

"I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice"

May 7, 2023 Sermon

Psalm 116

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Psalm 116 is one of the Psalms of Thanksgiving.

Thanking God for His goodness to us should be at the heart of our prayers.

Being thankful helps us worship, helps us trust, and helps us be generous.

Being thankful also helps us believe that God is with us, and he will answer our prayers.

Christians should be thankful people, who speak with a specific accent.

Christian author Jon Bloom said:

"grumbling is the accent of hell" and "gratitude is the accent of heaven."

I like that.

Grumbling and complaining are the opposite of giving thanks.

The apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 2:14 to "do all things without grumbling."

That's meaningful coming from Paul, who suffered beatings, imprisonment, and shipwrecks.

One time, Paul was stoned until he appeared dead.

But it is Paul who urges the Thessalonian Christians to:

"give thanks in all circumstances;

for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Gratitude is the accent of heaven, but we learn to speak that accent here on earth.

I know that grumbling is a normal response for people who live in a world of pain and disappointment.

But God gave people like us the psalms to be model prayers.

This book is about the relationship between real people who have real struggles, and the real God who cares for us and helps us.

Let's learn more about prayer now from Psalm 116.

1 I love the Lord, because he has heard

my voice and my pleas for mercy.

2 Because he inclined his ear to me,

therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

3 The snares of death encompassed me;

the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;

I suffered distress and anguish.

4 Then I called on the name of the Lord:

"O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!"

5 Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
our God is merciful.

6 The Lord preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.

7 Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

8 For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling;

9 I will walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.

10 I believed, even when I spoke:
“I am greatly afflicted”;

11 I said in my alarm, “All mankind are liars.”

12 What shall I render to the Lord
for all his benefits to me?

13 I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord,

14 I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.

15 Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his saints.

16 O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant.
You have loosed my bonds.

17 I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the Lord.

18 I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,

19 in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord!

Together we read Isaiah 40:8:

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Please pray with me.

Father in heaven, we come to you because you are the source of life and truth.

Jesus, we worship because you are full of mercy and love.

Holy Spirit, please open our hearts and minds to be transformed by the word of God, amen.

If you want the short version of this psalm, you will find it in verses 1-2.

The first few lines in Hebrew poetry are often a summary of the entire poem.

Listen to verses 1-2 again:

1 "I love the Lord, because he has heard

my voice and my pleas for mercy.

2 Because he inclined his ear to me,

therefore I will call on him as long as I live."

The author had a problem in the past.

We don't know what the problem was.

But he prayed and begged for help, and the Lord heard his prayers.

Therefore the author loves the Lord today, and will pray to him throughout his life.

The author's problem was something very serious.

Verses 3-4 are the words of a person in a life-or-death struggle:

3 "The snares of death encompassed me;

the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;

I suffered distress and anguish.

4 Then I called on the name of the Lord:

"O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!"

God wants you to come to him, even when you feel weak to pray at all.

You don't need strong faith to pray.

Look at verse 10:

"I believed, even when I spoke:

"I am greatly afflicted."

I'm glad verse 10 is in this psalm.

It reminds me of the man who told Jesus in Mark 9:24,

"Lord I believe, help my unbelief!"

God doesn't close his ears to people who have weak faith.

He hears the faintest whisper of his needy children.

Last week we looked at Psalm 77, to remind us that even godly leaders like Asaph struggled with doubt.

Like Asaph, we often ask: "Why God?"

"Where are you God?"

"Why is this happening if you love me?"

It's okay to say those things--but don't grumble into the darkness.

God wants you to pray your tears and fears to him.

That's what verse 10 means.

In your own words you might pray something like this:

"God, I am so sad, and so hopeless, that I can barely even talk to you.

But I will pray, because I know you are listening, even when I whisper."

Your prayer doesn't have to be any more sophisticated than that.

Just call out, as the author did when the "snares of death" threatened to pull him down.

