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Psalm 118

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Psalm 118

(RSV)

Introduction to Psalm 118

Psalms 113-118 are a grouping of Psalms known collectively as the "Egyptian Hallel" Psalms, so called because of the mention of the Exodus from Egypt in Psalm 114:1. These psalms were used at the annual Jewish festival of the Passover because the Passover was the yearly commemoration of that great deliverance. Psalms 113-114 were sung before the Passover meal, while Psalms 115-118 were sung after the meal, as also Jesus did according to Mark 14:26.

Psalm 118 is a psalm in which a royal descendant of David offers thanksgiving for victory over his enemies. The victory celebration which takes the form of a triumphal procession from the tents on the field of battle (verse 15) through the gates of the city of Jerusalem (verses 19-20) up to the altar of God in the Temple (verse 27). Against such a background it is quite easy to see how appropriate this Psalm is for use at Easter. The Resurrected Jesus emerges from the tomb as the victorious Lord over the enemies of God: Satan and Sin and Death. And "in Him" we too participate in that final victory.

The Lectionary of Lutheran Worship and Lutheran Book of Worship selects verses 1-2, 15-24 for its liturgical purposes; the Revised Common Lectionary selects verses 1-2, 14-24. In what follows I have considered the entire Psalm.

V. 1

**¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!**

This is a familiar basic all-purpose thanksgiving. The LORD is Yahweh, the God who entered into covenant with Israel. His steadfast love (mercy) is the promised faithfulness he pledged in his covenant with Abraham: I will be your God, and you shall be my people. That steadfast love, the Psalmist rejoices and confesses, endures forever.

Vv. 2-4

**² Let Israel say,
"His steadfast love endures for ever."
³ Let the house of Aaron say,
"His steadfast love endures for ever."
⁴ Let those who fear the LORD say,
"His steadfast love endures for ever."**

The call to "Israel" is a call to the whole people of God. The appeal to the "house of Aaron" is a special call to the priests. And the invitation to "all those who fear the LORD" is a universal call to all those who have learned to fear and worship the LORD, even if they are not Israelites.

Vv. 5-9

- ⁵ Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
the LORD answered me and set me free.**
- ⁶ With the LORD on my side I do not fear.
What can man do to me?**
- ⁷ The LORD is on my side to help me;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.**
- ⁸ It is better to take refuge (seek protection and safety) in the LORD
than to put confidence in (depend upon) man (any human being).**
- ⁹ It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes (powerful and influential human beings).**

The Psalmist looks back upon a victory that the LORD has given him (verse 5), upon a triumph over those who hate him (verse 7). Out of this experience he has learned what he now celebrates publicly. He has learned:

- 1) that the LORD hears when we call in distress,
- 2) that He answers us,
- 3) that He removes all need to fear, and
- 4) that He brings us into freedom.

As we pray Psalm 118, it is especially important that we stay focussed, not only upon the royal son (descendent) of David, but also upon Jesus Christ because of who he is. Jesus is the Royal Son (Descendant) of David. Just as in the Old Testament the king was a symbol for all the People of God, so Jesus is the embodiment of the whole People of God; he is Israel, as it were, reduced to one. Jesus is therefore our Mediator, who makes us his own in the Body of Christ, and thereby makes us truly God's People. The Davidic king of the Psalm is a (proto)type of Jesus who struggles in his warfare against all those who have come to hate him, who seek to do him harm, and who even seek his life. In his distress Jesus calls upon the LORD, his Father, for example in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46).

We are "in Christ," and because we are in Christ we find here a classical expression also of our need for Refuge in the LORD. There is blessing in relying completely, and solely, upon the LORD. The person who prays this Psalm in his/her own distress (even if it be simply a "minor" annoyance) begins to learn something; s/he begins to learn that God frees us from our fears (verse 6). The threat from without, whether it be from ill health or from an uncertain future or from people who are in fact hostile to us, is always so much more debilitating because of the fears they generate within. The great enemy of faith in the LORD is being fearful of something merely human. We are fearful that the LORD may be powerless to help. Or we are fearful that, though He may be powerful, God has lost His compassion for us. The covenant promise of the LORD, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is that His steadfast love, His mercy, endures forever. You can always rely on that!

