



Psalm 116 - Thanksgiving for Recovery from Illness

Introduction

This is a hymn of personal thanksgiving for God's care. The specific circumstance is a deliverance from impending death; the words of the psalm may be generalised to other kinds of dramatic answers to prayer in a time of dire need. The psalm is notable for its assumption that one's thanks for this very personal deliverance are properly consummated in public worship. These words are an excellent form for God's people to use in giving public thanks after their own emergencies, e.g. some churches use the psalm in a service of thanksgiving after a woman has given birth.

As another one of the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118), sung by Jesus with his disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest (Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26), the singer can say with G. Campbell Morgan: "Whatever the local circumstances which gave rise to this song, it is evident that all its rich meaning was fulfilled, when in the midst of that little company of perplexed souls, the shadows of the one death already on him, Jesus sang this song of prophetic triumph over the sharpness of the hour of passion to which he was passing. He has made it over to all his own as their triumph song over death."

Psalm 116:1-4 - I Love the Lord, Who Has Heard My Prayer.

The psalm opens with a straightforward statement of its overall theme: <<*I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications*>>. The people of Israel are urged to love the Lord in response to his covenant blessings, for example: <<*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*>> (Deuteronomy 6:5), and: <<*You shall love the Lord your God, therefore, and keep his charge, his decrees, his ordinances, and his commandments always*>> (Deuteronomy 11:1); that love grows as the faithful experience God's work among the community and in their

own lives. Likewise, the singer called on the name of the Lord in distress (v.4), and now resolves to call on him as long as he lives (v.2).

- 1 I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
- 2 Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

Psalm 116:1-2

I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. The psalmist began his song with the most simple expression of grateful love. He had a great sense of love for Yahweh because he answered prayer in a desperate season. Adam Clarke commented, “How vain and foolish is the talk, ‘To love God for his benefits to us is mercenary, and cannot be pure love!’ Whether pure or impure, there is no other love that can flow from the heart of the creature to its Creator.” and Charles Spurgeon added, “They say that love is blind; but when we love God our affection has its eyes open and can sustain itself with the most rigid logic. We have reason, superabundant reason, for loving the Lord.”

I will call on him as long as I live. The singer vowed to never call upon any other supposed deity. His allegiance, love, and prayer would always be to the one who inclined his ear to me. Derek Kidner commented, “It is a resolve to trust God exclusively (Romans 10:12) and worship him explicitly.”

- 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, save my life!’

Psalm 116:3-4

The snares of death encompassed me. In the painful grip of death, the psalmist knew nothing but distress and anguish. This death crisis may have come from sickness, injury, or persecution. The snares of death and the pangs of Sheol are probably the same thing; he was on the brink of dying.

Sheol is a proper name in Hebrew; sometimes it serves as a poetic name for the grave, to which all go, for example: <<*Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol*>> (Psalm 141:7), and other times it names the dim destination to which the wicked

go but not the faithful: <<Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me>> (Psalm 49:14-15).

Kidner wrote, “In Old Testament poetry death and Sheol are aggressive, clutching at the living to waste them with sickness or crush them with despondency; so the singer’s plight may equally have been a desperate illness or (as verse 11 suggests) a wounding and disillusioning experience. Like Job’s, it could well have been both together.”

Many centuries later Peter used the phrase the pains of death to describe the peril from which God the Father delivered Jesus Christ through his resurrection: <<But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power>> (Acts 2:24). It adds a powerful prophetic and messianic sense to the psalm, especially know that this was one of the collection of psalms Jesus sang with his disciples at the last supper. Later that same night Jesus also felt the distress and anguish expressed here: <<In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground>> (Luke 22:44).

Perhaps in this phrase Jesus considered the linen windings that would soon be wrapped around his dead body, as Adam Clarke suggested, “The cables or cords of death; alluding to their bonds and fetters during their captivity; or to the cords by which a criminal is bound who is about to be led out to execution; or to the bandages in which the dead were enveloped, when head, arms, body, and limbs were all laced down together.”

Then I called on the name of the Lord. In his deadly danger, the psalmist cried out to God in understanding of all he is and represents, i.e. the name of the Lord. His cry was:

- Delivered straight to God: O Lord.
- Deeply felt: I pray, literally, I implore you.
- Directly stating the need: save my life.

This can be a general term for invoking a deity in prayer, for example: <<Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.’ All the people answered, ‘Well spoken!’>> (1 Kings 18:24), but more often refers to a prayer that is part of public worship: <<To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord>> (Genesis 4:26), <<From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord>> (Genesis 12:8), and: <<O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among

the peoples>> (Psalm 105:1), which is likely the case here in view of the same term in v.13. Thus the request was made as part of a worship service. Spurgeon commented, “This form of petition is short, comprehensive, to the point, humble, and earnest. It were well if all our prayers were moulded upon this model; perhaps they would be if we were in similar circumstances to those of the psalmist, for real trouble produces real prayer.” These wise words are also expressed in: <<*Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few*>> (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

Psalm 116:5-7 - The Lord Deals Bountifully with His Own.