He was in distress and anguish, and then look what happened in verse 8:

8 "For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling;"

God delivered His child from death because He loved him.

Psalm 116 teaches us where to go with our fears and our doubts.

Even when our doubts and questions are about God, He invites us to pray.

Because our soul will only find relief and rest in Him.

You might not receive an answer immediately.

You might not get the answer you want.

But continue to seek God in the storms of life, keep praying.

Sometimes God calms the storm, and sometimes He calms His child.

But if you are His child, He will never ignore you or forget you.

I love verse 2:

2 "Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live."

God the Father isn't sitting up in heaven with his arms crossed and a stern look on his face.

When His children cry out, he leans forward, he bends down to give you his full attention.

Don't forget that!

The Creator and King of the entire universe will pay full attention to you when you pray.

There are many powerful people on earth who won't take your phone call.

Presidents and prime ministers won't answer your emails.

But your Father in heaven will always listen to anyone who has been born again through faith in Jesus Christ.

God doesn't listen to everyone's prayers, did you know that?

David said in Psalm 18:40-41:

40 "You made my enemies turn their backs to me,
and those who hated me I destroyed.

41 They cried for help, but there was none to save;
they cried to the Lord, but he did not answer them."

Until you confess your sin and need for Jesus, you don't have access to the Father through prayer.

But when you pray in the name of Jesus your Savior, then the King of Kings is listening to you.

If you want access to the ears of God the Father, first talk to the Son.

You have to come in humility saying: "Jesus, I am a sinner.

I have hurt myself, hurt others, and hurt you.

Please wash my sin away, and give me your righteousness."

Sophisticated vocabulary will not make God listen to your prayers.

He doesn't listen because you've been a good person this week.

Verse 5 says that God listens because:

5 "Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful."

God helps His people because it is in His character.

Grace and mercy aren't abstract ideas.

They describe who God is.

We receive grace and mercy because he IS gracious and merciful.

If you are God's child, then He will always hear your prayers for help.

But He might not answer them in the way you want.

You see, coming to the Lord as a child requires us to trust that he knows what is best.

Look at verse 6:

6 "The Lord preserves the simple;

when I was brought low, he saved me."

Sometimes I pray to God with a fully-formed plan, all laid-out in detail on a spreadsheet.

My plan is ready for His signature.

That is not praying with simple humility.

When we pray our plans to God, we are focused on what He can do, not who He is.

We should pray our hearts to God instead.

He gives grace to the humble, to the lowly in heart.

When we pray in the name of Jesus, we admit that we need help.

We confess that we are sinners saved by grace alone.

Jesus died the death we deserve, to grant us the access to God that sons and daughters deserve.

Jesus faced torture and death, in your place, so you can pray verses 8-9 to God.

This is a prayer only Christians can pray:

8 "You have delivered my soul from death,

my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling;

9 I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living."

Do you see the 3 blessings here that the author is thankful for?

Verse 8 tells us that God has delivered the author's heart, soul, and body--dealing with his past, future, and present.

God healed the author's heart, wiping away his tears about the past.

Looking into the future, the author's soul is delivered from death for eternity.

And in the present, God protects the author's body, guarding his feet so he will not stumble.

Jesus walked through the land of death for us, so we can walk in the land of the living.

That good news should change the way we live.

It changed the author.

Five verses in this psalm begin with the same two words: "I will..."

He says he will respond to God's goodness with gratitude and action.

He is finished grumbling, it's time for praising.

Look at verses 13-14:

13 "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord,

14 I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people."

This man is not going to stay quiet!

Something wonderful has happened, and he's going to tweet about it, post it on Facebook, and tell everyone he knows.

He's going to give his thanks to God at a worship service, so all of God's people will hear his testimony.

Last week in this room we shared some testimonies about God's good deeds.

Many of us share testimonies in our Life Groups.

One of the best things about attending a Life Group is praying for one another.

In our Thursday night group, we write our prayers in a book each week.

That way, we can report back to our brothers and sisters about how God answers our prayers.

