

Psalm 116-117 “A Matter of Life and Death”
Psalm 116
2 Corinthians 4

November 11, 2018

We sing Psalm 117 more often than any other Psalm!
After all, Psalm 117 is a short and simple doxology –
which is where we sang it a few moments ago!

*Praise the LORD, all nations!
Extol him, all peoples!
² For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
Praise the LORD!*

Psalm 117 provides a short, sweet, and to the point song of praise,
calling the nations to extol him for his great steadfast love and faithfulness *to us*.

Because God is faithful to Israel – because he shows covenant love and mercy to *his people* –
therefore *all people* should praise him!

It might seem odd that all nations should praise the LORD
because he is faithful to Israel –
but when you remember that God had promised to Abraham,
“the Land and the Seed and the blessing to the nations” –
then you realize that yes, all nations should rejoice that God is faithful to Israel –
because that faithfulness is what will – in the end –
bring salvation to the ends of the earth!

And we see this beautifully stated in our main Psalm for the day,
Psalm 116.

Sing Psalm 116
Read 2 Corinthians 4

Why do you love God?
Psalm 116 is a song that celebrates how God has delivered me from death.
If that’s as far as you go,
then it winds up as a fairly depressing song.
I love the LORD because he heard my cry for mercy
and he spared me from death – this time.

So I will keep calling on as long as I live –
because pretty soon, he’s not going to hear me –
and then I’ll die.

And the dead do not praise God.

So Psalm 116 *could* be sung as a song that says,
“Thank you, Jesus, for giving me one more day!”

But who is the main voice of Psalm 116?

We’ve been seeing in Book 5 of the Psalter
that the context is the context of the Restoration – after the Exile.
Israel is back in the land –
but there is no Davidic King.
They have rebuilt the temple –
but the Glory of the LORD did not fill the temple.

In most of the Psalter,

the first person singular is the voice of the Davidic King –
often the voice of David himself.

This is not a “Psalm of David” –

so you could read this first person singular as being any Israelite –
but the ancient Jews thought that this song fit beautifully with the Passover.

Psalms 113-118 were sung regularly at Passover.

And Psalm 116 fits the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus so well
that I have to believe that the same Spirit who anointed Jesus
and who inspired the Psalmist –
intended us to see that connection!

The Psalmist may have intended his references to death and Sheol metaphorically,
but Jesus experienced them literally!

As we go through Psalm 116, we need to see how *we* sing this song in and with Jesus!

And this is why we sang Psalm 117 as well –

because we need to see that the message of Book 5 of the Psalter
is all about how the blessing of Abraham will come to the nations
when God is faithful to his people Israel –
and thus we (even Gentiles) get to sing this song with Jesus!

1. Help! The Snares of Death Encompassed Me (v1-4)

a. The Character of God: One Who Hears (v1-2)

*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.*

Why do I love the LORD?

I love the LORD first and foremost because he has heard *Jesus*.
If this is all about me,
then, well, the LORD hasn’t always heard me!
Thirteen years ago my mother died –

suddenly –
I never had a chance to plead for her!

If I should only call on God so long as he does what I want –
well, this isn't going to last very long!

But that's why we need to see *who* is the "I" that speaks!

God always hears Jesus.

And that's why we need to learn how to pray from Jesus –
not so that we can figure out how to manipulate God to give us what we want!
But so that we can learn how to align our prayers with the will of God!

Because God is a God who *hears*.

Hagar – Ishmael's mother – rejoiced because God is a God who hears!

We saw this last week from Psalm 115.
The idols of the nations are so useless,
because they are lifeless images that accurately depict the gods of the nations.
They have eyes, but do not see,
ears, but do not hear;
mouths, but do not speak...

God's image is not a lifeless piece of wood!
God's image is found in human beings –
God's image also has eyes – but we see.
God's image has ears – but we hear!
God's image has a mouth – but we speak!

There's a way in which Psalm 116 is simply an illustration of one attribute from Psalm 115.
How is it that God has ears?

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

God is a God who hears!

And you may have confidence that *because he has heard Jesus* –
therefore he will hear all those who call to him in Jesus' name.

And that's where we turn in verses 3-4:

b. The Character of Me: One Who Prays (v3-4)

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!"*

If God is a God who hears.
Who am I?

I am a sufferer.
The snares of death encompassed me.
The pangs of Sheol – the grave – laid hold on me.
I suffered distress and anguish.

There are lots of circumstances that fit here!
Maybe you – or a loved one – is grievously sick –
the “pangs of Sheol” afflict you.
Death rears its ugly head!
Maybe it’s war – many of us have either served in the military,
or had loved ones who did –
the distress and anguish of not knowing if they will ever come home!
Or maybe it’s emotional distress and anguish
because of traumas experienced in the past.

In whatever affliction I face – in whatever misery I find myself in –
“then I called on the name of the LORD:
‘O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!’”