The answer to the urgent prayer leads to reflection on the character of God, namely, that he is gracious, merciful, and righteous, i.e. reliably faithful. The pious should know this already; and yet the experience being celebrated has made these notions all the more real to the believer.

- ⁵ Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
- ⁶ The Lord protects 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.

Psalm 116:5-7

Gracious is the Lord, and righteous. In light of his deliverance through answered prayer, the psalmist praised the gracious, righteous, and merciful character of God: <<*Then the officers of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, ‘The Lord is in the right’*>> (2 Chronicles 12:6), and: <<*O Lord, God of Israel, you are just, but we have escaped as a remnant, as is now the case. Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this*>> (Ezra 9:15). Before his obedient surrender to the ordeal of his suffering and crucifixion, Jesus sang these words with his disciples. He testified to the truth that God is gracious, righteous, and merciful before, during, and after his ordeal on the Cross.

The Lord protects the simple. In humility, the psalmist counted himself as one who did not exalt himself above others and who might be considered simple. He did not have to exalt himself, because when he was brought low, then God brought his salvation.

Derek Kidner saw the word ‘simple’ more from its context in Proverbs: “The simple is a revealing description to use, for in the Old Testament it has no trace

of merit. ‘The silly’ would hardly be too strong a term for these gullible, feckless people who roam the pages of Proverbs drifting into trouble. It is humble of the psalmist to identify with them; it is humble of God to have time for them.” In its messianic aspect, Christians consider these words sung and spoke by Jesus among his disciples. He was far from a simple man, but was considered so by the proud and arrogant religious hierarchy, who despised his lack of formal credentials and training.

Return, O my soul, to your rest. For a season, the death-like crisis had troubled the soul of the psalmist. Now he could reflect on how God had dealt bountifully with him, and come back to a previous standing of rest: <<**Be still, and know that I am God!**>> (Psalm 46:10a). There is true rest for the Christian soul in God’s bounty: <<**Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls**>> (Matthew 11:29). Spurgeon concluded, “Whenever a child of God even for a moment loses his peace of mind, he should be concerned to find it again, not by seeking it in the world or in his own experience, but in the Lord alone.”

Psalm 116:8-11 - You Delivered My Soul from Death.

The song returns to the desperate situation from which the person has been delivered: death, tears, and stumbling. These cover a wider variety of circumstances than simply the death of one’s body and may be the psalmist’s invitation to the singers to apply the psalm more generally to experiences of need. The psalm also leads the thankful person to see how to make good use of the deliverance: <<**I walk before the Lord**>>, i.e. in love, faith and obedience toward him.

- ⁸ For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.
- ⁹ I walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.
- ¹⁰ I kept my faith, even when I said,
‘I am greatly afflicted’;
- ¹¹ I said in my consternation,
‘Everyone is a liar.’

Psalm 116:8-11

For you have delivered my soul from death. The crisis was deep, even unto death. The deliverance was great, bringing comfort to tearful eyes and strength to falling feet. This powerful praise matched the greatness of the deliverance. Once again Christians are moved by the thought that Jesus sang these words with his disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. Knowing all the suffering set before him, Jesus sang with confidence of deliverance from his coming death, his coming tears, and the many occasions of falling under the weight of the Cross soon to come.

I walk before the Lord in the land of the living. These were the grateful words of the psalmist after his deliverance. They were also the confident words, sung in faith, by Jesus before every agony of the coming Cross. He could go to the Cross with full confidence that having been rescued from falling feet, he would once again walk in the land of the living. Kidner added, “To walk before the Lord, like the New Testament expression to ‘walk in the light’, is both demanding and reassuring, since ‘in the presence of the Lord’, as the TEV translates it, one is wholly exposed but wholly befriended.” And Spurgeon noted, “By a man’s walk is understood his way of life: some men live only as in the sight of their fellow men, having regard to human judgement and opinion; but the truly gracious man considers the presence of God, and acts under the influence of his all-observing eye.”

I kept my faith, even when I said. Full of faith, the psalmist trusted God in the depth of his distress. He was a shadowy preview of the greatest faith, demonstrated by Jesus among his disciples before the Cross. In 2 Corinthians 4:13, Paul uses the Greek Septuagint of this line: <<*I believed, and so I spoke*>>. Paul is narrating the kinds of desperate trials from which God has rescued him, and thus it is fitting that he would borrow these words. Walter Kaiser remarks from Paul’s quotation of v.10 in 2 Corinthians 4:13 that it was the same Holy Spirit who worked in the psalmist, in Paul, and all other Christians to believe.

