

*The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.*

- ¹⁵ *Shouts of joy and victory
resound in the tents of the righteous:
“The LORD’s right hand has done mighty things!
¹⁶ The LORD’s right hand is lifted high;
the LORD’s right hand has done mighty things!”*
- ¹⁷ *I will not die but live,
and will proclaim what the LORD has done.*
- ¹⁸ *The LORD has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.*
- ¹⁹ *Open for me the gates of righteousness;
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.*
- ²⁰ *This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may enter.*
- ²¹ *I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.*
- ²² *The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone;
²³ the LORD has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.*
- ²⁴ *This is the day the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*
- ²⁵ *O LORD, save us;
O LORD, grant us success.*
- ²⁶ *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless you.*
- ²⁷ *The LORD is God,
and he has made his light shine upon us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.*
- ²⁸ *You are my God, and I will give you thanks;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.*
- ²⁹ *Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever. (Psalm 118:14-29)*

This Is Why Jesus Came

I’ve always had trouble preaching on Palm Sunday. It gives me more difficulty and aggravation than any other festival of the church year. The issue I always struggle with is *why*. Why did these things happen? What are they supposed to mean? I’m a big believer that finding the main point helps us see what God is teaching us. So what is the main point here? The first Palm Sunday took place five days before Jesus died. The crowds gathered and cheered for him while Jesus’ enemies complained. Is the point simply to underline who he was? Is it the hypocrisy of the crowd that on Sunday could shout, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” but on Friday shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”? Is the point the fulfillment of the

prophecy or the humble way he came in? Or is it the irony in the fact that he came into Jerusalem as a king to die? All those things are there in Palm Sunday and I always struggle to know which ones I'm supposed to emphasize. So it's blessing for me, at least, that this year, I'm preaching on the psalms for Lent, because Psalm 118 is the key to understanding what happened on that day in Jerusalem and what it means for all the generations that wait for our King to return. Psalm 118 tells us, **"This is why Jesus came!"**

I.

In this psalm, Christ speaks. It was written by King David a thousand years before Jesus entered Jerusalem. But for ten centuries, the people of Israel heard their Savior's voice in this psalm. The first half of the psalm focuses on his sufferings and death. But the second half, the half that we're looking at this morning, focuses on his victory. We sometimes speak of Jesus' humiliation and his exaltation. His humiliation is when he laid aside the constant use of his power and glory as God and so lowered himself to suffer all the shame and hell and pain and death that we sinners deserve. His exaltation is when God raised him and showed the world that he is the Son of God and the promised Savior. This part of the psalm is about his exaltation. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was giving us a foretaste of what God was going to do for him not on Good Friday, but on Easter Sunday. **This is why Jesus came: to be exalted by God the Father.**

His disciples needed that foretaste. They were going to see him arrested and then run away. Two of them were going to see that he was convicted late that night and one would deny him three times. At least one of them would stand at the foot of his cross and watch him die. They all would go through the agony of a weekend of thinking that their Lord was dead. So before it happened, Jesus let them see this foretaste of where it was all going. But it wasn't just for them. It was for us, too. This triumphant entry into Jerusalem shows us that all that happened that week was part of the plan. To be exalted, Jesus had to reach the depths of hell itself on the cross. The suffering and the dying in our place is what earned him the praise and glory.

Psalm 118 gives us Christ's own perspective on what that meant. He says, **"The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation."** Jesus praises the LORD for what he has done. Understand that the Son of God was also a real human being. Even though he had no sin, he still had to pass through the weakness and pain of life here. He had to pass through the punishment for our sin – death and hell. To be a perfect human who takes our sin away, Jesus relied on the strength God provides, even though he was fully and completely God himself. If you think too much about what it's like to be both God and man at the same time, your eyes start to cross. We just can't put ourselves in Jesus' place. But in this is psalm, God gives us a glimpse of what it was like.

Jesus laid aside his own power and glory as God and put himself completely in his Father's hands. Jesus went to the cross and suffered all that our sins deserved, and he died. And then the Father raised him. That's why Jesus says that the LORD has become his salvation. Now, the Bible does say that the Son himself and the Holy Spirit were part of that work, because raising Christ is the work of the Holy Trinity. But Jesus himself and the Bible in general emphasize his Father's role.

God exalted Jesus. That was the plan, because God is the one who cursed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When Jesus entered this world, he became the new Adam, the one man who can save all people. So when his work was complete, God the Father raised him to testify that all his wrath was over and all his judgment was finished. That would not have been clear if Jesus somehow escaped from the tomb. The Father had to raise him to say that he was one hundred percent satisfied with all that Jesus did. So throughout this psalm, the Son of God celebrates the Father's role in his victory over death.

Jesus said, **"I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death."** Keep in mind, this is a prophecy. These verses are Jesus speaking after he rose. After his crucifixion, after Pontius Pilate sent the soldiers to find out if he was dead and they stuck the spear into his side, after he gave up his spirit and they pulled his body down from the cross and Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea buried it, Jesus says, "I will not die but live." He says that God "has not given me over to death." Does that mean that Jesus did not, in fact, physically die? Not at all. The psalms are poetry and sometimes poetry says things in surprising ways to make a point. The point is that death didn't win. In fact, the New Testament makes the same point. It says, **"For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him."** Jesus will not die again. He will live and proclaim what the LORD has done in raising him from the dead. The LORD

made him suffer severely – the LORD sent him here to die in our place. But he didn't surrender him to death. Now he will live forever.

