

From Prayer to Praise

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Preacher: Ian Naismith

[0 : 00] Thank you, Alice. Good morning, everyone. Really good, as has already been said, to have you with us. Let me start with a question. How is your relationship with God at present?

Try to be honest with yourself. Where are you spiritually at the moment? Some people might be saying, it's great. I've got a really strong relationship with the Lord.

I'm having good times of meditating on his word and prayer. I'm really aware of his presence with me every day. And that's great if that's your situation. I hope you'll be encouraged through what we say this morning to share with others what the Lord has been doing for you.

Some people might be the opposite. You might say, well, I've got no relationship with God at all. Maybe you've never had a relationship. You wouldn't call yourself a Christian. Or maybe you've put your faith in Jesus, but things have slipped.

You've had a crisis of faith or just gradually things have slipped down and really you've no relationship with God now beyond coming to church on a Sunday morning. I hope if that's you, that you'll be encouraged by this psalm to come to the God who really cares and who hears us when we call on him.

[1 : 12] And maybe a lot of us are somewhere in the middle. We have highs and lows in our Christian lives. Sometimes we feel close to God. We feel we're getting victory over sin.

We're serving the Lord Jesus. And sometimes we're not. Sometimes we have low periods. And I hope if that's the case that you'll be encouraged this morning as we think of God's goodness to us to strengthen your faith and to go on and serve the Lord.

All of us have different experiences, different needs that we need to meet. And so this morning I want to do three things and to say three main points.

So we're going to talk about how we grow closer to God when we see him act in our suffering, when God moves in our time of need.

We're going to think about how we remain closer to God when we reflect on how he's achieved our salvation. And we're going to think about how others can be drawn to know God and to have a relationship with him when they see our faith leading to service and what God means in our lives.

[2 : 28] These, I think, are three key messages which come across in Psalm 116. Let's begin, though, with a little bit of background and make a few observations. If you've been here the last few weeks, you'll know we're going through Psalm 113 to Psalm 118, which are sometimes called the Egyptian Hallel.

Hallel because they're Psalms of praise. Most of them end with the word Hallelujah, praise the Lord. Egyptian because they were used particularly by the Jews at two of their great festivals, the Feast of the Tabernacles when they remembered going through the wilderness, and also the Feast of the Passover when they remembered their freedom from Egypt.

And in particular, it's quite likely that on the night the Lord Jesus was betrayed, when he celebrated the Passover with his disciples, they ended up by singing some of these Psalms, including Psalm 116.

Now, let's just observe a few things from the Psalms before we go through it in a bit more detail. I hope it comes across quite clearly this is a very personal Psalm.

As we go through this little group of Psalms, most of them are either talking about God and his work, or they're encouraging others to praise God. Psalm 116 is quite different.

[3 : 50] You can see again and again the Psalmist talks about I, me, my soul, and so on. It is very much a personal testimony about someone's relationship with God.

And that's why I think it's appropriate that we use it to think about our relationships with God. This morning. The second thing maybe to notice is it's very raw.

When I read the Psalm this week, my first thought is, how am I going to analyse this? It's all over the place. Now, it's not, but it's not nice and ordered. Some of the Psalms come across immediately as being great poetry that can speak to us.

Psalm 23. David thinking of his work as a shepherd and using that as an analogy for God's care for us. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

And just a few lines of perfect poetry, he produces something that down through the years has been a great comfort to many people. Or Psalm 119, that longest of all the Psalms.

[4 : 50] The Psalmist thinking on God's law and how much he loves it. And he constructs a really intricate poem. In each stanza, every verse begins with the same Hebrew letter.

There's a lot of imagery in there, very good imagery, and a real order to it. It's a work of art in many ways. Psalm 116 isn't like that.

This is a psalm that someone writes in the grip of very strong emotions. And I think that really comes across. If nothing else, I hope that comes across to us this morning. This is a psalmist who's seen God at work, and he is just overwhelmed by what God has done, and he wants to commit himself to God.

If I can use a fairly topical analogy, sometimes at the Olympics, someone wins a medal unexpectedly. And they do the obligatory interview afterwards, and they ask various questions. And actually what they say seems to jump from one thing to another. They talk about the difficulties they faced, the sacrifice they made, their family and friends and all that, and so on.

[5 : 55] And it just comes out as a kind of constant stream of thought. Because the overwhelming thing that comes across is this person is absolutely delighted that they've won a medal.

