

Psalm 116 • The joy of answered prayer

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Psalm 116 is really a simple declaration of praise, and the reason for that praise is given in the very first verse of this Psalm. Look with me there in verse 1, and it says,

“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.” (ESV)

Let me just explain something here in the Psalms. It is very typical, and I'm sure you've seen this in our study thus far, for the psalmist to come out and do things backwards from our American Western way of thinking. When you and I tell a story, we tell the beginning of the story, then we slowly add to it and add to it, add to it and then, we come to the end, and we call that the payoff, and we make our point. So we say, so based on all these things, here's my point. Okay.

Well, in Hebrew literature, they would actually do the opposite. They would start by giving the point—in other words, the summary—at the very beginning and then go back to explain why they made that particular statement.

The summary is given at the very beginning of this Psalm, and that is, I love the Lord, because He has heard my voice. That's you and I would end the story that way.

We would say, man, let me tell you what happened to me this last week. and we'd start by saying, well, first of all... and then I'd tell you, and then this happened, and then that happened, and then this happened. But then I prayed, I cried out to God, and I really needed His help. And He met me. He heard my prayer. He answered my prayer, and man, do I love the Lord. You see, that's how we tell stories—opposite for the Jews, right?

You've got to understand that going into it. The summary is at the beginning, and he's saying to you at the outset, I love the Lord because He heard my voice. He heard my plea for mercy.

Hey, do you guys, do you remember , do you remember the joy? Maybe it's happened to you recently. I hope it has. But do you recall the joy of having a prayer that really meant a lot to you, answered? Have you ever cried out to the Lord with all of your heart? I'm not just talking about the prayers we do along the way: hey Lord, bless my day or whatever.

I'm talking about a situation that comes up in your life where it's like life or death, and you feel like, I need the Lord to intervene. And if He doesn't, I'm not sure I'm going to make it through this one. And you cry out with all your heart. And I mean, you cry out to the Lord. And the Lord, as the psalmist uses this language, inclines His ear to your prayer. That simply means to turn—to incline your ear is to turn.

In other words, the psalmist is saying, He turned to me, He listened to me. And obviously, He met the needs of the psalmist, which is why he says at the end of verse 2, “...therefore I will call on Him as long as I live.”

In other words, the psalmist has become mightily convinced of the power of prayer and of God's willingness to hear and respond to our prayers. And now he's jazzed, and he's like, man, I'm going to keep doing this. And that's such a wonderful thing when somebody gets that—when they get that, wow, this prayer thing works.

Have you ever noticed how we'll pray, we'll pray about something, and then when God answers our prayer, we're like, you're not going to believe this! It's like we kind of believe—you know our lack of faith sometimes, don't you think? But I think it's really an issue that we need to address as Christians, as believers, you need to ask yourself the question, and I need to ask myself the same question: Do I believe that prayer makes a difference? Do I really believe it? Okay, we've talked about this before.

But the more you believe something is going to have an impact, the more you believe you're investing in something that's going to have a payback, the more excited you're going to get about paying into that thing.

If somebody came along to you and offered an absolute guaranteed payback for some sort of financial investment...They said, listen, there's no possible way you can lose money. In fact, you're going to double your money within 6 months. And you knew this person to be trustworthy; they had a lifelong example of trustworthiness. Yeah, you'd probably go, yeah, I'm in. I'm in. I'll do it. Where's my wallet? Here, let's get going. Go ahead and invest my money in that thing.

Yeah, let's do this. Why? Because I know that I know that I know that it's going to make a difference.

Now think about that same investment in prayer. Think about the time we spend in prayer. Think about the things we pray about. Think about how we think about praying about things. Is prayer your first thought? Are you thinking, wow, I need to pray about that. I need to give that to the Lord. Why? Because I want, I need to invest myself into the process of where we need to be down the road. And I believe that when I invest myself, there's going to be a payoff down the road, right? That's called faith, you guys.

I don't mean to sit here and make prayer sound like nothing more than a financial investment, but the illustration follows, and it helps us to understand the whole idea that when you pray to God, you've got to have faith. You've got to have faith. You've got to know that He's listening. God's listening. He loves to have that relationship with me where I'm talking to Him, and I'm telling Him about my needs.

But I'll tell you something—once you've been where the psalmist has been, and you've been at that crossroads of some life-altering decision or situation in your life, and you cry out to God for all you're worth, and God responds—the response or the attitude is really very much like we see expressed here. It's like, man, do I love the Lord, and I am going to pray for the rest of my life as long as I live. I'm going to pray because I know that I know that I know that I'm not just throwing my prayers away. I know I'm not just praying them into the air.

