

A Refuge to Shelter In

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] Today's reading comes from Psalm 118. That's Psalm 118. Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

For his steadfast love endures forever. Let Israel say, his steadfast love endures forever. Let the house of Aaron say, his steadfast love endures forever.

Let those who fear the Lord say, his steadfast love endures forever. Out of my distress, I called on the Lord, and the Lord answered me and set me free.

The Lord is on my side. I will not fear. What can man do to me? The Lord is on my side, is my helper. I shall look and triumph on those who hate me.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes. All nations surrounded me.

[1 : 17] In the name of the Lord, I cut them off. They surrounded me. They surrounded me. They surrounded me. Surrounded me on every side. In the name of the Lord, I cut them off.

They surrounded me like bees. They went out like a fire among thorns. In the name of the Lord, I cut them off.

I was pushed hard so that I was falling. But the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my song.

He has become my salvation. Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous. The right hand of the Lord does valiantly.

The right hand of the Lord exalts. The right hand of the Lord does valiantly. I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.

[2 : 19] The Lord has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord. The righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing. It is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we pray, O Lord.

O Lord, we pray, give us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

[3 : 24] The Lord is God. And he has made his light shine upon us. Find the feastal sacrifice with cords up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you. You are my God. I will extol you. Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

For his steadfast love endures forever. Someone asked me this week whether I had chosen Psalm 118 just as a kind of random psalm.

No. We're looking at it over the next couple of Sundays because it features very much in the final days of Jesus' life.

So Psalm 118, it's quoted more than any other psalm in the Bible. It's quoted more than any other Old Testament passage, I think, certainly more than any other psalm in the New Testament.

[4 : 29] It's quoted three times in Matthew's Gospel, twice in Mark, three times in Luke, and once in John's Gospel. It's quoted on Palm Sunday, so the equivalent of next Sunday as the Lord Jesus enters Jerusalem.

Verse 26, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. It's quoted by the Lord Jesus himself as he tells the parable of the wicked tenants. Verse 22, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

It's quoted by the Apostle Peter in Acts chapter 4 when he's on trial before the Sanhedrin. It's quoted in Hebrews chapter 13 to encourage Christians to persevere in the face of opposition. And in 1 Peter to remind us of the amazing privilege of belonging to Jesus. So the plan is to look at this psalm in two halves.

The first half this Sunday, the second half Palm Sunday next Sunday. And the aim of the psalm is very much there in verse 1. O give thanks the Lord for he is good.

[5 : 33] That is then repeated at the end of the psalm, verse 29. O give thanks the Lord for he is good. Now let's just focus on that word good for a moment.

Because I wonder how that resonates with you. I guess there'll be some of us who frankly doubt God's goodness. Perhaps we look at our own personal circumstances or perhaps we just think of the events of the last year with the pandemic.

And we think to ourselves, well, is God really good? For others, I guess we may say with our lips that God is good.

But not really know God's goodness in our hearts. In other words, where we can say it, but not really sing it and rejoice in it. Well, perhaps others, if you're here just looking in on the Christian faith, or perhaps if you're at the Real Lives events, you may not even be convinced there is a God. And you certainly aren't convinced that he is good. In which case, my hope and prayer is that this psalm will show you what it is like and what it feels like to know that God is indeed good.

[6 : 50] Written as it was hundreds of years before the birth of the Lord Jesus. Now, in summary, we see God's goodness in his steadfast love.

And again, as Rosalie read the psalm for us, I wonder if you notice that echo of steadfast love. It's the refrain that runs through the first four verses. And it's again how the psalm finishes in verse 29. His steadfast love endures forever. Now, that phrase, the steadfast love, translates one word in Hebrew. It's the word *hesed*.

Unlike the kind of soft focus love, which we may see in a Hollywood movie or something like that. It's talking about a strong love. A love which has got backbone to it, if you like.

A love that is powerful. A love that's dependable. It's wrapped up in the whole idea of God's covenant. The promises that he makes to his people. It's a love that's faithful.

[7 : 55] A love that's compassionate. In other words, we might think of it in terms of love at its very best. Love that is faithful. Love that's committed.

Love that's self-sacrificing. Love that is self-giving. And God wants to set us out rejoicing this morning. That this is precisely the kind of covenant love that God demonstrates towards his people. If you've seen the outline, you'll see we've got two headings this morning. The first is, if the Lord is my salvation, the Lord is my salvation. And then secondly, he is on my side.

