

The Gate, the Stone & the Sacrifice

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[0 : 0 0] to the first of these readings to Psalm 118, the book of Psalms and Psalm 118. And I'd like us to focus on the whole Psalm, but if we could take one particular verse, it would have to be verse 19. Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. Verse 20 says, 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.

No doubt you'll recognize this Psalm as the Psalm that we sing during a communion service. And it's possible that you often wondered why this Psalm more than anything else. Of course, you don't have to sing it. There are many Psalms that are more than suitable to be sung during a communion service, but more often than not, we tend to choose this one. Well, the first answer is that it's part of a group of Psalms that are known as the Hallel Psalms. And they are from 113 to 118. And they would typically be sung in the Old Testament in connection with the Passover. The word Hallel simply means praise. And if you ever wondered what the word Hallelujah means, it simply means Hallelujah, praise the Lord. Yah is a shortened word for Jehovah, Yahweh. So Hallelujah means praise the Lord. And Hallel simply means praise. And this was a context, of course, in which the Israelite people would celebrate the Passover in praise and thankfulness. It was a time of great joy, as well as a time of great solemnity. It was a time of great joy in which they must never lose sight of the greatness and the goodness of God in bringing them out of Egypt. And apparently the first two

Psalms of the Hallel were sung before the Passover meal and the other four were sung after that. So these were probably the last items that Jesus would have sung before his crucifixion. And therefore, of course, it is appropriate that we might sing this at a time of communion. Typically, though, this Psalm would be sung by the Israelites. You remember, of course, that at the time of Passover, that many of them who lived in faraway places, they would make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover as a great crowd. And this was, they were pilgrims. They made their way many, many miles, many of them on foot and donkeys and perhaps other animals. I'm not entirely sure, but this journey would take them perhaps several days. And they would have to travel together, of course, for fear of being attacked or wild animals or whatever. And for them, this would be the pilgrimage itself was a time of great importance. And as they approached the gates of Jerusalem, they would sing this Psalm.

They saw what they were doing in going to Jerusalem itself as an act of worship in which they were giving thanks for what God had done for them. And they were preparing their own minds and their own hearts for what they were about to do in celebrating the Passover. It also focused on God's unique love towards his people. You'll notice that the Psalm opens with these words, let Israel give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. And that word steadfast love is a very important word in the Bible, in the Old Testament. It means the covenant love in which God bound himself to his people. It's not the kind of airy, fairy, general love that's here today and gone tomorrow that we find in today's world. God's love is a unique love in which he binds himself to his people. And the word shezed is that word, the loving kindness of God that endures forever and that nothing can change and nothing can separate us from. And so the Psalm focuses upon that love.

And the people would fill their minds as they made their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. But lastly, it focuses on a future event, something that they never really understood. And I wonder, many of them I'm sure would have sung it, wondering what the words meant. Words like, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Of course, there was an extent to which that was true for Israel. They were the stone that the builders rejected while they were in Egypt, while they were oppressed. And while Pharaoh was treating them with so much cruelty, the builders, it could have been said, rejected them. They hated them. And yet, out of all of that, God elevated his people and he established them in the promised land. And he gave them the significance of the people of God and gave them an enormously important place in his kingdom. It could have been read like that. But, and yet, there's a mystery to this Psalm. There's an element of mystery to it that the people in the Old Testament could never understand. And, of course, it was only when Jesus came into the world that the meaning, the true fulfillment of these words came to be, as he explains himself.

[5 : 51] It's also a responsive Psalm. Many commentators believe that it wasn't sung as a whole by all the people. Now, I'm not suggesting for a moment that we should sing it responsibly. But it's interesting, most of the, a lot of scholars believe that the people of Israel would sing it responsibly. And that means that parts of it were sung by one person and other parts were sung by the whole crowd.

For example, they say this, that at the beginning, if you read the beginning of the Psalm, one person would sing, let Israel say, everybody would then join in, his steadfast love endures forever.