Some people say, I just really feel like my prayers are going nowhere, and you want me to do something about that. That's a faith issue. That's a faith problem. It's not like God is hard of hearing or He's stopped listening to you. We've got to start taking responsibility for our feelings. I just feel like God just isn't listening. Well, get over it, because He tells you in His word that He's listening. So are you going to believe your feelings, or are you going to believe His word? Right?

We all have to come to terms eventually, deciding: Am I going to listen to my feelings, or am I going to listen to God? Am I going to believe my feelings, or am I going to believe God? Anyway, this is a beautiful Psalm as he expresses his love and praise for God, and the reason, of course, for that praise, as he restates it there in verse 2, saying, “...*he (turned or) inclined his ear to me...*”

And then he begins to do what you and I would do at the very beginning of our story. We would tell what led up to our prayer and then the answer, but he's

going to do that now, beginning in verse 3. He says, "*The snares of death encompassed me...*" and that's a poetic way of saying, I thought I was going to die. You and I would just say that we thought we were dead and leave it at that, but he's going to be more poetic about it. So he's going to say,

"The snares of death encompassed me (which means they're wrapped around me); (he says) *the pangs of Sheol* (which is the grave) *laid hold on me*; (and he says) *I suffered distress and anguish.*" And that's something we can understand, he says, though.

"⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD: (And he even tells us what he said, he said,) *"O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!"*

It was really a pretty simple prayer. He was just praying for deliverance—Lord, deliver me—but he cried out with all of his heart: Lord, deliver me, deliver me!

And so what happened? He says in verse 5,

"Gracious is the LORD (He's very—He's so full of grace and he says), *and righteous*; (and he says and) *our God is merciful.*" He's so merciful.

The Bible says that God delights to show mercy here (Micah 7:18-19). The psalmist now has experienced that mercy—he's experienced it. He didn't just read it somewhere. You and I can read it in the Bible and say, yeah, God is merciful. But when you experience God's mercy, it's a completely different thing, right? I experienced the mercy of God! He says in verse 6,

"The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me."

And so look what he then says to his soul. I think this is interesting because previously he said, *"...I suffered distress and anguish."* But now he says in verse 7—and you can tell he's taking a breath before he says this. It's this long, deep breath, and then he says,

"(Alright,) Return, O my soul, to your rest; (Why? Well) for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you."

Remember, your soul is the seat of your emotions, your intellect, and your will. And he said earlier, I was totally stressed out. I was in anguish. Well, that's the soul just being agitated and chaotic, and there's no rest.

Have you ever been through something like that, where you were in such distress? You, like, couldn't sleep at night. You knew that lying down was only going to make it worse because, during the day, you can stay busy, and you can forget a little bit by just doing something. And then night comes.

And have you ever been through a situation where you literally hated the night to come? Because you knew that when night came, the house was going to be quiet, the house was going to be dark, and you were going to need to lie down and at least pretend like you were going to sleep. But you knew that sleep wasn't going to come to your eyes, and you knew that what was going to happen is that your mind was going to kick in, and it was just going to start churning over these things.

And you were going to just sit and think, and pretty soon, you're going to think yourself into a tailspin. Then you throw back the covers in anger, and you get up anyway, and you just get up and start doing something because you feel like, well, that's stupid. I'm just wasting my time in bed, and you know what's happening. That's a soul that's in turmoil. That's a soul that is just completely agitated.

And the psalmist is admitting that during this time of difficulty, that's the condition his soul was in. But now, the Lord has answered his prayer. And so he now speaks to his soul and says, return to your rest.

It's a wonderful thing when your soul is at rest. That's when you can sleep. That's when you can be at peace. That's when you can look people in the eye and smile and say, hi, how are you? and really care about their answer because your soul is at rest. The psalmist is saying this: Now my soul is at rest because the Lord has dealt bountifully with me.

Verse 8, he's now speaking again to the Lord:

"For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling." And so what is he saying?

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

He thought he was going to die. He literally thought this situation was going to overwhelm him to the point of death. He says, no, but now I realize I'm going to walk in the land of the living with the Lord, and so forth. So, he goes on in verse 10:

“I believed, even when I spoke: ‘I am greatly afflicted’ Even while I was saying to the Lord, I'm greatly afflicted. I'm agitated. I'm anxious. I'm upset, I still believed. I still had faith. I was still exercising faith, he says,

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

In other words, he's saying to the Lord, I'm not going to put my faith in man. I'm not going to rest in their ability to get me out of this situation. All men are completely unfaithful. No one...

