

Psalm 118: Thanksgiving

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[0:00] Hi, everyone. My name is Dan. I served as an elder here at Watermark for a while. I have the privilege of sharing God's word with us today.

To remind us where we are in today's preaching series, we are praying through the Psalms. Each week, we're choosing a different Psalm, a different theme to pull out of that Psalm, spending some time to understand it, and mostly trying to see how it might help us to pray and therefore improve our prayer life and our relationship with God.

Our day-to-day relationship with God is generally through speaking. God speaks to us through His word in the Bible, and we speak to God in prayer.

In the Psalms, allow us to see this back and forth in both directions. Today, we'll be looking at Psalm 118. So I'm going to ask Iris to come up and read it for us first, and then we'll dive deeper into it. Thanks, Iris.

Good morning, Watermark. Today's scripture reading is taken from Psalm 118. Please follow along your Bible. If you don't have a Bible, please do still grab them from the front of the stage or at the back near the door. Our passage is on page 479 in the church Bible. Page 479.

[1:31] Hear then God's word to us today. 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. 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. 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. In the name of the Lord, I cut them off. They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side.

[2:32] 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. Glossons 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. 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.

[3:38] 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. The Lord is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us.

Bind the festival 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. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. For his steadfast love endures forever. Let us believe and respond to God's true and living word.

Amen. Thank you, Iris. Thanks for sticking with us through those 29 verses, guys. It was a bit of a longer passage today, but today's psalm, Psalm 118, is one of the more popular psalms in the Bible, whether you know it or not.

[4:47] It has verses that are extremely well known. They've been quoted many times over in songs, other parts of the Bible. You may recognize some, as Iris was reading out.

For the Jewish people at the time of Jesus, it was a regular tradition to sing this psalm at big national Jewish celebrations, such as the Passover and other festivals like it.

For Martin Luther, our great hero of the Protestant Reformation, this was apparently his favorite psalm. As he quotes, Although the entire Psalter and all of Holy Scripture are dear to me as my only comfort and source of life, I fell in love with this psalm especially.

Therefore, I call it my own. When emperors and kings, the wise and the learned, and even saints could not aid me, this psalm proved a friend and helped me out of great many troubles.

As a result, it is dearer to me than all the wealth, honor, and power of the Pope, the Turk, and the emperor, essentially the world. I would be most unwilling to trade this psalm for all of it.

[5:54] Verse 17 was also said to be one of his life mottos. He had inscribed it on his wall at one point in his life. I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.

Even with such a glowing review from someone like Martin Luther, this psalm was written a long time before him. And while his testimony is encouraging, we shouldn't just take his word for it.

We should go back to the time it was written, well before Jesus even, a few centuries in fact, to understand it for ourselves. It is a rich and complex passage.

Our focus on prayer means we won't have time to look into every aspect of that complexity, but with God's word we can always challenge ourselves to go deeper and wider. What was it saying to the audience back then?

Whether you are a Christian or not today, why is it relevant to us? What does it have to say to us?

How does it point us to the gospel, to the good news of Jesus?

[6:54] And in particular, how can it help us in our prayer life? We'll see a psalm that encourages us to follow Jesus in giving thanks and praise to God. For though hardship comes, God has and will deliver us.

First things first, I think it's pretty obvious. This psalm is a psalm about thanksgiving. These are the first and last verses in the psalm after all.

Oh, give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. And right in the middle of the psalm as well, verses 14 and 15. The Lord is my strength and my song.

He has become my salvation. Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous. If we can picture it in our minds, the psalm actually depicts this thanksgiving liturgy, or like a ritual worship procession to God.

The psalmist is leading a procession of Jewish believers, making his way from outside the temple, to the temple gates, into the temple sanctuary, and finally ending at the temple altar, as you see in verse 27, to provide an offering of thanksgiving to God.

[8:08] We might assume, given that it's a psalm about thankfulness, that it was all smooth sailing, peaches and cream, as they say. But what is interesting is the fact that in and around these verses, it is obvious that that is not the case.

There is much talk of hardship and suffering, as we see in some of these verses, crying out to God in the midst of great distress. So the thankfulness here doesn't seem to be related to good times.

Rather, it seems to be related more to difficult times. And these difficult times are really difficult times. Niels preached a few weeks ago on Psalm 23, and pointed this out to us, that sometimes the psalms can feel not quite for us, in some literal sense, because the events are likely bigger than anything we would ever have to deal with.

Look at the first half of each of verses 10 to 12, for example. Verse 10, the first half says, All the nations surrounded me.

