

And of course, this is about consecration, it's about devoting ourselves to the Lord. The main point of this is that he is offering himself, he is, if you like, representing his own commitment to the Lord by the burning of this offering.

It's a consecration offering, it's a thank offering. And you see, he's told, bind he, or you bind with cords the sacrifice upon the altar.

You're to do this, it's a command to do it, you're to commit yourself to the Lord, you're to fulfill your vows that you've made to the Lord. The outward ritual had to have an inward significance.

[23 : 30] It wasn't just about going through the motions. what they did had to mean something to themselves. And it is all about wholehearted commitment to the Lord, consecrating ourselves to his service.

And doing it in such a way as those who believe that we're saved to serve. he has given us light, saving light, in order that we can serve him in our lives.

And if you had any doubt about it before, then you know why we read Romans 12 now. Because at the beginning of Romans 12, that's just what Paul is saying.

He tells his readers, brethren, I plead with you by the mercies of God that you present your body a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service, or your spiritual worship, as NIV has it.

You're presenting yourself. And what was done in those days in binding the sacrifice with cords upon the altar, represented the believer, the worshipper's commitment to the Lord, not once but again, rededicating himself to the service of the Lord.

[25 : 10] This is why Paul uses the same picture in Romans 12, 1, offering ourselves in the service of the Lord.

It's a living sacrifice. It's a perpetual offering we are to offer, to offer ourselves, as long as we have the ability and strength to serve him.

God And you see, the passage that we're quoting from Romans 12, 1 reminds us that we have to be careful not to just get into this at the beginning with a great burst of enthusiasm and then to let things fade away.

No, no, says Paul, present your bodies a living sacrifice, a perpetual offering. consecrate yourselves as a holy sacrifice to the Lord, which is your reasonable service.

And we can ask the Lord to give us the grace we need to do that, the Spirit to strengthen us in that, so that when we read these words, we are reminding ourselves of committing ourselves

wholeheartedly to the Lord's service.

[26 : 39] We're doing it for Him, not for ourselves. After and all, He has given us light, but He has given us light to serve Him in our lives.

And you see, I think that helps us when serving becomes a bit heavy going and a bit more like tragedy than service.

we are reminded of what we're doing, that this is well pleasing to Him. This is what He wants from us, loving service, wholehearted service, which is our spiritual worship.

And I think, too, that that keeps us appreciating on the one hand what He has done for us, and on the other hand, what He expects from us.

In other words, we're not going around, oh, well, I did this and this and this for the Lord, aren't I good? No, no. We see what we do, even at the most, just simply as our duty to do, as our reasonable service.

[27 : 55] There's an interesting passage, isn't there, in the gospel record, about, Jesus talks about the servant who serves his master, who has come in from the field.

You're nodding, so you remember. And he says, now, does the master thank the servant for all he does?

No. Well, he doesn't need to, because the servant is only doing what's his duty to do. And there, the Savior has in mind that the master is not indebted to the servant for his service.

No, rather, the servant does the duty, which is his reasonable service, it's his appreciation of being a servant of the master.

And how much is that true of us in relation to the Lord? What we do, even at the best and in the most, we do.

[29 : 04] We're simply doing what it is our duty to do. It's our reasonable service. And we're to do it with heart, soul, mind, and strength, without any grudging at all.

Now, of course, this brings us up to speed on where we are. We're all at different stages. We all have different gifts. Some of you here are well advanced in years now, and some of you are more limited than others in what you can do.

But you support the work. You pray for the work. A prayer is a ministry in itself. prayer. And where you are limited by physical weakness, you are strengthened in the work, in the ministry, in the service of prayer.

There is something for each and all of us to do. And we look at what we can do as reasonable service.

And we hear the words, God is the Lord, and he has given us light. Therefore, let us bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.

[30 : 17] Let us serve him wholeheartedly, spontaneously, because we love him who first loved us, and hold nothing as our own, but as his, to be used for his glory.

Let us then lay these things to heart and be encouraged in our service to him, who, bless me, his name, first gave us light and continues to give us light in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.