

It is Thanksgiving Sunday and Thanksgiving weekend. I think most of you know that many will gather with family and friends for a meal and maybe to share a reason we are thankful. Have you ever thought about the word thankful? Thankful means to be full of thanks – to be full of gratitude or appreciation for something. We can be thankful for many reasons. Some people are thankful for stuff. They love their car or house or new toy. Some are thankful for circumstances. Life is going well or they have good health or fulfilling work or stimulating school or healthy relationships. Others may be thankful for people in their lives or some experience they just enjoyed. And we say “thank you” a lot out of courtesy. Are you full of thanks today?

We might think that depends on what’s going on in our lives at a particular time. But does it? Should it depend on that? Is it possible to be thankful even when we go through hard times, when life seems boring or when things are not going well? There was a man who went through a hard time in life. In fact he almost died. We don’t know exactly why he was in such a state. But we do know he survived to share a bit of his journey – its joys and its sorrows. He talks about thanksgiving. As we follow his story, I’d like you to watch for his heart and attitude in light of what he’s come through. I believe we can learn from his story about the possibility of being thankful not only on Thanksgiving day but everyday even in hard times. We don’t know his name but we do have his writing. It’s known today as Psalm 116.

**Psalm 116 (ESV) (Page 444)**

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

<sup>2</sup> Because he inclined his ear to me,  
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

<sup>3</sup> The snares of death encompassed me;  
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;  
I suffered distress and anguish.

<sup>4</sup> Then I called on the name of the LORD:  
“O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!”

<sup>5</sup> Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;  
our God is merciful.

<sup>6</sup> The LORD preserves the simple;  
when I was brought low, he saved me.

<sup>7</sup> Return, O my soul, to your rest;  
 for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

<sup>8</sup> For you have delivered my soul from death,  
 my eyes from tears,  
 my feet from stumbling;

<sup>9</sup> I will walk before the LORD  
 in the land of the living.

<sup>10</sup> I believed, even when I spoke:  
 "I am greatly afflicted";

<sup>11</sup> I said in my alarm,  
 "All mankind are liars."

<sup>12</sup> What shall I render to the LORD  
 for all his benefits to me?

<sup>13</sup> I will lift up the cup of salvation  
 and call on the name of the LORD,

<sup>14</sup> I will pay my vows to the LORD  
 in the presence of all his people.

<sup>15</sup> Precious in the sight of the LORD  
 is the death of his saints.

<sup>16</sup> O LORD, I am your servant;  
 I am your servant, the son of your maidservant.  
 You have loosed my bonds.

<sup>17</sup> I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving  
 and call on the name of the LORD.

<sup>18</sup> I will pay my vows to the LORD  
 in the presence of all his people,

<sup>19</sup> in the courts of the house of the LORD,  
 in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD!

### **What has the Lord done in this Psalmist's life? (1-9)**

This Psalmist has experienced a tremendous deliverance from some life threatening situation. He describes it in verse 3. "The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me. I suffered distress and anguish." The New Living Translation puts it like this. Death wrapped its ropes around me; the terrors of the grave overtook me. I saw only trouble or sorrow. It is the picture of someone caught in a trap and unable to free themselves from it.

In the Old Testament, Sheol was the place of the dead. Throughout the Old Testament, death and Sheol are portrayed as aggressive. They clutch at the living. They try to waste them with sickness or crush them with despondency. He uses the phrase “pangs of Sheol.” It is like he felt the terror of death grab at his soul. He wonders if he will soon be part of those who have died. He must have faced some serious illness or threat that he did not think he would survive.

If you’ve ever faced a life-threatening illness or situation, you may relate to this. Or if you have walked with a loved one through their journey of suffering and death, you might have seen them experience this. I remember when my Dad was dying. It was maybe 3 days before it happened. He was still conscious and we could talk. I remember him looking at me and saying, “Tom, I don’t think I’m going to make it. There’s just too much pain.” I remember thinking “what do I say?” My faces his own death. He was not going to make it according to the doctor. But I’m not going to say that to him. I certainly had my own suffering and anguish. But I can’t really imagine what it’s like to be the person who wonders if they will finally succumb to death. You may have tasted that in your life or seen it in a loved one.

But we can also have these kinds of feelings in other situations of life. A person struggling with mental illness or depression can experience the feeling of entrapment. They may suffer the anguish of wondering if they will ever get better. We can struggle when something very difficult happens at work or with our business. Things keep going wrong and we wonder if we will ever come out of it. Or we may go through a difficult family experience or breakup. We wonder if we’ll experience joy again.