Verse 11, They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side. Verse 12, They surrounded me like bees. This is a royal psalm.

[9:22] The psalmist is a king. We're not sure who exactly. It could be King David. But either way, the events recounted here, are by a king who has been in a great battle, against other nations, other armies.

He is in a position of authority and power, and dealing with a scale of things, that almost none of us will ever have to deal with. In verse 12, when it talks about bees, I don't know if you've ever been stung by a bee before.

I have. It's not fun. If you've ever seen a swarm of bees, or a footage of beekeepers making honey, they have to wear these huge suits, to protect themselves, from the sheer volume, and the ferociousness of the bees, that can sometimes attack them, defending their hive.

Back in the times that this psalm was written, while they may have had some thicker clothing, they wouldn't have had those protective suits. They certainly wouldn't have had antihistamine tablets, if they had a bad reaction to the bee stings.

A swarm of bees could literally be deadly. So it is with this king in battle. He is overwhelmed by a swarm of nations, attacking him from every side.

[10 : 34] He is literally facing death. The situation is hopeless, and he is failing in his role. As we see in verse 13, he says, I was pushed hard, so that I was falling.

He is right on the edge. How can this be a psalm of thanksgiving to God? Why is the king thankful? Well, we see that in spite of his great difficulties, and overwhelming opposition, the king was eventually victorious.

Not because of what he did, but because of what God did. That is why he is thankful. Because God gave him a great victory. God delivered him from his overwhelming enemies, as we see in the second half of those verses.

Look at how they play out on the screen. He is giving thanks and praise to the one who not just helped him in his distress, but did the full saving work in victory.

The deliverance is such wonderful news that the king cannot help but give thanks to God. And as Niels also highlighted a few weeks ago, as the people's representative, the king's victory is the people's victory too.

[11 : 46] That is essentially what this psalm is about. You can kind of split it into two main ideas. The first idea is a picture of the king's testimony, giving thanks and praise at what God has done for him and for his people.

And the second part can be seen as this same king leading his people to respond in the same way to God. We see a kind of back and forth between the king and his people in this psalm.

In verses 2 to 4, it's essentially, if you look at verses 2 to 4 in your Bible, it's essentially a universal call from the king to all people to acknowledge God's steadfast and eternal love.

Israel, mentioned in verse 2, are the native Jewish people. The house of Aaron, in verse 3, are kind of the priestly class in their community.

And those who fear the Lord, in verse 4, are all other true believers. Then in verses 5 to 18, the king's thanksgiving testimony recounts God's saving work from his distress.

[12 : 52] And then the end of the psalm, verses 19 to 27, the king's people themselves then respond and join the king, giving praise and thanks to God for what he has done.

And how much more wonderful for us in Jesus. In this psalm, it's obvious the theme of deliverance links to Jesus as well.

Take a look at verse 26 with me. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. If we know the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, we know that this is what the crowds shouted at Palm Sunday.

In all four gospels, as Jesus was entering Jerusalem for the national Passover festival, the Jewish people at the time were clearly proclaiming the expectation of Jesus as the coming Messiah and king.

And they were referring back to this psalm when they were doing it. See on the screen, Jesus even directly claims the verse for himself later in Matthew 23. Or take verse 22, for example.

[14 : 00] The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Another well-known verse. Initially referring to this king in the psalm who was ultimately lifted up by God, Jesus later implies that he is that very stone being spoken about.

And Peter repeats that message in Acts. The builders are the religious leaders at the time. The rejected stone is Jesus.

The builders, the leaders rejected Jesus. He suffered on the cross and died. And God raised him from the dead three days later, establishing him as the foundation or the cornerstone of God's kingdom.

I think it adds weight too if we think about the fact that the king in this psalm was powerless to save himself. Only God could save him. And Jesus, being in very nature human, was made powerless to save himself.

There are so many parallels. In the same way the psalmist king relied on God through victory and was delivered victorious, victorious, so did Jesus, who submitted to God even to death and was delivered victorious over death and resurrection.

[15 : 18] In the same way the people in the psalm were able to enjoy the king's victory over his enemies, so we are able to enjoy Jesus' victory over sin and death, a victory we are powerless to achieve ourselves.

In Christ, this is every bit a psalm of victory for us as it was the king's people back then. And we are also led by Jesus in response of thanksgiving too.

We'll get back to that a bit later. But isn't it amazing? It's all tied together. The Old Testament, the New Testament, and fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Now that we hopefully understand the psalm a little better, what does this all have anything to do with our prayer life?