And then that one person would sing again, let the house of Aaron say, then everybody would join in, his steadfast love endures forever. And then the one person would sing, let those who fear the Lord say, his steadfast love endures forever. And then going into verse five, the one soloist would sing, he would sing personally of how God had personally looked down upon him with favor and rescued him from the distress. He was in out of my distress. I called on the Lord. 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 as my helper. I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. And then everybody would join in again. Can you imagine the effect that this would have after everybody listening to this, this one solo singer singing of how God had helped him and rescued him and saved him out of his distress. Everybody would join in because they all knew that they could sing the same. That 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. And if you go through the Psalm like that, it gives a kind of a different sense altogether. Many, as I say, many people who understand these things, they tell us that this is the way it would originally have been sung. Well, tonight,

I want us to look at it in terms of the connection that it has with not just the Passover, but with the Lord's Supper and with the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I want us to focus on three things in the Psalm. We could focus on a lot more, but just three things. I want us to look first of all at the gate. I want us to look at the stone and I want us to look at the sacrifice. The gate you'll find in verse 19 where it is said, open to me the gates of righteousness.

[8 : 28] The stone you will find in verse 22, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And then the sacrifice you will find in verse 27 where it said, bind the festal sacrifice with cords up to the horns of the altar. I just want us to say one or two brief things about those three areas within the three words, the gates and the stone and the sacrifice. And see how they connect with one another and see how they connect with the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, apparently, as the people made their way up to the gates of Jerusalem, this is what they would sing. They would sing these words, open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

Now, again, it probably would have been the soloist who would sing this open to me, me personally, the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. But if we remember that in the minds of the people, what they were doing was an act of worship, they weren't just traveling. They weren't just arriving at any city. They weren't just at the end of any journey.

They were at the end of a spiritual pilgrimage in which the final act was to celebrate the God's goodness and bringing them out of Egypt. And their very arrival, their anticipation of that event was in itself an act of worship in which they saw Jerusalem, not as any old city. Jerusalem was given great unique significance by God to his people. It was the city of God. And therefore, the gate of the city of God symbolized for the people the way into the presence of God. They were going to meet with God. It wasn't just a kind of a national celebration they were going to have. This was an act of worship.

In which, and in which when they sang these words, at the gate of Jerusalem itself, open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them. They were asking something deeply significant.

They were asking that the Lord would open the way for them to come into his presence. That's after all what the sacrifice and what, what worship is.

[10 : 50] Both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, it's when we come into the presence of God and when we, when we express his worship to us. That's what the people were wanting to do.

And so you can imagine that this, whether it was all the people or whether it was just one, open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

Now in verse 20, the scholars tell me that verse 20 was the answer that was given to this prayer by the high priest. And this was his answer.

This is the gate of the Lord. The righteous shall enter through it. Now do you see, you see what's happening? Here are the people of God and they are, they're requesting, they're praying that God would open the gate, his own gate to them to allow them in.

But then they're reminded by the high priest, this is not just any gate or any door. This is the gate of the Lord. Only the righteous shall enter in.

[11 : 57] And that's the great truth that underlies everything about the Bible. Isn't it both Old and New Testament? It's the great dilemma that, that we sing very often in Psalm 24.

It's the greatest problem in the world, in the universe. And Psalm 24 puts it just a slightly different way, but the two things are connected when it says, who shall ascend the hill of God?

And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has a clean, a pure heart and clean hands. It's the same thing.

It's the greatest problem in the world, our separation from God. far above all the problems that we identify from day to day, like the great problems in the world that nations identify, like global warming or crime or conflict between various nations in the world.

All of these are problems, no doubt whatsoever. And I'm not undermining them in any way. But surely the greatest of all problems is our separation from God. That's what the Bible is all about.

[13 : 03] That's where it begins, with Adam and Eve in the garden, making themselves separate from God. And so down through the centuries, there's been a separation between us until God resolved that separation by sending his son Jesus into the world.

So here we have the problem. Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them. But this is the gate of the Lord, and the righteous shall enter through it. But then look at the response.

I thank you, say the people, that you have answered me, and you, now here's the crux, and here's the gospel. You have become, you Lord, have become my salvation.

When we read back through Psalm 24, who shall ascend the hill of God, and who can stand in his holy place, he who has a pure heart and clean hands, who does? Nobody.

There's a very, there's an extent in which, there's a sense in which, you read Psalm 24, and if it wasn't for the salvation that God brought about in Jesus Christ, we might as well just close the book and go away and do something else.

