

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 118

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Psalm 118 is the final psalm of the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113–118), sung at Passover and the great Jewish festivals. It opens and closes with the identical call to give thanks to the LORD, for He is good and His steadfast love endures forever (vv. 1–4, 29), forming a liturgical envelope around the whole. The psalm moves through three distinct phases. First, a corporate summons to thanksgiving is issued to Israel, the house of Aaron, and all who fear the LORD — each group called to affirm the permanence of God’s *hesed* (vv. 1–4). Second, an individual voice (presumably the king or the community’s representative leader) recounts a history of distress, deliverance, and vindication (vv. 5–21): pursued by nations like swarming bees, pushed back to the point of falling, the speaker was rescued by the LORD and has now arrived at the gates of the sanctuary to give thanks. The climax of this section is the declaration that the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (v. 22) — a reversal so dramatic that it can only be the LORD’s doing, and it is marvelous in the eyes of those who witness it. Third, a processional liturgy takes shape (vv. 22–29): the crowd blesses the one who comes in the name of the LORD, the LORD makes His light to shine on the festal procession, sacrifices are bound to the altar, and the psalm closes with the same refrain that opened it.

This Text — Intent:

God is calling His people — individually and corporately — to locate their entire experience of deliverance within His character: specifically within His *hesed*, His covenant faithfulness, which does not merely help in distress but reverses what appears to be final defeat. The intent is not merely to produce thanksgiving for past mercies but to reorient the reader’s fundamental posture toward life itself — away from the assumption that circumstances, enemies, or human power determine outcomes, and toward the settled confession that the LORD’s steadfast love is the permanent reality through which all other realities must be interpreted. The specific movement from “pushed hard so that I was falling” to “the LORD helped me” (vv. 13–14) is meant to create a faith-reflex in the hearer: when the situation is impossible, that is not evidence against God but the precise context in which His character is most fully displayed. The New Testament’s use of verse 22 in multiple contexts signals that the psalmist’s individual experience of rejection-then-vindication was always, even in the Old Testament setting, pointing toward a larger pattern of God’s redemptive reversal — one fully realized in Christ.

Subject Sentence: The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone — the LORD’s hesed alone explains it.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to anchor every experience of distress, near-defeat, and vindication in the permanence of His covenant love — because the pattern of rejection-to-vindication that runs through this psalm is the pattern of His redemptive work in history, fully realized in Christ and now available to every person who comes through Him.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Messianic Force of Verse 22

The most significant interpretive question in Psalm 118 is the force of verse 22: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” In its original context, most interpreters agree the image describes the community’s representative — the king, or Israel itself — who was despised and nearly destroyed by surrounding nations but whom the LORD has vindicated. The primary sense is clear and sufficient. The question is whether the New Testament’s application of this verse to Christ (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10–11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7) should be read as typological fulfillment, allegory, or creative reapplication.

Dispensational and some Baptist interpreters tend to read the psalm’s direct referent as national Israel — the rejected nation vindicated by the LORD in the eschaton — with the New Testament quotations functioning as analogical rather than typological. The verse “fits” Christ’s experience but was not originally about Him. This reading acknowledges the New Testament use but resists calling it fulfillment in the stronger sense.

The Reformed typological reading is both exegetically and canonically superior: the pattern the psalmist describes — the divinely appointed one, rejected by human authorities, vindicated by God in a reversal so dramatic it is “marvelous in our eyes” — is not merely analogous to Christ; it is the pattern that reaches its singular climax and full referential weight in Him. The New Testament authors do not read verse 22 as a loose metaphor; they read it as a text that always bore this weight and is now disclosed to have done so. Peter’s use in Acts 4:11 is particularly strong: there is salvation in no other name, and the one through whom salvation comes is precisely the stone the builders (Israel’s leaders) rejected. The type-antitype relationship is not imposed on the psalm from outside; it is the most coherent account of why this verse appears in four separate New Testament contexts with such force.

The Reformed reading does not deny the psalm’s original liturgical and national context — it insists that context is a real stage in the unfolding of a pattern God was superintending all along. The king who processed through the gates of the sanctuary bearing his deliverance

was a true but partial instantiation of the One who would enter Jerusalem to the same words (“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD,” v. 26; Matthew 21:9) and accomplish the definitive rejection-and-vindication the psalm could only gesture toward.

