

O Give Thanks to the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of July 1999. The preacher is Gavin Ward.

His sermon is entitled, O Give Thanks to the Lord, Psalm 118. Today by looking at Psalm 118.

It's on page 492 of the Pew Bibles if you'd like to follow. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His steadfast love endures forever.

This psalm is part of a series of psalms from 113 to 118, known as the Egyptian Hallel. And it was used, probably written prior to the exile in Babylon of the Israelites and it was used on many festive occasions in Jewish history.

It was used at the Feast of the Tabernacles or during Passover or during the ritual humiliation and victory of a king or even to celebrate a military victory.

[1 : 1 1] But it was used on a number of occasions when the Jews wanted to give thanks to God for victories won or for what he'd done for them. A lot of the psalm is in the first person.

It's a lot of I. And it's actually being led by somebody, a king or a priest, someone who's leading worship and encouraging others. So it's on behalf of a group of people, on behalf of the people, even though it's in the first person.

And it has a sense of a procession and we'll discover that later on in the psalm as we get through it. A sense of a procession leading people to a procession perhaps up to the temple where great celebration takes place.

And we'll discover that as we move on to the psalm. It's in three parts, this psalm essentially. There's an immediate bit of call to worship. There's a part of the psalm which is the salvation that God has won for his people.

And then there's the great celebration and thanksgiving at the end. And we'll look at each of those three parts together now. The first part is the call to worship and it's in verses 1 to 4 of the psalm.

[2 : 2 0] And it's similar call to worship in other psalms as well, 106 and Psalm 136. Jeremiah even records it as well. And the psalm is bracketed by verse 1 and verse 29.

As Janelle read it out, you probably would have seen that, that verse 1 is the same as verse 29. And this gives us the purpose of the psalm. I give thanks to the Lord for he is good.

His steadfast love endures forever. It's an exhortation to give thanks to our God because he is good.

And the thanks is being given to the Lord. The word Lord, the name of the Lord, is mentioned 27 times in this psalm, 27 times in 29 verses. He is the focus.

He is the one that we're giving thanks to. And the thanks is given to him. Why? Because he is good and because his steadfast love endures forever.

[3 : 2 1] God's love is not just when he feels like giving his love. It's not just today. It's not just this week. It's not just for those in the past. It's not just for those in the future.

God's steadfast love is forever, endures forever, for all time. And it's repeated four times in those four verses to emphasise the fact that God's steadfast love endures forever.

There's a call there to worship of all Israel. Let Israel say, let the house of Aaron, the priests say, let those who fear the Lord say. It's saying that those who've understood the salvation that God has brought for them, let them claim and proclaim that his steadfast love endures forever.

The next major portion of the psalm is from verses 5 to 18. And it talks about the salvation that God has brought about to these people on whatever occasion that this psalm is being used for.

And there's three reasons why these people are giving thanks to God and three reasons why we can too. The first is that the Lord is on his side, on the writer of the psalm's side.

[4 : 36] And we see that in the first few verses there. See that in verse 6. The Lord is on my side. Why? Because in verse 5, out of my distress, I called on the name of the Lord.

That's when, I should say that's when, the person, when the Lord is on their side because it's out of distress. Now, one way that this psalm was used is during the Passover.

And that celebrated, of course, as we know, the great event of Exodus. Where the Israelites were led out of Egypt, out of captivity in Egypt. And if we focus on that part of it this morning, out of their distress, they called on the name of the Lord.

The Israelites were in bondage to the Egyptians. They were being tortured. They were being battered. They were in slavery. They were completely oppressed. All looked hopeless for them.

And out of their distress, they called on the name of the Lord. And what happened, the Lord answered them and set them in a broad place. In other words, set them free.

[5 : 40] Gave them a road to salvation, freedom, set a way of free for them. And we read that the Lord, and we know that because of Moses being raised up to lead the people out of Egypt.

And the Lord is on their side. And it's repeated here twice. The Lord is on my side. The Lord is on my side. Verses 6 and verse 7. And when the Lord is on their side, they have no fear.

No fear of mortals. What can mortals do to harm them? The Lord will give them ultimate triumph. What can mortals do to harm us when the Lord is on our side?

Stephen knew this. When Stephen, if you recall, in Acts chapter 7, Stephen was being stoned to death. And at the end of Acts 7, as it records that, just before Stephen died, he looked up and he had a vision.

And he had a vision of the Son of Man seated on the right hand of God. And he knew that the mortals who were trying to stone him, who were ultimately going to kill him very shortly, could not harm him.

