

At the entrance of the sanctuary of God's holy temple stand mighty gates. Behind these gates dwells a Being so majestic and so glorious that mighty angelic warriors fall on their faces in worship. These gates are guarded by priests whose sacred calling is to protect the honor of God and the lives of fools who would rush into the presence of the Lord. Their role is much the same as the angel with the flaming sword on the edge of Eden: only the righteous may pass through these gates and live.

And Israel was not righteous. She had fallen away from her God, and had been overrun by invaders. She had stumbled into a bees' nest of enemies, and everywhere she turned, she was swarmed and surrounded and stung. The nations attacked her like fire attacks a dry Christmas tree, and she was falling.

Now, instead of bees and brushfires, picture Roman armies, incurable diseases, and legions of demons. Picture a puppet king chosen from a neighboring tribe, specifically chosen so that he *wouldn't* cause trouble, so that he *wouldn't* rescue and save his people. Picture a group of religious leaders, half of whom were in league with the oppressors, and half of whom were so busy micro-tithing and enforcing hyper-scrupulous Sabbath rules that no one was fed, helped, or given rest.

Look again at a tottering, staggering church today, feebly swatting at the bees of money, sex, and power, losing leaders by the hundreds to scandal and children by the thousands to disillusionment and worldliness.

And look at your own life, struggling to rise above the selfish and the petty, knowing that you're supposed to be a light to world, but wishing that just for one day you could get your own act together. You're not even righteous enough to open the door of your own life, your own heart.

Who is going to open the gates of righteousness for you? Or will you forever be on the outside, cut off from God, surrounded by enemies, and falling, always falling short of the glory of God? Will the church forever be a bloodstained whore? Will the nations always rage against the Lord? Will the gates of righteousness always be shut?

Psalm 118 shouts out that the answer is *no*, because Psalm 118 celebrates the coming of a righteous King who calls on the priestly guardians to *open the gates of righteousness!* This is good news; this is the gospel! The gates of righteousness *will* be opened, and the righteous *shall* enter through it!

And so the Psalm bounces back and forth from King to priest to people in a three-way dialogue of rejoicing and praise, and it ends with the King exhorting the people to join Him in thanking the Lord for His steadfast love. The love of the Lord opens the gates of righteousness to welcome the righteous King and the people that He brings with Him.

And the reason why this Psalm is read on Palm Sunday is because Palm Sunday marks the arrival of King Jesus into Jerusalem, as He is on His way to the temple. This is the moment where Jesus' life lives out the drama of Psalm 118, and we see that most clearly when the crowd on the Jerusalem road welcomes Jesus by shouting out their part of this Psalm, especially from vv. 25-26: "Save us!" (Which is what "Hosanna!" means); "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" That's what we read in Mark 11 today. And you might notice also that in Mark 12, Jesus applies verses 22-23 to Himself also: "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Psalm 118 is fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem, beginning with the Triumphal Entry: Jesus is the Righteous King, and the gate of the Lord is opened to Him, for Him, and by Him. But we need to look closer, because we need to know more about the righteousness of King Jesus, and most importantly, we need to know how we can share it!

Some people seem to think that the Righteous King *broke down* the gates of righteousness so that the *unrighteous* can come in. The cold, distant, unrelatable God of the OT shut Himself up behind gates to keep sinners out, but Jesus took a kinder view of sinners, and since God really likes Jesus, He tolerates sinners like us and lets us through the gate after all.

That's a terrible misreading of the Bible, but it's very attractive to sinners because *if it were true*, it would mean that we could get through those gates without *dying*, without paying the price for sin. But Jesus did not bribe God so that He would *overlook* your sin; Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice to *atone* for your sin. Although v.27 talks about a different sort of sacrifice, it raises the theme of sacrifice here in this Psalm: bind the sacrifice to the altar!