“This is the Day the LORD Has Made” (v. 24)

A secondary interpretive issue concerns verse 24, perhaps the most frequently decontextualized verse in the psalm. In popular usage it functions as a general affirmation of daily gratitude — “rejoice and be glad in it” taken as applicable to any and every day. This is a reading by extraction; it is not false, but it is deficient. In context, “this is the day” refers to the specific day of the LORD’s decisive act of deliverance recounted in the psalm — the day of vindication, the day the rejected stone was exalted. The rejoicing called for is not generic morning gratitude; it is the exultation of people who have witnessed God’s reversal of what appeared to be final defeat. In its fullest New Testament sense, “this is the day” points to resurrection — the day the builders’ rejection was overturned by divine fiat. Applications drawn from this verse should honor this specific, redemptive-historical force rather than domesticating it into a general principle of positive outlook.

The Individual Voice vs. Corporate Setting

Some Lutheran and Wesleyan interpreters emphasize the corporate-liturgical frame of the psalm so heavily that the individual voice of the “I” speaker in vv. 5–21 is absorbed into communal identity. This produces solid liturgical application but can miss the crucial dynamic that the psalm is built on: the individual experience of distress and deliverance becomes the ground and content of corporate praise. The psalm deliberately moves between individual testimony (vv. 5–21) and corporate affirmation (vv. 1–4, 22–29). Both poles matter; neither should be collapsed into the other.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 15:1–18** — The Song of the Sea shares the psalm’s core pattern: impossible deliverance accomplished by the LORD alone becomes the content of permanent praise; “the LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation” (v. 2) is quoted directly in Psalm 118:14, marking the conscious canonical link.
- **Isaiah 28:16** — The LORD declares He is laying in Zion a tested cornerstone; this grounds the stone imagery in divine intentionality and covenant architecture, confirming that what appears to be rejection is actually strategic placement.
- **Matthew 21:42 / Mark 12:10–11** — Jesus cites Psalm 118:22–23 directly after the Parable of the Tenants; the rejected stone is explicitly identified with Himself, and the reversal is declared to be the Father’s doing — the clearest New Testament disclosure that the psalm’s pattern finds its fulfillment here.

- **Acts 4:11–12** — Peter, before the Sanhedrin — the very builders who rejected the stone — applies verse 22 with maximum force and exclusivity: salvation is in no one else; there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.
- **1 Peter 2:4–8** — Peter weaves Psalm 118:22 together with Isaiah 28:16 and Isaiah 8:14 into a unified teaching: Christ is the living stone, chosen by God but rejected by men, and those who come to Him become living stones built into a spiritual house — the psalm’s imagery extended into the ecclesiology of the new covenant community.

Aim: To lead hearers to anchor their experience of distress and near-defeat in the permanence of God’s covenant love — and to show them that the rejection-to-vindication pattern they encounter in their own lives is not accidental but participates in the same redemptive logic that carried Christ through death to resurrection.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–4	Corporate summons: Israel, house of Aaron, all who fear the LORD — each called to affirm that His steadfast love endures forever	Opens the psalm’s envelope; establishes hesed as the theological ground of everything that follows
5–7	Individual testimony begins: out of distress I called on the LORD; He answered and set me free; with the LORD on my side I do not fear — what can man do to me?	“Set me in a broad place” (v. 5) — spatial imagery of liberation from constriction
8–9	Better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man or princes	Wisdom-shaped interruption; the deliverance just described generates a comparative judgment about where trust belongs
10–12	All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off — three times	Threefold repetition emphasizes the totality of the threat and the sufficiency of the name as the only weapon

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
13–14	I was pushed hard so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me; the LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation	Direct quotation of Exodus 15:2 — the speaker’s personal deliverance recapitulates the Exodus
15–16	Songs of victory in the tents of the righteous; the right hand of the LORD exalts, the right hand of the LORD does valiantly	“Right hand” — repeated three times; power attributed entirely to the LORD
17–18	I shall not die but live and recount the deeds of the LORD; the LORD has disciplined me severely but has not given me over to death	Death-to-life contrast; suffering acknowledged as the LORD’s discipline, not His abandonment
19–21	Open the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks; this is the gate of the LORD; I thank You that You have answered me and become my salvation	Arrival at the sanctuary gates; thanksgiving structured as direct address to the LORD
22–23	The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes	The psalm’s theological climax; rejection reversed by divine sovereignty; wonder is the only appropriate response
24	This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it	“This day” = the day of the LORD’s decisive reversal; not a generic daily affirmation but a specific redemptive-historical moment
25	Save us, we pray, O LORD; O LORD, we pray, give us success	“Hosanna” — save now; the cry of the processional crowd
26–27	Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD; we bless you from the house of the LORD; the LORD is God	The blessing of the arriving one; light imagery; sacrifice bound to the altar — the procession reaches its

