

Joy in the Morning
based on Psalm 118:1-29

Psalm 118 lies quite literally in the very center of the Bible. And it begins with these words in verses 1 and 2:

1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. 2 Let Israel say: "His love endures forever."

People often oversimplify the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, saying that the Old Testament God is a God of wrath and the New Testament God is a God of Love. And, in some ways that's true.

But there are many acclamations in the Old Testament that God is a God of love. Psalm 118 is an example of that, for it bubbles over with joy.

In verses 19-21 we read:

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.

And notice the next two verses, 22 and 23:

22 The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone 23 the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

Sound familiar? It should. Those verses appear five times in the New Testament including Acts 4:11 in which Peter uses it as a prophecy of Christ.

The capstone is the finishing touch on the top of a building or a monument; it's the crowning achievement; it's the culmination of all that has gone before. That's what Christ is to us. But, before he could become the capstone, he had to be rejected.

Psalm 118 has one of the most familiar and best loved verses in scripture:

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.

Who could argue with this Psalm today? It speaks our language during the days of Covid-19. "Save us . . . Grant us success." And then comes the verse prized on Palm Sunday:

26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD . . .

This was the cry that came from the crowds that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. We talked about it last Sunday! It's almost as if the Psalmist could see these events unfold in his mind hundreds of years before the actual event. Listen to his words in verse 27:

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.

Then he adds a final declaration, so appropriate for us today:

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.

The Psalm begins and ends declaring God's unfailing love.

What is the Psalmist saying to us this day? How can his words help us find a way out when we're trapped in sin, sequestered in our homes, shut off by social distancing, gloves, and masks?

The Psalmist is saying to us that there is a time to celebrate. There is a time for parades and festivities. Life was never intended to be all duty, all serious-minded endeavor. There is a time for dancing before the throne of God, for praise, for shouts of joy.

It may surprise you, but, no language has as many words for joy and rejoicing as does Hebrew. In the Old Testament 13 Hebrew roots, found in 27 different words, are used primarily for joy or joyful participation in religious worship.

“The surest mark of a Christian,” said that great saint, Samuel M. Shoemaker, “is not faith, or even love, but joy.”¹ Theologian and philosopher de Chardin put it this way, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”²

Could it be that joy is a Christian’s primary duty? I don’t mean that we go around with a salesman’s phony smile on our face all the time. Rather that we consciously seek to trust God in all our activities in order to convey to others our quiet confidence that God is with us, and therefore, we can handle life in a victorious way.

Joy can be a powerful force in our lives. Joy can improve our relationships, enhance our physical well-being, refresh our spirits. We read in Nehemiah 8:10, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Don’t grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” Think about that for a moment. “The joy of the LORD is your strength.”

We must start each day by speaking aloud verse 24 of Psalm 118, “This is the day that the Lord hath made, I will rejoice and be glad in it”. Then we looked in a mirror and gave ourselves a big smile. It will change our lives. It will alter our attitudes. It will guide us through days of isolation and fear and worry.

Bo-feedback experts tell us that we don’t smile because we feel great, we feel great because we smile. Same goes for posture. You can affect your attitude by the way you stand. If you slump your shoulders and look at the floor long enough, you’ll get depressed.

Joy is a Christian duty. Joy is the Christian’s witness to the world of God’s love. Joy is a powerful force in our lives. Joy is an introduction to heaven for we were created for joy. Today, amidst all pain and suffering and fear and dismay rampant in this world, let’s make room for joy, unadulterated joy, in His presence for evermore.

As the Psalmist said,

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

¹ <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1638794/Sam-Shoemaker-The-surest-mark-of-a-Christian-is-not-faith-or-even-love-but-joy>.

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8986-joy-is-the-infallible-sign-of-the-presence-of-god>