

October 11, 2009
“Join the Festal Procession”
Psalm 118
Pastor Ron Harris

Sometimes as a Pastor we carry concerns and burdens of our people. As parents we often worry for our children's vulnerability. As friends we often share in the travail and anguish of a friend. A few years ago while driving to make a visit I suddenly realized the downcast appearance of my countenance and was deeply convicted of my lack of faith and lack of the joy of the Lord. I realized that anyone observing me would not see the faith, hope, and love of Christ I wanted to share. I determined to 'lighten up!' and not to act like someone who carried the burdens of the world. I didn't have the answers anyways. While I want to do all I can for others, **my focus should be on thanking God** that I can trust the world with him. I'm still working on living life as praise to the Lord! Today's scripture invites us to see the journey of life as a joyful procession!

This Psalm is the last of the Egyptian Hallel, or praise psalms. The Hallel psalms are found in three separate collections: the "Egyptian Hallel" (113-118), the "Great Hallel" (120-136), and the concluding Hallel psalms (146-150). The Hallel psalms had a significant part in the "praise" (Heb. *hallel*;) of the Lord. The Egyptian Hallel and the Great Hallel were sung during the annual feasts (Lev 23; Nu 10:10). The Egyptian Hallel psalms received a special place in the Passover liturgy, as 113-114 were recited or sung before and 115-118 after the festive meal (cf. Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). (The concluding Hallel psalms (146-150) were incorporated in the daily prayers in the synagogue after the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70).)

Tying the Psalm together, in the first and last verse is thanksgiving to God; ^{Ps 118:1, 29} ***Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.*** The Psalm is wrapped in Thanksgiving! At the climax of the Psalm is the invitation ***“with boughs in hand, join the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.”***

1. Realizing strength for Life. The horns on the altar are symbols of strength. The horns on the altar also represent a place of refuge. When Solomon gained David's blessing as his successor his older brother who had presumed he would be king fled to the altar for safety. ^{1Ki 1:50} ***But Adonijah, in fear of Solomon, went and took hold of the horns of the altar. Taking hold of the horns on the altar*** indicate recognition of weakness, of guilt, even of desperation. Here in Psalm 118 The worshiper thanks the Lord because the Lord has heard his cry of "anguish." He was without perspective and in dire straits, but the Lord answered him by "setting him free." ^{Ps 118:5} ***In my anguish I cried to the LORD, and he answered by setting me free.*** ^{Ps 118:6} ***The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*** The psalmist knew that the Lord was with him in all circumstances of life and based on that conviction he was not afraid of troubles caused by his fellow human beings. ^{Ps 118:8} ***It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.*** ^{Ps 118:9} ***It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.*** In a song of celebration, the individual worshiper confesses his confidence in the Lord. ^{Ps 118:14} ***The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.***

The Lord did not keep trouble from him but rather knowing and affirming the presence of the Lord, even in the face of opposition, has brought him through the adversity. He is stronger in faith as a result. I'm sure many of you can join the worshipper in this Psalm in proclaiming the Lord who brings us through. It is good to have a day to pause and remember, to celebrate.

When I am facing adversity, the pain becomes my focus yet when I am through the travail I seldom take time to thank the Lord. In fact I have a hard time even remembering all I have been through this past year. I tend just to move from one crisis to the next. **Pausing to remember, to thank, strengthens us for the next challenge,** keeps us in perspective, and helps us persevere the next time.

Pausing to remember keeps us in touch with our human limitations, keeps us humble and points us to the Savior. *Ps 118:22* **The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;** The capstone was an important stone that held two rows of stones together in a corner ("cornerstone") or stabilized the stones at the foundation. The Lord who knew rejection became the capstone, the Lord holds the world together. **Jesus speaks of himself as the capstone;** *Mt 21:42* **Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: " 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes' ? ...⁴⁴ He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."** Peter in his sermon given in Acts 4:12 repeats this reference; *'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.'*¹² **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.** And in 1st Peter this teaching is summed up for us; *1Pe 2:4* **As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.⁶ For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,"⁸ and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."**