[6 : 44] Because his vision was of God and the Son of Man, God. And in fact, he prayed to God and he said, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

Those who were stoning him, similar to what Jesus said on the cross, isn't it? And so Stephen is saying that the ultimate triumph is with God and over the enemies.

Mortals cannot harm us. And this is elaborated on in verses 8 and 9. It's better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. That's repeated again.

It's better to take refuge in the Lord, another emphasis coming through, than to put confidence in princes. In the past, in the Old Testament, we read about kings.

King Ahaz, for example, who tried to put confidence in princes. He tried to set up alliances with other countries around him to try to, and he put his confidence in those, ultimately to his peril.

[7 : 44] And ultimately, it brought Judah into captivity in Babylon as we read on. Sometimes today, we can do the same things. We can put confidence, not in God, and replace our confidence with God and put our confidence in others.

I'm sure, how would you feel if you were a sheep farmer at the moment and you'd put all your confidence in the trade with the United States and all of a sudden, the rug seems to have been pulled out from underneath your feet a bit?

And I'm sure John Howard will have something to say about that when he meets Bill Clinton on Tuesday. How would you feel if you'd lost money, and maybe some of you did, in the stock market crash of the 1980s?

I was talking to someone during the week who'd borrowed \$10,000 on their bank card and had bought money in the New York Stock Exchange only a week or so before it crashed and lost the lot.

Putting confidence in mortals, putting confidence in things of this earth rather than confidence in taking refuge in the Lord. Closer to home, friends can let us down.

[8 : 58] We can put a lot, too much confidence and reliance and friends can let us down. Even friends in the church can let us down. We can be disappointed by people's attitudes, even here at Holy Trinity perhaps.

Over 2,000 years church leaders have been letting people down. Popes and bishops throughout the ages, throughout the church age have been letting people down. In more modern times tele-evangelists from America have let people down.

And even within our own diocese here in Melbourne church splits take place letting people down and people get disappointed by that. We need to have our focus on God.

We need to have our focus on Jesus because he will not let us down. We need to trust him and not others. When push comes to shove, when we're at our wits end, God is there and does not let us down.

He provides a firm foundation for us to plant our feet firmly on in times of distress. We need to put our refuge in God.

[10 : 12] And when we do that and when some of you have done that and you'll be able to reflect on that and know that when times of real trouble have arrived you've put your firm foundation in God.

you can celebrate because you know and you can give him thanks because you know that you have been standing on a firm foundation. And it's a great time for celebration and we can give thanks to the Lord because we know that his steadfast love endures forever.

The second reason for giving thanks appears in verses 10 to 14 and the victory here, the giving thanks is because the victory appears in the name of the Lord.

The victory occurs in the name of the Lord. Now all nations surrounding me could be a literal thing if it's a victory of a king and he may be feeling all the nations around him or it could be metaphorical language and we're not sure and it could have been used either way the way this psalm was used by the Jews but the key here is the word surrounded me.

It appears regularly throughout there four times all nations surrounded me, they surrounded me, they surrounded me. In verse 12 it talks about they surrounded me like bees, you can imagine just the overwhelming feeling of feeling completely overwhelmed and it's like bees buzzing around their head and I mean they're just coming from all angles and we don't know how to stop them and try to fight them off.

[11 : 38] That's the sort of sense that's being expressed here. Everything surrounded me. I was at my lowest ebb and it all surrounded me. when we go back and think about what happened at the Exodus event when the Jews had escaped out of Egypt and Moses was leading them and they got to the Red Sea all they faced was water and behind them came the Egyptians and their chariots and their warriors and they would have felt surrounded and oppressed and overwhelmed and hopeless and where are we going to go to from here?

What's going to happen? victory occurs in the name of the Lord. The victory is God's and it talks there about they blazed like a fire of thorns.

If you've lit a match and lit up a thorn bush it just disintegrates it just explodes and disintegrates very quickly. Thorn bushes burn very quickly. That's the sense here that it went up quickly in smoke it fried it disintegrated it shriveled up very quickly and as we know from the Exodus event God parted the waters and the Israelites went through and then as the Egyptian army charged in after them the waters flooded over them and they were extinguished like that very quickly shriveled up and extinguished.

That's the victory that appears that occurs here in the name of the Lord. And verse 14 the Lord is my strength and my might he has become my salvation is a quote from Exodus 15 the victory song that Moses sang at the Red Sea when that great salvation had been won for the Israelites.

