

Psalm 118:1

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/ps/ps-118/psalm-1181/>

Psalm 118 begins with a common exhortation to “Give thanks to the LORD.” The reason he provides for us to give thanks is: “for He is good.” The psalmist’s proof that the LORD is good is: “For His lovingkindness is everlasting.” The psalmist’s gratitude for God’s lovingkindness is established up front and it permeates the entirety of Psalm 118.

Psalm 118 is the climactic finale of group of five consecutive praise psalms called “the Hallel.”

The commentary for this section is divided into two parts:

1. **Commentary for Psalm 118:1**
2. **Background of Psalm 118**

Commentary for Psalm 118:1

The Bible provides no introduction to Psalm 118. Consequently, this psalm is technically among the fifty or so psalms whose author is not identified by the psalm itself. However, there is ample reason to believe that King David was the psalmist. (See the “Background of Psalm 118” section at the bottom of this commentary for details explaining his likely authorship and other important information regarding this famous psalm).

Psalm 118 is the climax of the sequence of praise psalms (Psalms 113-118), called “The Hallel.” “Hallel” means “to praise.” The exclamation, “Hallelujah!” comes from this word. Psalm 118 can be described as the “Hosanna Hallel.” It is called the “Hosanna Hallel” in part because the crowds were apparently singing this psalm and directing it toward Jesus as they shouted “Hosanna” when He triumphantly entered Jerusalem in a prophetic fulfillment of this psalm (Matthew 21:9, Mark 11:7-10, Luke 19:37-38)

Psalm 118 is a salvation song, with Psalm 118:1-4 functioning as the introduction or chorus to the narration and Psalm 118:28-29 serving as the conclusion. The middle of the psalm (Psalm 118:5-27) poetically narrates a personal story of how *the LORD*’s faithfulness saved the psalmist when he was in great distress. The psalmist describes a military campaign and describes a desperate scene when he was surrounded by his enemies, about to be killed, when he called upon *the LORD* (Psalm 118:5-13) and was rescued and given the victory (Psalm 118:14). The story continues with a celebration in his camps following the sudden deliverance (Psalm 118:15-18) and a triumphal procession returning to the city (Psalm 118:19-26), and it ends with an offering of sacrifice to honor *the LORD* for His *lovingkindness* (Psalm 118:27). (The events of the psalm’s poetic narrative matches biographical experiences from King David’s life).

Psalm 118 begins with an exhortation and two simple but profound facts,

*Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good;
For His lovingkindness is everlasting (v 1).*

This verse is not only repeated verbatim in the final verse of this psalm (Psalm 118:29), it is also found elsewhere in the psalms (Psalm 106:1, 107:1, 136:1). The second expression—*For His lovingkindness is everlasting*—is repeated after every praise of “The Great Hallel” (Psalm 136).

The psalmist exhorts us to *give thanks to the LORD*.

Dictionaries often define thankfulness as a feeling of happiness because of something. Often the source of this feeling are pleasant circumstances or desired outcomes which we have no control over. It can be a fine thing to *give thanks for* these *good* things. But this is not why the psalmist tells us to *give thanks*. We are to *give thanks* because *the LORD is good* regardless of our circumstances or success. All *good* things come from *the LORD* (James 1:17). When the Bible says *the LORD is good*, it means that *He is* absolutely, infinitely, unalterably, and perfectly *good*.

The exhortation to *give thanks* (like the exhortation to be joyful) is not therefore dependent on our circumstances or outcomes which are sometimes *good* and sometimes not. Being thankful and *giving thanks to the LORD* are things we should be and do at all times. Being thankful should stem from a perspective we choose about life:

“In everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

We are able to *give thanks to the LORD* when we consider all our circumstances as joy (James 1:2). And we are able to consider it all joy when we 1.) Trust *the LORD* and 2.) choose to adopt His perspective of our circumstances. All our circumstances, pleasant, painful, or otherwise are given to us to perfect us into *His good* character (James 1:2-4). All of this fits within the three things we can control, which are:

- Who we Trust...the LORD (James 1:6)
- Our Perspective...Thankfulness/Joy (Colossians 3:15-16, James 1:2)
- Our Actions...Giving Thanks/Honoring God with our actions (Psalm 118:1, James 1:25)

From a Biblical perspective, thankfulness is not merely a passing emotion. If it were, the Bible’s exhortations to *give thanks* and be thankful (Colossians 3:15-16, 1 Thessalonians 5:18) would amount to no more than a moral command to be lucky or fortunate enough to feel grateful. Rather, thankfulness is a chosen perspective within our control. And *giving thanks* is an action that follows from having a grateful heart.