This Psalmist experienced something like that. Thankfully, he could look back on these terrors as something from his past. He rejoices because the Lord reached down to deliver him. Look at all the Lord did for this Psalmist. Verse 1. “I love the Lord because he has heard my voice.” Do you ever think about the fact **the Almighty God of the Universe listens to your voice**? Sometimes, I will listen to my messages to see where I can improve or grow. I get to hear my voice as it sounds to you and not in my head. I think it sounds weird. I think you deserve some commendation for listening to such a voice. Yet, it’s the voice God gave me and He listens to it. He not only acknowledges the sound of your and my voice – He listens to what we say. He listens to your under the breath exasperation; your whispers; your comments that may not be heard in a noisy room – He listens to. He hears your pleas for mercy when you say, “Oh my,” when you get that bad news. Or “Oh no – help” when you hear something shocking at home or at work.

Or verse 2 – Because He inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. Notice who makes the first move in verse 2. **The Lord inclines or turns His ear to us.** It's like He's looking out for us and seeking to hear what we have to say. You know when someone has a soft or weak voice how you go closer to them to listen or you cup your hand around your ear so you can hear them better? That's the picture of God here. This points to His greatness and supernatural ability. He can incline his ear to all of us at the same time and hear each one clearly.

So the Psalmist will call out to the Lord as long as he lives. Then he recounts in verse 3 that terrible time we've already thought about. Yet he doesn't remain in distress and anguish. He calls out to the Lord. Verse 4 – "Then I called on the name of the Lord: "O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!" So he saw no way out without The Lord's help. It is a cry of desperation and yet some confidence. The Psalmist trusts that somehow the Lord can deliver him.

If you're a Christian here today, this verse describes your cry to the Lord at some point in the past. You cried out for the deliverance of your soul from Hell and from God's wrath. God answered and rescued you. And there are likely many other times when the Lord intervened in your life to rescue you from something. Did you ever think about how God had a hand in every recovery from illness that you've made? God had a hand in bringing you through difficult relationships or trials or work situations. Sometimes we think it was all us and our brilliance in finding solutions. But might it be that God directed us to the solution? God brought that person along or that resource that helped us at exactly the time we needed it.

Then the Psalmist enters into a time of celebration of the Lord. Verse 5 – "Gracious is the Lord and righteous; our God is merciful." Well that's a pretty good trilogy to have in our God; **grace, righteousness and mercy.** Sometimes we put unrealistic expectations upon people as if they are the Messiah. A new person or party gets elected to some office and everyone is excited about the freshness, change and hope. And then we discover they are just a person with their strengths and weaknesses like we have. But our God is full of grace yet He won't smooth over wrongdoing. He's righteous. Yet He is also merciful giving grace to people that don't deserve it like you and me.

Verse 6 – "**The Lord preserves the simple.**" The word translated "simple" describes someone who has no merit in themselves. They don't really have power or wealth. They're not refined. They border almost on the naïve or gullible. Yet they are straightforward; open and honest. The Lord preserves them. It's like he watches out for them. Notice the

Psalmist doesn't distance himself from them. He identifies with them. He was in a place where all he could do was state the obvious. "Deliver me for there's no other way out."

Are you ever too proud to state the obvious to God? To yourself? To others? "I need help. We need help. I need rescue. We need prayer. I need encouragement." Why do we hide this or push it down? Maybe we've been taught that it's weakness. We've been raised to be tough and self-sufficient. But there are times when we need to call out for help. It's not a sign of weakness. It's a sign of reality. It's an acceptance of our frailty and that God is God and we are not. The Psalmist admitted this.

Then look at what he can say to himself in verse 7. "Return, O my soul, to your rest; for **the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.**" The Psalmist speaks to his own soul. He preaches to himself. God has rescued him therefore he can stop worrying. Sometimes we have to preach to ourselves "God is a rescuing God. So though we are in the thick of something, God is always at His rescuing work. He will deliver in some way in His time."

Verse 8-9 contain a cascading summary of the deliverance experienced by the Psalmist. "For you have **delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.**" The hopelessness of verse 3 is long gone. The Lord rescued this writer from the threat, terror and distress of potential death. So now he looks forward to life again. Verse 9 could be both a celebration and resolution. "I WILL walk before the Lord *in the land of the living*. I have been given my life back and I get to taste the simple treasures of life again." Or it could mean "I will WALK BEFORE THE LORD in the land of the living. I resolve to walk in a way that pleases the Lord as I go forward in life. Either way, it is a focus on life and not the potential of death.

The Lord has done much in this Psalmist's life. He has heard his voice and pleas for mercy. He has inclined his ear to listen to the Psalmist's pleas. He has delivered him. He is gracious, righteous and merciful. He preserves the simple and saves those who are brought low. He changes circumstances so that the Psalmist's soul can rest. He transforms the Psalmist's perspective from dreadful anticipation of death to hopeful excitement about life.