Well, I think it highlights a few things. Firstly, as we've touched on already, what do we need more than anything in the world? I wonder if you've noticed the fact that in the psalms in general, the focus of the prayers in the psalms are not necessarily on the material things that people might need at the time, but it's often deliverance from hardship, from suffering, from enemies.

[16 : 35] Asking a simple chat GPT query shows that there are over 400 references to deliverance or deliverance-related themes in the psalms.

And there are, and there's 150 psalms in the Bible. Material blessings are referenced about 40 times. I don't know how accurate those numbers actually are, but I think they'd generally be pretty accurate, and the idea is still there.

In our prayers, I think, me included, we so often pray for the practical things we need, like health, work, school, family.

These are good things, don't get me wrong. But in the psalm itself, so in the psalm itself, we see the king and his people praying for what they need materially, but what we have, but what we need more than anything in the world is what we already have in Christ, deliverance from sin and death. We don't have to work for it. We don't have to study for it. We don't have to try harder. We don't have to prove ourselves worthy one little bit. If we are in Christ and we have accepted his gift of salvation, we already have deliverance from sin and a restored relationship with God.

[17 : 56] That is what we need most. Just think about how miraculous it is, really, if you are a Christian in the room today, that you have the beliefs you do. Given what your background might have been, the world we live in today, it is pretty miraculous.

If we were to look at our prayer life, how often are we giving thanks to God for what he has done for us in Jesus? Does your prayer life look like Psalm 118 with this much giving thanks and this much asking for what we need?

Or if we are honest, is it more like this much giving thanks and this much asking for what we need? Now these questions are not meant to condemn us by no means or make light of some of the really, really hard things that some of us have to deal with in life.

The tone of this passage is of encouragement, is of celebration. God wants us to be thankful here and respond to him like that. But I do also think there may be levels of truth here in that for all of us in our prayer life.

Secondly, what about when times are really hard? like Simon shared a little bit before in his testimony and feeling thankful does not come easy. While we saw in verse 13, for example, if we read it carefully, it is actually alluding to the fact that this extreme suffering the king is facing to the point of breaking, of falling over, it's actually God's doing.

[19 : 27] God is not part of our good times only. He is in control and he is in our hard times as well. Our worst times even. If we are going through really hard times right now, I'm really sorry about that.

And as Christians, we cannot escape the fact that God is in that as well. Honestly, this topic could take a whole sermon series in itself. Kevin preached about it a couple of weeks ago from Psalms 42 and 43.

So I can't do it justice in just this short section of the sermon. But I do think, partly, the psalm would encourage us to try and give thanks, sorry, to give thanks that Jesus rose from the dead and has ultimately delivered us even in those really hard times.

The big deliverance that changes everything has already happened even if we don't experience it fully now. I'm sure there were actually people in Israel at the time who were suffering greatly. Bereavement, sickness, yet the king encourages them to join with him in celebrating their deliverance which towers over all of that.

[20 : 45] We do also know from scripture that God has given us the Holy Spirit to help us. We do know he is gentle to not break us. We don't have to try harder or just grin and bear it.

He has initiated with us. Come to us. He is present right here with us in this moment. He is for us, guiding us, helping us, leading us.

He is declaring the truths of his gospel to us by the power of his Holy Spirit, allowing us to give thanks in the midst of hardship. Thirdly, with respect to our prayer lives, I think there is actually an exuberance and a joy in the thanksgiving that we see in the psalm that is quite unique.

It's wonderfully unique to the psalms, in fact. We can learn from it. I mean, just look at some of the verses from the psalm. The king and his people are overjoyed. And here's an interesting point, I think.

In the same way the king is thankful to God for his deliverance over enemies, I believe Christ was thankful to God for his own deliverance over death as well.

[21 : 55] To be clear, we have no record of Jesus' words as he came out of the tomb. That's true. But if we're right to read the psalm, the king and the psalm, as a type of Jesus figure, and the kind of suffering he went through as foreshadowing Jesus on the cross, then I think we can assume that the king's great joy and thankfulness at being delivered will also affect how Jesus must have felt when he came out of the tomb.

Why would the first half of the psalm point to the cross, but the second half have nothing to do with the resurrection? Jesus fully submitted himself to humanness.

He was fully human. He trusted his father as he physically died. That his father would raise him three days later.

And for three days he was fully separated from God. Fully separated from God. In the depths of hell, powerless to save himself. Can you imagine how Jesus felt when God actually raised him three days later?

Yes, he trusted God. But when the stone was rolled away and he stepped out into the day, can you imagine how he felt? He must have felt unbelievable.

