

Psalm 116

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Preacher: Jerome Peirson

[0:00] So we're looking at Psalm 116. Why this psalm? Why have I thought about this psalm for communion this evening?

! Well, I think here in the psalm we see a really good example of the believer's devotional life. Of devotion, of praise and worship to the Lord in a time of real suffering and affliction. I think it's good as we come together to take a few minutes to reflect on the Lord's goodness to us. Even in the midst of struggle and difficulty and trial. I was thinking about how best to consider this psalm.

How to kind of divide it. And I was thinking of the usual. Does it fit nicely into the three points? I couldn't really see that. But just a couple of things really came to mind for our meditation this evening.

[1:13] Firstly, God's gracious goodness. Verses 1 to 11. God's gracious goodness. And secondly, the faithful servant's response.

Verses 12 to 17. Well, this is part of a unit of psalms called the Hallel Psalms. The Psalms 113 to 118.

Those six psalms have been known as the Hallel Psalms. They were often recited as a unit in times of the festivals and the feasts. And I think it's highly likely our Lord Jesus would have sung this psalm.

It's a psalm of praise, as we can see. And it would have been lovely to have sung it. I'm not confident of any tunes for this psalm.

Hence us not singing it. Maybe we will one day. It's a psalm of personal thanksgiving for God's care. We don't know the author. It's not said.

[2:14] Many have suggested David. Certainly, when you read the psalm, it really echoes what we see in other psalms where we know David is the author. That sense of being in real straits, real struggle, in real affliction and calling on the Lord.

And it brings to mind, doesn't it, that the Christian life, the life of the believer, is not just a life of roses and ease. But we can praise in the midst of the struggles and the difficulties.

And I think that's helpful for us to be reminded of. And let's look at my first point. So God's gracious goodness. God's gracious goodness. The psalmist opens up with this.

It's almost a declaration, isn't it? I love the Lord. I love the Lord. It's a declaration of love. And he starts off with his response.

And it literally says in the original in the Hebrew, it just says, I love. I love. It's the first of two major declarations in the psalm.

[3:22] Firstly, this, I love. And then later on, it says, I believed in verse 10. But you notice this love, it's grounded in the Lord's goodness.

In that the Lord has heard his plea for mercy. He's heard his plea for mercy. And we're immediately confronted with, I think, a heartfelt expression of affectional praise here, aren't we?

I love the Lord. This isn't the cold, routine, lukewarm ritual of a kind of religious formalist.

This is true heart religion. There's something relational here. There's something experiential.

There's something affectional.

And there's something covenantal, I think, here. You might be thinking, well, how do you see that? The word for Lord is God's personal name.

[4:29] His covenantal name that we would say Yahweh or Jehovah. Not anyone can use this name and express this love. It's a psalm that's, the psalmist is one of God's peculiar and treasured people.

And brothers and sisters, that's us, isn't it? That's the church and that's who we are. And this introductory statement, it's both a declaration. But it's also an encouragement, I think, for us to stir us. And, you know, as we're coming to the table this evening, I think it's a helpful question to ask, isn't it? Just a fundamental question. And you may come to communion and you might have all kinds of things going on in your head. You might feel, oh, the fervency of my faith is just not where it could be or should be. You might be thinking, the degree of my devotion, it's just down here at the moment. Or you may be reeling from a week where you've fallen foul to sin.

[5:34] And sin seems to have the upper hand in your life. And you just feel as a Christian, I don't have the consistency and focus that I really should have.

But at the end of the day, at the end of the day, can you say in your heart, I love the Lord? I think it's a good question to ask yourself. There are so many distractions for us, aren't there? There are so many things we think about as Christians. And they're important things and they're sometimes necessary and good things. But this is foundational. That love for Christ. And this first evidence of God's goodness. We're thinking of God's gracious goodness as him inclining his ear to the psalmist. To hear him. It's a tender picture, isn't it?

[6:35] It's a lovely picture. It's a picture of God stooping to listen and to answer prayers of his child. It made me think as I was reading this.