Vv. 10-12

- ¹⁰ All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!**

- 11 They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!**
- 12 They surrounded me like bees,
they blazed like a fire of thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!**

The Psalmist is surrounded in battle, on every side, like a swarm of buzzing bees, by "all nations." When he uses the expression "all nations" he is not thinking globally, as Jesus is when he uses the expression in Matthew 28:19. The Psalmist's enemies are the surrounding hostile kingdoms in the area; that is the political dimension of his situation. However there is also a religious dimension. Those who surround him are not "People of God," who worship Yahweh; they are the "Goyim," who worship other gods. Thus there is for David and for his descendants a double reason for suspicion, or even hostility.

We need to remember that there were, and indeed *are* those times when the Goyim are not at war with the People of God. Simply because there are neighboring people who are "not God's People" is not necessarily a reason for warfare between them and God's People. Nor is every friction between the People of God and the Goyim attributable to the "obvious righteousness" of the People of God and the "terrible unrighteousness" of those who are not; conflicts between them will participate in the messiness of human life generally. When the Psalms so repeatedly, as here, speak of the battle between the Goyim and the anointed son of David, we need to assume that what is at stake is "the Name of the LORD." Thus, the hostile crowd around Jesus in his Passion, the hostile leaders of the Jews, the hostile attacks of Satan -- these are enemies for The Royal Son of David, because what was at stake was the lengthening Name of the LORD. The LORD is Yahweh, who reveals his Name as I AM WHO I AM: I AM the Creator God, I AM the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, I AM the God who has entered into an unbreakable Covenant of Promise with His People, I AM the God whose promised Kingdom is coming, I AM the God whose Kingdom is now incarnated in Jesus, I AM the God who put Jesus to death and raised him up again on the third day.

The royal son of David cuts off the hostile enemies "in the Name of the LORD." That means that he acts as the representative of the LORD or that he acts with the power he had received from the LORD. Or better yet, both!

In the context of military activity, the verb "cut off" probably means "to destroy utterly." However, in every other instance of its use in the Old Testament this verb means, "to circumcise." Circumcision of the males was the outward sign of belonging to the People of God. That leads to some interesting possibilities for interpreting this passage:

1. 1 Samuel 18:25-27 shows David "cutting off" in both senses.
2. About 128 B.C. John Hyrcanus, the Jewish ruler and military leader from 134-105 B.C., compelled Gentile Idumeans to accept circumcision and thereby forced them to become, at least externally, members of the Jewish people. He did this to punish the Idumeans for attacking Jewish territory to the south and in hopes of preventing another such attack. Here is an instance in which the enemies were not "cut off" or destroyed in any military sense, but they were superficially added to the people of God.

3. Christ does battle against his enemies in order that he might win them over and add them to the ranks of the People of God, not simply externally as John Hyrcanus did, but in truth. "In the Name of the LORD," on the Cross, Jesus destroys all opposition, seeking to circumcise them with the circumcision not made with hands, but with what St. Paul calls the circumcision of Christ (Colossians 2:11). The circumcision of Christ is not really a physical circumcision at all. Paul uses the term "the circumcision of Christ" because, just as male circumcision was the rite of initiation into the People of God in the Old Testament, so now Holy Baptism is the new rite of initiation into the New People of God. The New Testament rite moreover has the additional advantage that it is applied to both males and females. With baptism into Christ there is no longer male and female (Galatians 3:27-28).