And that really can sum up the psalm for us. If the Lord is my salvation, he is on my side. Let's think about those two things in turn.

Firstly, the Lord is my salvation, verses 10 to 14. And the reason we're looking at verses 10 to 14 first, before verses 5 to 9, is because if you look at verse 5, it's clear from verse 5 that there is a desperate situation that the writer of the psalm is facing.

[9 : 04] Out of my distress, I called on the Lord. Literally, out of the great distress. In other words, something really terrible. And yet, it's only really in verses 10 to 14 that we see what the distress was.

And that is why we're going to start there. So have a look at verses 10 to 14. All nations surrounded me. In the name of the Lord, I cut them off. They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side.

In the name of the Lord, I cut them off. They surrounded me like bees. They went out like a fire among thorns. In the name of the Lord, I cut them off. I was pushed hard so that I was falling.

But the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my soul. He has become my salvation. Now, immediately, we get the sense, don't we, that the psalm is written by some kind of military leader, most likely the king as the representative of his people.

Verse 10, I wonder if you can feel what's going on. All the nations surrounded me. In the Lord, I cut them off. It echoes the words of Psalm 2, verses 1 and 2. Why did the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

[10 : 14] Again, the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed. Probably not King David, where you start with the psalms being written by King David.

Probably not King David, but one of the later kings, when God's people, Israel, were a declining power, surrounded by hostile nations.

Surrounded, I wonder if you can kind of feel them. Surrounded, verse 11, on every side.

Surrounded, verse 12, like bees. If you've ever experienced bees swarming, they just keep on coming at you.

There's nothing you can do to get out of their way. Terrifying. And like fire among thorns, the flames quickly take hold of the countryside of the landscape in no time.

And the seriousness of the conflict in verse 13, being pushed hard by the enemy. And yet, there's been the most wonderful deliverance and rescue.

[11:14] Verse 14, the Lord has become my salvation. In fact, the theme of rescue and deliverance is so central in the psalm that this is a psalm which was sung at the time of the Passover, together with all of Psalms 111 to Psalm 118.

Collectively, they're known as the Hallel Psalms, the Hallelujah Psalms, praising God, boasting in what he's done. And they were linked especially to the Passover, the rescue of God's people from Egypt.

Remember how they painted the blood of the sacrificial lamb around their door frames, how the Lord rescued them from Egypt, from his judgments, how he rescued them as the Red Sea parted, and then as the Egyptian army was destroyed, as the waters came back together again.

And God's people then sang a song. It's called the Song of Moses. You can look it up later on in Exodus 15. And there are a number of allusions or quotations from that song in our psalm.

So verse 14, for example, the Lord is my strength and my song. He's become my salvation, is a quote from Psalm 15. And then verses 15 and 16 is a sort of echo that song in Exodus 15, the right hand of the Lord.

[12:31] And also verse 28 echoes Exodus 15, You are my God, and I'll give thanks to you. You are my God, and I will extol you. I guess the Passover event was ingrained in the memory of God's people, perhaps in a similar way to which the victory in 1945 over Nazi Germany is ingrained in the consciousness of many British people, such that 75 years after the war, it still very much shapes, doesn't it, our national consciousness.

So, you know, you think of the number of films or documentaries or public occasions when different events which led up to that victory 76 years ago are publicly celebrated.

And God's people celebrated that rescue each year at the Passover. It's what the Lord Jesus was doing on the night of his arrest and his betrayal and his trial.

So most likely as they celebrated the Passover, they would have started off by saying Psalms 111 and Psalms 112 together, or singing them. And then the rest of the Hallel Psalms, 113 to 118, just before leaving at the end of the Passover.

So this is the psalm, which most likely is the very last psalm that the Lord Jesus said with his disciples. And so I wonder, as we look at verses 10 to 14, whether you can hear the echoes of Jesus' death on the cross.

[14:04] Verse 10, surrounded by nations. His title, the King of the Jews, remember, written above the cross in three languages, in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek, so the nations could read.

In verse 11, surrounded by every side, the political leaders, the religious leaders, the crowds, those who had once followed him. Here it's seen, verse 13, was the great triumph of the enemy, of the devil.