[14 : 19] But, the Bible goes on to tell us that God himself has become our salvation in the person of Jesus Christ.

And that's what's explained to us in Old Testament form, in this symbolic form, in the verses that follow. And that brings me on to the second thing I was going to look at this evening in verse 22, which is the stone, the stone.

Look at what it says. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing. And it is marvelous in our eyes.

Now, I said before, that originally the people of Israel may have thought of themselves as those who had been rejected. But as you come to the Old, the New Testament, fast forward a thousand years, and Jesus makes very plain and clear to his disciples, as he teaches them, about how the Messiah, he was the Messiah coming into the world.

And instead of recognizing him, the very people, the Pharisees and the scribes and the chief priests, who should have been able to recognize him because they were experts in the things belonging to God.

[15 : 38] And yet, instead of recognizing him and bowing down to worship and obey him, they had actually rejected him and by throwing him and by nailing him to a cross.

You remember the parable that he told in Matthew 21, just after he entered Jerusalem on a donkey, the master who planted a vineyard and left it in the hands of tenants who treated all the servants with great cruelty.

They beat some of them. They killed some of them. And then at last, the master sent his own son saying, they will honor my son. But instead, when they saw him, they killed him. And then he said, this is this Jesus, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

And again, it's echoed in Acts chapter 4 and verse 11. This Jesus is the apostle, is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And of course, this is what happened at the cross, wasn't it?

After three years of public ministry, the so-called experts, and they say, I think I've said this before at some point. They say that it takes a lot of knowledge to recognize a stone in building.

[16 : 50] Of course, we build houses with bricks nowadays. So this whole art is a forgotten art. But apparently when you build a house with stone, you have to know the right kind of stone to choose.

And apparently a builder will go into a quarry and he will have a look at all the different types of stone that there is, all the different cuts and shapes and sizes. And he will choose some of them and he will reject the rest.

And he knows which one to choose and which stones if he's building a house. He knows exactly which ones to choose and which ones to throw out. And this is what the apostle is saying, that this is what you, chief priests and scribes and Pharisees, you should have known which stones to choose and which stones to throw out.

And instead, you did the wrong thing. You made the wrong choice. But God has taken the very stone that you thought was fit for the rubbish heap.

That's what they did with Jesus. They killed him. They mocked him. They had him arrested. They had him flogged. They hated him.

[17 : 59] Sometimes I think we lose sight of the intensity of the utter hatred with which the religious people of the day, with which they hated Jesus.

But that very same stone, says the apostle, was taken by God and has become the most important stone in the building. The cornerstone, the one on which the whole building rests, is the one that you have rejected.

And he has become sent. This is the Lord's doing. It is marvelous in our eyes. The day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Well then, the last thing I want us to look at this evening is in verse 27 where it says, the Lord is God and he has made his light to shine upon us and bind this festal sacrifice with horns, with cords and up to the horns of the altar.

I'll say that again. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords up to the horns of the altar. There is one more element then in the salvation in which God has, by which God has opened the gates of righteousness to his people and that is the sacrifice.

[19 : 19] And the feast in which the people would be making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate would be accompanied by the sacrifice. If it was the Passover, it surrounded the killing of a lamb.

The lamb had to be one year old. It had to be without blemish and it had to be taken and it had to be killed. You remember, of course, all the way back to that day, the night in which God delivered his people from Egypt and it was through the lamb, the killing of the lamb and the substitute which the lamb made and so that instead of killing the firstborn son by the angel of death, the lamb was put to death.

It became the substitute for the people by which they were saved. And so ever after, there were various kinds of sacrifices. God was teaching his people that it was through the shedding of blood that there was forgiveness and salvation for his people.

There could not be forgiveness except through the shedding of blood. So if the people were making their way to Jerusalem in that procession, they would have animals with them, goats and lambs without blemish.

They were taking them to be killed at the altar to be offered up to God as a sacrifice. It lay at the heart of Old Testament worship.

[20 : 39] You can't get anywhere in the Old Testament without coming to terms. with sacrifice, the sacrifice of animals. But it also lies at the heart of New Testament worship as well because no animal sacrifice could ever truly, effectively take away sin.

