

I Love The Lord Because...

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to be looking at Psalm 116 together this evening. If you do have a Bible in front of you, please flip back there to verse 1. It'll help you to see that hopefully what's being said is coming from the text and then we can chew it over together as we chat after the service.

A little word as we begin on the wonderful and yet slightly funny nature it is to read and sing a Psalm together, perhaps even to preach from a Psalm, let alone to think of how it applies to us. I wonder what you noticed as I was reading and then as we sang Psalm 116, surely one of the things that jumps out and certainly for me this Psalm has been a precious companion for the last six months or so.

I'm very struck by just how personal it is. All the way through the Psalm, the Psalmist speaks in the first person, I love the Lord, he says as he begins, because he's heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.

It's a wonderful testimony to God's saving kindness and preserving grace in the life of this anonymous Psalmist. We don't know who he was, we don't know when he was writing, we don't have the little superscription that we have in some of the other Psalms within the Psalter to help us date it.

[1 : 1 1] And yet there is wonderful kindness in God from that because then this Psalm serves as a timeless reminder to God's people, a timeless encouragement to God's people of who God is and how he deals with us.

The Psalms of course throughout the history of the church have been a storehouse of comfort, of private devotion, of praise to God, both individually and corporately.

I think of how the Psalms have so shaped the imagination of ourselves as a church over the years. Wherever our background is and wherever we're at now, think of how famous the Lord is, my shepherd is within the culture not only of Christians but of the wider culture.

Jesus himself clearly deeply reflected on the Psalms such that as he dies on the cross one of the first things he says is from Psalm 22 as we sang this morning, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And the wonderful privilege we have then as we look at Psalm 116 this evening is that the personal experience of the Psalmist back then has in God's mercy been recorded for us such that it can become our own song this evening even, that it would become our own testimony that as we hear the words written down all these thousands of years ago just as it was for the nation of Israel then, well so it is for us today.

[2 : 3 3] You see this man writing, he's had an intense experience of the deliverance of God and he doesn't keep it for himself. And this sort of Psalms is a little bit like righteous eavesdropping as he chews on the goodness of God to him, well we get to hear him doing it.

We get to have a taste of his experience and because the Lord Jesus experiences this in all its fullness, well in him it becomes ours as well. It's always worth as we read a Psalm to ask well who is this about first but then move through the lens of Christ to us.

This Psalm 116 sits in the middle of a little collection of Psalms, Psalms 113 to 118. You may well know them as the Hallel Psalms, they're a little unit that tradition says was sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

When they would get together in towns and communities and go en masse up to the temple these are the Psalms that they sang and there's a good suggestion that in the tradition of Judaism that Jesus himself was in, this might have been one of the Psalms he and his disciples sang as they approached and then celebrated the Lord's Supper together.

So it's great to be able to consider this, to hear what God would say to his church through the ages and to really ask the question of one another this evening and of God, well how does this apply to us?

[3 : 56] The first thing we're going to consider from verses 1 to 4 is that this presents to us God, the Lord, as the faithful God who hears. You have noticed from the opening that wonderfully emphatic statement, I love the Lord.

We could just stop there couldn't we and ask God that that would be our own testimony, our own statement. We were down on the beach at Dalmore on Thursday evening shortly after we'd arrived and it's very moving seeing that the gravestones there reading some of the epitaphs that have been chosen.

It's going to be wonderful if on our epitaph on our gravestone it simply said he or she loved the Lord. Wouldn't that be great? Here is a man who loves the Lord but there is a real reason for that. He doesn't just leave it there blankly, he doesn't stop does he? He says I love the Lord because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Here is a psalm that is all about the love of God made concrete in the lives of his saints and that they in turn are to respond to him in love.

He heard my voice, you see three times that that is stressed in verses one and two. I love the Lord because he's heard my voice. Verse two because he inclined his ear to me therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

[5 : 18] Now God's ear remains always open to his saints but there is a particular instance the psalmist is reflecting on. He says that he turns his ear to me in this world of suffering that he's in.

Now we're going to think about the content of his cry in a moment but I think it would be well worth us just stopping there for a moment and meditating on the fact that God is the God who hears.

I wonder how often when we think of why we should love God we might jump to really true biblical reasons but oversee and skate over the fact that God hears us.

You could reach all the way back into the past of Israel and get to the foundational moment if you like of their national history when God saved them from Egypt in the Exodus. By his mighty hand and outstretched arm he adores them to himself, he reveals to Moses his name, Yahweh, I am who I am.