Everyone is a liar. The bitter experience of the psalmist made this seem like a logical statement, but that would be a hasty conclusion. Even so, although forsaken by all his disciples and partners in song, Jesus would not come to this hasty conclusion. In Romans 3:4 Paul borrows the Greek wording, ‘everyone is a liar,’ to emphasise God’s truthfulness, which honours the context of the psalm.

There is a sense in which the statement is true, because “all men will prove to be liars if we unduly trust in them; some from want of truthfulness, and others from want of power” (Spurgeon). Yet the phrasing makes it clear that the psalmist understood that he was wrong at this time in saying so, that it was too harsh a judgement in his present circumstances.

Psalm 116:12-19 - How Shall I Show My Thanks to Him?

The final section raises the question, 'What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?' The answer is, with acts of public worship, as the following phrases show: the cup of salvation, perhaps a part of the sacrifice of thanksgiving (v.14); call on the name of the Lord; pay vows and offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving; in the presence of all his people; and in the courts of the house of the Lord. The personal deliverance is a benefit to the whole people, and the entire congregation shares in giving thanks: <<*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*>> (Romans 12:15).

- 12 What shall I return to the Lord
for all his bounty 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.

Psalm 116:12-14

What shall I return to the Lord. Gratitude drove the psalmist to consider what return he could make to the God who so generously shared his bounty or benefits. It was good for him to consider this, making him like the one grateful leper among the ten Jesus healed; refer to Luke 17:12-19. The psalmist wisely considered why God had been so good to him instead of why he had problems at all. He knew that problems were common to all men, but the benefits often only belonged to those who trusted God. Spurgeon added, "His benefits are so many, so various, so minute, that they often escape our observation while they exactly meet our wants."

I will lift up the cup of salvation. Gratitude drove the psalmist to receive from God. Before he could do anything for the Lord, he had to first gratefully receive. Again Spurgeon commented, "We can do this figuratively at the sacramental table, we can do it spiritually every time we grasp the golden chalice of the covenant, realising the fullness of blessing which it contains, and by faith receiving its divine contents into our inmost soul."

The Christian reader continues to consider how significant it was that Jesus probably sang these words on the night of his betrayal and arrest, having instituted the cup of salvation under the New Covenant with his disciples: <<*This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood*>> (Luke 22:20b). Jesus received that cup of salvation from his Father and gave it unto his people.

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. The idea is that the singer publically declared – perhaps in a sacrificial ritual of gratitude at the temple’s altar – God’s greatness and faithfulness. He would complete what he had determined to do before God.

15 Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones.

16 O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving-maid.
You have loosed my bonds.

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

Psalm 116:15-17

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones or his saints. This psalm celebrates the deliverance from death, but the singer was wise enough to know that death is still a reality for every one of God’s saints. When that day comes, God holds the death of his people as a precious thing. Spurgeon adds, “They shall not die prematurely; they shall be immortal till their work is done; and when their time shall come to die, then their deaths shall be precious. The Lord watches over their dying beds, smooths their pillows, sustains their hearts, and receives their souls.”

God regards the death of his martyrs as especially precious. According to Spurgeon, “Though they have been cast to the beasts in the amphitheatre, or dragged to death by wild horses, or murdered in dungeons, or slaughtered amongst the snows of the Alps, or made to fatten Smithfield with their gore, precious has their blood been, and still is it in his sight, who will avenge his own elect when the day shall come for his patience to have had her perfect work, and for his justice to begin her dread assize.”

Although death is a curse and an enemy, it is still precious because it removes the remaining barriers between God and his saints, and is the doorway to an eternity of perfect fellowship. Again Spurgeon commented, “Death to the saints is not a penalty, it is not destruction, it is not even a loss.”

O Lord, I am your servant. The singer dedicated himself to God’s service on the basis of loosed bonds. Set free by God’s great work, both honour and gratitude led him to forever be Yahweh’s servant. Adam Clarke saw here the words of a bondservant, as in Exodus 21:5-6: ‘I am a servant, son of thy servant, made free by

thy kindness; but, refusing to go out, I have had my ear bored to thy door-post, and am to continue by free choice in thy house for ever.'

You have loosed my bonds. God has promised to set his people free, not necessarily from a physical prison but from their captivity to sin, the fear of death, and the ways of the world: *<<Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?>>* (Isaiah 58:6), and: *<<For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery>>* (Galatians 5:1).

I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord. Once again readers find themselves at the altar of sacrifice with the singer; refer back to v.14. He was happy and duty bound to proclaim his gratitude to God and to call upon him alone.

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!

Psalm 116:18-19

I will pay my vows to the Lord. The repetition of this phrase keeps the reader at the altar with a public sacrifice of thanksgiving. There, **in the courts of the house of the Lord**, would the psalmist proclaim his praise and gratitude toward God: *<<Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name>>* (Psalm 100:4).

Praise the Lord! The psalm ends with Hallelujah, both as a declaration of personal praise and a call to God's people to join with the proclamation.