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	and has made His light to shine on us; bind the festal sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar	climax
28	You are my God, and I will give thanks to You; You are my God; I will extol You	Personal, direct, doubled address — “You are my God” — the covenant formula internalized
29	Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever	Closing envelope: identical to v. 1; the entire psalm is framed by the permanence of hesed

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Summons: All Who Fear the LORD, Declare His Hesed
2	5–18	The Testimony: Out of Distress, Through the Nations, Into Life
3	19–21	The Arrival: Entering the Gate of the LORD with Thanksgiving
4	22–24	The Reversal: The Rejected Stone, the LORD’s Day, Marvelous in Our Eyes
5	25–29	The Procession: Hosanna, Blessing, Sacrifice, and the Closing Refrain

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone — the LORD’s hesed alone explains it.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to anchor every experience of distress, near-defeat, and vindication in the permanence of His covenant love — because the pattern of rejection-to-vindication that runs through this psalm is the pattern of His redemptive work

in history, fully realized in Christ and now available to every person who comes through Him.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe your distress as the address where God characteristically shows up. [Mind/Belief]

The psalmist does not describe distress as God's absence but as the specific location from which he cried and was answered (v. 5). If you are currently in a situation that feels like "pushed hard so that I was falling" (v. 13), the psalm is not calling you to deny that reality — it is calling you to recognize it as exactly the kind of situation in which the LORD's character is most fully displayed. Reframe the impossibility not as evidence against God's care but as the theater in which His steadfast love becomes unmistakable. The one who keeps insisting "this situation cannot be redeemed" has not yet grasped that the same God who made a cornerstone out of a rejected stone is the God who holds this situation.

2. Transfer your functional trust from human power to the LORD's name — specifically and practically. [Will/Behavior]

Verses 8–9 are not a platitude; they are a comparative judgment forged in the heat of national-level threat. The speaker has watched princes fail and seen what the LORD's name accomplishes where human power could not. Name, concretely, the person, institution, income source, or relational structure in which you have been placing trust that belongs to the LORD alone. This passage calls you not merely to feel differently about God but to make a concrete transfer — to act differently in the specific area where you have been trusting a prince more than the LORD.

3. Let the permanence of *hesed* become the emotional ground on which you stand, not merely a doctrinal affirmation you hold. [Affections/Worship]

The fourfold repetition of "His steadfast love endures forever" (vv. 1–4, 29) is not rhetorical filler; it is liturgical formation. The psalm is trying to do something to you emotionally, not merely inform you doctrinally. Ask whether God's covenant faithfulness functions as a felt reality — something that actually steadies you in distress — or merely as a belief you would affirm on a questionnaire. The difference between these two is the difference between the psalmist's confidence in verse 6 ("I will not fear") and a theoretical agreement with the proposition "God is trustworthy." Let this psalm's repetition work on you: say it, sing it, write it out — until the truth migrates from the propositional layer to the affective ground.

4. Receive the rejection-to-vindication pattern in your own life as participation in Christ's pattern, not merely as personal resilience. [Mind/Belief]

When you experience rejection — by people who should have affirmed you, by systems that should have included you, by circumstances that should have gone differently — the

psalm calls you to see that experience within a specific theological frame: the builder's assessment is not final. The stone the builders reject is the stone God chooses. This is not a general encouragement toward optimism; it is a claim about the specific way God's redemptive logic works, a logic demonstrated definitively in the cross and resurrection of Christ. The person who has been passed over, dismissed, or written off by human judgment is standing exactly where the pattern of God's redemptive work has most characteristically played out.

5. Come to worship as someone arriving at the gate of the LORD with something real to recount — not as a passive observer of a religious event. [Will/Behavior]

Verses 19–21 portray entrance into worship as the culminating act of a journey: the speaker arrives at the gate of the LORD bearing specific testimony — “You have answered me and become my salvation.” This psalm will not let worship be merely a scheduled activity. Before you enter the next gathering of God's people, take the time to identify one specific instance — recent or remembered — where the LORD answered you. Arrive at the gate with that testimony ready. The psalm's processional structure implies that corporate worship is most alive when the people entering it are carrying personal accounts of the LORD's faithfulness rather than arriving as blank participants.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 118 is the supreme Old Testament expression of the theological claim that God's *hesed* — His covenant faithfulness, steadfast love, and loyal commitment — is not a static attribute but an active, intervening, reversing force in history. The psalm teaches that God characteristically operates through the pattern of distress → cry → answer → deliverance → testimony, and that this pattern is not accidental but reflects the LORD's nature and covenant commitments. The cornerstone saying (v. 22) reveals that what human judgment regards as final — rejection, dismissal, defeat — is never final when God is involved; He reserves the right and exercises the power to make the rejected thing the defining structural element. The psalm also teaches that individual deliverance and corporate worship are not separable: personal testimony of God's faithfulness is the content that fills communal praise, and communal liturgy is the frame that gives individual experience its full theological weight.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 118 functions within Reformed theology as one of the clearest Old Testament witnesses to the sovereignty of grace operating through apparent defeat — which is to say, it is one of the most important typological anticipations of the theology of the cross. The stone the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone is not merely a metaphor for unexpected reversal; it is a disclosure that God's redemptive

