



The rejected stone exalted

Psalm 118:19-24

Most scholars believe that this Psalm was written after the exile when Israel again came to their own land and the temple had been rebuilt. It was a very important song for Israel's liturgy because it expressed certain things which had not been spoken of before. There are many repetitions in this Psalm. *"Let Israel say, let the house of Aaron say, let them that fear Jehovah say"* and *"they compassed me about, all nations compassed me about, they compassed me about like bees"* etc. The Psalm is written in this form because different groups would sing and others would answer. Psalm 118 was one of several for the antiphonal singing.

The new temple

As the temple was being completed in the days of Zerubabel, there were still people who remembered the gorgeous temple of Solomon. To them this new temple after the captivity appeared to be a poor shadow of the temple which Israel had once enjoyed. But, they must realize that this is the gate, the gate of righteousness that leads into the presence of God! The temple of stone is not the important thing, but what goes on in this temple. There the sacrifices are to be brought. This temple, though it does not seem to be as splendid as its predecessor, will also be the way of approach to the living God. Let the people realize that this is indeed the gate of Jehovah. Let them see to it that they themselves are righteous so that they may be able to enter this gate which leads into His presence of the Righteous One. Despite all the troubles which have happened to this people, there is abundant reason for gratitude. The Lord had brought them back from captive lands. He has again given them a place to stand. Salvation has been given this people. If they share in this salvation they have everything. Now He has permitted them to build this temple. It may not be as fine in appearance as the former one — let them dry their eyes and look to Him in thanksgiving for all that He has done. The Psalmist realizes this and urges himself as well as all the people to give thanks to God! God has indeed answered the prayers of His people. He has made all things well. They will have to begin anew, but, they may begin!

The corner stone

It is especially the 22nd verse of this Psalm which calls for the larger share of our attention. It is primarily this verse which makes Psalm 118 a Messianic Psalm. Surely, it has reference to Israel first of all. That Israel which had virtually ceased existing as a nation when it was taken into captivity is now being restored. It is the nation which has been rejected by the other nations of the world so that it does not even count among the nations. However, it was the people whom He had chosen, and He always remembers His covenant. Perhaps the other nations will not give Israel a place among them, not even a minor place. God, however, has a purpose with this people and will give it the place of prominence. That is the place it has occupied in spite of its small size. No, don't come with the argument that the nations around Israel do not do the building and therefore also do not do the rejecting! These words of this verse have virtually become a proverb in Israel. This is the way God will ultimately deal with His people. He deals with them in the very opposite way from the way which men have dealt with them.

Christ Himself quotes these words as having reference to Himself (Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10, and Luke 20:17). In each one of these instances He has described the way in which tenants have dealt with the vineyard and then the way in which they have dealt with the Son of the owner. Peter, when he is making his defence before the rulers of the Jews also refers to this verse and applies it

to Jesus (Acts 4:11). He refers to these words once more in his first general epistle (chapter 2) and there shows how His people are built on the Christ. Paul too makes reference to this passage in Romans 9:33 where he also shows how the Israel of God is built on the foundation, Jesus Christ. Obviously this verse has played an important role in the thinking of God's people, revealing the place which Christ will occupy in the economy of God.

Discarded

Looking at these words more closely, we realize that the picture drawn is one of builders seeking out the proper stones for the building of the temple of God. They come to this stone, which is the Messiah, and they cannot see how this one can fit into the building and be of service there. As a result, they discard it again and again, much as one would reject a piece of a puzzle which he cannot seem to fit into the whole picture he is making. This, says Jesus, is exactly what has happened to Him. The rulers of the Jews, those who were entrusted with the building of the Israel of God, rejected Him. Peter emphasizes this same truth before the Sanhedrin. They had not recognized Him as Messiah; they did not even recognize Him as a worthy son of Israel, and therefore cast Him out. These were the men who had great responsibilities. They had to see to it that the vineyard would be profitable for its Owner. They thought that it would detract from the profitability of the vineyard if they allowed Him in. He was in their estimation the total misfit. They couldn't use Him anywhere. The leaders of His day did not consider Him a fit member of the church of that day. They took extreme measures to show their displeasure with Him and "excommunicated" Him by sending Him to an accursed death! The rejection of verse 22 is therefore not to be taken lightly. It was a conscious rejection! They could not see how He could have a place in that building of God which they were erecting. They ousted Him as a blasphemer.