Thankfulness is a chosen perspective. Thankfulness is an attitude of gratitude to *the LORD* and His many blessings in our lives. The act of *giving thanks* is an expression of a person’s gratitude that they are receiving some unearned *good* from someone else. Thankfulness is a perspective that is born out of humility and appreciation of others. (Humility can be thought of as “seeing reality as it is” or “the capacity to see and act upon what is true”).

The opposite perspectives from thankfulness are entitlement and bitterness. Entitlement and bitterness are born out of pride and focus on self. Entitlement asserts that any good a person has, or desires, is owed to them. Bitterness stems from an illusion that we can punish others, or change the past.

The self-focus of entitlement and bitterness render a person incapable of being thankful. And not giving *thanks* is one of the first steps a person takes when they turn away from *God* (Romans 1:21).

The psalmist's exhortation is absolute. We are to *give thanks to the LORD* at all times (Psalm 34:1).

The psalmist's reason for giving *thanks to the LORD* is because *the LORD is good*.

The LORD is good because goodness is His nature. When the psalmist declares: *the LORD is good*, he is saying that God is perfectly and absolutely *good*. Many psalms praise the goodness of the LORD (Psalm 27:13, 31:19, 34:8, 107:1, 119:68). God is never other than *good*. Goodness is who He is.

By virtue of being God, *the LORD* determines what is *good*. He defines what is *good*. We do not. God's will is good (Romans 12:2). He works all things for *good* to those who love Him (Genesis 50:20, Lamentations 3:25-26, Romans 8:28). God withholds no *good* thing from His people (Psalm 84:11). *The LORD is* simply and wonderfully *good*.

Here the psalmist's proof that *the LORD is good* is provided in the following expression: *for His lovingkindness is everlasting*.

The reason we can *give thanks to the LORD* at all times, is because *the LORD is good* at all times. The reason we know *the LORD is good* at all times, is because *His lovingkindness is literally everlasting*.

The Hebrew word translated as *lovingkindness* is חַסֵּד (H2616). It is pronounced "hesed." It can be translated as "mercy," "kindness," "favor," "steadfast love," or "loyalty." Here the psalmist seems to be referring to all these definitions when he describes *the LORD's everlasting "hesed"/mercy* at the same time,

- *The LORD's* unending mercy;
- *His* gracious kindness and favor toward people;
- *His* unwavering love of Israel;
- *His* unfailing loyalty to the covenant He established with *His*

The psalmist's expression here in Psalm 118—*For His lovingkindness is everlasting*—is captured in Jeremiah's lines of hope in the middle of Jerusalem's ruin,

"The LORD'S lovingkindnesses ["hesed"] indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.

They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness.”
(Lamentations 3:22-23)

The psalmist emphatically reinforces the inexhaustibility of *the LORD*'s “hesed”/mercy by repeating the expression: *His lovingkindness is everlasting* three more times in the verses that immediately follow (Psalm 118:2-4).

The perspective of Psalm 118—“The Hosanna Hallel”—begins in thankfulness *to the LORD* and acknowledges *His* perfect goodness and *His everlasting* “hesed”/mercy toward us. This perspective becomes even more significant as we will consider the personal and intense “distress” the psalmist describes in his “Salvation Song” (Psalm 118:5-27).

Background of the Hallel Psalms, and Psalm 118

Psalm 118 is the climactic finale of the Hallel grouping of psalms called the “Egyptian Hallel” found in Psalm 113-118.

“Hallel” has its root form in the Hebrew verb הָלַל (H1984 - pronounced: “haw-lal”). “Hallel,” in various forms means “to acclaim,” “to boast of,” “to glory in,” “to praise.” It expresses a deep satisfaction that is found in praising the activities and character of the person being praised.

The verb “Hallel” is used primarily in the plural suggesting that the joy of recognizing God’s greatness is to be shared by God’s people. Those who love God come together to rejoice in *the LORD*, and to exalt Him together.

In addition to Psalm 113-118, the Egyptian Hallel, the book of Psalms contains two other Hallels: Psalm 136, the “Great Hallel”; and Psalms 146-150, the “Final Hallel.”

The Egyptian Hallel (Psalm 113-118) gets its name from the reference to Egypt in Psalm 114:1. This group of psalms were traditionally sung during Passover Seders which commemorate God’s deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. ([To learn more about Passover Seders, see The Bible Says article: “The Passover Seder”](#)). Psalm 118 may have been among the hymns sung by Jesus and His disciples during their Passover celebration the night before He was crucified (Matthew 26:30).