So then, when we New Testament Christians pray the Psalms, we need to think of "baptism" where the Psalms refer to "circumcision." Just as here in the Psalm, to "cut off" means *both* to defeat *and* to administer circumcision as the rite of initiation, so also when we pray this Psalm we may think of Christ on the cross where he *both* defeats his enemies *and* creates the new baptismal rite of initiation.

This makes it possible for Christians to pray these verses in such a way that the same instrument of God in fighting against and destroying all opposition, namely, the Cross, is simultaneously the means of their salvation. So when we pray this Psalm, we may think something like this: "Cut them off (defeat them), dear Lord Jesus, as those who oppose you, and cut them off (circumcise >> baptize them), dear Lord Jesus, and make them your own.

Vv. 13-14

¹³ (RSV: I was pushed hard)

(Hebrew: ***You pushed me hard***),

so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me.

¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my song;

he has become my salvation.

Most all the versions translate verse 13a as the Revised Standard Version does, despite the fact that that is not quite what the underlying Hebrew is saying. The Hebrew says, "You pushed me hard." The RSV translation is a way of trying to make sense of the verse: I was being pushed around by my enemies, but the LORD helped me.

Another way some translations try to make sense of the verse is to translate the Hebrew exactly, and take the "you" to be referring to the enemy, so that it would read, "You, my enemy, pushed me hard, but the LORD helped me."

But maybe in some deep sense we should take the "you" in the grammatically obvious way, even though that makes it theologically more difficult. "You, O LORD, are the one behind the enemy who is pushing me so hard, even as you, O LORD, are also the one who is helping me." That would be exactly what we are dealing with in the death of Jesus. God put Jesus to death (Romans 3:25) and Jesus seems to know it (Matthew 27:46); but the same God is also the one

who saves Jesus by raising him from the dead (Romans 6:4). Christians know in their believing bones that, when circumstances turn against us, we need to deal with God, who, if He does not send the catastrophe, at least allows it. And faith says, "The LORD will also become my salvation."

Vv. 15-16

15 Hark, glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous (the military camp of the People of God):

"The right hand of the LORD does valiantly (wins the victory),

16 the right hand of the LORD is exalted (raised aloft in a gesture of triumph),
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!"

The Lectionary selection, having begun with verses 1-2, continues now with verses 15-24 for the Easter celebration. In these verses we may think of ourselves in the victory procession of Christ, who celebrates his triumph over the enemies of God and man in the company of all the saints and angels.

The right hand of the LORD is a standard image of the power of Yahweh over those who oppose Him in His plans for His People (see Exodus 15:6).

Vv. 17-18

**17 I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.**

**18 The LORD has chastened me sorely,
but he has not given me over to death.**

Here we need to recall the multiple layers of the Psalm:

1. We need to think of the original royal son of David, who had fought a hard battle and eventually defeated the enemies in the Name of the LORD.

2. We need to think of Jesus, who in his death entrusted himself into the hands of the heavenly Father and in his resurrection revealed that death does not have the last word.

3. We need to think also of those of us who are among the People of God in Christ, who trust the same God, now the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who raises us with His Son.

To "recount the deeds of the LORD" is the life-purpose of those whom the LORD has rescued from sin and death. That is also fundamentally what the Bible does; it recounts the deeds of the LORD, Yahweh, the I AM.

Vv. 19-21

**19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.**

**20 This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.**

**21 I thank thee that thou hast answered me
and hast become my salvation.**

In the triumphal procession from the field of battle, these verses may reflect a ceremony at the gates of the Temple, where the victorious king asks admission (verse 19). "The gates of righteousness" are the gates through which only the righteous may enter. In the ceremony of the gate, a gatekeeper then announces (verse 20) that this is the gate of the LORD, through which the righteous (namely, the victorious king) shall enter. In verse 21 the king then offers the promised thanksgiving.

Again the multiple layers must be observed:

- 1) the original victorious king;
- 2) the victorious Jesus of Easter, entering the heavenly Temple;
- 3) all those who in Christ are a part of Jesus' triumphal procession.