[23 : 17] God, you did it. That is amazing. Praise be to you alone. Can we have this same reaction about our salvation? In a small way.

I think recently of the football world cup winners. Just unbridled joy and ecstasy for the team themselves, for their fans, their people.

And for us, it is not a one-off every four years. It can be every single day. How joyful and exuberant are we about our own salvation and deliverance when we pray?

Fourthly and lastly, with respect to our prayer, are we praying and worshipping together? Not just on Sundays, but during the week as well, as a regular pattern of life.

Here we see the Jewish people praying and giving thanks together. We do have corporate prayer once a month and we should do that where we can do that. That's an obvious one.

[24 : 17] But it doesn't have to be just that. It can be CG, it can be smaller groups, husbands, fathers. Are you leading and encouraging your families in doing the same out of thanksgiving to God for what he has done for you?

This is something I myself was really challenged about when preparing for this sermon. I don't think I do this very well at all. But if it is something we see of Jesus, then it is likely something we should try and replicate in our own life.

Just think about when someone shares a powerful testimony of what God has done in their life, like Simon did earlier today, delivering them from some sin or some difficult situation. It builds our own faith.

It builds our own love for God. It gives us courage to bring our own distress before God, to pray with confidence, not to pray and not fear, as the king and the psalm himself did.

There is communal thanksgiving for what God has done for the individual. Baptisms also probably provide the best picture of this idea.

[25 : 21] When we go up these days to the rooftop, we are communally overjoyed at what God has done for the person being baptized. I actually think it's probably like when we are all the happiest, right, together as a group.

And so we should be. That is the kind of picture we see here. A huge celebration together at how God has delivered us. We should give thanks together more often.

So let's try and get really practical now. Let's try and look at an example prayer and try and put this all together. Let's see how this goes.

Imagine someone who is going through a really difficult time at work. I know, I know, predictable example in Hong Kong, but it's something I assume many of us are dealing with right now.

Our usual prayer may sound something like this. Dear God, work has been really difficult lately. My workload is increasing.

[26 : 24] My manager doesn't seem to appreciate the extra effort I'm putting in. I'm worried about my future at the company. Please provide some relief from the workload. Please provide some wisdom to navigate things.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Honestly, it's not a wrong prayer. I'm not saying it's a bad prayer. It expresses a dependency on God. It brings our request to Him as we should.

It's not bad. But what if we try and apply some of the truths from Psalm 18 in this example as well? Thankfulness. How might our prayer change a little bit?

Well, let's see. Dear God, thank you for you are good. Your steadfast love for me endures forever. Thank you that through Jesus Christ you have already given me the greatest gift I could ever receive.

whatever happens in my life cannot take that away. But work has been really difficult for me lately. I need help. Please provide opportunities for relief and to work well.

[27 : 34] Give me wisdom and patience and integrity. Love for those I work with. Help me to be thankful here in spite of the difficulties and the painfulness of the situation even if it remains.

And may my joy be not found in success at work but in belonging to Jesus. Thank you for you are good and your steadfast love endures forever. In Jesus' name.

Amen. I know it's kind of cheating I've just added like a lot more words to the prayer and you know quoted from the psalm etc. I get it, I get it, I get it. Alright? But do we see the difference?

Our greatest deliverance has already been accomplished which doesn't remove our daily needs but it does change the heart the focus the practical words of our prayers to be more focused on deliverance versus our practical needs.

I think it's something we'll be able to try later on as we get together in groups and pray. So let's come into close. If you are a Christian today may the words of this psalm encourage all of us to follow Jesus in his example of giving thanks and praise to God for though hardship will come God has and will deliver us.

[28 : 57] If you are not a Christian today please take this as an opportunity to consider the person of Jesus for yourself what the Bible has had to say today about who he is and what he did.

What he has done for you through his death and resurrection is what you need most deliverance from the eternal consequences of your sin which is death and an eternal relationship with God in its place.

This is a gift freely given to you if you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Please consider doing that today. Don't let another day go without doing that.

I'd love to chat with you about it after the service as well. Let me finish in a quick prayer and then we will pray together. Father, thank you for these words.

I pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit you may have removed me and anything that was from me or of the world from this sermon and brought Jesus to the forefront.

[30 : 12] Brought the beauty of the gospel and the deliverance from sin and death that we have experienced in Jesus. May your name be glorified. Thank you God for you are so good to us.

your steadfast love endures forever before now and in the future as well. In Jesus' wonderful name I pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.