

Psalm 116 is more than one person's passionate testimony; it is our testimony too. This Hallel hymn of praise, inspired by the Exodus and sung at the annual Passover feast, invites believers to enter into the psalmist's personal experience. The psalmist gives us words and a theology of salvation to navigate the fragile human condition. His cry for mercy, his fear of death, and his plea for help, are true to being human. We cannot save ourselves.

This highly personal psalm is not private, but communal.¹ We are drawn to the psalmist's testimony because we identify with his desperate need for deliverance. There is not a neutral line in the whole psalm. Every line, every word, comes from his soul, not just his head. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" and we echo, "Lord, save me!" We share his passion for the Lord who is gracious and righteous, full of compassion and worthy of all praise. Like the psalmist, we are bold to say, "I will call" on the Lord (Ps 116:2, 4, 13, 17). In all situations, the Lord is the one to turn to and he will hear our call and respond with his salvation.

The psalmist is filled with gratitude for the Lord's deliverance and so are we. The Lord has delivered us from death, from tears, from stumbling, and raised us up to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us (Eph 5:1). We share the psalmist's verdict, "Everyone is a liar," including me and you. No one can save us, no spouse, no leader, no celebrity, no friend, no parent, only the Lord is powerful to save and worthy of our trust. And like the psalmist we are eager to express our gratitude and fulfill our vows to the Lord.

Spurgeon captured the meaning of the psalm in a sentence: "Personal love fostered by a personal experience of redemption is the theme of this Psalm, and in it we see the redeemed answered when they pray, preserved in time of trouble, resting in their God, walking at large, sensible of their obligations, conscious that they are not their own but bought with a price, and joining with all the ransomed company to sing hallelujahs unto God."² In three stanzas the psalmist covers his cry for deliverance (Ps 116:1-4), his need for deliverance (Ps 116:5-11), and his gratitude for deliverance (Ps 116:12-19).

The Anguish of the Grave

*I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.
The chords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
"Lord, save me!"*

Psalm 116:1-4

¹ Boice, Psalms, 942. Boice: "'I' occurs eighteen times, 'my' nine times, and 'me' seven times in the NIV."

² Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 116.

“I love the Lord,” *because . . .* There is always a redemptive antecedent to our love for the Lord. God’s grace goes before making our redemption and our response possible. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Before we can say, “I love the Lord,” we need God to act, but no one need to wait. For “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). The love the psalmist expresses for the Lord is the kind of faith-filled obedient love described in Deuteronomy, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:5).

Psalms 116 was one of the psalms traditionally sung after the celebration of the Passover meal. This psalm may have been sung by Jesus and the disciples *after* Jesus showed “the full extent of his love” by washing the feet of the disciples – a parable pointing forward to the cleansing power of his atoning sacrifice on the cross (John 13:1 ESV). This psalm was sung *after* Jesus gave a new command to love one another: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). It was sung *after* Jesus emphasized, “If you love me, keep my commands” (John 14:15). Psalm 116 was prayed *after* Jesus said, “If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father. . .” (John 14:28). The disciples reinterpreted Psalm 116 in the light of Jesus’ upper room discourse and it is that understanding that the church brings to the psalm today.

The intensity of the psalmist’s cry for mercy is commensurate with his fear. “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me,” implies extreme danger – mortal danger. His life is in peril. He feels like a trapped animal or a terminally ill patient facing immanent death. Shrouded in metaphor the specific occasion remains a mystery. Serious physical illness may indeed be the threat, but the psalmist intentionally leaves the experience unspecified. The “chords of death” may be a cancer diagnosis or an opioid addiction. It may be an abusive relationship or suicidal thoughts. But whatever the presenting problem may be, the primary cause of all life-threatening endangerment is sin. We live in a fallen, broken, sin-twisted world that is bent on evil. If we think cancer is insidious, sin is all the more. If we think AIDS is awful, sin is worse. Ultimately the root cause of all our fears is the fact that we are dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1). The presenting problem needs to be addressed with great care and compassion but when we cry to the Lord for mercy we are dealing with the root cause of all our suffering. We are crying out for his forgiveness and for deliverance from our bondage to sin and death. The cry, “Lord, save me!” is the fundamental cry for salvation. It is wonderful when cancer goes into remission or an addiction is overcome or a broken heart is healed, but ultimately the fundamental human need is for deliverance. The apostle Paul wrote, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23).

