

Thank You God, Thank You!

Psalm 116

Turn to Psalm 116 please. Somewhere in your life, God rescued you from a bad thing. Something scared you, pressed you, you were in trouble, and you were praying about it and asking God for help. And he helped you, rescued you, took the bad thing away.

Maybe recent, maybe a long time ago, doesn't matter. If you're old like me you've a few. There are things where you're still waiting for rescue, of course, but today is not about those.

Psalm 116 is about the time when God heard your voice, he heard your cry for mercy. So remember a story like that. I'm not going to ask you for it. It's to help you understand our psalm.

A few weeks ago I made a distinction between two kinds of praise psalms, worship praise and thankful praise. Worship praise is praise for God's overall goodness and greatness.

“Worship the LORD with gladness, with joyful songs. He made us, we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.” That's from Psalm 100, worship for God's eternal goodness and greatness, the big picture God: “worship praise.”

The lament psalms say, “How long will you forget me LORD? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will you ignore my prayers and my suffering? Look on me and answer, LORD my God, or I will fall.” That's from Psalm 13, a lament.

And then, when God answers the lament, we have thankful praise. “I love the LORD for he heard my voice, he heard my cry for mercy. When I was brought low, he saved me. The LORD is gracious, our God is full of compassion.” That's thankful praise.

Worship praise sings about God's eternal greatness and goodness. Thankful praise sings about a particular rescue, one specific thing that our God did, God's answer to a clear cry for help.

While we are lamenting we cannot bring God thankful praise, although we can join in with someone else's thankful praise. While lamenting even worship is hard, though not impossible.

All the psalms are intended to be congregational worship. While some of us thank God, others lament. While some of us lament that God's not helping, someone else overflows with thankful praise. In Psalms, this is healthy normal body life, healthy normal church life.

Psalm 116 is the most joyful and pure thanks to God in the Psalter, as far as I can see. I've been reading and re-reading this psalm all week. It infects you with happiness and relief.

“God took the bad thing away and I'm so glad, so thankful to him.”

So we'll go through it now. It has three stanzas. Some divide it differently, but this seems best. Each stanza begins with God's goodness, and ends with the psalmist's response.

The first stanza is mostly about the wonderful thing God did, the second stanza has more about our response to God, how we say thank you, and the third stanza is mostly about how we respond. How exactly should we say thanks to God when he takes away the big bad thing? This psalm will show us what thanks could look like.

### 1. What God for me – Verses 1-7

<sup>1</sup> *I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.*

<sup>2</sup> *Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.*

<sup>3</sup> *The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me;  
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.*

<sup>4</sup> *Then I called on the name of the LORD: "LORD, save me!"*

<sup>5</sup> *The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.*

<sup>6</sup> *The LORD protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me.*

<sup>7</sup> *Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.*

He heard my voice, he heard my cry, he turned his ear to me (vv1-2). In the Psalms and the rest of the OT, when they say God "hears" our prayer that means he answered it. It does not mean that he's not listening before the prayer is answered. God pays attention whenever we pray. But they did not talk about God as "listening" to them until he actually did what they asked for.

Verse 1 is the theme of the whole psalm: *I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.* Because he heard my cry, *I will call on him as long as I live.* I won't pray to anyone else, I will always pray to the LORD.

Verse 3 speaks of death. Each of the three stanzas mentions death. Sickness? Danger? Don't know. The actual trouble is vague. What was the big bad thing? We don't know. The psalms are composed for group worship, and that is why the psalms are always ambiguous about the details, so that as many people as possible can make this their prayer.

The psalms are remarkable for this combination. They are usually heartfelt and personal and genuine, like this psalm, and at the same time give very few specific details about the situation, so that all kinds of thankful people can sing this to God. Psalms are user-friendly.

Verse 6 – *the LORD protects the unwary.* The "unwary" means the "simple," almost the "silly." It sounds like this thankful person should have seen the trouble coming. "If I had been paying attention, if I was a little smarter," the psalm says, "I would have seen this disaster coming, maybe I could have avoided it. But I was not paying attention, I did not see this coming. But the LORD protects the simple, he protected me; when I was brought low he saved me."

## 2. What God did for me, and what I will do for God – Verses 8-14

<sup>8</sup> For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,

<sup>9</sup> that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

<sup>10</sup> I trusted in the LORD when I said, “I am greatly afflicted”;

<sup>11</sup> in my alarm I said, “Everyone is a liar.”

<sup>12</sup> What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?

<sup>13</sup> I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

<sup>14</sup> I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.

This stanza also begins with God’s goodness. *You, LORD, have delivered me*, from my eyes to my feet, you delivered me from top to bottom.

Verses 9-10 are not easy to understand, no one is quite sure. But it seems to mean that the psalmist was in great distress, but even while in distress was also trusting the LORD. And not trusting in people, the psalmist completely mistrusts people, helps will come only from God.

Verse 12 - *What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?* Most of the psalm from here on answers that question. The psalmist is grateful to the core of his soul, and wants to give something back to God. When God answers a specific prayer, a big prayer for us, how should we say thank you? Psalm 116 will tell us.