But just before he does that, just before he meets with Moses in the not quite burning bush, he says that he is the God who hears.

[6 : 25] Exodus chapter two verse 24 here's the foundation of God's grace, God's action. We're told that God heard the groaning of the Israelites and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

You see it is in God's DNA, it is in his nature to hear. It's part of his loving kindness, part of his promise keeping faithfulness to listen to the cries of his people.

Here is the Lord, Yahweh, the faithful God who hears the collective shout of Israel as it goes up to him in their suffering under Pharaoh. Here in Psalm 116 it's as though the focus of that hearing narrows all the way down.

See God doesn't just hear the massed shouts of a nation, he doesn't just hear the corporate prayers of a gathering like ourselves, he hears the individual cry of an anonymous worshiper. Think of the pronouns in that sentence in those first two verses, I know that's not an exciting thing to say, think of the pronouns. I mean I am a geek but it is wonderfully glorious.

[7 : 30] He has heard my voice, he's heard my pleas for mercy because he inclined his ear to me. You could look back in Psalm 113 and you would see God presented as the God who is high above all and yet who stooped down to raise the poor and needy.

Or hear the God who is high and lifted up, stooped as it were to hear us, as a father might crouch down to hear their child, so God loves to hear us.

See no matter how random sometimes our prayers may seem, no matter how inarticulate we feel they might be, no matter how weak and faint our voice spiritually feels, our God is the God who hears.

That is a staggering thing, no wonder the Psalmist loves this Lord, no wonder he calls on Israel with him at the end to praise this God.

And that's the call to us this evening, to love the Lord and to call upon him. You see here's a God who is infinitely lovable. As Israel went up to Jerusalem to remember the Exodus, they were remembering that God is God and not the idols of the nations.

[8 : 44] You could cast your eyes just across to Psalm 115 verse 1 and you'll see that the statement there is that God alone is the one who is worthy of glory because Psalm 115 verse 4, he's not an idol.

A key feature of an idol is that it looks the part but can do nothing. The Psalmist in 115 gives a devastating take down of idols, they have mouths that cannot speak, eyes that do not see and critically ears that do not hear.

See the people could cry out to Baal or Mollach if they chose. All today you could cry out to Allah or Vishnu and we can cry and we can cry and we can cry all we like and they cannot hear.

And yet this is the God who hears. And so we love him for he is for his people. And it's from that love that the Psalmist and every single one of God's people can cry out.

He does it from even the bleakest of situations. I love the pastoral comfort of verse, where have we gone, Psalm 115 verse 10, Psalm 116 verse 10.

[9 : 53] Look at what the Psalmist says, he says, I believed even when I spoke I am greatly afflicted. Here he is in the middle of a terrible situation and in the midst of grief and panic he cries out to the Lord and he says that even that is a cry of faith.

Even that is a cry of belief. Isn't that comforting to us when we don't even know what to pray sometimes. We look at the scenario of someone we love going through terrible times.

We think of a sorrow or a hardship in our own lives. Sometimes all that can come is to say Lord this hurts. Lord this is tough.

The Psalmist says that is a cry of faith. I think that even on the cross that is what Jesus is doing. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And yet not once does he falter in his belief, for he cries to God as his own. So I take it then that just these four verses are very practical for us.

[10 : 54] To know that God hears, to love him and therefore to cry out to him. Just in our own we gathering this evening, there are going to be lots of situations of grief.

I think of my own church family back in St. Andrews, bereavement, chronic illness, people being hounded by enemies against them, the crippling struggle of mental illness, worries about money and employment, uncertainty of what the Lord would have in store for us.

I take it that that will be true of a gathering like this with the spread of ages and stages that we have. Let me say, my brothers and sisters, that this is an enormous comfort. We can call upon the Lord and know that he hears us.

So may we call on him as long as we live. So he is the faithful God who hears. But there is a particular context that this Psalmist cries out from.

And that's what we're going to look at now. Verses 5 to 11, we see God as the gracious God who delivers. And don't worry if we're only up to verse 4 at this point, that the Psalm, the way it is structured, it sort of overlaps one with another.

[12 : 05] So we'll be picking up speed as we go. But we're now going to zoom in on the situation the Psalmist found himself in. This isn't just a random scenario that he is remembering.