If you're in a place right now where things are going relatively well, have you thanked the Lord? If your life is ordinary have you thanked him that you're not in crisis? We have so many privileges in our society that we've come to expect as normal; good health, enjoyable days, good food, clean water, fulfilment at work and much leisure time. We

think this is normal. We can even think we're entitled to these blessings. Yet each one is a tremendous gift that perhaps 75-80% of the world does not experience most of their days. So the Lord has done much in this Psalmist's life.

**What can the Psalmist give back to the Lord?** Verses 12-19 contain his response. "What shall I render or give to the Lord for all his benefits for me?" So it's payback time in a good way. How will he respond to the Lord's generosity and rescue? How do we respond when someone does something kind, merciful and even rescuing for us? Maybe we express deep appreciation. Maybe once the crisis passes we have them over for dinner or cook them a meal or write them a card or give them a gift. Or if they've had us over, we think about having them over. We think about paying back or giving back in some way.

So what can the Psalmist give back to the Lord? Verse 13 – "I will **lift up the cup of salvation** and call on the name of the Lord." Now do you notice anything unusual or unique about this gift? When we give gifts, where do we get them? Maybe we go to the store; maybe we make them with our hands. Where does the Psalmist get the gift he offers up in response – the cup of salvation? From God! So the only thing the Psalmist has to offer to God in gratitude and appreciation is what God already gave Him. So he can't pay back God. We cannot out-give God. We cannot make Him our debtor. We have not done God a huge favor by believing in Him. We have not pushed up His status because He's now got us as one of us followers on Instagram or as one of his friends on Facebook.

Everything we have and are comes from God – health; life; breath; personality; opportunities; brains; blessings; salvation. All from God. Therefore the grateful response to all God has done is **to offer up what He has given to us to be used for His glory**. The Psalmist offers up the cup of salvation. He will continue to call on the name of the Lord.

But then verse 14 looks like it unravels everything I've argued. I've just said, "You can't pay back God." But verse 14 uses the word pay. "I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people." So you can pay God back if you just pay your vows? What is this talking about? Well, I think he's talking about vows made in the time of trouble. I don't think these are the vows of bargaining that some people make – "God if you get me out of this, I promise to go to church every week." Then once things settle down, the vow gets forgotten.

I think this Psalmist was serious. Maybe he vowed something like "I'm not going to waste the opportunity of this new lease on life. I am going to give my life for that which matters. "I am going to set aside the selfishness and pettiness with which I lived. I will instead love the Lord and others much more seriously than I did before." Or "I need to change

Lord because you've shown me how fleeting is my life." So I wouldn't view the word "pay" in the transaction sense. I would view it more as "fulfill" or "follow through." I will follow through on my vow.

But he's not going to keep this to himself. He will fulfill his vows *in the presence of all his people*. So this was likely at a public worship gathering. The Lord provided the Israelites with a practical way to say thanks through thank offerings. So they had more opportunity than a once a year thanksgiving service. They could bring a thanksgiving offering that didn't pay God back but simply represented a heart of thanks towards Him. But then he throws in verse 15 which I didn't really understand for the longest time. "**Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.**" I always thought that meant it's sweet or special to the Lord when his saints die. But though there may be a little sweetness in death because there's an end to suffering and being present with the Lord for the Christian, it's still hard and leaves that bitter taste. So that never made sense to me until the commentators pointed out that the word "precious" does not refer to something sweet and cherished but something costly. "Costly in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." It costs God when His people die. It costs Him sorrow and pain. Just like Jesus' wept at Lazarus' tomb, God pays the price of sorrow when his saints die. So In paying his vows, the Psalmist acknowledges that God was not yet willing to pay this price for him.

This Psalmist didn't know that God would pay a much higher cost to deal with the bitterness of death. Costly in the sight of the Lord is the death of his Son." Jesus Himself would pay the cost so that death would not be our end. But here we get a glimpse of God's heart for us and desire to protect us from death.

So the Psalmist concludes by offering up what God has given Him. Verse 16 – I am your servant. So **he offers his life**. Verse 17 – I will offer you **a sacrifice of thanksgiving**. So he offers God a sacrifice of what God has already provided. Verses 18-19 – He resolves that He will continue to **live a life of thanks to God before the people**. This is the picture of a thankful life that recognizes God's gifts and resolves in God's strength to offer those gifts for His glory. It was a tremendous time in this Psalmist's life. Today, we have the opportunity to imitate Him by giving thanks to the Lord for His gifts in our lives.