Psalm 113 appears to be a rework of the Song of Moses and the sons of Israel after God saved them from the clutches of Pharaoh when He closed the Red Sea upon the Egyptians (Exodus 15:1-18). The central verse of this psalm—“Who is like the Lord our God?” (Psalm 113:5)—asks the famous question of the hymn in Exodus: “Who is like You among the gods, O Lord?” (Exodus 15:11).

Psalm 114 is a praise song describing the Exodus. It marvels at how the physical features of the earth trembled in wonder at how God called and miraculously brought Israel out of Egypt through the sea and across the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

Psalm 115 proclaims how God is the central figure in every story and beckons its listeners to trust the LORD for they will not be disappointed.

Psalm 116 is a prophetic hymn of praise about the Messiah's betrayal, death, and resurrection.

Psalm 117 is a praise and an evangelical command. It is an exhortation for all peoples to praise *the LORD* for His lovingkindness, and whose proclamation prefigures the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

Psalm 118 is "the Hosanna Hallel."

The expression "Hosanna" never appears in the Old Testament or Psalm 118, but

it seems that its lyrics were sung by those entering Jerusalem for the Passover as Jesus entered the city, and applied to Him (Psalm 118:26, Matthew 21:8-9). Its sentiments were sung by the children in temple courts at that time (Psalm 118:25-26, Matthew 21:15). Thus the name for Psalm 118, "The Hosanna Psalm." The expression, "Hosanna," is simultaneously a petition and praise. As a petition, it is a cry for help meaning "Save!" or "Deliver us!" As a praise, it is a shout of joy meaning "Salvation!" or "Deliverance has come!"

"Hosanna" is rich in meaning. It is an English transliteration of a Greek word ὡσαννά (G5614—pronounced: "ho-san-nah"). The Greek term is a transliteration of a Hebrew expression. Hosanna in the Hebrew language is not one word, but two. The first word is יָשׁוּׁעַ (H3467—pronounced: "yaw-shah"). "Yaw-shah" means "to save, to deliver." The second word is נָא (H4994—pronounced: "naw"). It is a particle of incitement. It is a way to emphasize a sense of desperation or urgency in a personal request. It is sometimes rendered "I pray," "save now," or "please."

Both words combine in the expression, "Hosanna," to convey adoration, praise, and a desperate plea. The expression means "Oh, save us!" or "Praise to the Savior!"

Because "Hosanna" is both a cry for rescue and a declaration of praise, it should not be surprising that the "Hosanna Hallel" of Psalm 118 sings of a desperate cry for salvation (Psalm 118:5) and a joyful praise to the LORD, the psalmist's Deliverer (Psalm 118:14-15).

Sandwiched between the shortest (Psalm 117) and the longest (Psalm 119) chapters in the Bible, Psalm 118 is the final song in the Egyptian Hallel. But Psalm 118 is no obscure hymn tucked neatly away in the middle of the Jewish Psalter. Psalm 118 was (and continues to be) recited, remembered, and reinforced in the hearts of Israelites at least three times each year at the Feasts of Passover (March-April), Pentecost (May-June), and Tabernacles (September-October).

In regard to Passover, Psalm 118 was the traditional closing of the Passover Seder meal. Psalm 118 was possibly among the psalms Jesus and His disciples sang to close out their last Passover celebration together (Matthew 26:30).

In regard to the Feast of Tabernacles, lines such as “The sound of joyful shouting and salvation is in the tents of the righteous” (Psalm 118:15) were proclaimed as Israel lived in tents for seven days; and “O LORD, do save, we beseech You; O Lord, we beseech You, do send prosperity!” (118:25) was the usual cry at the altar of burnt offering during the seven-day festival.

This offering was made once on each of the first six days and seven times on the seventh of the Feast of Tabernacles. This seventh day was called the "Great Hosanna." (The exclamation of Hosanna is a major theme of Psalm 118). What's more, the Jews bound together osier (a type of willow), myrtle, and palm branches with a golden thread. These branches were called Hosannas. These Hosannas were waved at certain times during the ceremony in the Temple. This too is reminiscent of what the crowds did for Jesus (the Word of God who “tabernacled” among us—John 1:14) as He entered Jerusalem at Passover (Matthew 21:8-9)

Some believe the first half of Psalm 118 was sung as a processional hymn while approaching the sanctuary, while the second half was sung at the Temple gates, partly by a chorus of priests inside the Temple, and partly by the procession while entering the Temple.

Psalm 118 was a sort of national hymn and cultural touchstone for Israel, not unlike the song “Amazing Grace” within contemporary Western culture. We see this in how Psalm 118 was celebrated, sung, and applied throughout Israel's history.