There had to be one forthcoming, once and for all sacrifice, this time in the person of the Messiah, the Son of God. And only he, by giving his life, could take away, could truly pay for our sins as our substitute.

And you have to wonder to what extent the people who sang these words in faith a thousand years before the coming of Christ, to what extent they were able to lay hold of the fact that God somehow or other was going to provide the one sacrifice that was necessary for taking away their sin.

I believe, I believe that those who sang these in faith, they perhaps perceived more than we think they did.

Now, I'm not absolutely sure about this, but I'm not entirely sure of how much they knew. But in faith, they were able to lay hold upon God's mercy and his grace in the way that he was going to bring that about in the person of his Son.

[22 : 01] In other words, these words expressed both what they were doing at the moment in binding the sacrifice and bringing the sacrifice into the place of death and offering.

But they also expressed a prophecy which is quite remarkable and which was astonishingly fulfilled when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that last final occasion a short time before he was crucified.

Again, fast forward a thousand years to John chapter 12. So they took branches when they were coming. And the next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him crying out Hosanna blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord even the king of Israel. Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it just as it is written fear not daughter of Zion behold your king is coming sitting on a donkey's coat.

I want us tonight to just look very very briefly at the exact words in verse 27. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.

[23 : 30] Some people think that that meant that they were to take the animal with cords and that they were to bind that they were to tie the animal to the horns of the altar. The scholars tell us that that is not what it means at all.

But it means that they were to take their animals from the gate of Jerusalem all the way in procession and they weren't to stop until they got to the horns of the altar.

Until they were almost able to reach out and touch them. In other words they weren't to stop, they weren't to delay. Such was the importance of the sacrifice they were to keep on because without that sacrifice there could not be any salvation.

Now look at these words again. The words, the word for cord can actually mean, it can mean cord or it can actually mean a branch.

The word for sacrifice can also mean a procession and a sacrifice. And fascinatingly when Jesus rode into Jerusalem and these people all came to meet him outside of Jerusalem and rode through the gates of righteousness, here was their sacrifice, here was their procession and here were their branches in which they were bringing the sacrifice in procession all the way to the altar.

[25 : 07] And he would not stop until he got there. Such was his undying love for his people. He would continue on and on and on because in front of him lay the cross and nothing could prevent him from reaching that point at which he gave his own life for his people.

These people who were proclaiming him king in John chapter 12, they had other ideas. They wanted him to be an earthly king and so they were saying, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the king of Israel.

But what they actually were singing was this psalm. What they actually were singing is bring the sacrifice. They didn't realize what they were singing.

But they were fulfilling the word of God. They were leading the sacrifice in through the gates of righteousness and in through the town and they were leading him all the way through into the cross.

But where were the cords when Jesus rode into Jerusalem?

[26 : 24] There weren't any. Because he came willingly. There didn't need to be cords.

He didn't need to be led. He went himself. His cords were the obedience which he was determined to make to his father in heaven who had given him to do the work that the father had given him to do.

His cords were the love which bound him to his people and which meant that there could not be any other way for their salvation but his death on the cross even the death on the cross.

It had to be that way. With all the agony and the suffering and the darkness and the dereliction the sacrifice had to be made.

And he made it willingly lovingly voluntarily every step of the way. so the next time you sing those words remember what they mean in their New Testament context.

[27 : 44] He is the stone that the builders rejected who has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing.

This is the day that the Lord has made. we will rejoice and be glad in it. And we can also sing blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Singing of course about Jesus. And what he did for us when he gave himself on the cross. But we also know what these words mean bring the sacrifice.

in the procession all the way never stopping to the altar upon which he who knew no sin was made to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Let's pray. Amen. Our gracious and eternal God we ask that you will give us understanding and perception.

[29 : 00] We ask that you will fill our minds with the Lord Jesus Christ. We ask Lord that we will go into tomorrow if it be your will and to take part in this great act of remembrance meeting with the very Jesus who suffered on the cross as our Lord and as our Redeemer.

we pray that you will prepare our minds pray that you will give us an ever increasing appetite to understand and to grow in our knowledge of the Saviour.

At the same time give us an ever increasing determination to obey him out of love in the love in which he has created in our hearts for himself and for his glory for we ask in Jesus name.

Amen. We're going to sing together in closing the last three verses of this very song.