

Psalm 118: The Finale of the Egyptian Hallel

In Book 5 of Psalms, the two great sequences of psalms sung at Israel's three Pilgrim Feasts — Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles — reveal the authentic joy of relying on the LORD in all of life's circumstances. **The Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118)** and **the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-135)** echoed on the roads to Jerusalem, in the homes of the faithful, throughout the city of Jerusalem, and in the liturgy of worship in the Temple. "Hallel," praise the highest God, reverberated for all to hear as Psalm 117, the shortest psalm and shortest chapter in the Bible, summarizes:

Praise Yahweh, all ye nations! Laud him, all ye tribes!

For his hesed is mighty over us, and the truth of Yahweh is eternal!

Praise Yahweh!

(Psalm 117, translated by Win Groseclose in his book *The Egyptian Hallel Psalms*, who defines "hesed" as God's covenant faithfulness, his faithful care for his people.)

The LORD-centeredness of the psalms of **the Egyptian Hallel** were reminders to praise, exult in, speak well of the LORD, in a way that attracts others in the world to be drawn to join in worshipping the LORD, the one whose love and power delivers his people. **The Egyptian Hallel** was used at Passover which commemorated God's deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt. Writing about The Egyptian Hallel, F.D. Kidner states:

Only the second of them (114) speaks directly of the Exodus, but the theme of raising the down-trodden (113) and the note of corporate praise (115), personal thanksgiving (116), world vision (117) and festal procession (118) make it an appropriate series to mark the salvation which began in Egypt and will spread to the nations. (F. D. Kidner, *The Book of Psalms*, 401)

Psalm 118, the finale of **the Egyptian Hallel** which is framed by the twin Psalms 111-112 and Psalm 119, was the last psalm sung after the final cup at the Passover meal. One of the most popular psalms and Martin Luther's personal favorite, Luther wrote about it:

This is the psalm that I love...for it has often served me well and helped me out of grave troubles, when neither emperor, kings, wise men, clever men, nor saints could have helped me. (Weiser, *Psalms: A Commentary*, 724)

1. Reading **Psalm 118** in its Old Testament context, its form is an individual song of thanksgiving by a leader thanking God for his own and his community's deliverance from an evil enemy. This psalm has many voices, and medieval

scholars without as much knowledge of Hebrew even divided it into as many as five separate psalms. The many voices and repeated rhetorical features make sense if you read it as a liturgy for a thanksgiving processional that begins at the entrance of the temple. Find the attached text of **Psalm 118**, an attempt to clarify the voices.

Here's an outline: An Opening Call to Praise (vv. 1-4), Introductory Summary account (v. 5), A Confident Confession of Trust (vv. 6-7) A Memorable Maxim (vv.8-9), A Condensed Retrospective Report (vv. 10-13), Triumphant Victory Songs (vv. 14-16), A Marvelous Confession (vv. 17-18), Open the Gates! (vv. 19-20), A Pivotal Personal Thanksgiving (v. 21), a Remarkable Communal Testimony (vv. 22-24), A Unique and Urgent Communal Prayer (v. 25), A Priestly Benediction (v. 26), A Congregational Response (v. 27ab), A Call to a Ritual Action (v. 27c), Confession of Loyalty and Resolve to Give Thanks (v. 28), Concluding Call to Give Thanks (vs. 29). (Carl Bosma, Calvin Institute)

*Read **Psalm 118** aloud (maybe with a friend!) to practice for our group reading. What stands out for you as you read **Psalm 118** in its Old Testament context?*

2. Recall what Jesus talked about with the two disciples he met on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27 and 32), and what he told all of his disciples as recorded in Luke 24:44-48 when he appeared to them. **Psalm 118** is quoted in the New Testament more than any other psalm except Psalm 110, and it is used to interpret the death and resurrection of Jesus. Parts of it were used in Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem.

Here's a list of New Testament quotations from **Psalm 118**:

Ps. 118:6	Heb. 13:6
Ps. 118:22-23	Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7
Ps. 118:25-26	Matt. 21:9, 15; Mark 11:9-10; John 12:13
Ps. 118:26	Matt. 23:39; Luke 13:35; 19:38

*How does reading **Psalm 118** in its Old Testament context impact your understanding of its use in the New Testament? Reflect on how the message of **Psalm 118** informs the interpretation of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Also consider how Jesus used **Psalm 118** in the parable of the wicked tenants (Matt. 21:42, Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17) and in his lament over Jerusalem (Matt. 23:39, Luke 13:35). Consider Jesus' experience with **Psalm 118** at his final Passover.*

3. Remember that a song of thanksgiving in the Psalms is a response to a heard lament. (**Psalm 118: 5**) Clearly, the painful experiences of the leader and his people are the matrix of his and their genuine prayer and authentic praise. How might your dialogue of prayer and praise with God reflect **Psalm 118:19-29**?