

“New Testament Soundtrack”

Kevin Watkins

11/26/23

If someone walks into the room to the Imperial March, you should probably leave.

I found myself saying this to my kids recently. My kids have not watched Star Wars yet, but my son Ryan likes the songs, so we listen to them a lot in the car. And Kinsey, my youngest, every time she hears the dun, dun, dun, da, da, dun, da, da, dun... oh no bad guy song. Having never seen the movie, she knows it is a bad guy song. Darth Vader and the Imperial March go so well together. The music brings a sense of foreboding. But if I came up to the podium with a song that sounded like, dun, da, dun, da, dun, da, dun, da... That music builds a different kind of expectation.

And it goes beyond creating atmosphere, the soundtrack to a movie also helps us understand and remember the story. Why this matters this morning is because if the last week of Jesus’ life and the early church had a soundtrack, it would be Psalm 118.

Before we go into the New Testament and the stories of Jesus and the early church, let’s start with Psalm 118.

Psalm 118 is a victory song. This song is the one they play after you win the championship game, it is “We are the Champions.” Psalm 118 is actually one part of 6 psalm collection (Psalms 113-118) called the Egyptian Hallel Psalms. This collection of songs celebrates God’s miraculous provision in delivering the Israelites out of generations of slavery in Egypt. Psalm 118 is a song of thanksgiving and celebration that starts this way:

*1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.*

This is an invitation to praise and to be thankful for God is good and his love endures forever. One significant reason we are studying Jesus in the Old Testament is that for many of us there is a disconnect between the God of the OT and the God of the NT. It seems as if there is a God of anger and judgment in the OT and a God of love in the NT. And there are some passages of judgment in the OT, but there is also judgment in the NT. There are passages about love in the NT, but right here we hear from the people who know God how they feel about God.

God is good and his love endures forever. Please don’t ignore this language. The people who lived with God in the OT experienced God as good and loving.

And it is more than that, the Hebrew word here translated as the word love is the Hebrew word, hesed. We have mentioned this word a few times because it is foundational to the Psalms, to the OT, and to God. Hesed is difficult to translate, because it has such range and depth. In our English bibles, Hesed is translated as mercy, loving kindness, steadfast love, faithfulness, covenant love, loving faithfulness. And Hesed includes all of these things and more. As one commentary put it this week, Hesed includes elements of love, mercy, fidelity, and kindness. Hesed is a relational term that describes both the internal character as well as the external actions required to maintain a life-sustaining relationship. It is both feelings and actions. Character and work.

Hesed appears 255 times in the OT, 130 of those in the Psalms. This is loving kindness, this Hesed is the basis for the Psalms. It is both who the Lord is and what the Lord does.

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

One more thing, Psalm 118 was made to be sung in community. It would very likely have had some call and response. For example, in verse 2, the worship leader might say, "Let Israel say: "His love endures forever." And the people would say, His love endures forever. Will you try that with me for a minute? I will read vs 2 and you will respond, "His love endures forever."

2 *Let Israel say:*

"His love endures forever."

3 *Let the house of Aaron say:*

"His love endures forever."

4 *Let those who fear the Lord say:*

"His love endures forever."

It is true that God's love endures forever.

The writer of the psalm goes on to say, I know that God's character and actions are marked by love because

5 *When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;*
he brought me into a spacious place.

And in v. 10-14

10 *All the nations surrounded me,*
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.

11 *They surrounded me on every side,*
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.

12 *They swarmed around me like bees,*
but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns;
in the name of the Lord I cut them down.

13 *I was pushed back and about to fall,*
but the Lord helped me.

14 *The Lord is my strength and my defense;*
he has become my salvation.

I know God the psalmist says. He has shown himself to be my salvation. The Lord helped me when I was hard pressed and in danger, the Lord saved me.

A question for you, have you ever experienced God's intervention in your life? A prayer answered? A miraculous change in circumstances? A moment of wisdom in a confusing time? The experience of peace in the midst of things you could not change? Bring those to mind for a minute. Remember.

There are a number of potential writers and potential occasions for the writing of this psalm and without getting too deeply into the weeds, it seems as if this Psalm is a mosaic of different stories of Israel.

The language of v. 5, "When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord; he brought me into a spacious place," is the exact same language David used in Psalm 31 when he was running for his life. Verse 15 and 16 talk about "The LORD's right hand has done mighty things," which is language from Moses' song in Exodus 15. We see Aaron's blessing in verse 27, The LORD make his face, his light shine on you. There are echoes of the prophet Jeremiah who prophesied that in the midst of the ruin of Israel, God would one day save his people and "There will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness," so "Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love endures forever.

All of these stories are brought together in Psalm 118, likely in 516 BC, when the people of Israel returned from their exile in Babylon and were celebrating their first Passover in the newly reconstructed temple.

Once again after generations of exile, after death and pain, God had gathered his people back together and they wrote a new song that told the old stories of God's steadfast love.

A few more words about Psalm 118. Verse 22 says this

*22 The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;*

Can you say this with me one time?