He is thinking of a particular instance where God rescued him from a death-like experience. It's summarised for us in verse 8. If you cast your eyes down there, it's like his conclusion to the situation he found himself in.

And you, Yahweh, the Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling. The rest really unpacks that situation for us.

Lord, you have delivered me from death. It's a striking phrase, isn't it? I don't know if you've ever had a near-death experience. The nearest I came to was a really bad neck injury. But there will be those who have known something of being near death's dark door and being snatched away from it. But the Psalmist explains what that was like for him. So verse 3, he describes the snares of death that encompassed him. It's the word for a clinging vine, the sort of thing that will wind itself around another tree and squeeze the life out of it, or a boa constrictor that will find its prey and squeeze and squeeze and squeeze until it dies.

[13 : 21] That's what these cords are like, he says, an experience which is suffocating that enmeshes him further and further in it. He speaks of the anguish of the grave in verse 3.

It's a fierce pang of grief and suffering that hits in a totally unexpected way. You may well know that yourself, either through the loss of a loved one or watching others dealing with bereavement.

The day can be going along absolutely normally and suddenly whack, that the anguish of death hits you, the remembered sorrow of an empty place that comes out of nowhere.

Here's a man, he says, who was overcome by distress and sorrow. He's drowning in the tide, he says, the rising flood of panic and sadness.

In verse 6, he was brought low, he was brought down. In verse 8, he's weeping and his feet are stumbling. He's an exhausted refugee who's about to fall and collapse because he can't go any further under the burden that he's in.

[14:22] Verse 10, as we've seen, he's greatly afflicted and in verse 11, he is opposed and alarmed. You see, here is a man who knows suffering.

He's facing death and it's as though the dark shadow of that death has infected every area of his life, every area of his thinking. And I take it we can empathize, whether it is death itself that you either are facing or have faced, or simply the suffering that comes in a broken world.

I guess we can resonate with the panic and claustrophobia of our writer. I'd invite you to try and put yourself in his shoes. And maybe by doing that, you can consider the suffering in your life at this stage, whatever it is.

And if you're someone here who's not yet suffering in this way, well, because of the world that we live in, you will one day suffer. All of us are either sufferers or waiting for it to hit.

But I take it many of us will know that sense of blinkers being put on when life is hard. And as the suffering continues, it's like your gaze contracts and contracts until there's no horizon anymore.

[15:32] And you're even wondering, can I get through this next moment? So overwhelming is the hardship that you feel. Prayer seems futile, though you know the Lord hears.

The heavens are like brass closed over. The love of the Lord feels distant and dutiful. Perhaps reading God's word feels like a challenge and the thought of coming out to church or to see people feels beyond you.

I wonder, do you feel what he feels? If you do, let's together now hear what he knows, even in his grief.

Because you see throughout this Psalm, there's a wonderful dialogue that happens. You've got this staggering overwhelming feeling of suffering. And in the middle of it, the steadfast, rock like graciousness of God.

Verse five, gracious is the Lord and righteous. Our God is merciful. He is the one who is full of compassion.

[16:37] He is the one who preserves the simple in verse six. The unwary, you see this is who God is in himself all the time in every way, all the way down the eternal and unchanging God remains these qualities.

He is never against his people. He is never the opposite of merciful or preserving. He is never one who does not save. You see our feelings go up and down like a yo-yo, don't they?

Because the circumstances of life can feel like they yanked around on the end of a road. But while we're waggling around down here, well, God is the one who is always as he is and is always ready to help his people.

When I was brought low, the Psalmist says, he saved me. God's eternal attributes burst out in flower in the salvation of this saint.

He has saved me. He has been good to my soul, the Psalmist says. Now whatever particular event was going on for this Psalmist, think how much more we today can echo his words.

[17:49] How much more can we cling to them? How much more can we speak them to ourselves? How much more can we encourage our brothers and sisters with them? For we can look back not just to one specific event in our own lives, though I take it that for many of us we can share that testimony.

But we can look further back beyond ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who knew the experience of death far beyond anyone who's ever lived, for he bore the weight of hell itself on his shoulders.

We feel forsaken by God. Christ was forsaken under the wrath and right anger of the heavenly judge. And yet he lives.

He came through the other side. He himself was vindicated and saved by God. And so in and through Jesus we're given a lens that takes these words and magnifies them for us.

God has saved us through the death and resurrection of Christ for life, life in all its fullness with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so these are our words.