But you might have noticed I skipped verses 10 and 11. I saved them for the end because I think they describe some of you here today or they at least describe how some of you feel today. Some of you are not in verse 8 where you can look back at the Lord's deliverance from death, tears and stumbling. You're still in verse 3 – feeling trapped, dragged

down; suffering distress and anguish. **How can you earnestly appreciate and pray Psalm 116 when you haven't experienced deliverance?**

Verses 10-11. "I believed," even when I spoke: "I am greatly afflicted"; I said in my alarm, "All mankind are liars." When I read these verses in preparation for this week my immediate reaction was "What on earth do these verses have to do with anything?" They don't fit. They don't follow any flow. They barely even make sense.

I agree with those say the Psalmist gives us a glimpse into his mind during the distress. He's saying "I believed," "I kept trusting God," even when I said "I am greatly afflicted or I'm going through a hard time." And when I said in alarm, "All men are liars." One commentator states "Verses 10-11 require a little reading between the lines. The Psalmist asserts his faith. He remained a believer. His position was not called into question by anything he said in alarm. But the way one line follows another, leaving much unexplained, reflects the nervous alarm of the situation. It amounted to a frightening sense of isolation and the absence of anyone trustworthy."<sup>1</sup>

If you face a turbulent time in your life right now, you might relate to this. You still trust and believe in the Lord. Yet you're distressed. You might be alarmed. You might wonder if there is anyone trustworthy besides God. But how can you apply this to your situation?

Maybe the lesson is **to keep trusting the Lord even when your thoughts are scattered**. The commentator puts it like this – "The Bible makes no secret of the fact that life can be a troubled existence and that life's troubles are no cause for surprise. James calls us to joy in trial (James 1:2-4) because it is God's plan for our spiritual perfecting. God, like a personal trainer, allows pressures and stress in your life – to grow your faith. Peter (1 Peter 4:12) tells us it is nothing strange; it is the way the Master went; shall not the servant tread it still? And what does Ps 116 teach? A great deal, indeed! The writer can look back over the whole period of the trial and say without hesitation: "I believed (10) – a strong, undeveloped statement, a maintained position of faith. Like Jesus, when he asked his awesome question, "why have you forsaken me?" on the cross, but (Mark 15:34), was careful to preface it with "My God, My God," a double affirmation of sustained faith. Not a thing we always do!

Yet what a lesson to learn! To **look into teeth of the storm and say "I believe."** Come what may, this is not going to knock me off course. Here I stand! In the Psalm, the writer's faith found expression in rest: Come back to your rest (7).

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<sup>1</sup>Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day* (Christian Focus, Scotland, 2016), 325.

Don't let the storm drift you from your moorings; come home to God. And inside that enclave of security, give yourself to prayer (4, 13, 17). None of this is easy. It contradicts our fallen nature – which is always to turn from God to ourselves, to rehearse our grievances rather than to pray.

But above all, in Ps 116, the time of trouble is a time of spiritual determination and commitment, an opportunity to decide to make spiritual progress, to come out of the testing loving him more than ever; more aware of his grace, righteousness, compassion (5). More disciplined in walking in his presence (8-9) and keeping our promises to him (14,18). More public in our testimony (14) closer to the cross and the one great, all-sufficient sacrifice (17); drinking ever more deeply from the cup of salvation. (13).<sup>2</sup>

So though you may not have experienced deliverance yet, you can continue to trust in Him. You can by God's strength and the help of other Christians, make spiritual progress and seek to come through loving Him and having more awareness of His grace to you. Today you might even be able to offer thanksgiving to the Lord that He is with you through this time.

So where have we been today? God delivers us from life-threatening situations. We can respond to the Lord's deliverance by living a thankful life. This involves offering what He has given us to be used for His glory. If we are in need of deliverance today, we need to continue to trust in the Lord and thank Him for His presence as we go through whatever we face. .

All of these benefits and this close relationship is possible because of what Jesus did on the cross. We can drink the cup of salvation because He drank the cup of God's wrath. Since the death of His saints costs the Lord much, He paid the cost of His own Son's death so we could have life. We receive the Lord into our lives and can experience this deep fellowship with Him by putting our trust on Jesus and what He did on the cross. We don't trust ourselves or our good works. We can't bring cups full of our blessings to God. We can only respond with thanksgiving and a God honoring life of praise and worship.

If you don't know Christ, you have never received Him into your life, maybe this Thanksgiving will become the most important Thanksgiving of your entire life – you can receive Christ now by putting your trust on Him. "Lord, I want to move the foundation of my life from myself to you – I put my trust on you and what you have done. I pray that on the

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<sup>2</sup> Motyer, 326.

basis of your sacrifice, God will deliver me from the death of separation from Him.” Through your faith, God will pour His blessings and Himself into your life. You will become His child and begin the journey of a thankful life.

It is Thanksgiving Sunday. But by God’s grace and strength, let us make every day a Thanksgiving Day.