

Psalm 116

Psalm 116

Ephesians 3

Psalm 116 is a beautiful example of a prayer which pleases God.

Psalm 116 is not a treatise on prayer.

It is a meditation on prayer.

It is not itself a prayer,

but rather a reflection on the importance of prayer –
and how God has saved him *through prayer*.

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.

Because he inclined his ear to me,

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

Why do we pray?

We pray because we love God.

I love the LORD – and why do I love my God?

Because he has loved me – he has heard my voice –
and he has shown mercy to me!

Because God has done what he has promised,

therefore we pray that God will *continue* to do as he has promised!

Psalm 116 also asks

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

I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. (v12-14)

The language of paying vows suggests that the Psalmist had said,

“If you will deliver me, then I will offer X.”

Because in verse 17, the Psalmist says that because God has loosed his bonds,

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

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

in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD!

When you think about Jesus as the singer of this Psalm,

Psalm 116 is a celebration of the resurrection.

God has raised up Jesus,

and now Jesus stands in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in the midst of the heavenly Jerusalem,

and he gathers in the presence of all his people,

and he calls upon the name of the LORD.

Sing Psalm 116
Read Ephesians 3

We are concluding our catechetical series with a ten-part reflection on the Lord's Prayer.
And I want to start by connecting what we have seen in the Creed with Prayer.

If our *faith* is a Trinitarian faith,
then our prayers should be Trinitarian prayers!

Our Larger Catechism has some useful reflections on how to pray.

It starts by asking:

Q. 178. *What is prayer?*

A. Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, in the name of Christ, by the help of his Spirit; with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.

Notice the Trinitarian structure of the answer:

Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto *God*,
in the name of *Christ*,
by the help of his *Spirit*,

and remember that the Creed goes on to speak of "one baptism for the remission of sins"
and the catechism echoes that "with confession of our sins,
and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies."

1. Prayer Is an Offering Up of Our Desires unto God

Q. 179. *Are we to pray unto God only?*

A. God only being able to search the hearts, hear the requests, pardon the sins, and fulfill the desires of all; and only to be believed in, and worshiped with religious worship; prayer, which is a special part thereof, is to be made by all to him alone, and to none other.

God has commanded us to come to *him* and pray about everything!

So if there is something in your life that you are not praying about,
that means that it is something that you think you can handle on your own!

Why do you suppose that Jesus said, "do not be anxious about what you will eat or wear"?

He knows that we think that we can handle the "ordinary" day-to-day stuff.

(That's why we get anxious about it...

We don't think that God will do things correctly!)

How often do you pray that God would do what he has promised?

Far, far too often we spend our time praying that God would do what *we* want.

If you would be effective in your prayers, then start praying for what *he* wants!

The groundskeeper at Westminster Theological Seminary kept a record of all the prayers

that God has answered.
He was in the millions when I was in seminary.
Every day, as he went about his daily tasks, he would pray for the students,
and for the faculty, and for an ever-growing list of pastors and churches.
He would pray that Christ would bless the flock,
that pastors would preach the word faithfully,
that Christians would grow in grace and wisdom.
And every week he would add tally marks for all the sermons for which he had prayed,
all the Christians who had gone another day, another week, growing in grace.
The count went up by the hundreds daily.

Do what you have promised, O God!

Some might say,
But that's cheating!
God has already promised to do that!
What is the point of praying for what God has already promised to do?

Well, first of all, you are talking to *God*.
If you cannot ask him to do what he has promised,
then there is not much that you can ask him,
because he has made so many promises!!

And even more, think about how you relate to your children:
the baby needs the food;
you have promised to give him the food;
and yet, he still has to say "please."

Will you feed him, even if he doesn't say please?
Yes – eventually!
But will he learn what he was supposed to learn?
No – you'll have to try again later.

Prayer is how God teaches us to speak to him.

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.
Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

When I pray to him, he saves me.

And that is why we pray *in the name of Christ*.

2. In the Name of Christ

The Larger Catechism asks:

Q. 180. *What is it to pray in the name of Christ?*

A. To pray in the name of Christ is, in obedience to his command, and in confidence on his promises, to ask mercy for his sake; not by bare mentioning of his name, but by drawing our encouragement to pray, and our boldness, strength, and hope of acceptance in prayer, from Christ and his mediation.

It's just about saying 'in Jesus' name'!

It's about coming with boldness into the presence of the Father
through the grace of Jesus Christ his Son!

That's why the Catechism asks:

Q. 181. *Why are we to pray in the name of Christ?*

A. The sinfulness of man, and his distance from God by reason thereof, being so great, as that we can have no access into his presence without a mediator; and there being none in heaven or earth appointed to, or fit for, that glorious work but Christ alone, we are to pray in no other name but his only.