Who am I?
If I worship a God who hears,
then I must be a soul that prays.
“O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!”

Salvation belongs to the LORD
Make haste, O God to save me!
O LORD, come to my aid!

And that salvation is the theme of verses 5-9.

2. Salvation: You Have Delivered My Soul from Death (v5-9)

a. Gracious, Righteous, and Merciful: a God Who Preserves the Simple (v5-7)

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.*

Well, that was quick!!
Just like that – “he saved me”!

And in its most basic form,
salvation is that simple.

The LORD is gracious and righteous and merciful.
He saved me – and now I can return to my rest.

You know all those praise songs that are just happy, happy, happy!?
Well, there *are* a few Psalms that are like that!!!
It's okay to sing happy songs sometimes!!!

(You never thought you would hear me say that, did you?!)

There are times when you just need to say God has been *good!*
He preserves the simple.
When I was brought low, he saved me!
He didn't leave me there forever!
God has been merciful! (Can I get a Hallelujah?!)

The LORD has dealt bountifully with my soul.
He has given me far more than I deserved!

And,

b. When God Rescues, I Walk (v8-9)

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.*

When the Psalmist says “you have delivered my soul from death”
he undoubtedly was thinking in terms ‘preserved me so that I didn’t die;’
but when you sing Psalm 116 *after* the resurrection of Jesus,
you cannot help but see that these words mean so much more!

My hope is not just that God will give me a long life before I die and cease to exist.

My hope is that I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living!

Because when God rescues me,
then I walk before him –
yes, *here and now* –
it starts, *here and now!*

But God’s salvation is a salvation that includes both the *here and the hereafter.*

I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living –
because the one who lives and believes in Jesus will never die.

Part three of the Psalm then turns to the theme of confidence in the face of death.

What is our ground of assurance before God?

3. Confidence: The LORD Values the Death of His Saints (v10-19)

a. Faith Speaks Honestly about Circumstances (v10-11)

¹⁰ *I believed, even when^[a] I spoke:*

“I am greatly afflicted”;

¹¹ *I said in my alarm,*

“All mankind are liars.”

First, in verses 10-11, the Psalmist says that even in the midst of my affliction,
I still believed in God.

That doesn't make it easy.

After all, “I am greatly afflicted”!

And “all mankind are liars.”

If you think about it,

that's not a great combination.

I am afflicted.

And you are a liar.

How is this supposed to end well?!

The point here is that my trust was never in *man*.

All mankind are liars.

If I'm waiting for someone else to save me,

I may be waiting for a long time!

But even in my affliction, “I believed and thus I spoke.”

Paul cites this in 2 Corinthians 4 –

a passage that is all about death and resurrection.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:8ff,

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;

perplexed, but not driven to despair;

persecuted, but not forsaken;

struck down, but not destroyed;

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,

so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake,

so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life in you.”

And then he cites Psalm 116:

“Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written,

‘I believed, and so I spoke,’ we also believe, and so we also speak,

knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus
and bring us with you into his presence..." (4:13-14)

In other words, Paul says that just as Christ went through death and the grave for us –
just as Christ fulfilled Psalm 116 in his own person,
so also we are called to live through Psalm 116 –
the afflictions and the trials that we face
are conforming us to the likeness of the death of Christ!

I know – this is supposed to be a happy song!
But even the happy songs of scripture
deal *honestly* with the afflictions of life!

Our hope is *not* that we will be free from affliction in this life.
Our hope is that he who raised Jesus from the dead
will raise us also with Jesus
and bring us with you into his presence.

For now, we carry in the body the death of Jesus.
We bear the cross.
We share in his sufferings.

Because as Paul says next – in 2 Corinthians 4:17 –
“For this light momentary affliction
is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,
as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.
For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

“Light momentary affliction.”
Paul is talking about getting arrested, thrown in jail,
beaten within an inch of his life, stoned almost to death,
betrayed, mocked, attacked...
“Light momentary affliction!”

And notice that Paul does *not* say that we should endure these afflictions
because *God* is preparing something better for us.

No.
He says that this light momentary affliction *itself*
is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory!

There is no way to glory except the way of the cross!
Affliction and suffering is the only path to happiness!

Now do you understand why the happy songs cannot escape affliction?
Because you can't raise someone from the dead
until they're dead.

Resurrection requires a corpse!

Ah, but then!

When God has raised his people from the dead –
and restored to life those who had gone down to Sheol –
then comes joy and glory in the House of the LORD!

b. Faith Worships: Sacraments and Vows in the House of the LORD (v12-19)

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.*

I've called this "sacraments and vows in the house of the LORD"
because that's what this is talking about.

What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? (v12)
Sacraments (v13)
and vows (v14) in the temple.

And these two things are then explained in more detail in verses 15-19.

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!*

Last week, when we looked at Psalm 115,

I encouraged you to think about the rhythms and practices that shape and form you.
This is precisely what Psalm 116 is getting at.

