

GIVE THANKS PSALMS 116

It's that time of the year again. Summer's over, the leaves have fallen, the weather is getting cooler and we are into the holiday season. I think most of us enjoy the Thanksgiving - Christmas - New Year period. It is really a "feel good" time that is packed with memories and thoughts of anticipation. It is a time for family and good food, a time for giving and receiving.

This is the time of year that we call THANKSGIVING. We trace the origins of this commemoration back to the days of Pilgrims in Colonial times and we are reminded that those people who entered that brave new world did so out of conviction that Jesus Christ was Lord of all and they were thankful to God for His great bounty and blessing. Our forefather who honored God in their day set the stage for this nation and we are still being blessed because of it.

Don't you find it encouraging, especially in light of many negative things that we see happenings all around us that we, as a nation, have a National Day of Thanksgiving? What a great heritage this is for a nation. Not many nations have such a day set aside during which they pause and give thanks for God's blessings. It is a time of feasting and festivities and this is good. It is a time of sharing and reaching out with a helping hand to those who have less and are struggling and this is better. It is a time that sets the stage for the celebration of the birth of our Savior and this is the best. John the Baptist proclaimed to the people of Judah, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Can you think of a better way to prepare ourselves for the Savior to impact our lives than being thankful and filled with gratitude for God's great mercy and His amazing grace?

Just as we have a heritage which inspires praise to God as an expression of our thankfulness, the Israelites looked back to the deliverance from Egypt as a seminal event to which they could point as evidence of how great God had been to them. This was celebrated in song and poetry which has many references in the Scriptures. There is a section in the Psalms (113-118) that is called the Paschal Hallel or the Egyptian Hallel. Paschal refers to the Passover and Hallel is the Hebrew word for praise. These songs were chanted in the temple while the Passover lambs were being killed and on other festival occasions, such as Pentecost, the feast of Tabernacles, and the feast of Dedication. It was also chanted in private families at the feast of Passover. This was probably the hymn which Jesus and the disciples sang at the conclusion of the supper held in the upper room before He was arrested in the garden.

We will be looking at one of the psalms in this Hallel that concentrates on praise for being delivered from death. In this psalm there is emphasis on Praying to God (1-4), Resting in and Walking with God (5-9), Rethinking Opinions (10-11) and Worshiping God (12-19).

Praying to God

¹ I love the LORD, because He hears My voice *and* my supplications. ² Because He has inclined His ear to me, Therefore I shall call *upon Him* as long as I live. ³ The cords of death encompassed me And the terrors of Sheol came upon me; I found distress and sorrow. ⁴ Then I called upon the name of the LORD: "O LORD, I beseech You, save my life!" Psalm 116:1-4 (NASB95)

Most (all?) translations render the first verse to imply that we love God conditionally. If you were to ask professing Christians if they loved the Lord, most would tell you "yes." If you asked them "why do you love the Lord?" most would give you a reason that relates to some benefit they attribute to God's grace and mercy. Perhaps this is the only way most of us can relate to the idea of love as it being a response to some benefit received. How does this idea mesh with the words of John in 1 John 4:19 where he wrote:

“We love him, because he first loved us.” Does this also imply a “conditional” love or does it simply mean that we are “enabled” to love God because of His love for us? We find some comments on this enabling idea from Paul in Romans 5:5 where he said “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” We could conclude that God gives us the ability to love and therefore we are enabled to love Him and to love others.

So, what can we say about the opening to Psalm 116? If we consider a simple change in punctuation of the first two verses, then we can see the following possibility:

I love the Lord! I will call upon Him as long as I live because He hears my voice and my supplications and has inclined His ear to me. (Ps 116:1-2, paraphrased)

This interpretation is more in line with the words of Job who said “Though He slay me, yet I will trust in Him.” I think we are on dangerous ground to make our love for God conditional upon His response to us. Many times “His response” to us is beyond our understanding because He has an agenda for us that is for our ultimate good but it may involve some difficult situations that we would not choose. How would we like the love of God **for us** to be conditional? The evidence of the love that comes from God to us (not from us to God) is that He does hear us when we call to Him for mercy. Knowing that He has such love for us, then we can and should call on Him.

In verse three, we see the first of three concerns of the threat of death from which the Lord delivered the psalmist. Various translations have the “cords” of death, the “pains” of death, the “sorrows” of death, or the “snares” of death had encompassed or entangled him. There are several different pictures these words bring to our imaginations. He may have been referring to the strips of cloth used to wrap bodies in preparation for burial when he wrote of the “cords of death.” From a spiritual perspective, the real cords of death are the sins in our lives that entangle us, cause us to be overcome with trouble and sorrow and eventually lead to death. The “law of sin and death” tells us “The soul that sins will die.” Without a great salvation, then the fear of death produces the “anguish of the grave” and a sense of hopelessness. But God did not leave us without hope because He does love us and He has provided a way of salvation in the Lord Jesus.

When people find themselves in such a hopeless condition, the only way out is to call for help. This is exactly what the psalmist did as we see in verse four. He prayed a simple prayer “Lord, deliver me.” The ideas of “deliver” and “save” are interchangeable as used here. In Acts 2:21 we see that Peter used similar words as he quoted from the prophet Joel “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Resting in and Walking with God

⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; Yes, our God is compassionate. ⁶ The LORD preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me. ⁷ Return to your rest, O my soul, For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. ⁸ For You have rescued my soul from death, My eyes from tears, My feet from stumbling. ⁹ I shall walk before the LORD In the land of the living. Psalm 116:5-9 (NASB95)

The nature of God is many faceted. He is both the God of grace and the God of righteousness which would ultimately call for justice. Another expression of this could be that God is love and God is holy. We tend to focus on the compassionate part of His nature as reassurance for those who put their trust in Him. In His compassion we see graciousness and righteousness coming together on our behalf at the Cross where we find mercy and justice blended together so that we are saved in spite of our sinfulness and the penalty for our sin is paid by God’s own Son. However, for those who reject His love, His forgiveness and His salvation, the remaining option is His justice.