It seems Psalm 118 was sung, following Israel's return from the Babylonian Exile, when the second temple was rebuilt (Zechariah 4:6-10) and commemorated (Ezra 3:10-13).

Ezra reports: “when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD...” (Ezra 3:10). Ezra then goes on to record some of the lines the dedicators sang: “For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever” (Ezra 3:11a). This praise mirrors the refrains of Psalm 118:1-3: “For His lovingkindness is everlasting.”

It is in this passage that Ezra attributes this psalm to King David (Ezra 3:10).

The prophet Zechariah also alludes to Psalm 118 in regard to the temple's restoration. He records *the LORD's* message to Zerubbabel, the faithful governor of the returning Jews, regarding the temple's restoration in the face of intense opposition. *The LORD* assures Zerubbabel that, “he will bring forth the top stone with shouts of ‘Grace, grace to it!’” (Zechariah 4:7) and that as “the hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands will finish it” (Zechariah 4:9). The LORD predicts how those who are faithful “will be glad when they see the plumb line [corner stone] in the hand of Zerubbabel” (Zechariah 4:10).

It is interesting to note that the foundation-stone of the temple laid by Zerubbabel is the first prophetic application of “the stone which the builders rejected” that “has become the chief corner

stone” (Psalm 118:22). That chief corner stone laid by Zerubbabel kept its place against many adversaries (Zechariah 4:6-10), by “the LORD’s doing” (Psalm 118:23).

The second and greater fulfillment of this prophecy is Jesus the Messiah, as the chief corner “stone which the builders rejected” (Psalm 118:22, Isaiah 8:14, 28:16, Matthew 22:42, Acts 4:10-11, 1 Corinthians 3:11, Ephesians 2:20, 1 Peter 2:4, 6-8).

Traditionally Psalm 118 is attributed to King David. And the Bible seems to support his authorship of this psalm as well. Ezra describes a psalm with similar lines that he attributes to King David which was sung during the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 3:10-13). And the prophet Zechariah also makes multiple references to Psalm 118 when he describes the same rebuilding with Zerubbabel, the faithful governor of Israel, laying the corner stone of the temple amidst opposition (Zechariah 4:6-10, Psalm 118:22). Aligning the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah suggest that the unnamed psalm Ezra attributes to King David (Ezra 3:10) is Psalm 118.

Additionally, Psalm 118’s personal and poetic narrative bears similarities to the life experiences of King David. Moreover, the poetic narrative of Psalm 118 is comparable to the biographical narrative of Psalm 18, which was written by the king.

- Psalm 18:4-5/ Psalm 118:10-12 (psalmist surrounded by death/enemies)
- Psalm 18:3, 6/ Psalm 118:5 (psalmist called upon the LORD in distress)
- Psalm 18:19/ Psalm 118:5 (psalmist saved to a broad place)
- Psalm 18:20-22 / Psalm 118:15, 19 (the righteous are delivered)
- Psalm 18:37-38, 40-42/ Psalm 118:7 (the psalmist’s victory over his enemies)
- Psalm 18:49-50/Psalm 118:28-29 (giving thanks for the LORD’s everlasting lovingkindness)

The book of Nehemiah suggests that Psalm 118 was used in the dedication of the restored walls and gates of Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles in 444 B.C. (This was in the time of Ezra). Nehemiah 8:1, 14-18 tells us that as part of the Feast of Tabernacles the people made booths on their roofs and in their own courts, as well as the courts of the temple, using palm-branches, and there was “great rejoicing” (Nehemiah 8:16-17).

This activity corresponds to what is described in Psalm 118:15: “The sound of joyful shouting and salvation is in the tents of the righteous.” Nehemiah also tells us that some people made their tents in *the gate* (Nehemiah 8:16). Psalm 118:19 sings: “Open to me the gates of righteousness; I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; The righteous will enter through it.”

Moreover, at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews in the city were surrounded by enemies who first ridiculed them and then threatened to attack them and stop the work (Nehemiah 2:19-20, 4:1-9, 6:1-9). Again, we see a correlation between this scenario and Psalm 118. Psalm 118:10-14 sings about how enemies surrounded God’s people, but *the LORD* delivered them from danger. God’s rebuilding project championed by Nehemiah took fifty-two days, and this remarkable accomplishment by God and His people astounded the surrounding nations

(Nehemiah 6:15-16). There is a corresponding astonishment in verses 15-16 and 23-24 of Psalm 118.

Finally, Psalm 118, which was likely written by David, is also highly prophetic of Jesus the Messiah and Son of David. We will point to these prophetic connections as we come upon them throughout our commentaries of Psalm 118.

Biblical Text

**¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good;
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.**