The Lord’s Deliverance

*The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The Lord protects the unwary;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return to your rest, my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.*

*For you, Lord, have delivered me from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.
I trusted in the Lord when I said,
“I am greatly afflicted”;
in my alarm I said,
“Everyone is a liar.”*

Psalm 116:5-11

The dramatic shift in tone signals without stating it explicitly that the Lord has come to the psalmist's rescue. His personal testimony is important, but secondary to his description of the Lord. All praise goes to the Lord who is gracious and righteous and full of compassion. These three attributes describe the Lord and his salvation. He is gracious because he extends his unmerited favor upon needy sinners; he is righteous because he is true to his holy word and he makes things right; and he is compassionate, because he acts on behalf of the needy. The psalmist identifies himself as “simple,” that is to say, “helpless,” “unwary,” “naive.”³ He is in need of the Lord's saving power and he cannot save himself. The psalmist leads by example. Implicit in his story is our story. We acknowledge our complete dependence on the Lord. We mourn for our sin, and we turn to him for his gracious forgiveness. It is sad, but true. We have to be at the end of our resources, our merit, our power, our wisdom, and our hope, before we can truly receive the mercy of God.

After praising the Lord for his saving benefits, the psalmist counsels himself in the presence of the Lord. But in talking to himself he advises us. His spiritual direction begins with an admonition, “Return to your rest, my soul.” “Rest” is a loaded term, which goes back to the Sabbath rest in the wilderness and goes forward to the promised everlasting rest of the people of God. There is an immediate in-the-moment emotional and existential fulfillment to this promised “rest” but also a future everlasting fulfillment to the meaning of “rest.” The pastor who wrote the Book of Hebrews dwelt on the theme of “rest.” The Sabbath “rest” and the promised land “rest” were types for the everlasting rest promised by Christ. He saw the ground for this everlasting rest at the beginning of time in creation's seventh day. “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his” (Heb 4:9-10). The pastor shows how our ultimate rest was achieved by Christ's high priestly work on the cross when he fulfilled the sacrificial hope of the Day of Atonement (“a day of Sabbath rest,” Lev 16:31). This promised rest invokes “the longing for a better country – a heavenly one” (Heb 11:16); that awakens a deep godly fear that we not fall short of it (Heb 4:1); and that we “make every effort to enter into this rest” (Heb 4:11).

The Lord's “rest” is made possible by his saving deliverance. The psalmist praises the Lord for

³ Calvin, Psalms, 362. Calvin writes, “The term, rendered ‘simple,’ is often understood in a bad sense, denoting persons inconsiderate and foolish, who will not follow wholesome advice. But, in this place, it is applied to those who are exposed to the abuse of the wicked, who are not sufficiently subtle and circumspect to elude the snares which are laid for them.”

his deliverance from death. He is no longer a broken man, crying his eyes out and stumbling around in the dark. The Lord has given him joy and strength for the purpose that he might walk before the Lord in the land of the living. Like the meaning of “rest,” the metaphor of “walking” pictures an abiding and obedient relationship with the Lord. The apostle Paul exhorted believers, “Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.”⁴ Since we are dearly loved children, having been delivered from sin and death, we are commanded to follow the example of our heavenly Father. Because of Christ’s love we are commanded to walk in the way of love. This is not a pious rhetorical flourish but sound theological reasoning. Believers today need to read and pray Psalm 116 in the keeping with the psalmist’s redemptive trajectory. Christ is not only the Savior who redeems us, but our Lord who calls us to follow him in sacrificial love. Therefore, we agree with the apostle: “Follow God’s example, therefore as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1-2).

The psalmist ends this second section with two succinct quotes that sum up our need for deliverance. “I am greatly afflicted,” acknowledges the desperate human condition. Unless we admit our need and cry out to God for help there is little hope of true repentance and real dependence on the Lord. Failure to understand our situation results in an inflated-self and a resistance to God’s saving grace. C. S. Lewis famously said, “A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world—and even might be more difficult to save.”⁵ The second quote, “Everyone is a liar,” warns us not to put our trust in people. It may sound harsh and hyperbolic, but it is not, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The apostle John wrote, “If we claim we have not sinned, we make [God] out to be a liar and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:10).