"Head of the corner"

Now a most astounding thing happens. While the builders had not considered Him as a fit stone in any part of the building, He is made the "head of the corner." Much has been written about cornerstones. The Bible also often refers to them. It is difficult to determine exactly what the function of a cornerstone was. Some say that the entire building rested on it, and the Bible at times seems to point in that direction. However, that is not the usual meaning; nor is it the meaning it has today. The cornerstone is the stone which binds two walls together and determines the angle of these walls. It is one of the most important stones in a building — and, it may even be said that it is the most important one. Accordingly, the stone which was rejected because it was a misfit by the builders is nevertheless the most important stone in that building and they will never be able to complete that building without this particular stone! How did they stumble on this truth? Was it by trial and error? No, they never came to the conclusion that this One should have this place. Someone else stepped in and took over. The Owner for Whom they were building this building. The One Whose vineyard it was stepped in and exacted proper workmanship from these so-called builders. It is Jehovah's doing! No one can understand it. It is marvelous in our eyes. Who had ever understood the way of salvation? No one! That the promised salvation had to come about in this way — no one had dreamed. How could Jesus go from suffering into glory? How could He repudiate the ways of the leaders of the people and still be the Messiah for Whom they had longed?

The Lord's doing

With the placing of this cornerstone, the building is complete. Isaiah had spoken of the fact that God would lay a precious stone in Zion and that the further building would be upon this stone (Isaiah 28:16). The Apostles also play on this same theme. He is the foundation stone on which the people of God will be built. So the church comes into being. Israel, the true Israel of God, owes its very existence to Him. Here again we are reminded of the fact that salvation is of Jehovah. It has not been thought out by man. The leaders, the religious leaders, stand amazed at the ways of God! He seems to go in a direction which is the very opposite of the one they would have chosen. And, these leaders were serious. They sought the welfare of Zion, as they saw that welfare!

Having seen the wonderful works of God, how He has reached down into the history of our redemption, the Psalmist concludes this beautiful passage by singing the praises of this God. This is the day which Jehovah hath made. The writer of this Psalm has seen the salvation of God's people completed. When that occurs he rejoices with unspeakable joy. Salvation gives the greatest reason for joy; in fact, if there is no salvation there is no rejoicing at all. The world of unbelief may think that they can rejoice, but, their happiness is empty, it is vanity. Jehovah has seen to it that this day might come. He is the Author of all the blessings of this day. To Him thanks must be given. The writer finds it necessary to remind himself of the fact that he should rejoice and be glad in this day of salvation. Salvation is often taken for granted. Should we be thankful for material things? Of course. Thankful for life and health? Of course. But, to be thankful for salvation we must look deeply into the ways of God and see the marvelous things which He has done.

There have been various types of the Christ in the Old Testament. Israel itself is also a type of Christ. That Israel of God had been rejected by all men, but not by its God. Even the leaders of God's people were going to reject His Son, but God intervened. What they did not recognize, He had sent for their life and their salvation!

These leaders may well have wrestled with God in their prayers on Easter morning. What would now become of Israel seeing this troubler of Israel had escaped them? Later many of the priests also believed on Him, thank God!

Jehovah did not follow the route they would have chosen. But, only His route leads home!

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Questions for discussion

1. How important is it for a church to sing the Psalms? What are churches who sing only hymns missing? Explain.
2. The building of the new temple after the captivity proceeded amid great difficulty. The prophet Haggai told the people that they would have no prosperity until they built the house of God. How important is the house of God today for our general welfare?
3. Why would the builders reject the stone mentioned in vs. 22? Did "He" not immediately present Himself to the people as the all-together lovely One?
4. How do the words of Psalm 118:22 remind you of Psalm 2?
5. When the Christ has been assigned His proper position the people are able to rejoice. How does this hold true in the preaching of the Word.