In prayer we rest on this firm foundation, that, although we do not deserve it,
God will certainly hear our prayer for the sake of Christ our Lord,
as he has promised us in his word.

We heard that in verses 5-6 of Psalm 116:

*Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful.
The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. (v5-6)*

God is merciful.

The whole point of mercy is that it is undeserved!
In spite of our sin and rebellion,
God saved us.

He hears our prayers – not because we are so great,
but because *he* is so gracious.

*Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling;
I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living. (v7-9)*

This confidence in God's word and God's hearing
is contrasted with the Psalmist's profound lack of confidence in man!

*I believed, even when I spoke, 'I am greatly afflicted';
I said in my alarm, 'All mankind are liars.'*

Whose promises do you trust?
Whose word do you listen to?

Prayer is a response to what God has said.

If you spend much time around sports fans you can see what this means.

They have heard the words of promise:

“I will turn this team around!”

Or politicians:

“I will turn this country (or city, or state) around!”

And so the blogosphere is jammed with the prayers of the faithful,
from their hearts calling on their (false) gods
who have revealed themselves by their (empty) words
knowing their need and misery
because they haven’t won a championship in years...
or this politician will make everything right...
and trusting that this time all the promises will come true.

When the sports fan jumps up and down in front of a TV (or in the arena)
or when the political junkie gets fired up “for the cause”
they are praying to their gods.

But as the Psalmist points out,
“all mankind are liars.”

Only God is true.

And that’s why we need the help of the Holy Spirit in prayer!

3. By the Help of His Spirit

Q. 182. *How doth the Spirit help us to pray?*

A. We not knowing what to pray for as we ought, the Spirit helpeth our infirmities, by enabling us to understand both for whom, and what, and how prayer is to be made; and by working and quickening in our hearts (although not in all persons, nor at all times, in the same measure) those apprehensions, affections, and graces which are requisite for the right performance of that duty.

Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 3:

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,
that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you
to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,
so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—
that you, being rooted and grounded in love,
may have strength to comprehend with all the saints
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

This is an incredible sentence!

I need to say up front that the ESV did a *great* job translating this.
Sometimes I point out the translation when I disagree with it,
but here I am impressed with how they put this together.

Because Paul prays three things:

- 1) that he may grant you (v16-17)
- 2) that you may have strength (v18-19a)
- 3) and that you may be filled (v19b)

Paul's prayer for you is not that you will do a lot of stuff
(though I daresay that if these three things are true of you,
there is no telling what you might do!).

Paul's prayer for you is that God would radically reorient you to himself.

And let me just remind you that all of the "yous" here are plural.
Paul prays this for the church – that it might be true of *you*.

That God would grant "according to the riches of his glory"
(the glory that he has revealed in the resurrection of Jesus)
that you might be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner man.

And with the power of the Holy Spirit at work in your inner man,
Paul prays also that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

What does Paul pray for?!

The first thing that Paul prays is for the work of Christ – the work of the Holy Spirit –
in the hearts and lives of church.

But then Paul turns from the passive to the active.

This shouldn't surprise us.

In Ephesians 2 he said that we were saved by grace through faith,
and this was not our own doing, but the gift of God.

And then the very next thing he said was that we were saved *unto good works*,
which God created us for in Christ Jesus!

Even so, here, after emphasizing our need for God to empower us by the Spirit
and for Christ to dwell (to inhabit) our hearts by faith,
then Paul says "in order that you might have strength to comprehend."

If you are rooted and grounded in love
through the indwelling of Christ and the empowering of his Spirit,
then you will have strength to comprehend – to understand – to realize
with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth.

What does that mean?

At the end of chapter 2 Paul had said that we are being build together into a holy temple.

The measurements of the church are the measurements of this new and glorious temple –
this holy dwelling place for God.

And Christ is already dwelling in his church (inhabiting his holy temple),
And so by this love we are enabled to comprehend this spiritual dwelling place.

But Paul prays that you would have strength to comprehend two things:

- 1) not just that you are part of this holy temple,
- 2) but also that you might know the surpassing love of Christ.

The word there is *huperballo* – literally, to throw beyond.

Perhaps we should translate that ‘the mind-blowing love of Christ’!

Brothers and sisters, if we ever take this for granted,
then we are in big trouble!

If we ever think that the love of Christ is obvious,
then we are oblivious!

If we ever think, “of course he loves me! After all, look at me, what’s not to love?!”

Then we need to go back to Ephesians 1-2!

We were dead in our sins.

We were strangers, aliens.

We were without God, without hope.

And yet God loved us!