There is no righteousness for the people of God without sacrifice. Christ Jesus offered Himself as a sin-bearing sacrifice and called on God to save Him, and God answered and declared Him to be righteous by raising Him from the dead. (More on that next Sunday!) That's why, when King Jesus calls for the gates of righteousness to be opened, *they open* – a righteous King has come to sacrifice!

And that's what is going on in verses 19-21. The King says: "Open the gates so that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord!" Thanks for what? That's verse 21: "Thank you for answering me and becoming my salvation."

Then in v. 22, we see the response of the people, and this is where we learn about how the King's righteousness can become ours – *through our response to the King!* The people look at the King, and they are astonished: "That stone was rejected! We threw Him away! We didn't want Him to be our King!" And that's what we've been seeing in Mark – Jesus is insane, demon-possessed, He's a meddling lawbreaker – He's not the King Israel is looking for, and so they reject Him.

But here's what's amazing: through that rejection, not just *in spite of it*, but *by means of it*, Jesus becomes the cornerstone! They reject Jesus as *unrighteous*, which leads them to make Him into a sacrifice, but God opens the gates of righteousness to Jesus when He knocks because of His sacrifice! That's marvelous; that's the Lord's doing. The people didn't crucify Jesus as part of their plan to become righteous; they killed Him out of jealous rage and spite. But it was the Lord's doing, so that the righteous King could make many righteous. This is a marvel, a wonder! This is an amazing work of God!

And notice what this means: God wasn't holing up behind the gates and judging sinners from a distance; He was sending Jesus so that He could make a way to open the gates. God wants to welcome us, but we have to be righteous first; and so He sent Jesus to make us righteous! That's *His* doing, and it's marvelous!

And there have been a million posters and cross-stiches that ignore the backstory of verse 24: "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!" What "day"? It's not talking about each new day, as a morning pep-talk get-out-of-bed verse. There are two days: there is a day when the gates are closed; and there is a brand new day in which the gates are flung open so that Jesus can walk through! Rejoice and be glad – it's Open-gates Day!

And that brings us to the all-important verse 25: the people have responded to what God did in and for Jesus by saving Him, and now in verse 25, they turn to God and say, "Hosanna!" That is, "Save us, too!" Having just seen what God did for Jesus, making the rejected stone into the cornerstone, finding value in something that was seen as worthless, they want Him to do that for them, too. Don't you? Don't you want to be found righteous?

And so they turn in faith to the Righteous King in v. 26 and say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” And on Palm Sunday, this means that they accept and affirm Jesus’ ministry as coming from the Lord God Himself. That’s a confession of faith – they are asking God to save them as they follow Jesus. “We’re following Him, Lord! Save us, too!”

And the Word comes back from the priests in verse 26, from the house of the Lord: “Jesus, we bless you from the house of the Lord.” And the gates swing open. Here is a righteous King, leading His people into the presence of God to worship.

And then I take verse 27 to be the response of the people: “The Lord is God.” *Right worship has been restored.* “And He has made His light to shine upon us.” *The people have found favor with God – they may approach Him.* “Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!” Now, a festal sacrifice is not specifically an atoning sacrifice, the kind that deals with sin, but by raising the *theme* of sacrifice, when we read Psalm 118 in light of Christ, it’s hard not to hear at least an *echo* of the sacrifice that Christ will make on the cross, which results in our sacrifices of praise, which we offer up in worship through our songs and prayers.

And in the context of that sacrifice, the King speaks again in verse 28, speaking to God: “You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you.” This is what had been missing: a righteous King leading people to worship God. Thanks be to God for King Jesus, who comes in the name of the Lord!

And then the King does what a good king should: He turns in verse 29 and exhorts the people to follow Him: “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!” And this is what we are doing even today: as we remember Jesus’ triumphant march to the temple in Jerusalem, we are joining Him in giving thanks to God. Our palm branches and our Hosannas proclaim that we have seen what God has done in and through Jesus Christ, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

So here is the charge: Follow the righteous King to give thanks to God, and the gates of righteousness will never be closed to you; since you are found righteous in Christ, you may enter in and be saved.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*