Sometimes on my way to drop the kids off at school, you'll see a child about this big talking to a parent or a grandparent. And there's so much going on with the traffic and so forth. And the adult has to kind of stoop down to hear the child. That sense of tenderness. And that's how God... Now it says here God inclined his ear.

And we know God is a spirit. We know that God does not have ears or body parts. But here, the psalmist is using language, as is so often the place in scripture, to accommodate to us in our finite humanness to our level.

And to be more technical, the idea of God having body parts. You may have heard the term anthropomorphisms. Meaning that human body parts are attributed to God.

[7:46] He has an ear. He has hands. He has arms. He has eyes to see. Obviously, we don't take that literally in a literal sense.

We take it analogically. But there's something of who our God is stooping to our level. You see this with psychological functions as well.

You read in the scriptures that God grieves or God is angry. And, of course, he doesn't grieve or feel anger the way we do in a sinful way.

He is God. But it's just to accommodate. And I thought of a beautiful portion in the psalm, Psalm 94, where it says, He who planted the ear, does he not hear?

He who formed the eye, does he not see? Our God is a hearing God. He answers prayers. He stoops and inclines to hear us and attend to our needs.

[8:46] We see that very much in the table, don't we, in communion. And the psalmist says, as a result of this, he says, Therefore, I will call on him as long as I live.

And this is the first example of the psalmist making a resolution. This psalm has a number of resolutions. And I'll speak more about that as we come to verse 14 and we think about vows. But the Christian life is a life that does have resolutions. And we may feel uncomfortable to read that the psalmist is saying this resolution, that I will call on him as long as he lives. But I think that's the heart response of someone that's overwhelmed with the goodness of God. God is the overflowing fountain of all good.

In verse 3, we see the struggle and the affliction of the psalmist. The snares of death encompass me.

[9:51] The snares of death, literally the cords of death surrounding him. You picture someone being surrounded, being entangled, being hemmed in. Trapped in such life-threatening circumstances.

Or on the brink of death. This is serious affliction that's going on here. But the psalmist knows God intimately, even in the extremity of his struggle and suffering.

And you may be thinking, well, this isn't my experience or this isn't anywhere near my experience.

But I think it's helpful to think of these passages as a church. Because if it's not you personally, there will be someone not very far from you in this church who is suffering at this time.

We can all bring to mind people we know and care for deeply who have got really difficult circumstances. Who are really struggling. There may be people among us who have known this in a more literal sense.

Where their own lives have been close to death through illness and disease. Or a loved one very dear to them has come close to death or death itself.

[11:01] This is the reality of the Christian walk. And it's helpful for us to remember that the Bible speaks very profoundly and deeply into our suffering and our struggles.

And it's an encouragement. And it's a comfort to us. And if we haven't experienced these things, we will at some point.

Or things close to it. It's life in a fallen world, isn't it? We share the struggles. We share the pains.

We share the anguishes of even the unbeliever.

Our friends, our neighbours. But there's a difference in the way we respond. And we see it in this psalmist. In the midst of it, he calls on the name of the Lord.

O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul. Verse 4. I pray, deliver my soul. He called on the name of the Lord.

[12:06] Remember the name of the Lord. It's more than just a way of classifying God. But it's all that God has revealed himself to be. It's often summarised in his perfections or his attributes, which the psalmist goes on to speak of in verse 5.

And he recounts these glorious attributes. Aren't they glorious?

Gracious is the Lord. And righteous, our God is merciful. When I was reading this, I was thinking these attributes in many ways are the crowning perfections of God in his salvation work, aren't they?

Gracious, merciful, and righteous. They're key aspects of who God is that shine forth in the gospel. Now, it's important when we read these lists of attributes in the Psalms or anywhere else in the scriptures, not to see them as parts of God.

That God has a little bit of graciousness. He has a little bit of mercy or lots of graciousness, lots of mercy, and lots of righteousness. A bit like a pie chart.

[13:18] And he has them equally distributed. And you then get the whole of who God is. You know, when you think about certain character attributes in a human being, it doesn't say who we intrinsically are.