So in the next few verses, Jesus celebrates. He gives thanks to God as he enters through the gates of the righteous – as he enters heaven itself and comes into the presence of God. Of course, all those things he does so that we can do them. We sinners could never enter God's presence on our own. Without the blood of Christ, the day we see God would be the day we go to hell forever. But Jesus has conquered death and hell, he's wiped out our sin and we will live. All that was the goal on that first Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem. He rode in to die, to suffer hell itself, to pay all that we owe. But above all else, he rode in to rise and set us free.

II.

If Jesus himself praised God for the victory he won, shouldn't we also praise God? We don't live in the centuries before the cross, so we don't need foreshadowing. We see the fulfillment. So when we celebrate Palm Sunday, it's a really a lead-in to Easter. This week, God's path will take us to the cross first. But the path ends at the empty tomb. That was always God's plan. **This is why Jesus came: to be celebrated by us.**

That's our role in the plan – to praise the Father and the Son for all eternity for their endless love in saving us. The last verses of Psalm 118 show believers of every age cheering for the work Christ has done. They show us, centuries before we lived. By a miracle of the Holy Spirit's power, God put the words of Psalm 118 in the mouths of that Jewish crowd that gathered there on the first Palm Sunday. They shouted and welcomed Christ as if they truly were the Church of God. Sadly, for so many of them, it wasn't true. Their hearts were not filled with faith. But the Holy Spirit still put his words into their mouths so that we can hear the God's testimony echoing down through the ages.

This psalm is the source of the people's shout, **"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD."** That's our shout of welcome for Christ. The psalm pictures us making a procession to the altar rejoicing in Christ's victory. In another context, Jesus makes clear that this is the cry that all people, even God's enemies, will shout when he returns to judge the world. So on Palm Sunday, even that crowd that was going to reject him within days welcomes him with these words. These words point to Christ as the promised Messiah, the true King of Israel. They are true words.

The crowd echoed the verse before that on Palm Sunday, too. Verse 25 says, **"O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success."** Do you recognize those words? You've all heard them before. In fact you said them this morning at the beginning of our service. "O LORD, save us!" in Aramaic is Hosanna. To this day, Jewish festivals use this word as the welcome cry for the Messiah. God gave them that welcome cry a thousand years before Jesus came.

The crowd wasn't the only place where Psalm 118 was echoed. Later in the week, Jesus himself echoed this psalm when his enemies confronted him. He quoted these words, **"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."** This is the miracle that Palm Sunday is supposed to make us see. God uses the image of building, a temple. The people are the stones of that temple. You and I are each a brick. But the capstone, the summit of the temple, is Christ. The capstone God had chosen to be the pinnacle of his Church was rejected by the builders – by the religious leaders of Israel. They hated Christ. They engineered his death. They couldn't even show a little decorum when they got rid of him – they had to mock him while he was hanging on the cross. But in spite of all that, in spite of his dying and being sealed in a tomb, in spite of Roman soldiers sent to guard that tomb, Jesus rose. He won. He took his place again at the right hand of God. And he is now the capstone of the true Church of God.

The Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes. The Hebrew word that David uses for "marvelous" means miraculous. That's the only way to describe the outcome. How else does a dead man live? How else does a man who was totally defeated and cast aside become the ruler of the world and the hope of all mankind? God did a miracle that we have come to celebrate today. King David says about that miracle: **"This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."**

Many years ago, when I was in the army, I was stationed in Germany. I used to have to get up at the crack of dawn and ride an army bus every day from the barracks to the station where I worked. It took about a half an hour and they always had Armed Forces Radio playing. Almost every day, as the bus rolled into the grounds of the station where we worked, a chaplain would be giving a five minute devotion. He always ended that devotion by saying, "This is the day the Lord has made. Enjoy it!" Of course, he was thinking of this verse. But he kind of missed the point. "This is the day that Lord has made" is actually referring to Easter, the

day that God planned for thousands of years, the day that God worked toward from before he made the world, the day when all sin was washed away and Christ rose to give us life. That is what we are praising God for.

There is a sense in which every day is the day God has made and we rejoice in it, because every day is a celebration of our victory in Christ. But during this Holy Week, we want to remember the greatest day of all, the day of resurrection. That day is the real point of Palm Sunday. For the last five weeks, as I've welcomed you to church, I've told you that the Sundays in Lent are not really part of the forty days of Lent. Since ancient times, the Sundays in Lent have been considered "little Easters," days when we remember God's solution to the sin we contemplate during Lent. Well, Palm Sunday is the biggest "little Easter" of them all. It's the day when Holy Week starts, the day when Christ enters Jerusalem to finish his work and win eternal life for us. Let us rejoice and be glad in this day. Let us celebrate it now by singing Psalm 118.