

## “OPENING THE GATES”

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Palm Sunday      March 29, 2026

When I was in grade school, we used to have a way to order books through the mail. We would be given a multicolored page with a list of new books for young people from which to make our choices. At that time I enjoyed **detective stories**, actually I still do. I remember ordering an unusual small book which challenged my problem-solving skills. The book was not a novel, rather it was a collection of 1-page interviews or police reports. The reader played the role of detective, and your task was to read a brief interview and solve the case.

That detective book was challenging because you couldn't ask follow up questions, check on past behaviors, or do forensic analysis. All you had were the words from the brief. Fortunately, the solutions were written in the back of the book. If I became overly frustrated, I could take a peek, but even then, some of these puzzle solutions came out of left field.

Psalm 118 is the last in the series of **Hallel psalms** or praise psalms, used in Jewish festivals such as the Passover. It is a wonderful psalm and quite appropriate for Palm Sunday, however it is a bit of a mystery. There are several unanswered questions. For instance:

1. **Who is this person that comes in the name of the Lord?**
2. What crisis has the psalmist been saved from?
3. What does the gate of righteousness mean?
4. **Who or what is this stone that has become the chief cornerstone?**

I like a good celebration as much as anyone else, but the details behind this celebratory psalm are sorely missing and not even this sermon will unravel all the mysteries. Yet, all four Gospels quote from this **Psalm** on the day we call **Palm**

**Sunday.** Why was it so important to include it? Perhaps by exploring it, it will reveal some mystery about our faith in Jesus.

## **I. THE IMPORTANCE OF GATES**

This Psalm describes a **grand parade** full of people making a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem where they will celebrate a Jewish festival. This moving party has people singing, relatives and friends are greeted, food is shared, dancing takes place. The crowd continues to grow as people traveling from different places merge into one big noisy body. But up ahead there is a gate, and their journey will end unless they pass through the gate.

We probably don't think much about gates anymore. We might live in a gated community, or we could have a gate attached to a fence to keep the dog in and the deer out. But our cities are no longer surrounded by giant walls and even the expressway toll gates are being replaced by **EZ-Pass readers**. But in the time of Jerusalem's kings, the city gates were important. From a security perspective, they kept the peace of the city.

**City gates** in the ancient Israelite culture were far more than simple entry and exit points. They were the bustling, multi-functional hearts of the city, serving as the central hub for social, legal, economic and even military life. The city gate was a powerful symbol and a vital institution representing the community, its identity and its well-being. To control the gate was to control the city, and the activities that took place there were central to the life of every Israelite.

But our Psalmist is not talking about an **actual gate** when he cries out, "**Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord**". The **Gate of Righteousness** is a symbolic gate much like the **Great Arch of St. Louis**, which is called the Gateway to the west, but there is no fence around the

West. The Gate of Righteousness is an entrance into a new life with God. It is the gate of a redeemed people, those who have been put right and saved by God. To enter this gate is to enter into a new kind of relationship with God. However, we cannot enter the gates by our own effort. For that, we will need a rock and specifically a cornerstone.

## II. TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE OR TOO GOOD NOT TO BE TRUE

The Psalmist writes, “**The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.**” In ancient times, builders inspected stones carefully. The **cornerstone** was critical. It set the angle for the entire building and bore enormous weight. A stone tossed aside as unsuitable could suddenly be recognized as the most important of all.

Jewish tradition sometimes read this verse as referring to Israel itself: a small, overlooked nation chosen by God. Some saw it in the story of David, the youngest son dismissed by his seven brothers, yet chosen by God to be king. Christians think of Jesus being this rock, rejected, crucified, and risen to the right hand of God. All of these interpretations could apply because all of them refer to a surprise. The longshot wins. But I want to look closer at this **stone**.

One of the commentators I read referenced the cornerstone on which the great weight of the Temple rested, which would be the Southwest corner of the building. That stone kept the whole building from sliding into the Valley of Hinnom. By New Testament time it was the city garbage dump that burned continually and was renamed **Gehenna**. It became a metaphor for judgment, punishment, and damnation, in other words, **HELL**.

Now whether this valley actually lined up with the Cornerstone of the Temple, as historical fact or not, isn't as important as its powerful imagery. Without the stone

everything slides into...well you know where. The stone is what saves us. And here is the important part,

**“This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”** The psalmist is awestruck, overwhelmed by God’s work. He was not saved, he did not enter the gate of new life by accident, or by human invention, nor by just dumb luck. **No, it is the Lord’s doing.** This astonishing, miraculous, accomplishment flows out of God’s mercy, goodness, and steadfast love. It’s something you shake your head at because its too good to be true, but it is.

The once rejected, outside the gate, and troubled people have come to a different place in life because God has acted in human history. This verse calls to mind the resurrection itself — the ultimate reversal, the ultimate surprise, the moment when God’s power rewrote the ending of history. So, when reconciliation happens where only division seemed possible, when light shines in darkness, when life comes out of death, we can only say, **“This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”**

### **III. THIS IS THE DAY THE LORD HAS MADE.**

We have a gate, we have a stone, and now all we need is a **procession**. **“This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”** The response to what God has done is to receive the grace, to surrender to its call and to join in the grand parade of thanksgiving. When we do each day becomes miracle of God’s grace. **“O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, his steadfast love endures forever!”**

And yet, on this Palm Sunday there is a somber note to Psalm 118. It invites us to shout, **“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”** as we welcome the King of Kings through the gates of righteousness and into our lives. But let’s be honest. **We still struggle to welcome the real Jesus.** We want a Savior who confirms our worldview, not challenges it. We want gates that open on our terms, not his. **In**

other words, we want a political powerhouse. A king on a horse. A new David. But what we get is a man on a donkey, surrounded not by soldiers, but by children, disciples and commoners. It looks like a parade. But there's neither a crown nor a scepter. It's not like Jesus is on a Rose Bowl float doing the fake hand-wave thing. For Jesus, the road ahead is not strewn with roses or palm branches, **but rather nails, thorns and bitter gall**. He came to the capital city, but not to take the throne. He came to carry a **cross** and in doing so he redefines what it means to be King.

Perhaps we have forgotten that the gate of righteousness is more than a celebratory arch. **It is an invitation to surrender our lives, to pick up a cross and follow**. This Psalm does not unveil all the answers to our questions. We are left with a certain amount of mystery. But at the heart of this text, what it celebrates, what is not a mystery is God's unshakable covenant love and goodness. The details are not as important as one who is at the center of it all.

The gate is still open. The way is faith. And the cornerstone is Christ. Where is your parade going? **Amen**.

**First Presbyterian Church in Hawley**  
**Sunday, March 29, 2026**  
**Second Scripture Lesson**

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**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29**

1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

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19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

20 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

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 marvelous in our eyes.

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

25 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

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 he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

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 he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be To God.**