

PSALM 118: 1-9, 21-24, 26-29

O give thanks to the LORD, for God is good;
God's steadfast love endures for ever!

² Let Israel say,
'God's steadfast love endures for ever.'
³ Let the house of Aaron say,
'God's steadfast love endures for ever.'
⁴ Let those who fear the LORD say,
'God's steadfast love endures for ever.'

⁵ Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place.

⁶ With the LORD on my side I do not fear.
What can mortals 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 in the LORD
than to put confidence in mortals.

⁹ It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes.

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ The LORD is God,
and God has given us light.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for God is good,
for God's steadfast love endures for ever.

Like any song, you know what key it's in by the first and last chord. So it is with a psalm theme. And Psalm 118 makes it extra easy because the first and last verses are identical. This is a psalm of thanksgiving to God. The psalmist proclaims on behalf of all those who

have experienced the goodness of God, the reason for thanksgiving: “God’s steadfast love.” Not only is God’s love steadfast, but it endures. And so confident is the assertion of this psalm, and so all-encompassing the experience of God’s goodness, that God’s steadfast love endures, it proclaims, “forever”! Wow! What a wonderful experience and what an exuberance of feeling to be able to shout and sing: “O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever!” Can you hear the melody of the words, easily memorized and repeatable?

But here’s how the psalm also invites the congregation to move into the experience of thanksgiving. Verses 2-4 calls different groups to participate. First there is Israel. The worship leader calls the congregation of Israelites to respond: “Let Israel say:...” Then the leader calls “the House of Aaron” who are the liturgists (worship team) to say... But finally, the leader calls on all those who embrace God (the faithful) to say... Do you see the progression? As humans we belong to various races and clans and we have different roles to play, even in worship. But our deepest identity is our belonging to God as God’s precious creation. How central to your personal identity is your belonging to God?

And this identity of belonging is ever more deeply forged in our time of trouble as much as in our coming together in worship to offer thanksgiving. Verses 5-9 points to an experience of serious threat. What or who is the source of the threat? The psalm is intentionally general in order to allow the reader to put themselves into it. We all face threats of various kinds, be they from people, from circumstances or with our health. The experience here is of being accompanied and empowered by God to not only to build resilience, but to overcome what threatens somehow. Rather than feel threatened by mortals or relying on them or on those in power (princes) to rescue us, God is the one who must finally liberate us into genuine freedom and peace.

Verses 21-24 also provide another dimension to the experience of freedom and peace, namely vindication. Verses 22-23, made famous as an important utterance of Jesus to describe himself (Matthew 21:42), uses the metaphor of a cornerstone. As the crucial stone in a building it has to be specially chosen. Imagine if the stone discarded by the whole team of workers ends up being the chosen stone by the head builder. So it is with God choosing the one rejected by others. Jesus himself, the crucified one, becomes vindicated as the very chosen one of God, the beloved child, the Messiah. How specially chosen do you feel of God? Perhaps another dimension of your relationship with God must become a renewed sense of special purpose God has planned for you. Finding our purpose at every new stage of life, through every new circumstance, be it an opportunity or a limitation, is crucial to our identity of belonging anew to God as God’s special creation.

Verse 24 are words many of us know from a great hymn that's often sung as a round: "This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made; we will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it..." (Book of Praise # 78)

Verse 26 is also familiar from the liturgy of Holy Communion. It is a very traditional communion response from the earliest days of the church. See if you catch it this coming Sunday in the congregational response during the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving.

Finally, the psalmist uses pronouns very skillfully. From addressing the congregation in the third person they shift to first person, heart-felt and personal address to God. The psalmist is calling each person in the congregation and as readers of the psalm to give thanks to God, and then provides some words for how to make it personal: "You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you."

So, how will you give thanks to God? Will this psalm help you come to that place again where you can give thanks no matter how circumstances may seem to conspire against you or "mortals" disappoint and hurt you?

PRAYER: You are my God, O God, and I will give thanks to you. Even as mortals can harm me and even as circumstances may throw my life into turmoil, I thank you that you are steadfast in being there for me, accompanying me and opening up pathways for me to emerge out of the darkness and into the light. When I am in the darkness, O God, I ask you to give me faith and hope that light will come again. If and when I am happily and safely in the light, give me some loving compassion so that I look around me and share some of that light with those suffering the dark. May I find my special purpose in being your child, and my deepest belonging as your chosen and unique creation. The world around me may dismiss me at times or oftentimes, but you cherish me as a one-of-a-kind gift of your creative artistry. Thank you! Amen.