[18 : 57] These are your words. You're resting in Christ. They are given to you freely by God himself because of all that Jesus has done. And so there is a big implication for us.

If that is true, that this truly in Christ is our testimony because this is our God. Well then verse seven becomes dynamite, I would suggest, for each and every one of us, whatever our situation, look at how the psalmist applies the truth about who God is to himself.

Can oh my soul to your rests for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. Return oh my soul to your rest for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

See the psalmist in the midst of the storm of life hangs on to the objective, the rooted, the fixed goodness of God to him.

He says you have delivered my soul from death. You have delivered my eyes from tears. You have delivered my feet from stumbling. It's so pastorally real this because consider our own souls.

[20 : 09] Consider your heart this moment before the Lord. Consider if you had a little graph, the jagged line that would be charted by your soul throughout the past week up and down and up and down as fickle as a bird that might fly away from its perch and yet all the way through the psalmist says to himself, God's goodness remains.

And while our experience of rest might fly away, the rest itself is fixed. You see that in verse seven, return my soul to your rest.

The rest goes nowhere. Christ goes nowhere. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. And though we might wander far, we can say to our own souls, come back on my soul, return on my soul to your rest, enjoy and rest in the goodness of God.

I want to suggest that we can and must do the same. I said that this Psalm has been precious to me in the last few months and in earnestness, verse seven, has been most particularly dear.

For whatever particular sorrows I have been facing, we have been facing in St. Andrew's and as a family, God never changes. And so we've been able to say to ourselves, I've been able to say to myself, even in grief, return to your rest, oh my soul, why?

[21 : 38] Not because I've done anything. Not because I can just blank out and meditate. Not because mindfulness is the way to rest and restoration.

Not because the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. You know, each of us can take the finished work of Jesus and a little bit like you might rub ointment on a wound.

We can apply that salve to ourselves. We can apply it to one another. A feature of suffering is that people often cannot think in these terms themselves.

And so why not consider a friend, a family member, someone in Christ who needs the hope that Christ alone can bring? Why not in the power of the Spirit seek his help to apply it to their own wounds?

You know, I might be speaking to someone, very personally, who feels this weight of suffering, who feel the cords of death crushing you, and yet you can't really grasp anything of the hope that is found in Christ.

[22 : 44] That is you. Please do come and chat. I'd love to talk to you afterwards. One of the elders here, I'm sure, to think through, well, what is it about the Lord Jesus that offers such wonderful, concrete hope for the soul?

Because if you would have that hope, you must turn to him, the psalmist says. So God is the faithful God who hears. He is the loving God who delivers.

And finally, verses 12 to 19 as we close, he is the good God who is to be thankfully worshipped. I wonder if you've ever had the experience of coming through some sort of trauma, an emotional trial, and just simply being left exhausted.

I remember a few years ago, my son, Alexander, and I went down to Newcastle in the northeast of England to watch Scotland play Samoa in the Rugby World Cup. And it was a bit of an adventure. We drove down, stayed with some friends, we went there.

I don't know how many of you are into rugby at all. I know Lewis is a wee bit more of a football place, but bear with me. It was the most dramatic game, Scotland just about won in a basketball match.

[23 : 47] Every time Samoa touched the ball, they scored. And as we were driving home, Alexander said to me, Papa, you spent most of that game with your head in your hands. I was just

like this for most of the match. And I was on the train back to the car, just drained emotionally. That's a trivial example, I know that. There are many more serious times. We'll feel totally wiped out because we don't know what to do. But do you notice how the psalmist is different? He's not wiped out. He's not left stranded on the beach. Rather, because of who God is and what he's done, he is resolved to serve him. There is a next step, quite literally. Verse nine, I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. It's made explicit in verse 12, what he's going to do. This walking before the Lord looks like sacrificial service of him. See, in the background here are the words of King David from Psalm 56 in verse 13. [24 : 45] David says that because of God's faithfulness, he will serve him all his days. And that is the flow of our Psalm as well. He voices it in a monologue for us in verse 12. And he says, well, what am I going to do to the Lord?