You might say, I can be loving, I can be kind, I can also be grumpy, and I can also be stressed. But it's not intrinsically. It's something I do or feel or act or it's a part of me.

Because we are people who are made up of parts, aren't we? We are composite beings. We're creatures. But God isn't composite.

He isn't a created creature. He's not made up of parts and attributes. It's really hard to get your head around. But for something to be composite or made up of parts requires someone previously to have created or to pull those parts together.

But God just is. He's fully and wholly who he is. His divine essence and his attributes can't be severed or separated. He just is gracious.

[14:28] He is merciful. But as time-bound creatures, we experience him, don't we, a bit at a time. And here we see these beautiful aspects of who God is.

And let's think about them just for a few moments because I think they really shine forth in the supper. Gracious. Generous. Forgiving. Compassionate favor for the undeserving.

Think of mercy. Again, mercy denotes compassion. Mercy is a bit different. It's pity for the weak.

You think of those who are poor and in need. This idea of mercy is a picture of protectiveness and kindness. And you think of the compassion of a mother.

The root of the word is apparently, I read, comes from the womb. So you get this sense, a picture of protection and enclosure.

[15:29] It's a lovely picture, isn't it? God's mercy. I've said this before and it's sometimes helpful to think mercy can be God.

He withholds giving us what we deserve. He doesn't give to us what we deserve. That's his mercy. There's a withholding. Yeah?

Whereas grace, he does give us what we don't deserve. There's a subtle difference. I heard one man say that mercy almost gets us to that place of neutrality.

God withholds. But in a sense, grace goes further in a sense. Grace is actively, I mean, mercy does show us forgiveness and does show us such compassion.

But grace, we're adopted by God. We're brought into the family. We also read of God's righteousness. He's blameless.

[16:36] He's just and right. He's always just and right in all that he does, even when we don't understand it. He's perfectly just in all his dealings with us and with man.

And his law is perfect. And I think these are attributes that really come to the fore in the cross, actually. If you think of the cross and the attributes of God, you see very clearly, don't you, the compassion, the mercy and the grace of God.

But you also see God's divine righteousness and his justice. It's been said, hasn't it? And you've heard it and we've sung it, that it's almost mercy and justice kiss or they meet in the cross.

Well, the psalmist then goes on to say that the law preserves the simple. We often think of the simple as those who are lacking intelligence, don't we? Some kind of mental deficiency.

I'm not entirely sure what the psalmist means here. We come across a simple character in Proverbs 7 and parts of Proverbs where the writer of the Proverbs, Solomon, he says, I've seen among the simple and I've perceived among the youths a young man lacking sense.

[17:53] So there's a sense where the simple person is someone who's enticed, who's seducible, who's easily bored into sin. But I wonder if in this psalm, the simple is more likely to be a kind of naivety, but a teachability.

It describes a person that's still open, maybe someone that's impressionable. I read somewhere, someone who's unformed, fully formed in judgment.

Someone who may be spiritually vulnerable and urgently needs the guardrails of God's given instruction. In a sense, we all need that, don't we?

In a sense, we all have this simplicity about us. Spurgeon suggests that the simple are those who do not have worldly wit and ability to take care of themselves. They have no worldly craft, subtlety and guile, but simply trust in the Lord.

That would fit, wouldn't it? That kind of simplicity where they trust God and his word. I've often, when you meet a new believer who's really zealous and on fire for the Lord, I'm often struck sometimes there's this lovely simplicity and trust.

[19:02] They're thinking, but that kind of cynicism hasn't set in. That just childlike, lovely trust, and that cynicism shouldn't set in.

But I think you know what I mean. He preserves us, doesn't he, in our simplicity. Sometimes in our naivety. Sometimes we are limited in our understanding, in our wisdom.

And he gives us a teachable spirit. I think it's true to say that often we want to be known, don't we? As strong, as sophisticated, as profound in our thinking and wise and mature.