And the third reason that we see that there's a reason for giving thanks is that victory was achieved through the right hand of the Lord verses 15 to 18 there are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous everyone's celebrating where God's people dwell in the tents of the righteous people are celebrating because the victory victory that has been achieved and the victory is achieved by the Lord's right hand once again it's mentioned three times for emphasis by the Lord's right hand the right hand of God is a hand of power we saw that in Stephen's vision that I mentioned earlier in Acts chapter 7 he saw the son of man sitting on the right hand of God and throughout the Bible as it refers to the Exodus events both in Deuteronomy and Joshua and in Exodus it talks about victory was given by God's mighty hand and others in the Bible Isaiah 59 and John 10 and 1 Peter also talk about our salvation our salvation has been won through God's mighty right hand through his right hand it's God's right hand that brings victory and salvation for us so three reasons to give thanks to God because the Lord is on his side because victory is in the name of the Lord and because victory is achieved through God's mighty right hand great reasons to celebrate and everyone gives thanks and we'll move on to that in a moment we have victories in our own lives too both big and small we have blessings we receive from God we have victories over areas of our life where we need victories attitudes to people some sin in our life that we just can't seem to get rid of and yet when we lay it before God he gives us a victory over that area of our life and we have great reason individually each of us to celebrate we've started a little institution at home if you like and it's been going for quite a while now in the evenings when we put the children to bed

[15 : 32] Emily and Graeme to bed to be in my role as it has been for a number of years to sit on the bedside with them and we pray and part of what we do is we reflect upon the day that we've just had and so with Emily and Graeme each of us and myself each of us we pray and we give thanks to God for things that have happened throughout the day small things and big things notwithstanding that we give God the glory and the thanks for the day that has taken place and so Emily and Graeme come up with all sorts of things that have happened throughout the day for them giving thanks to God for what takes place and that's a special time for us every day is a blessing from God every day that we have is a real blessing from Him we have much to give thanks to God for for the blessings that He gives us for the victories that we achieve that He achieves for us in our lives the final part of the psalm verses 19 onwards is the great celebration and I'd just like to pick out three things just to note in this great celebration firstly verse 19 it talks about the gates of righteousness open to me the gates of righteousness now this could be literal if you like if it's the procession going through the city of Jerusalem perhaps and it gets up to the temple open the gates of righteousness that we may go in and celebrate in the temple area in God's presence celebrate the victory that has been won for us by God it can also be metaphorical gates of righteousness the interesting thing to note is in verse 20 that it's the gate of the Lord and that only the righteous shall enter through the gate only the righteous only those who have a covenant relationship with God shall enter into the presence of God only those who God has declared as righteous only those who fear the Lord only those who God has saved freely by his hand only those who take refuge in the Lord rather than mortals not those who think they are righteous only those who God declares as righteous and as Christians we know that God declares us as righteous as we accept what Christ has done for us on the cross and the great salvation that has been born for us on the cross only the righteous enter through the gate second point is verse 22 the stone that the builders rejected have become the chief cornerstone the stone that's referred to there is a stone that was in the construction of the building and was probably just thrown aside

I know our house was built a number of years ago and even now I find little bits of tile and brick and what not that's just been thrown aside in the garden as I'm digging around etc the builders just sort of jettisoned it all over the place in the yard at the end and this was the same sort of thing a bit of stone that was deemed to be worthless has been thrown aside but here it's saying that that stone that the builders rejected they just threw aside has become the chief cornerstone binding two rows together becoming foundational two rows of bricks becoming foundational in the building or could also be the capstone which completes an arch and the meaning here is that there's a person who's been deemed to be worthless who had God through God's power God has raised him up to bring salvation for the people and of course we immediately think of in the exodus event Moses who was out as a shepherd in the wilderness being a shepherd and God called upon him and laid it upon his heart you will save my people you will bring them out of

Egypt and Moses what did he say I can't speak I'm not eloquent I couldn't go to Pharaoh I'm not going to do it there's plenty of other people send someone else just leave me alone I can't do that and God through God's power through God's mighty right hand raised Moses up and enabled Moses to be able to stand up to Pharaoh and to lead the people out of Egypt lead God's people out of Egypt and finally the third point I'd like to make is from verse 27 in this section and this is the real the height of the festive occasion and the Hebrew here is a bit uncertain bind the festal procession with branches up to the horns of the altar it could mean that there was a sacrifice tied to the horns of the altar which was sacrificed then as part of the great celebration or it could be referring to the lula branches the branches of a tree that everyone grabbed a branch and waved and they danced around the altar in celebration as part of the feast of tabernacles either way it doesn't matter either way this is the peak of the celebration the giving thanks to God for the salvation that has been won and in verse 28 we read that the leader the worship leader the king of the priest is saying you are my God and I will give thanks to you you are my God and that verse is actually once again from Moses song at Exodus at the