Have we come to Christ that living Stone? This stone, this refuge, this shelter, this one is precious. To the Hebrew mind a stone was not simply a symbol of shelter or of secure foundation but it was also a symbol of forgiveness. Boiling a stone in a pot could cleanse or make the pot 'kosher,' the stone absorbing the impurities. So Christ took our sin upon himself. Do we find strength by living in the grace of Christ? Even recognizing our weakness we can say with the Psalmist *Ps 118:23* **the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.** (Larry's poem.) *Ps 118:24* **This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.** No wonder Nehemiah (8:10) confessed; *This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

2. Realizing direction in life. *Ps 118:19* **Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.** *Ps 118:20* **This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter.** *Ps 118:21* **I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.** Here is the open gate is before us. Because of Christ's forgiveness and our forgiveness for those who trespass against us, it is a gate of right relationships, of righteousness. Here we have a freedom we need to celebrate each day of our lives. **In Christ we have a new way of life, whose foundation is giving thanks.** Again the NT affirms this truth. *1Th 5:16* **Be joyful always;** *1Th 5:17* **pray continually;** *1Th 5:18* **give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** Scripture says; here is the way to live, the open gate before us in Christ Jesus. It is the way of joy, of prayer, of thanksgiving. *Eph 5:19,20* **Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.** *Col 3:17* **And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.** This new way of life is to practice the joy of the Lord in the midst of the challenges of life. This is not easy or a given, it takes courage, it takes faith! A skeptic shares this wisdom; *Ecc 2:24,25* **A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction**

in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? Giving thanks is the key to meaningful life. For 2 years in the last 10 I made a thankful heart my New Year's resolution. It was rewarding. You would think it would become habit, yet once again I need to focus on gratitude. *Phil 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

3. Realizing support for life. The psalm exhibits features of both *communal* and *individual thanksgiving*. The individual thanksgiving is the personal cry of anguish of the worshipper which he shares with the whole congregation. While the Psalm reflects on a personal challenge, perhaps of a king or priest as worship leader, it celebrates his salvation in a **communal procession**, the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. Passover is the annual celebration of the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. In fact our communion celebrations are a reinterpretation of the traditional Passover Meal (it was Jesus Himself who took the Passover meal and explained that He had come to offer us complete and everlasting deliverance). Every year – for thousands of years now – Jewish people retell the story of Passover – to remember, be thankful, and stay faithful. It is wise to remember the lessons of the past; it is foolish to forget them. **We give thanks as a community.** Our life in Christ is based on being in a community, his body, the church.

So this Psalm is not just about me. **Life and salvation is to be shared and in celebration with others we find support and joy.** Our culture is far too much about me and we often interpret scripture with this blindness. As a result we lose the strength and joy that come from living in community. The Lord really impressed this on me in India last winter. When you read your Bible and sing praise songs sing as a representative of the whole body of Christ. Our singing and confessing and glorifying should not simply be about us! Internet surfing and games can isolate us from meaningful relationships and we are weaker for it. Living in Christ on the other hand is living in community, is sharing struggles and faith with others. I do not think it is by accident that today, even at church we seek friendships, interaction over a cup of coffee more than ever before. God has placed in us a hunger for others.

I never tire of sharing this vision God gave me some years ago of the church on a Sunday morning. In the vision the sun is rising over the world and as the world turns and light reaches the different continents, the voices of believers raise in praise to God. It begins in the east; Philippines, Japan, China, Burma, India, Africa, Middle East, Europe and finally we get to join our voices in the Americas. Praise in many languages, a growing number of voices, we long for the day when *at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, Phil 2:11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* Each Sunday we experience a foretaste of this wonderful day! In a similar way I love trying to join in John's vision; *Rev 7:9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. Rev 7:10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."*

"with boughs in hand, join the festal procession up to the horns of the altar." What a strength we have together in the Spirit. What a journey of faith we have the privilege of joining! What a family to belong to! *2Co 2:14 thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.* In Christ we have the privilege of joining in the festal procession of thanksgiving and praise to our God! *Ps 118:29 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.*