And of course, we should be striving for maturity. We don't want to be stuck in childishness or childlikeness as Christians. But this reminded me of where Christ said it's the humble, those who are brought low that are exalted.

And the exalted are humbled. And there's a beautiful humility in this psalmist. He says, return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

[20:10] In verse 7. Again, a lovely gospel picture, the rest of the soul. And here in the supper, we can come back to the table and find true rest, can't we, in the supper.

And we see the Lord's bountiful, generous provision to us. As we consider that it is finished. Christ has said it is finished. Christ's work is complete, as we reminded this morning of the gospel.

We needn't strive. We can truly rest. We don't look to doing or the law as a means of justification or being right with God.

We were so helpfully reminded of that this morning. But we can rest in the sense that our position and our favor with God is secure, based on the finished work of Christ.

Made me think of that lovely verse in Matthew 11. And come to me, all who labor and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart.

[21:22] And you will find rest for yourselves, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Well, we see in verses 8 to 11 a kind of recapitulation or a return of the struggle and affliction of the psalmist.

But notice that these are quite wide ranging. He says, his soul is delivered from death, his eyes from tears, and his feet from stumbling.

He walks before the Lord in the land of the living. Verse 9.

I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. The idea of walking encapsulates the entirety of the believer's life. The walk is something that is often mentioned in Paul's epistles, Ephesians 5. Look carefully how you walk. Look, it's the tone and the flavor and the way that you live your Christian life. We as believers, we need to be mindful that we conduct every aspect of our lives before the Lord and in his presence.

[22:37] You see that here. I will walk before the Lord. There's something here about being before God's face. The reformers often use the Latin term to describe this kind of overarching ethos of the Christian life being lived out before God, before his face.

It was Coram Deo, before the face of God. And that's how we live, isn't it, as Christians. We walk in his presence. The psalmist then makes the declaration, I believe, even when, or could be rendered, therefore, I spoke, I am greatly afflicted.

I said in my alarm, all mankind are liars. It's interesting, isn't it, when you're walking with the Lord, your perspective is totally altered, isn't it? Even in the midst of struggles and afflictions.

And I think as we look at this kind of first section, thinking of the goodness and graciousness of God, and there's much in the way of the psalmist's response even here, actually.

But we can't help thinking of the example of Christ in many of these passages. Christ is the one who loved the Lord in such an exemplary way, isn't he?

[23:58] He's the one that has suffered to such an extent that he bore our sins on that accursed tree. That he tasted death in a way that we would never fathom.

The one who was brought so low. The one who walked before the Lord in the land of the living so perfectly. Well, we come to verses 12 to 17.

And here we have, in sharper relief, the faithful servant's response. What shall I render? What shall I render? The psalmist, he can't help but to respond with thankfulness and heartfelt devotion.

It reminded me, it's similar to when, you know when someone does something so utterly kind and loving and selfless to you. You're so touched. You're so moved.

You're so, you cannot help but to respond. We've all had situations like that. And that's just a glimpse or a glimmer of what this is. And how is this done?

[25:01] How is this response kind of manifest or borne out? It's largely in the acts of public worship.

You see that. Firstly, I will lift the cup of salvation. Verse 13. One writer said that this is possibly the cup of thanksgiving as part of the sacrifice at the temple worship.

Or another writer I read said this could be a metaphor for the good portion received from the Savior. But what immediately came to mind for me is the cup that we partake in at supper.

This symbol of salvation. The blood symbolizing the costliness of our salvation. And symbolizing the life. The blood always symbolic of the life. And then we can't help but to think of the cup that our Savior drunk.

The cup of God's wrath. And verse 14. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. I was struck by this section because we rarely think about or talk about paying vows, do we?

[26:13] As modern Christians. Don't know about you. I've never heard that spoken of in church. Might make us feel a little bit uneasy. I've heard it said that some have felt that our church practice of membership.

Where we ask the incoming member to be at the front of church. And make promises and publicly make promises. Some have felt uneasy by that.