V. 22

**²² "The stone which the builders rejected
has become the head of the corner."**

This image is drawn from a construction project, and it seems out of place in the present context of victory in warfare. Therefore many commentators regard this saying as a proverb that was available back then and applied to the king, who to all appearances seemed to be going down in defeat but --surprisingly -- rallied to win.

In later Judaism this proverb was then applied also to the coming Davidic Messiah; and that is the way the early Christians understood it (see the quotations in Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7; the quotations of Psalm 118:22-23 in Matthew 21:42 and Mark 12:10-11; and the allusion in Ephesians 2:20). The meaning when applied to Jesus is that, though human beings rejected Jesus, God -- surprise of all surprises -- raised him up to be the "head of the corner." This stone was of greatest importance, because it set the lines for the foundation of a building.

V. 23

**²³ This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.**

Such an unexpected turn of events as the victory of the son of David, or as *the* victory of *the* Son of David, the Messiah, can be understood only as Yahweh's marvelous deed.

Vv. 24-25

**²⁴ This is the day which the LORD has made (the day on which the LORD has acted);
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
²⁵ Save us, we beseech thee, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech thee, give us success!**

In the original setting these verses may have been a kind of chorale anthem.

Part of verses 25a-26 are alluded to in Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:9-10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13. The Hebrew phrase in verse 25a, "Save, we beseech," is transliterated in the Greek text of the New

Testament by "*osanna*." This appears in many translations of the New Testament as the acclamation of praise, "Hosanna!" Thus, the triumphal procession of the original son of David is seen in the New Testament as the (proto)type of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the answer to our Hosanna-prayer.

V. 26

**²⁶ Blessed be he who enters in the name of the LORD!
We bless you (plural: you-all!) from the house of the LORD.**

In the original setting, perhaps a priest from within the Temple pronounces as blessing upon the royal son of David, who enters in the Name of the LORD, as Yahweh's representative, as the one who is victorious by the power of Yahweh. The blessing upon the king extends then also to all who are a part of his procession. Hence, the words of verse 26a are appropriately used also of all those who appear at the altar for the Lord's Supper in the Eucharistic liturgy.

V. 27

**²⁷ The LORD is God, and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar!**

Yahweh, and no other, is God. It is He who has given us light, that is, success in battle and prosperity.

The LW gives us a good interpretive translation of verse 27b: **with boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns (corners) of the altar.**

Vv. 28-29

**²⁸ Thou art my God, and I will give thanks to thee;
thou art my God, I will extol thee.
²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever!**

With verse 29 the Psalm achieves closure, ending with the same words with which it began.

The LBW Prayer to accompany Psalm 118:

Lord God, your Son, rejected by the builders, has become the cornerstone of the Church. Shed rays of your glory upon your Church, that it may be seen as the gate of salvation open to all nations. Let cries of joy and exultation ring out from its courts to celebrate the wonder of Christ's resurrection, now and forever. Amen.

Nugget

O Lord, my God,
 Light of the blind and strength of the weak,
 yea, also Light of those who see and Strength of those who are strong:
hearken unto my soul, and hear it crying out of the depths.

O Lord, help us to turn and seek Thee,
 for Thou hast not forsaken Thy creatures as we have forsaken Thee, our Creator.
Let us turn and seek Thee,
 for Thou art here in our hearts,
 when we confess to Thee,
 when we cast ourselves upon Thee, and weep in Thy bosom, after all our rugged ways,
 when Thou does gently wipe away our tears, and we weep all the more for joy,
 because Thou, Lord, who madest us, does remake and comfort us.

Hear, Lord, my prayer,
 and grant that I may most entirely love Thee;
and do Thou rescue me, O Lord, from every temptation, even unto the end. Amen.

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354 – 430)

Walter E. Keller

April 4, 1999 – **The Resurrection of Our Lord, Easter Sunday**