Jesus called for us to be as little children – simple-hearted – in the way we trust in God.

The opposite of “simple” as used here is crafty or subtle. I’m sure each of you know people who are sly as they can be. They always looking for an angle or to make a deal or get an advantage. Some are religious and they try to figure how they can do something that will cause God to be obligated to them. That is not childlike simplicity!

In our childlike simplicity we may find that others will take advantage of us and we may find ourselves afflicted or brought low. When that happens, we find that we have a lot to be humble about. The truth of the matter is that all of us have a “great need” in that we can do nothing to save ourselves. How wonderful it is that for this great need we have a great Savior. We see the testimony of the psalmist in the latter part of verse six: “He saved me!”

I would guess that the psalmist is writing about what he or others had been going through in the physical realm when they were in mortal danger. However, in a spiritual sense, this is the condition of every person prior to being saved or delivered.

Because He has saved us He restores us to the place He intended us to be when He created us. He created us to be at one with Him and to enter into His rest and to rest in Him. When we are resting in Him, then we have complete confidence that His bountiful benefits are more than sufficient for all our needs. Those benefits are enumerated by the psalmist: rescued our very life from death, delivered us from sorrow, and has given us firm footing as we go through life so that we can walk before God in this life. This is a summary of the benefits of salvation!

Rethinking Opinions in Light of God’s Salvation

¹⁰ I believed when I said, “I am greatly afflicted.” ¹¹ I said in my alarm, “All men are liars.” Psalm 116:10-11 (NASB95)

During the time when we are undergoing problems and afflictions we can believe that things are worse than they are. Elijah had this problem when Ahab and Jezebel were intent on killing him. He thought that he was the only one in the nation who trusted in God. The psalmist was at such a point prior to being delivered from his affliction and the threat to his life. His conclusion was that no one was capable of being truthful. His confession was that he said it because he really believed it.

The reasons for discouragement can be many. There could be physical health problems, financial problems, problems with family members, and disappointments in dealing with other people. We tend to think that the good health we enjoy will always continue, we assume or that we will have enough money and put a lot of reliance on our jobs or bank accounts, and we believe that family and friends will always be loyal. We should not be surprised to find that all these can fail and that confidence in God is the only sure hope we have.

Worshipping God

¹² What shall I render to the LORD For all His benefits toward me? ¹³ I shall lift up the cup of salvation And call upon the name of the LORD. ¹⁴ I shall pay my vows to the LORD, Oh *may it be* in the presence of all His people. ¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD Is the death of His godly ones. ¹⁶ O LORD, surely I am Your servant, I am Your servant, the son of Your handmaid, You have loosed my bonds. ¹⁷ To You I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, And call upon the name of the LORD. ¹⁸ I shall pay my vows to the LORD, Oh *may it be* in the presence of all His people, ¹⁹ In the courts of the LORD’s house, In the midst of you, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD! Psalm 116:12-19 (NASB95)

Some translations use the word “repay” rather than “render” or “return.” In the strictest sense of the concept of “repay” we can never repay the Lord for all He has done for us. If we could repay, then we could have purchased His goodness from the beginning and that is impossible. While we cannot repay, we can certainly respond appropriately to the benefits God has given to us. The appropriate response that any of us can make is to say “Yes” to God’s offer

of salvation, to trust Him for our daily needs and to live lives of integrity toward God and our fellow man.

There are various “cups” mentioned in the scriptures. In addition to the obvious meaning of a small container from which a person drinks, it is also used to denote an allotment or portion which a person is given. We find expressions such as the cup of God’s fury, the cup of trembling, the cup of consolation, the cup of astonishment and desolation, and Jesus referred to the suffering and death of His passion as a cup. The “cup of salvation” would be the portion of God’s benefits, blessings, trials, and tribulations that salvation brings to those who trust in Him. To lift up the cup is to embrace and drink the portion in life that God gives to us as a result of His salvation.

Part of that portion may be to fulfill the vows we have made to the Lord when we accepted salvation. We could argue that when we were saved no vows were made. However, our salvation involved our being bought and redeemed from slavery to sin and Satan and we now have a new Lord and Master. So, in a very real sense, our confession that Jesus is Lord is a vow that we will be obedient to His direction for our lives and that we will walk according to His word.

Part of the portion of the cup of which Jesus drank involved His death. His death was indeed precious in the sight of the Lord. A portion of our cup of salvation involves our dying to self. In a conventional sense of the meaning, God especially values those who are set apart for Himself (His saints). We could also argue that true saints of the Lord die daily by taking up their cross to put self to death and in doing so become more like Jesus. This too is precious in the sight of the Lord.

By putting self to death we are freed from the chains that bind us such as pride, greed, and the fear of death. However, as we find that we are freed from the chains of the old life that we must wrap ourselves with the chains of the love of God that constrain us to desire His will more than anything else and that hold us ever closer to Jesus. The closer we come to Him the more we can see the inexpressible benefits of the great salvation we have. When we see this, praise becomes the anthem of our lives as we call upon Him for everything all the time. We find that He is good and that we want to please Him more than any other desire we have in this life. We find that we had rather be with God’s people than with those whose portion is in the world system.