The Psalmist uses common language to describe Israel's experience. The common meaning of this verse is that builders who construct a building rejected a stone that they thought "unsuitable for their purposes, such as if it was cut improperly and did not fit the specific position in the wall where it was projected to fit." And then another builder came and recognized the stone's potential as the foundation stone upon which a new building could be built.

The language here for rejection is "to have no use for something" "to not be worth consideration." Just to pause and say to be rejected, to not be worth consideration is one of the worst feelings, one of the worst experiences we have as people. This is a near universal experience and it is horrible. My guess is that we all carry around wounds from rejection, from relationships, professionally, when we weren't chosen for a team or production. And over and over again in Israel's history, Israel was rejected, but God vindicated them.

The Psalm ends as it began with verse 29 *Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.*

This is the whole story, the beginning and the end, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever."

And this is the song that was the soundtrack for the week before Jesus' death and the early church. Go with me back to Palm Sunday. Jesus enters into Jerusalem like a king returning home after a victory and as he came down the road, Luke 19:37-38 says "When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

These words are straight from Psalm 118:26

The people of Israel had come to expect the Messiah to come and when he came they greeted him with this victory song, "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

This is the first time that we hear the song during Holy Week.

Two days later, Jesus used the language of Psalm 118 to confront the religious leaders of his day for not taking good care of God's people. Using a parable, Jesus says to the leaders, God has rented to you the job of caring for and leading the people of Israel. And you, religious leaders have not done what God asked, you misused and killed God's servants, and now you are in danger of killing God's son.

When the people listening to Jesus heard this story, they said, "God forbid!"

And Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written:

"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'?" (Luke 20:17)

Jesus himself said that he was being rejected, but would become the cornerstone.

Palm Sunday and this parable of the vineyard are the first two times this song is being played in the background of Holy Week. Then finally on the night Jesus was betrayed, he celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples. This meal with his disciples is while we still celebrate communion. And when they were done eating together, Matthew 26:30 says this, "*When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*" If you remember, I mentioned this Psalm was written as a Passover Psalm. Every year for over 500 years, the people of Israel would gather together on the Passover and sing the Psalms and the last Psalm in the collection is Psalm 118. This is likely the hymn that Jesus and his disciples sang together. Imagine Jesus and his disciples singing this song of celebration on the way out to the Mount of Olives. Imagine Jesus defiantly singing "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever," knowing he was on his way to experience an excruciating death on the cross. I wonder if those words about being hard pressed on every side hit different.

As it turns out, Jesus' death on the cross would be the ultimate example of being hard pressed, of being surrounded, pushed back and about to fall, it was the ultimate experience of rejection. Jesus was betrayed by Judas, abandoned by his disciples, denied by Peter, beaten and killed by the people he had hand crafted in their mother's wombs. He died an unbelievable shameful death on the cross. He lived a complete rejection.

But then the stone the builders rejected became the cornerstone.

God chose him as the cornerstone for his new creation. God raised Jesus from the dead and set him up as the launching pad of his new creation.

But for the early church and those who lived in Israel, Jesus' rejection and death were still confusing and disorienting. Trauma like that doesn't just go away. To be hung on a cross was intentionally the most shameful and painful way to die. It didn't make sense why all those painful things happened. And it was the lyrics of Psalm 118 that ultimately helped the early church make sense of how such a bad and shameful thing could be part of salvation history

In Acts 4, Peter and John are arrested for healing a man and when they are questioned, their accusers ask: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 Jesus is

"the stone you builders rejected,

which has become the cornerstone.'

12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

To the accusers, Jesus was dead, but Peter and the early church knew differently. Jesus who was rejected had become the foundation of something else entirely. Paul in Ephesians 2 writes about how God has made one new ethnicity of people from Jews and Gentiles saying, "19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." Again this refrain, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This isn't just a nice 500 year old song. It is reality.

God is building a new family, a new kingdom and Jesus is the foundation.

We, who are here this morning, are part of this new family, this new creation. And that is worth celebrating and singing songs of victory about. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the beginning of something new. The great reversal from rejection to being the cornerstone changed everything.

I want to say again that to be rejected is a horrible thing and we live in a world where rejection, weeping, death, and darkness are too common. We wonder what good could ever come of this. But beginning in Jesus, something has happened. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Jesus's own rejection, weeping, death and darkness, have become an invitation into a new family, into praise, life, and wonderful light. It is the great reversal. The resurrection of Jesus is the start of what will ultimately be the renewal of all things. The love of God endures forever and the new creation has just begun.

As we close this week, I want to read two short quotes about this new creation that is founded on Jesus. These words encouraged me this week when I read them and I hope they would encourage you

Dostoyevsky wrote, "I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all humiliating absurdity of the human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage."

It may sound childish, but that is what I believe, we believe. That suffering and rejection will be healed and made up for.

CS Lewis said, "They say, of some temporal suffering No future bliss can make up for it, not knowing that heaven will work backwards and turn even that agony to glory."

What seems like failure will ultimately become something very different. Heaven will work backwards.

Jesus is building a new family, a new kingdom, a new way of life and you are invited. We join Jesus and his first disciples and sing, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." We remember the greatest moments of God's deliverance are but a foretaste of the renewal of all things. And at the end of all things, we too will give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love endures forever. Amen.