And yet in reality, it is the great moment of salvation. As Jesus dies, just like that Passover lamb, to turn aside the wrath of God, and bring the forgiveness of sins to those who trust him.

It means that those of us who belong to Jesus, we can join in with this psalmist in rejoicing, in saying, verse 14, the Lord is my strength and song.

He has become my salvation. So then, what are the implications, if that is the case? Well, very simply, he is on my side.

[15:17] That brings us to our second point this morning. He is on my side, verses 5 to 9. I wonder if you notice the repetition there in verses 6 and 7, the Lord is on my side.

I guess it's something, the kind of thing is that it's easy to read, but much harder to appreciate, because, of course, we are not, by nature, on God's side.

By nature, we turn away from God, we're rebels against him, it's the very heart of sin. And yet the problem isn't only sin, it's also the wrath of God, it's his right and just punishment of sin.

So what does God's salvation achieve? The forgiveness of sins. It means I no longer face the wrath of God. The Lord is indeed now on my side if I put my trust in him.

Easy to say, hard to really digest. It's wonderful, wasn't it, how during those Real Lives events 10 days ago, we had those three people, Christian Diamond, Yvonne Edwards, Pius Jani, how each one of them had come to a definite point of the conviction of sin.

[16:29] They realized they weren't good people, they realized they were far from God and that was the turning point, the point at which they realized they needed the Savior. And from then, having put their, from then on, having put their trust in Jesus, they, with us, if we put our trust in him, can now say, the Lord is on my side.

Imagine, from a moment, a game of fantasy football, if your thing is football, fantasy cricket, if your thing is cricket. I wonder who your dream team would be. Well, you probably know I'm not particularly into football, so I had to ask a friend when I WhatsApp to friends who told me who his top three fantasy football players would be.

So, Bruno Fernandes, Kevin De Bruyne, and Harry Kane. And he even told me how to pronounce Kevin De Bruyne, such was his lack of confidence than I'd have ever heard of him. Now, of course, it's one thing, isn't it, to have top footballers on your side in a game of fantasy football.

But what an extraordinary thing to have the living God on your side in real life. A wonderful, a wonderful promise.

Well, what are the implications? Or to put it another way, how does this change life? Or to put it another way, how does this help us to flourish? Well, a number of things.

[17:55] Firstly, in verse 6, it means we needn't fear other people. Notice, it's the second time the psalm uses the word fear. The first is there in verse 4, those who fear the Lord say.

The point is, of course, that fear of the Lord, a right reverence of and trust in the Lord, drives out other fears. The fears of other people.

The fears of circumstances and situations. Just worth asking. Just think to yourself a moment. Who or what do you fear?

Might be people. Might be circumstances. Might be the opinion of a parent or a colleague. Perhaps you fear for your reputation at work or on social media.

Perhaps you fear for about, you have fears about health or old age or perhaps there's a particular person that you fear. A bully. A bully at school. A bully at work.

[18:57] Or maybe that we're fearful about the future, the ongoing impact of the pandemic or we're anxious about the effect of it long term on our children. Perhaps we're just fearful about how we're going to keep going.

The Lord is on my side. I will not fear. Another implication is verse 7 that the Lord is my helper. I think all of us struggle, don't we?

We so easily imagine that God is distant. Even as those of us who have trusted in Jesus, we so easily still think God is out there somewhere, but actually he is the one who has come alongside us. In fact, that word helper, it's a very intimate word. It's precisely the word that back in Genesis chapter 2 at the very start of the Bible is precisely the word God uses to describe the way in which the woman will be a helper for her husbands.

So how very extraordinary that the Lord God uses exactly the same word to describe the way in which he comes alongside his people. Now, again, I wonder what situations we are facing at the moment where we need to remember that the Lord is our helper.

[20:14] Perhaps COVID has left you feeling crushed, fearful, or concerned, perhaps concerned for your mental or financial well-being. The Lord is my helper.

And then finally, he is, verses 8 and 9, a refuge. The best refuge, the best shelter we could ever have.

Verses 8 and 9, 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. He will not fail us.

Now, of course, it doesn't always mean that life is going to work out how we would like it to work out. It doesn't always mean life is going to work out how we think it should work out. But he won't fail us.

And everything will, in fact, work out for our very best, for what is for our spiritual good and benefit. A wonderful assurance in all the ups and downs of life.