It is a blessing to share those stories, and it is also obligation.

Look at verses 17-18:

17 "I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the Lord.

18 I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,"

What is "the sacrifice of thanksgiving?"

It is described in Leviticus 7:12 and 15:

12 "If they offer it as an expression of thankfulness,
then along with this thank offering they are to offer thick loaves made without yeast and with olive oil mixed in,
thin loaves made without yeast and brushed with oil,
and thick loaves of the finest flour well-kneaded and with oil mixed in.

15 The meat of their fellowship offering of thanksgiving must be eaten on the day it is offered;
they must leave none of it till morning."

Notice that the sacrifice of thanksgiving was food.

God did not ask for a sacrifice of bricks, or clothing, or jewelry.

After hearing a testimony about God's goodness, the people ate the sacrificed food and celebrated together.

Psalms 34:8 says:

8 "Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him."

Giving thanks reminds us, and everyone around us, that we depend on God for everything.

We all need that reminder.

There is something in our hearts that is reluctant to be truly and fully thankful.

Pastor Matthew Jacoby has written a lot about the Psalms.

He says: "To be truly grateful, to allow ourselves to feel indebted to God--
we have to be willing to give up the masquerade of independence."

Friends, we really like to be independent and self-sufficient, especially in America.

All human beings want freedom from God, to do whatever we want to do.

This started with Adam and Eve.

Instead of being truly thankful for God's generosity, they focused on the only thing they couldn't have.

We all think we will be safer and happier if we are independent.

When problems come along, we like to solve them ourselves.

Then we can say, "I did it!"

But everything good in our lives comes from God.

Anything in this world that is good flows from his hands.

Giving thanks to God reminds us of that fact, and it builds our faith for the future.

Verses 17 and 18 are a declaration of total trust and dependence on God:

17 "I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord.

18 I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people,"

When you give God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, you give him your heart.

Because God always cares about His relationship with us more than anything else.

That brings us to the last verse we need to look at before I finish.

Verse 15 might sound strange to you:

15 "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

What does this mean?

The Hebrew word here means valuable, costly, or precious.

When something is very valuable or precious you are careful with it.

You give it special attention to keep it safe, right?

I think that's what verse 15 means.

Remember what we read in verse 8a:

"For you have delivered my soul from death."

The author's life had been in danger, but the Lord saved him.

It was not the right time for him to die.

This means that our death will only occur when the Lord allows it.

Our life is precious and valuable to the Lord.

Therefore our death is something he weighs carefully in his mind.

And when you die, God's protection and concern for you will continue.

Our death is precious because God meets us in death with tenderness and hope.

The Lord also pours out tenderness and hope for those who weep when our loved ones die.

We are able to grieve with hope for anyone who could pray verse 9 with confidence:

"I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living."

When you think about your death, do you have confident hope that you will spend eternity in heaven?

If your hope is built on your own record of obedience, then please don't be confident about heaven.

But if you have built your hope on Christ's record of obedience, then you can have confidence.

Trusting in Christ's finished work for us, we can focus our eyes on heaven as our eternal home.

This is what we will see there.

Listen to Revelation 7:9–10.

9 "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number;
from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages
standing before the throne and before the Lamb,
clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,
10 and crying out with a loud voice,
"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

One day we will sing with that congregation.

We will understand and proclaim that all our blessings on earth were from God.

We will sing with the accent of heaven, with the accent of thanksgiving for all God has done.

Until then, we can practice the accent of heaven here on earth.

Here are seven Psalms for you to read this week.

Praying these will help you speak to God with an accent of gratitude:

30, 40, 66, 92, 100, 118, 138.

Meditate on them, pray them out loud, read at the dinner table.

Make these prayers your own prayers of thanks and trust in the Lord.

Now, let's read together a few verses from Psalm 116 as our closing prayer.

Please stand and read with me.

1 "I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.

2 Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live!"

12 What shall I render to the Lord
for all his benefits to me?

13 I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord!"