Immediately following the Lord’s Supper, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn, according to Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26. Those verses in Greek, the New Testament’s original language, say “they had hymned” — so they may have sung more than just a single song. What did they sing? Almost certainly they sang one or more of the “Egyptian Hallel” Psalms (113-118), or possibly the “Great Hallel” Psalm (136). Hallel means “praise” in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, and these Psalms call on the worshiping congregation to give thanks to Yahweh (“the LORD”).

By the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the Jewish people had come to associate Psalms 113-118 with the Passover and God’s redemption of his people from their bondage in Egypt; accordingly, these Psalms were known as the Egyptian Hallel. Even though only the second of these Psalms, Psalm 114, refers to the exodus, the themes of exalting the lowly (113), Yahweh’s superiority over idols (115), personal thanksgiving (116), God’s dominion over the world (117), and “festal” (that is, related to a feast; see Psalm 118:27) procession (118) all suit the annual observance of God’s deliverance in the Jewish Passover feast. The Egyptian Hallel Psalms were read and sung during the three Pilgrim Festivals — Passover, the Feast of Weeks (or, Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles — when Jews went to the temple in Jerusalem to offer their required sacrifices.

Psalms 113 and 114 of the Egyptian Hallel would customarily have been sung before the Passover meal, and Psalms 115-118 would have been sung after. The Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples may have been a Passover meal or simply an ordinary Jewish meal that occurred one day before the Passover (there is some debate on this issue); regardless, their singing of such Psalms would have prefigured a greater exodus, a deliverance from sin and eternal death that Christ our Passover lamb was about to accomplish by offering himself as the full and final sacrifice God requires (1 Corinthians 5:7).

It is also possible that the hymn Jesus and the disciples sang after the Last Supper was Psalm 136, known as the Great Hallel. Psalm 136 came to be called the Great Hallel because it reminds worshipers of God’s steadfast love demonstrated to his people throughout their history at the time of the Psalm’s writing, from the creation of the world, to the exodus from Egypt, to the conquering of the Promised Land, and after. Each verse contains the refrain “for his steadfast love endures forever” (a phrase also used twice in Psalm 118 of the Egyptian Hallel). In some Jewish traditions, the Great Hallel is recited at the end of the Passover festival. If Jesus and his disciples sang the Great Hallel after the Last Supper, they would have been heartily celebrating Yahweh’s faithful kindness to his people in preserving them and rescuing them from their enemies, which Jesus would accomplish in a yet more profound and lasting way through his death and resurrection.

- **Sunday – Psalm 113** summons us to praise Yahweh all our waking hours, because he is exalted and mighty above all peoples and things, and because he is merciful and gracious to those who are lowly and in need.

- **Monday – Psalm 114** recalls the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, and God’s miraculous deliverance through the sea. It ends by pondering God’s exercise of power over the world he created in order to provide for his people after the exodus, as he also did in Exodus 17:6 and Numbers 20:8-13.
• **Tuesday – Psalm 115** calls on God’s worshipers to renounce glory for themselves in favor of glory for God. It contrasts the greatness of the living Yahweh with the baseness of inanimate idols, and promises God’s eternal favor toward his people.

• **Wednesday – In Psalm 116** the psalmist commits to express his love and gratitude to Yahweh through acts of public worship, because God delivered him from death.

• **Thursday – Psalm 117** is a concise but worldwide call for all peoples to praise Israel’s God, because of his great and faithful love to all who trust in him as their God.

• **Friday – In Psalm 118** one who describes himself as a king in the line of David directs all of God’s people to praise God for his eternal, steadfast love, demonstrated here especially through God’s unexpected victory of the king from his enemies.

• **Saturday – Psalm 136** intersperses the refrain “for his steadfast love endures forever” amid calls to thank Yahweh for his power and wisdom in creating the universe, his miraculous deliverance of his people Israel from Egypt, his giving of the Promised Land through Israel’s military conquests, and his ongoing care to both Israel and all of creation.
Psalm 118

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

2 Let Israel say, 
   “His steadfast love endures forever.”

3 Let the house of Aaron say, 
   “His steadfast love endures forever.”

4 Let those who fear the LORD say, 
   “His steadfast love endures forever.”

5 Out of my distress I called on the LORD; 
   the LORD answered me and set me free.

6 The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. 
   What can man do to me?

7 The LORD is on my side as my helper; 
   I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

8 It is better to take refuge in the LORD 
   than to trust in man.

9 It is better to take refuge in the LORD 
   than to trust in princes.

10 All nations surrounded me; 
    in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

11 They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; 
    in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

12 They surrounded me like bees; 
    they went out like a fire among thorns; 
    in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

13 I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, 
    but the LORD helped me.

14 The LORD is my strength and my song; 
    he has become my salvation.

15 Glad songs of salvation 
    are in the tents of the righteous: 
   “The right hand of the LORD does valiantly, 
    the right hand of the LORD exalts, 
    the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!”

17 I shall not die, but I shall live, 
    and recount the deeds of the LORD.

18 The LORD has disciplined me severely, 
    but he has not given me over to death.

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 cornerstone.\[el\]
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 pray, O LORD!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!
26 Blessed is he 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 made his light to shine upon us.
Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, 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 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

Background Reading: Psalm 118; Matthew 21:9,15 (parallel passages: Mark 11:9,10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13); Matthew 21:42 (parallel passages: Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17); Isaiah 28:16; Acts 4:8-12; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4-7

- God’s purpose in our peril is to display his steadfast love, as we surrender our sinful self-reliance and discover God’s sufficiency in a more profound way. Have you experienced a dangerous, even potentially life-threatening situation? How did this experience impact you spiritually?

- Read Psalm 118 and also 2 Samuel 7:8-16. What clues in these passages indicate that the author of Psalm 118 was in the line of Davidic kings?

- From what you recall of the sermon, what is the original meaning of “steadfast love” (Hebrew chesed) in verses 1-4 and 29? How does God’s “steadfast love” relate to God’s sparing the king from death by enemy nations? (Note also that the people bless the king in celebrating the king’s divinely given victory over his enemies, v. 26).

- Did the crowds at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem think he, too, was a king in the line of David? See Matthew 21:9,15; Mark 11:9,10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13. (Note that the exclamation hosanna comes from the Hebrew in Psalm 118:25, and means “O save!”) How were the crowds’ assumptions correct? How were their expectations incorrect?

- Psalm 118:22 seems to describe the psalmist-king as “the stone that the builders rejected [who then] has become the cornerstone.” What did this description probably mean to its initial audience? How did Jesus fulfill this description (see, for example, Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10-11, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:8-12, Ephesians 2:20, and 1 Peter 2:4-7)?

- Psalm 118:14 quotes Israel’s victory song from Exodus 15:2. How is the experience of the author similar to that of Israel’s exodus from Egypt? How did Jesus later accomplish and fulfill an exodus for God’s people?
Eventually the writer of Psalm 118 died (contrast with verse 18). God also does not rescue us from every danger, nor from our eventual departure from this life. How then can we rely on God’s “steadfast love”?

What one encouragement or other application do you take away from this Psalm?