The psalmist attributes both perspectives, his need for deliverance and his confidence in the Lord’s deliverance to his faith and trust in the Lord. The apostle Paul draws on Psalm 116:10 (LXX) to affirm his gospel proclamation of the risen Lord. “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ Since we have the same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God” (2 Cor 4:13-15). Paul takes these two negative statements, one about affliction and the other about liars, and turns them into a positive testimony of the proclamation of the gospel.

The Response of a Grateful Servant

*What shall I return to the Lord
for all his goodness to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation*

⁴ The verb *περιπατέω*, “to walk” is used eight times in Ephesians (2:2, 10; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15) metaphorically to refer to one’s conduct or lifestyle.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (London: Fontana Books, 1972), 181.

*and call on the name of the Lord.
 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
 in the presence of all his people.
 Precious in the sight of the Lord
 is the death of his faithful servants.
 Truly I am your servant, Lord;
 I serve you just as my mother did;
 you have freed me from my chains.
 I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
 and call on the name of the Lord.
 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
 in the presence of all his people,
 in the courts of the house of the Lord –
 in the midst, Jerusalem.
 Praise the Lord [Hallelujah!]*

Psalm 116:12-19

The third stanza begins with a humble, *impossible* question. It is the question that all who have experienced the Lord’s salvation humbly ask, not just once or twice, but every day of their lives. It is an impossible question, because we can never repay the Lord for his goodness, but the question is necessary because we long to act in accord with our new life in Christ. Such a question implies the beautiful devotion of a grateful person. We want to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because “it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:12-13).

The psalmist vows to lift up “the cup of salvation,” “to call on the name of the Lord,” and to “fulfill [his] vows in the presence of all the people.” These three descriptive phrases are variations on a theme of complete commitment. The psalmist willingly and joyously seeks to participate in the fullness of salvation. It is stunning to think that Jesus sang this psalm with the disciples shortly after he instituted the Lord’s Supper. He lifted up the cup of salvation, saying “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Jesus knew that he would be “lifted up from the earth” and that he would draw people to himself (John 12:32). No one has ever lifted up the cup of salvation, and called on the name of the Lord, and fulfilled his vows in the presence of God’s people the way Jesus has. But as shocking as it may be, we are called to follow his example. We cannot replicate his sacrifice, nor would we want to, (“He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” – Heb 9:26), but we can deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23).

At the grave side of a close friend, Steve Befus, I read from Psalm 116:15, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” “Precious” may mean either “highly valued” or “costly,” but both meanings may converge in this instance. The Lord highly values the life of his saints and he finds the death of his saints costly.⁶ We who remain feel their absence with an ache in our

⁶ Kidner, Psalms, 410.

heart. The more they loved and the greater their service the more they are missed. But it is not only the saints who remain who feel their absence, the Lord himself pays a costly price in the death of his servants. The loss is different from the Father giving up the Son, and yet, in the mind of God, it is still related in some special way. For God so loved the world that he gave his servant Steve, who gave his life unselfishly to demonstrate the love of Christ. On one level there is no comparison: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him shall not die but have everlasting life.” But the precious, costly gift of both Steve and Steve’s Lord are bound together in the gift of God and the Father’s will.

Jesus linked his own sacrificial death for our salvation with our costly service and death. He said, “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:24-26).

The psalmist concludes by affirming his loyal and humble status as the Lord’s servant. His calling and identity are certain. He declares, “Truly I am your servant, Lord.” He knows who he is and to whom he belongs. He pledges himself as the son of your handmaid in “absolute servitude” and loyalty.⁷ The Lord has set him free “from the tensions and anxieties of the world by delivering him from death, and so now he belongs to the Lord as a servant, a loyal servant – the redeemed belong to the Lord.”⁸ There is nothing he desires more than to offer the sacrifice of praise and call on the name of the Lord. He reaffirms this desire to fulfill his vows to the Lord, in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the Lord. The psalmist’s passion for the Lord corresponds to the apostle’s exhortation “to offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom 12:1).

The psalm ends on a high note of praise. Hallelujah! The very one who died to set us free, left the upper room on the night he was betrayed with Psalm 116 guiding his thoughts and prayers.

⁷ Ross, Psalms, 431.

⁸ Ross, Psalms, 431.