architecture was never dependent on human endorsement or institutional approval. This aligns precisely with the Reformed insistence that salvation is of the LORD from first to last — that the instrument God chose, the one the world’s builders rejected, is the one through whom the entire structure of salvation is held together (1 Peter 2:4–8; Acts 4:11–12). The psalm’s framing of individual experience within corporate covenant identity also reflects the Reformed emphasis on covenant community: personal deliverance is not a private transaction but testimony offered within and for the gathered people of God. Finally, the fourfold hesed refrain grounds the whole psalm in the objective, unchanging character of God rather than in the fluctuating experience of the worshiper — a deeply Reformed instinct: what stabilizes the believer is not the quality of their own faith but the permanence of the One in whom their faith is placed.

Main Takeaway

The LORD’s steadfast love is not merely a comfort when things go wrong — it is the permanent reality that overturns every verdict human builders render final. The stone they rejected is now the cornerstone. What looks like your defeat may be precisely where God is doing His most decisive work. Come to Him with that — and do not leave without declaring it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Extracting verse 24 from its redemptive-historical context.** “This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” is among the most beloved and most decontextualized verses in the Psalter. It is routinely preached as a general principle of daily gratitude — applicable to any morning of any day. While the truth it implies is not false, its specific force in context is far more powerful: “this day” is the day of the LORD’s decisive redemptive reversal, the day the rejected stone was exalted. In its fullest New Testament resonance it points to resurrection. Preaching it as a mindset tip for positive mornings is not wrong, but it is a significant reduction. Restore its redemptive-historical weight before making broader applications.
- **Flattening the individual testimony into generic community language.** The “I” of verses 5–21 is doing crucial work: this is someone who was specifically, personally, severely threatened and personally delivered. Preachers who rush past this testimony to get to the corporate liturgy of verses 22–29 lose the dynamic the psalm is built on — that corporate praise is funded by individual testimony. The “I” should be preached with full weight before the “we” is addressed.
- **Treating the cornerstone saying as merely inspiring without engaging its exclusivity.** Verse 22 is not a general encouragement to resilient people who have been underestimated. In the New Testament’s own use, it is an exclusive claim: *this*

stone, the one through whom salvation comes, and no other. Applications that use verse 22 to encourage listeners who feel overlooked are not wrong, but they are incomplete and potentially misleading if they do not arrive at the canonical referent — the one in whom the pattern is fulfilled and through whom alone the gate of the LORD may be entered.

- **Moralistic application of the trust comparisons in verses 8–9.** “Better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man or princes” is easily preached as a self-improvement maxim — try harder to trust God, rely less on people. This misses the gospel motivation entirely. The speaker is not offering a better productivity strategy; he is testifying that the LORD has proven Himself to be a better refuge than man or princes by actually delivering him. The application must flow from demonstrated character, not from bare imperative. The reason to trust the LORD rather than princes is not “because you should” but “because He is the one who answered when I cried, who helped when I was falling, who made the rejected stone the cornerstone.”
- **Missing the Exodus intertextuality of verse 14.** “The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation” is a direct quotation of Exodus 15:2 — Moses’ song at the sea. The psalmist is deliberately placing his personal deliverance within the defining Exodus narrative of Israel’s history. This is not a coincidental verbal echo; it is a theological claim: what the LORD did at the Red Sea, He has now done for me. Preaching that misses this connection leaves the passage thinner than it is. The individual testimony is consciously placed within the largest available framework of God’s redemptive acts.
- **Preaching the hesed refrain as sentiment rather than as load-bearing confession.** The fourfold repetition of “His steadfast love endures forever” opens and closes the psalm. Preachers who treat this as poetic flourish — a warm feeling at the beginning and end — miss the structural and theological point: the permanence of hesed is the ground on which every other claim in the psalm stands. The testimony of distress and deliverance in the middle is comprehensible and trustworthy only because this character claim brackets it. The refrain is not decoration; it is the theological thesis statement of which the rest of the psalm is the proof.