Jesus Christ loved us, died for us, came to dwell with us by his Spirit.

And all of this for the final thing that Paul prays for:

In order that you may be filled unto all the fullness of God.

This is the goal of that predestination to adoption in Christ (Eph 1).

This is the purpose of the redemption wrought by Christ.

This is the end of the sealing work of the promised Holy Spirit.

Redemption predestined, redemption accomplished, redemption applied –

all this is so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Talk about mind blowing.

I can handle the part about redemption.

I can see the whole Jesus died in my place as my substitute.

I got that.

Adoption.

That works.

God adopts me as his heir.

Great.

But that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

What?

It was not enough for God to love me.

It was not enough for God to give me a place at his table.

It was not enough for God to send his only Son to die that I might live.

But he also says that I am to be filled with all his fullness.

How can I, who am mortal, receive the fullness of the immortal one?

How can I, who was born in sin, receive into myself the Holy One?

How...

The eternal Son of God became all that we are by nature,
so that we might become all that he is by grace.

Indeed, so astounded is Paul at what he has just said,
that he pauses to give glory to God:

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think,
according to the power at work within us,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations,
forever and ever. Amen.*

Again, notice how Paul connects Christ and his church.

“to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus has united his church to himself.

We share in the fullness of God which dwelt bodily in Jesus Christ.

And so prayer always includes:

4. With Confession of Our Sins and Thankful Acknowledgement of His Mercies

We must know our need and misery,

so that we may humble ourselves before God.

We sang this in Psalm 116.

*“The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me;
I suffered distress and anguish.”*

You often hear people say that in good times it is easy to forget God.

That is why God does not leave us long in our blithe and perilous comfort.
Death is the only path to life.
The cross is the only way to glory.
It was true for Jesus.
It is true for us.

And so it is in the midst of our suffering – in the midst of our misery –
that we cry out to God:
Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!’

If you do not know your misery,
then you will not see any reason to cry out to God!

The Psalmist doesn’t specify the cause of his misery.
Sometimes your own sin will get you in trouble.
Other times it will be someone else.
But as we come to God in prayer, we come as those who know that we need a Savior.
“O LORD I pray, deliver my soul!”

We cannot save ourselves.
No one can redeem a life from the pit –
not without dying!

How often do you confess your sins to God?
We have a weekly prayer of confession as a way to encourage regular confession.
And likewise, our prayers of thanksgiving are designed to train you in gratitude.

I mentioned a few weeks ago the importance of repentance –
I feel very much the need to repeat it again –
Because I need to repent of my poor teaching and example over the years!
When you are repenting, you are confessing your sin –
acknowledging that you have sinned against God and others –
that you have harmed others –
I have come to realize that I used to use the words “please forgive me”
as a way of flipping the script and controlling the situation.

Listen to our Shorter Catechism’s definition of repentance:
where does it say anything about asking for forgiveness?

Repentance unto life is a saving grace,
whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin,
and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ,
does, with grief and hatred of his sin,
turn from it, unto God,
with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

In a few weeks we'll come to where Jesus teaches us to ask *God* for forgiveness.
"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"
And of course! We should ask God for forgiveness!

And I'm not saying that you should *never* ask for forgiveness!
But I *am* saying that asking for forgiveness is not an actual part of repentance.
Think about it:
Let's say I stole \$100 from you.
I could be completely and totally unrepentant –
but I could still come to you and say, "will you forgive me?"
Will you forgive me for stealing that hundred dollars?

You might say, "Um, sure, as soon as you pay back the hundred dollars!"

In the same way, if I have harmed you through my words and actions (or lack thereof!)
then it is entirely right to expect a repentance that bears fruit!

My point is that we should not use repentance as a weapon.
In the same way, we should not use *forgiveness* as a weapon.
If I have sinned, it's not my job to *ask* for forgiveness.
It's my job to *repent*.

But if I have been sinned *against*, then it is my job to *forgive*.

Just to be clear – if someone comes to you with a full "shorter catechism" sort of repentance,
acknowledging their sin, grieving over their sin, seeking to make it right,
trusting in the mercy of God in Christ –
then it is your responsibility to forgive them!

Jesus says in Matthew 6
"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,
but if you do not forgive others their trespasses,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

God will forgive you in the same way that you forgive others!
Do you say, "Yes, I forgive you" – and then hold it against them anyway?
If so, then you are asking God to hold your sin against you as well!

You might say, "he doesn't deserve mercy!"
And you're right.
He doesn't.
No one *deserves* mercy.
Mercy is what God gives us – in spite of what we deserve!

If you give to others "what they deserve" –
then you can expect God to give to you "what you deserve"!