What can I give back to the Lord for all that he has done for me? Well, I will lift up verse 13, the cup of salvation, and call on the name of our Lord. He says, I will pay my vows, verse 14, to the Lord in the presence of all his people. He will offer verse 17 the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord. You see, rather than a sense of rebalancing the scales, God's done this amount of good stuff for me and now I'm going to do this back for him. The Psalmist is simply saying, because of who God is and what he's done, I am going to worship him. With all that I am, I am going to serve him. He doesn't speak of some extravagant act of devotion different to everyone else. He doesn't talk about climbing upstairs on his knees or walking around the holy mountain, however many times.

[25 : 45] He simply speaks the ordinary language for them of worshiping God, of going to the temple, of giving sacrifices, of praising God with a thankful heart in the assembly of his people.

And that is what he says he's going to render to God. A life of undivided, unmixed devotion to him. It's something of a sandwich structure going on in these closing verses and right at the centre is that funny little verse in verse 15.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. That's often troubled people. What does that mean? How can God who saved from death now somehow rejoice over the death of his saints? I'd love to know what you make of that verse over coffee afterwards, but I take it that rather than this saying that God rejoices in the death of his saints, it helps us to see it in context.

Given what comes before and after it, I think it must be tied in some fashion to thankful service. And here the psalmist is reflecting on the fact that God holds the death of his saints precious.

[26 : 53] They are valuable to him. God does not count any single life lived for him as wasted and nor will he waste those who serve him.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints, but comes in a comfort. In particular, I found over the last few years to those who are older in the Christian life, older in life as well, looking ahead to the final reward that the Lord gives to his faithful servants.

Precious in his sight of the death of those who love him of his saints. And so it's a spur to the psalmist and to us to keep on going in this type of service of God.

So I take it there is a final implication for us in view of who God is, of all that he's done, of how we are to respond, where we are then to sacrificially serve the Lord.

Think of the attitude of the apostle Paul to live as Christ, he says, to die is gain. Summed up in Romans 12 verses one to three in view of God's mercies, we are to offer up ourselves as living sacrifices, because we are those in Christ who know the goodness of God, where we can worship him with all that he's given us heart and soul and mind and strength, all that we are, all that we have, all that we will have with our psalmist here is to be given up to God in faithful serving.

[28 : 27] I wonder what that might be for you. Could be time, it could be money, it could be the very simple gift of words, of a word in season here and there to comfort the suffering, to challenge the proud, to spur one another on in the love and service of the Lord Jesus, to someone who doesn't yet know Christ that they too might know him, whatever God has given you, because of all he's done for you, because of all he's done for me, whether we gather here and when we scatter, we do it for God himself.

Let's pray and ask that that might be saved. Heavenly Father, we praise you, that you are the God who hears, we love you, for you hear our voice, you have heard our cries for mercy in Christ, and

you love to turn your ear to us now, stooping and hearing as our Father, help us we pray therefore, gracious Lord, to remind ourselves, to remind our souls to return to their rest.

Thank you for Jesus, the same yesterday, today and forever, but he still today calls the weary and heavy laden to find rest in him.

And Lord, I pray very practically for any of my brothers and sisters here who are in the desperate need of that rest, that they would come to Christ and to find the salving of their souls in him.

Lord, we pray that we might be instruments of your grace to others too. Make us wholehearted servants, we pray.

[30 : 15] Would we echo the words and the prayer, the vow of the psalmist, to serve you with all that you have given us, for you have loosed our bonds, and so with the sacrifice of thanksgiving, enable us to call on you, to pay our vows to you, to honour you, and to praise you.

We think of that final note of the psalm, praise the Lord. And we ask now that not only with our lips as we sing your praises now, but with our words for the remainder of this evening, and with our lives for the remainder of our days, would you make us walking demonstrations of your praise.

Please do that by your spirit, Father. Click in us to life, we ask, in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to finish our time together by singing some of those final verses from Psalm 116.

It's a wonderful opportunity to sing them as a gracious promise to the Lord, perhaps to sing them as an encouragement one to another, and that these words might be our own as we head back out into the remains of the day.

So in the Scottish Salter version, we're going to sing Psalm 116 verses 11 to 19, 11 to the end of the Psalm. Let's stand and sing.

[31 : 37] I say when I was in my haste that all men lie earthy, or shall I render to the Lord all his gifts to me, and all salvation take back up.

I'll pay my house now to the Lord before his people long.

I'll pay my house now to the Lord before his people long.

I'll pay my house now to the Lord before his people long.

I'll pay my house now to the Lord before his people long.

[34 : 09] I'll pay my house now to the Lord before his people long.

I'll pay my house now to the Lord before his people long.

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