I will skip v13 for now, come back later. Verse 14 - *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.* Verse 18 says exactly the same thing – *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.*

What we learn here is that there has been a vow. Along with the prayer, “*LORD, save me (v4)*” there was a promise. “LORD, if you save me, I will do this for you.” What we do is a one-time event. Don’t say what you’re doing to do for a year or the rest of your life.

Don’t go near vows like that. *I will call on the name of the LORD, I will fulfill my vows in the presence of all his people.* LORD, if you answer this prayer, I will thank you and give you honour in front of your people. That’s a good vow. Tell us in our worship service here.

## 3. What I will do for God – Verses 15-19

<sup>15</sup> Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.

<sup>16</sup> Truly I am your servant, LORD; I serve you just as my mother did;  
you have freed me from my chains.

<sup>17</sup> I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.

<sup>18</sup> I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,

<sup>19</sup> in the courts of the house of the LORD—in your midst, Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD.

V15 *Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.* This has been preached at funerals, I've heard it, how much God likes to bring his faithful servants home to him in heaven.

Most commentaries say it should be translated differently: *Costly in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.* That is, *The death of his faithful servants costs the LORD dearly.*

“Precious” can nicely mean “costs the LORD dearly,” and it fits better into this psalm. The psalm is not about how much the LORD wanted the psalmist to die, the very opposite, the psalm is about how the LORD kept the psalmist alive.

Now we pick up the question from verse 12 - *What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?* The first part of the answer is in v16 - *Truly I am your servant, LORD; I serve you just as my mother did; you have freed me from my chains.*

This is a basic choice to keep serving God. It is not a decision to be a better servant, it is simply a determination to keep serving the LORD. We don't know how mother got into the psalm, there must be an interesting story there, but we've no idea. Except that I will keep doing what my mother passed on to me.

V17 - *I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.* In Leviticus 7 Moses gave the regulations of a thank offering. It says in Lev 7:15 that the meat of a thankfulness offering must be eaten on the day it was offered, leave none of it until morning. This is repeated in Lev 22:29-30 – it must be eaten the same day, leave none of it until morning.

The animal for this offering could be a cow or a calf or a sheep or a goat, male or female (Leviticus 3). What does it mean that you have to eat it all the first day?

It means that you have to take lots of people with you. For a free-will offering you had two days, did not have to take along so many family and friends, but for a thanksgiving offering you had to talk enough family and friends along to eat all the meat the first day.

So we need to imagine something like a big thanksgiving meal like we have on thanksgiving day. They did it because someone was thankful to the LORD for being rescued. This psalmist is going to do put on a meal like that. When he prayed, *LORD save me*, it seems that he told God that if God answered the prayer, the psalmist would do this.

This is probably where the cup of thanksgiving comes in. Wine was a part of offerings like this, wine poured over the part of the animal that was burned on the altar (Num 15:1-14; 28:1-8). And wine will also have been part of the thanksgiving meal.

So somewhere in the process the thankful person lifts the cup of wine and says something like “*I love the LORD, for he heard my voice, he heard my cry for mercy.*”

And so he fulfills his vows to the LORD in the presence of the LORD's people.

*<sup>12</sup> What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?*

*<sup>13</sup> I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.*

*<sup>14</sup> I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.*

*<sup>17</sup> I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.*

*<sup>18</sup> I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,*

*<sup>19</sup> in the courts of the house of the LORD—in your midst, Jerusalem.*

*Praise the LORD.*

So think about this. I know that if we have a desperate prayer, we are tempted to make a deal with God. God, if you do this for me, I will do that for you. For the most part I suggest that you do not make a deal with God. But this kind of deal with God is good.

Three things to promise God. One, and most basic, “God, if you rescue me from this big bad thing, in front of your people I will thank you and honour you.” This one should be normal.

Perhaps what you want rescue from is private, you don't want to discuss the details. You can say that. Just read the first six verse of this psalm, and tell the people that this is your story, God has been good to you and you are full of thankfulness to God. One, thank God publicly.

A second thing you might promise is a gift to God. A simple gift would be a one-time gift of money in the church offering beyond your normal tithes and offerings. You're not paying God back, or paying for services, you are giving a gift to God as a sign of your gratitude. Does not need to be big.

Tell God: “God, if you answer this prayer, I will give you ...” and then tell God what your thank offering will be, a one time gift. And if he answers, make sure you give it.

A third thing you might promise is a thanksgiving meal. You could put in on in your home, or go somewhere else. The meal would be a celebration of what God had done, how he had heard a prayer and answered it. You would tell the people there what God had done for you, and that the meal was to celebrate God's goodness to you.

It all puts a different flavour on thankfulness, doesn't it. The law of Moses built these things into temple worship, and the Israelites used it. This psalm certainly encouraged them and encourages us to respond to God in this way.

We have a real God, who is close to us whenever we pray to him. This real God listens to our real prayers about our real lives, and sometimes he gives real answers, doing the very thing we asked. So, let's give him real thanks.

We love you LORD, because you heard our voice. You heard our cry for mercy. Because you turned your ear to us, we will call on you as long as we live. Anguish came over us, we were overwhelmed with distress and sorrow. Then we called on you, LORD: “LORD, save me!” You are gracious and righteous, you are full of compassion. You protect the unwary, the simple that were not paying attention. When we were brought low, you saved us. You have been good to us. Amen.