The sacrifice of thanksgiving – the "thank offering" –
was to be brought when someone wanted to give thanks to God
for some special deliverance.

Often this was connected with a vow.

A person might say,

“Lord, if you will deliver me from this sickness,
I will bring a thank offering to the temple.”
So the sacrifice of thanksgiving would be offered –
which would include an animal sacrifice,
along with its grain offering and drink offering
(hence the “cup of salvation”).

These were among the sacraments of the Old Testament.
The OT had a lot of sacraments.
It was a complicated system –
and we can be thankful that in the NT it is much simpler!

But I want you to see how the Psalmist emphasizes
how the corporate and the individual fit together.
Here we have a situation of individual thanksgiving –
the Psalmist giving thanks for God’s deliverance;
which turns into a corporate service of thanksgiving –
as God’s people come together, rejoicing with those who rejoice
(even as we weep with those who weep!).

We sometimes think that in the OT they partook of the covenant meal three times a year –
at the great feasts – Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.
But in fact, people might come with their thank offerings every day.
The priests would partake daily –
and quite frankly,
if you were celebrating God’s goodness in sparing your life –
you might very well include everyone who happened to be around you,
when you were partaking of the thank offering.
So weekly (or even daily) communion would have been *available*
for God’s people in the OT!

And those who partake of the sacrifice partake of the altar (as Paul says in 1 Cor 10).
Jesus has offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice of thanksgiving
(he is also the burnt offering, the guilt offering, the sin offering, the peace offering)
He fulfills *all* the Law and the Prophets!

And when Jesus pays his vows in the house of the LORD,
all his people are drawn together with him.

How does the Lord’s Supper shape your daily life?
Why do Christians pray before meals?
There is no command in scripture saying that we have to!
The reason why we pray before our meals
is because we see the connection
between the Lord’s Supper and our supper.
In the same way that God provided the bread of life in Jesus,

he also provides our daily bread.
But also the Lord's Supper is a participation in the body of Christ.
We have been reconciled to God – and to one another – in Christ.
And so therefore we need to be reconciled to God and one another in daily life.

If we would partake of the cup of salvation,
then we cannot be holding grudges against others.

But what about vows?
(We'll be talking more about vows next week in Sunday school).

A vow could be expensive.
A thank offering could be costly.
There was the cost of the animal –
and all the other expenses that went with it –
together with the cost of travel to the sanctuary.
“Paying my vows” is a good way to put it.
Worship is not cheap.
If you are going to worship God,
you should be *devoted* to him –
and that should be expressed in the way you use your wealth.

When you looked at the finances of an ancient Israelite,
you could tell who he worshiped –
by where his wealth went.

If someone looked at your finances,
could then tell who you worship?

Could they see how your financial priorities demonstrate your love for the Lord Jesus Christ?

(Now, a word of encouragement to the poor:

the poor in ancient Israel had no animals to offer as thank offerings!
Further they had no fields – so they had no produce to offer as a tithe!

How do you see the financial priorities of the poor?

They do what they can.

That widow at the temple whom Jesus commends for giving her last penny.

She couldn't afford to tithe.

She had no fields – no source of income.

That penny was given as a thank offering –

because she loved God and gave thanks to him

in the midst of her affliction!

The lesson of the widow's mite is *not* that everyone needs to give everything –

but that even the poorest of the poor can give *something* –

if only a penny!)

But Psalm 116 concludes – as it began – talking about death.

“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.”

What does that mean?

The death of his saints is *valuable* to God.

In other words, God does not take it lightly when one of his holy ones dies.

God does not treat it cavalierly –

“oh, another saint died – too bad!”

NO!!

And we can see why – when we look more closely at Jesus!

Did God take the death of his Son lightly?

Was it a cheap thing?

Psalm 44:12 says that God has sold his people cheaply
and handed them over to their enemies.

Certainly, it might look like God demanded no high price for his Son!

Jesus went to the cross without a fight!

Sold for a handful of silver.

You do not calculate the value of a saint – the value of one of God’s people –
based on their financial net worth!

No, *precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.*

And the Psalmist – indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ – says,

“O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant (he repeats again),
the son of your maidservant.

You have loosed all my bonds.”

The Seed of the Woman declares that he is the servant of the LORD.

Now, it is true that all of us who believe in Jesus

can say the same thing –

we are his servants – we are the children of his maidservants.

But it is only true of us *because* it was first true of him!

Our song of response comes from the ninth century –

a Byzantine abbess name Kassia,

who understood what it meant to be a “maidservant” of Christ.

We don’t have a huge number of songs that use that term!

But Kassia’s Hymn understand it well –

and takes the story of Mary Magdalene,

weaves it together with the story of Eve in the garden,

and shows how all these stories – and indeed all our stories –
can only find their conclusion in the Lord Jesus Christ –

for “mercy without measure comes from thee.”