Red Sea when he was celebrating the victory the final victory the Israelites were free from the Egyptians so this psalm was used on many occasions in Jewish life to celebrate victories that God had won it was used to reflect upon their escape from Egypt and slavery and bondage in Egypt it was used on other occasions too as they settled into the promised land and as they had victories and fights against other neighbouring countries it was used to celebrate those victories as well and we can give God thanks too for the victories that he has won for us in our own lives as we have defeated areas of sin in our life as we have healed relationships through God's power and the victories and the blessings that God gives us when he has brought us out of depths of despair at times but this psalm is about God's salvation also and we know in the

New Testament writers and Jesus himself knew that this psalm was also talking about and they used this psalm to describe what Jesus had done for them and there's a number of references to Jesus throughout this psalm if you like or a number of references taken up by the New Testament writers in referring to what Jesus had done for example in verses 8 and 9 better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals Jesus articulated that principle specifically in the Sermon on the Mount when he said seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness take refuge in the Lord seek God first and all these other things will be added to you in verses 10 to 12 when the nations are surrounding me the disciples when they're preaching in Acts chapter 4 refer to that as being Jesus hanging on the cross when he's going through being crucified people are all around him he has many enemies against him of course in verse 22 we're familiar with the stone that the builders rejected becoming the chief cornerstone

[23 : 03] Jesus described himself as that stone that the builders had rejected who became the chief cornerstone Peter and Paul picked up that reference as well and also spoke about Jesus who was the one who was rejected within Israel he was there and the people rejected him the rulers the church leaders rejected him and he was crucified but God raised him up triumphant on the cross and then raised him up as he was resurrected for us triumphant and he becomes the chief cornerstone the capstone the critical one in God's salvation history for all of us verse 26 of course is used as the crowds as they came in blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and finally this psalm as I started out to say was part of a series of six psalms 113 to 118 used at the

Passover and in Matthew 26 we read that Jesus at the Last Supper just before he went into the Garden of Gethsemane they sang a song and then rose and went out and it's quite possible that this was the psalm that they sang at that particular time before they went into the Garden of Gethsemane how fitting how fitting that this great psalm of thanksgiving and praise how fitting that this be used at the time of the most critical point in history when Jesus suffered was tried was crucified and then rose again at the starting point of that process how fitting that this psalm of great thanksgiving to God was sung then I mean if I'd been there I reckon I would have sung it out with hindsight having known what was going to happen sung it out boldly and loudly and I would have led the charge in singing it that great thanksgiving to God for his mightiest act of salvation for all of us so for those who have accepted

Christ as their saviour who have accepted the greatest act of salvation that God has borne for us we know that the Lord is on our side we know that it's better to take refuge in the Lord than in mortals that salvation has occurred through the name of the Lord only that salvation comes through the right hand of God his mighty powerful right hand that we are declared righteous because of what Christ has done not because of anything we have done not because of good works not because we come to church not for anything else and we cannot declare ourselves righteous it is God who declares us righteous through what Christ has done and by that means we can enter the gates and we know that for us God's steadfast love endures forever Romans 8 talks about nothing can separate us those who have accepted

Christ nothing can separate us from the love of God mortals cannot harm us if you haven't experienced this if you really perhaps don't even know what I'm talking about this morning you haven't accepted Christ into your life you can't confidently claim thanks and praise to God because of what he's done through Christ can I suggest that you talk to someone today about it don't go out of this building today without raising it with Phil or with Paul or with myself do something about it today if you have experienced it and you know Christ is your personal saviour and you know the freedom that Christ has given you what more can we ask for than the privilege of saying give thanks to the Lord for he is good his steadfast love endures forever let's pray heavenly father thank you for the great victories that you have won in the past for the saving acts that you have won that we can read about from your word thank you father for the victories that you have won in each of our lives and for the blessings that you have given to us and chiefly father thank you for sending your son for each one of us and through his death and resurrection that we trust in him we can be declared righteous with you and enter through those gates into your presence father help us to take time to reflect and to give you thanks as we continue our relationship with you in Jesus name we pray amen amen so we pray may be yeah