

Psalms 118(117)



In all our trials, God has the last word



Give thanks to the Lord for he is good,
for his love endures for ever.

Let the sons of Israel say:
"His love endures for ever."

Let the sons of Aaron say:
"His love endures for ever."

Let those who fear the Lord say:
"His love endures for ever."

I called to the Lord in my distress;
he answered and freed me.
The Lord is at my side; I do not fear.
what can man do against me?
The Lord is at my side as my helper;
I shall look down on my foes.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in men;
it is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in princes.

The nations all encompassed me;
in the Lord's name I crushed them.
They compassed me, compassed me about;
in the Lord's name I crushed them.
They compassed me about like bees;
they blazed like a fire among thorns.
In the Lord's name I crushed them.

I was thrust down, thrust down and falling,
but the Lord was my helper.
The Lord is my strength and my song;
he was my savior.
There are shouts of joy and victory
in the tents of the just.

The Lord's right hand has triumphed;
his right hand raised me.
The Lord's right hand has triumphed;
I shall not die, I shall live

and recount his deeds.
I was punished, I was punished
by the Lord,
but not doomed to die.

Open to me the gates of holiness:
I will enter and give thanks.
This is the Lord's own gate
where the just may enter.
I will thank you for you have answered
and you are my savior.

The stone which the builders rejected
has become the corner stone.
This is the work of the Lord,
a marvel in our eyes.
This day was made by the Lord;
we rejoice and are glad.

O Lord, grant us salvation;
O Lord, grant success.

Blessed in the name of the Lord
is he who comes.

We bless you from the house of the Lord;
the Lord God is our light.

Go forward in procession with branches
even to the altar.
You are my God, I thank you.
My God, I praise you.
Give thanks to the Lord for he is good;
for his love endures for ever.



1. The sequence of Psalms from 112[111] to 117 [118] was sung during the most important and joyful feasts of ancient Judaism, especially during the celebration of the Passover. This series of hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God were called the "Egyptian Hallel" because, in one of them, Psalm 114 A [113], the



exodus of Israel from the land of oppression, Pharaonic Egypt, and the marvelous gift of the divine covenant are recalled in a visual poetic way. The last Psalm that seals this "Egyptian Hallel" is the Psalm 117 [118], just proclaimed, which we have already meditated on in an earlier commentary (cf. *General Audience, 5 December 2001; ORE, 12 December 2001*, p. 11).



2. This hymn clearly reveals its liturgical use in the Temple of Jerusalem. In fact, as it unfolds, we see a procession going forward, from among "the tents of the just" (v. 15), that is, the homes of the faithful. They exalt the protection of the divine hand, that can protect the just and believing, even when invaded by cruel adversaries. The Psalmist uses expressive imagery: "They compassed me about like bees; they blazed like a fire among the thorns. In the Lord's name I crushed them" (v. 12).

After escaping from this danger, the people of God break into "shouts of joy and victory" (v. 15) in honour of the Lord's right hand [which] was raised and has done wonders (cf. v. 16). Thus there is a consciousness that we are never alone, left to the mercy of the storm unleashed by the wicked. In truth, the last word is always God's, who, even if he permits the trial of his faithful, never hands him over to death (cf. v. 18).

3. At this point it seems that the procession reaches the end the Psalmist suggests with the image of "the gates of holiness" (v. 19), that is the Holy Door of the Temple of Zion. The procession accompanies the hero to whom God has granted victory. He asks that the gates be opened to him, so that he may "give thanks to the Lord" (v. 19). With him "the just enter" (v. 20). To express the harsh trial that he has overcome and his consequent

glorification, he compares himself to a "stone which the builders rejected" that then "has become the cornerstone" (v. 22).

Christ will use this image and verse, at the end of the parable of the murderous vinedressers, to announce his passion and glorification (cf. Mt 21,42).

4. By applying the Psalm to himself, Christ opens the way for the Christian interpretation of this hymn of confidence and gratitude to the Lord for his hesed, his loving fidelity, that echoes throughout the Psalm (cf. Ps 117 [118], 1.2.3.4.29).

The Fathers of the Church made use of two symbols. First of all, that of the "gate of justice" on which St Clement of Rome commented in his Letter to the Corinthians: "For many gates stand open: the gate of justice is the gate of Christ, and all are blessed who enter by it and direct their way 'in holiness and justice', accomplishing all things without disorder" (48,4: *I Padri Apostolici*, Rome 1976, p. 81; *The Apostolic Fathers, Letter of Clement of Rome to Corinth*, Thomas Nelson and Co. 1978, p. 44).

5. The other symbol, linked to the previous one, is the "rock". We will therefore let St Ambrose guide our meditation with his Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke. Commenting on Peter's profession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, he recalls that "Christ is the Rock" and that "Christ did not refuse to give this beautiful name to his disciple so that he too might be Peter, and find in the rock the firmness of perseverance, the steadfast solidity of the faith".

Ambrose then introduces the exhortation: "Try hard also to be a rock. However, to do this, do not seek the rock outside yourself but within yourself. Your rock is your actions, your rock is your thoughts. On this rock your house is built, so that it may never be battered by any storm of the evil spirits. If you are a rock, you will be inside the Church because the Church is on the rock. If you are inside the Church, the gates of hell will not prevail against you" (VI, 97-99: *Opere Esegetiche* IX/II [Exegetical Works], Milan/Rome, 1978: *Saemo* 12, p. 85).



Blessed John Paul II
General Audience, 12 February 2003
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20030212_en.html