[21 : 20] Because the fact is, we're all too, we all too quickly do put our trust, don't we, in people, verses 8 and 9, in princes, other saviors, you know, the new coach who's brought in to save the sports team, the new prime minister who people think is going to be our saviour, the new head teacher who will work wonders, the new company CEO who will save us, that new friendship or person we've met who we think is going to transform us and transform my life.

And yet, of course, all of us will have had countless experiences of people who have let us down. They haven't delivered. Countlessly let down by perhaps we feel let down by a parent, by a partner, by a friend we entrusted ourselves to, perhaps by a colleague we trusted or a boss who we thought was on our side.

Whereas the Lord is completely trustworthy. He'll never let us down. Now, I want to finish by looking at the New Testament because just have a look for a moment at verse 6 of the psalm.

Verse 6 is quoted in the New Testament as if to say if you're someone who is trusting in Jesus, then this is the main thing to take away from the first half of this psalm.

So please, will you turn, if you're able to, to Hebrews chapter 10, Hebrews chapter 10. Now, the psalm's not actually quoted in Hebrews 10, but I just want us to get a feel for the kind of situation into which the letter was written.

[23 : 07] So Hebrews 10 verses 32 to 34. But recall the former days when after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

For you had compassion on those in prison and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Can you hear how well these Christians had started in the Christian life, willing to suffer for Jesus, willing to associate with other Christians who are in prison, willing to lose their property, wonderfully zealous for the Lord Jesus.

And yet now they're in danger. Verses 35 and 36. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. Do you have need of endurance so that when you've done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

Can you hear? They're in danger of throwing it all away. They're in danger of turning away from Jesus. Because as followers of Jesus, we will always be outsiders.

And to live as an outsider is tough. We all naturally want to live as insiders. And perhaps they've begun to realize how very costly it will be always to live as an outsider.

[24 : 42] Now we're about to start reading a book as a staff team. Hopefully we've got a picture of it coming up on the screen. And I wonder if you get the title. Just have a little look at the title of the book.

And I wonder if you get it. In the UK, and not only the UK, we have moved from living in a situation where generally speaking Christians were regarded as the good guys.

Perhaps slightly odd, perhaps a little bit quirky, but generally the good guys. And yet now increasingly we live in a situation where to be a Christian and a follower of Jesus is to be regarded on a whole range of issues as one of the bad guys.

we encounter hostility, suspicion, rather than apathy. And we know, don't we, that feels very uncomfortable.

Being an outsider feels very costly indeed. So now turn on to Hebrews chapter 13, verse 6, which is where our verse from Psalm 118 is quoted.

[25 : 54] It says, Hebrews chapter 13, verse 6. So we can confidently say, the Lord is my helper, I will not fear.

What can man do to me? Isn't that just what we need to hear when we're increasingly conscious that to be a follower of Jesus is to be an outsider?

Now we haven't got time to look at Hebrews 13 in detail, but it is full of outsider language. Have a look at verses 11 to 14. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.

Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach that he endures.

for we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. The pressure on us to be insiders is enormous.

[27 : 09] At school, the pressure to be with the right crowd of friends. At work, the pressure to be on the inside track, achieving, pushing our way up, succeeding.

For some of us within our families, if the majority of people in our families are not trusting Jesus, the pressure to conform. Or with friends, the pressure to be like them in terms of lifestyle, the kind of house we live in, and all the rest of it.

In society, we want to fit in. We want to be insiders. Of course we do. It's deeply uncomfortable being an outsider in the way we live, in what we believe, in the way in which other people think of us.

And all the harder, of course, in a place like Dulwich, which is full of insiders. And it's not going to go away.

Look at the world. Look at history. to be a follower of Jesus is, on the whole, to be an outsider. And yet Psalm 118 gives us the wonderful assurance that we need.

[28 : 25] It gives us the resources that we need to say, the Lord is on my side. I will not fear what can man do to me.

We can be confident that the Lord is indeed my salvation. He is on my side. Why don't we finish by turning back to the psalm, to Psalm 118.

And why don't we finish by saying verses one to four together, well, sort of together. I'll say the first bits of each verse. And then if we would like to join in for his steadfast love endures forever.

Okay, so we'll say it kind of responsibly. like that. Verses one to four. O give thanks to the Lord for he is good. Let Israel say, let the house of Aaron say, let those who fear the Lord say, amen.

Amen.