And some have suggested that that could be legalistic. But I think it's biblical. And I think this is maybe somewhere you could go to to see how that is biblical.

I think it's helpful to think of vows, resolutions, commitments, promises. And it's really important to remember that when we ask people to make, or when the Bible asks to make commitments or vows or promises.

And we were reminded of this this morning. You have to get the horse before the cart. This is something that flows out of a heart that's just so in love with God.

[27:34] This isn't the psalmist saying vows to get right with God, or curry favor with God, or to be justified with God. And certainly when we ask for promises to be made, we're not saying that.

It's helpful to think in terms of goals. Do you have goals as a Christian? Spiritual goals. Do you have commitments that you feel are important?

Not to get right with God, but just as a response to what God has done in your life. Christianity is certainly not a set of rules. I've heard that said, and that's absolutely correct.

And we would say that it's not a set of rules. But we do need to qualify that by saying Christianity does come with duties, responsibilities, goals, commitments, and governing principles.

That's not a bad thing. That's not legalism. That's what love does. Promises and commitments are part of life.

[28:39] Specifically the Christian life. But even beyond just Christianity, you think marriage is a great example, isn't it? Marriage is a very good example of that. Now it's possible to make vows with a legalistic heart.

It's also possible to be utterly unrealistic. We need to be very careful that we don't rashly make promises. Thinking of a silly example.

If I was to stand up in church and say, well, I promise to get up at 3am every morning. I'm going to read my Bible and pray for three hours. Get the kids breakfast. Do the school running.

Get to work. You'd be right to say, that's not realistic, is it? That's not likely to happen. So that's a silly example.

I mean, some may do that. You'd certainly need to do that in God's strength. But we need to be mindful as we make promises. And even in the supper, largely the supper, we're celebrating what God has done.

[29:40] But I think in terms of self-examination, there is an element of thinking about our recommitting. We're told to search and examine ourselves. And I think often in the Lord's Supper, I've kind of considered kind of a recommittal, a recovenanting, a refocusing maybe.

It's something that the Puritans said a lot. It's something many of you will know of Jonathan Edwards.

He made a number of resolutions. I won't read some of them to you. They're very profound and deep. I think, and I'm speaking, I'm not pointing the finger at anyone here. Actually, I'm probably thinking more of myself here.

I think we live in a slightly flabby, non-committal age, if I'm honest. I think people are nervous about commitment. People are generally suspicious of commitment.

Things like vows and promises. But anyway, the psalmist ends by proclaiming to God who he is.

[30:49] I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. This is the identity that's really going to bring fullness and wholeness and joy, isn't it?

This is who I am. I am your servant, God. But it's one of those paradoxes we see. Christian servanthood is true freedom, isn't it?

And what sacrifice can he offer as he brings this to a conclusion? It's the sacrifice of thanksgiving. And I thought of Psalm 51. It says that the Lord does not delight in sacrifices or is pleased with burnt offerings.

But the sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart. And here we see thanksgiving also. I was reminded in this little bit on thanksgiving.

And we thought about thanksgiving last week. Verse 17, I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving. Lovely picture of this in the lepers in Luke, isn't it?

[31:56] And the leper who was a Samaritan out of the ten. The one came back to give thanks. And I thought of that one that came back when I was thinking of this psalmist. Jesus said, was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?

And interestingly, the leper. He goes, ten were healed, but one came back to Jesus and fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. And he said, rise and go your way.

Your faith has made you well. Well, we can so easily enjoy the benefits that God bestows upon us in life, can't we? And we can so easily forget to be thankful.

We enjoy the gifts and sometimes we can forget the giver. Well, let's ensure as we come before the table to give thanks to our Lord in the supper.

And again, I repeat this psalm, it ultimately points to and is fulfilled in Jesus, who is the true servant, isn't he? He's the one who never broke his vows.

[33:09] He made that promise in eternity past with the Father. He made that promise in the supper, that he would come into this world and die for our sins, for us.

He's the one who faced the cause of death in such an unimaginable way, taking upon himself our sins. So let's remember that as we come to the table.