In fact, let me show you these couple of verses from today's English version. I don't quote this very often, but they render it this way: verses 10 and 11.

Psalm 116:10-11 (TEV)

I kept on believing, even when I said, ‘I am completely crushed,’ even when I was afraid and said, ‘No one can be trusted.’

I kept on believing, even when I said, ‘I am completely crushed,’ (and) even when I was afraid and said, ‘No one can be trusted.’

And that's their take on those particular verses. He goes on in verse 12. He says,

“What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?” In other words, what shall I give to the Lord? What shall I offer to the Lord for all that He has done for me? He says,

“¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD,” I'm just going to keep praying.

“¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.”

Now, apparently, we see from this last verse, 14, that the psalmist had made a vow in the midst of his distress. And that's what happens. Have you ever done that? Have you ever made a promise? You may not call it a vow, but you're in the midst of a very distressing situation, and so you go, Lord, if You get me out of this, I'll give You 100 bucks, and it's like trying to make a deal with God, and we've probably all done it.

Do you guys know that's why Martin Luther went into the ministry? I'm not talking about Martin Luther King; I'm talking about Martin Luther, the reformer. He was actually in a storm. He was going through this forested area. It was dark, and there was this horrific lightning storm that was going on, and he

was afraid. And he said, Lord, if I survive this storm, I'll become a priest. And he survived it. And so, much to his chagrin, he had to become a priest.

And yet, he didn't even really totally believe in God for all that. I mean, it was a distant sort of thing. But the priesthood is something that got him thinking about God. And so, he started searching for God, and he realized he never could find God within the halls of Roman Catholicism as it existed back then. And that's why he began to read the Bible and lo and behold, he got saved reading the Bible. So anyway, just one example of a vow that actually turned out okay.

And, of course, in the Old Testament, they were strongly encouraged that if you made a vow, you needed to fulfill your vow. And he says it here in verse 14, and he's actually going to repeat it again at the end of the psalm. And then he makes a somewhat unexpected statement in verse 15, and it's this: *"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."*

Now, honestly, this statement has confounded Bible students because it seems weird that he would say it in light of the fact that the Lord has just delivered him from death. And yet, he makes this statement saying,

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."

And so honestly, if you read through commentaries like I often do when I'm studying, you will find that many Bible commentators are a little befuddled and at a loss to explain the consistency of this statement with the context of the rest of the Psalm.

But you know what I think? I think it doesn't really matter because I think this statement makes a declaration of truth that stands apart from the context. And that is, very simply, that God considers it a precious thing when one of the saints passes away.

And let's define saint here because some of you may have been raised in a religious system that defined it for you. The Bible says a saint is a believer. It's a believer that's all it is. If you're a believer today, if you've put your faith in Jesus Christ and what He did on the cross, you're a saint, okay. That's the Bible's definition.

Now, I know that religious systems have come up with other definitions, but those are not biblical. And so, in my estimation, they're not worth anything because if it's not biblical, that means it was made up by man. I'd rather take God's definition. And so, this says that when a believer closes their eyes and

breathes their last, it is a precious thing in the sight of the Lord. It is a precious thing.

And more than that, it is an important step when an individual breathes their last because, when that happens, they enter into the presence of the Lord. I wish we could see what happens in the spirit. Wouldn't that be cool? I mean, I've seen Hollywood versions of this, but it would be very cool to see someone breathe their last and then rise up from that body, probably holding the hands of the angels.

Jesus told that lovely story of the man named Lazarus, the diseased beggar, who, after living a life of great hardship, died. And He says in that story, the angels escorted him after he died into the presence of Abraham at that time. Because prior to Jesus's death on the cross, people did not go directly into the presence of the Lord; they went to paradise (Luke 16:19-31). That's what Jesus promised the thief on the cross: This day you'll be with Me in paradise (Luke 23:43). But later on, on the third day, I believe Jesus ushered all of those saints into the very presence of the Lord.

But the point is, it would be so cool to see that transition, which I believe the Lord oversees—and beautifully so. So, it is a precious thing. And then the psalmist closes the Psalm with these words:

“¹⁶ O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. You have loosed my bonds.” And that's again a poetic way of saying you've taken the chains off my life and you've released me from my slavery. And what a beautiful picture that is. He says,

“¹⁷ I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.” He repeats here in verse 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. (And then he ends with) Praise the LORD!”