And in some ways they're not able to think very straight beyond that as they try to answer interview questions. Well, it's a bit more to Psalm 116 than that, but it is of that kind.

It's not something that is in a nice logical order. You can say this section, then this section. I know I've tried to do it, but it's not really. There are things all over the place. Psalm talks about one thing, he comes back to it again later.

And what's really meant to come across is here is someone who loves God because God has been so good to them. And I hope, as I say, that we'll get that as we go along this morning.

Someone who's really in the grip of a strong emotion and just wants to share it with us. It doesn't mean the Psalm 116 is any less inspired by the Holy Spirit than any other part of the Bible.

[6 : 54] It's just a bit different from some of the other Psalms. So let's just very quickly, we've not got much time this morning, let's just very quickly try to work out what the Psalmist is saying and how it applies to us.

So the first part, we're talking about his suffering and how God has freed him from that. The Psalmist has had a near-death experience. He describes it quite graphically in verse 3.

He says, The cords of death entangled me. It's someone who feels he's been tied up, he's trapped, he's helpless, and he's just waiting for the final blow when he'll die.

He is on the edge of death. And he doesn't want to be. Later in the Psalm, there's a verse which in some ways sounds a bit strange when you first read it.

It says, Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants. That's verse 15, if you're following along. Now that doesn't mean that God delights in our death.

[7 : 55] That is really precious, something he really looks forward to. It's probably more appropriate to think of it as death is costly, pressure is costly. It is of consequence, it is something that matters.

It matters to God as it matters to us. Because while we're alive, we can be witnesses for God, we can serve him, we can tell other people about him.

Once we've died, that opportunity has gone. I think the psalmist there is saying, I didn't feel it was my time to go. I didn't feel that I was ready to die because death is such a big thing, and I had so much I wanted to do for God.

That a psalmist's prayer was answered. Other people in similar situations might not have that prayer answered in the same way. But for the psalmist, he had faced death. He had prayed to God that he would be freed from death, and he had been preserved.

The other thing that's noticeable about this is that the psalmist had lost trust in anyone else to help him. In verse 11, he makes this really sweeping statement, Everyone is a liar.

[9 : 07] Now, maybe his sufferings have been caused by others, by their deceit. Or maybe people had come to him as he was suffering, and Job's comforted his state and said, Ah, you must have

sinned.

You've done something wrong. God's punishing you. Or maybe some people had promised to help him and said, We can really help you through this situation, and they hadn't done it.

So the psalmist says, The person I can rely on, the one that I can rely on, is God. Where other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

And he's justified in his confidence. If we go back to verse 1, Hitzamah says, I love the Lord.

Literally, he says, I love.

The Lord is added in by the translators as their interpretation of it. Now, it's clearly true. He loves the Lord. But perhaps what he's saying in these verses, He loves particularly that the Lord hears his voice.

[10:11] So we take out the words, The Lord says, I love, for he heard my voice. And he presents a beautiful picture to us of how God listens to our prayers.

He says in verse 2, He turned his ear to me. Now, to me, the picture there is perhaps of a mother. She's busy in the kitchen doing lots of things.

And her child, her young child, comes in and wants to speak to her. And she could just continue doing things and be listening as she did. But very often, the mother will just stop and bend down towards the child to make it clear that she really cares for them and that she wants to hear what they're saying.

And I think that's what the picture here of God is. Our Heavenly Father wants us to bring our requests and our thanksgiving to Him. And when we do, we have His attention.

He listens to us and He acts on it. He is a loving Father who wants what is best for His children. And let's rejoice in that.

[11:22] He's the one who's there when we're at our wit's end. When we feel that nothing can help us, no one can help us, God is there. God can help.

He's the one who turns His ear to listen to our desires, who cares about every aspect of our daily life, not just the big crises, but every aspect of our daily life.

And we can come and we can bring our requests to Him. Now, He won't always give us the answer we want. No parent will always give a child what they want.

And sometimes we'll pray for things and our Heavenly Father who knows much better than us won't give us the desires of our heart, but He will answer us in ways that are maybe even better.

I came across this quote during the week. It says, I think that's a great summary of what our prayer life should be.

[12:32] We should pray with confidence that God does answer, He does hear, and He can give us more than we could ever ask or think. But He may not do it in the way that we expect.

And sometimes the way that He has for us is a way of suffering, and it is building our character, it is helping us to become more like Jesus. And that way He's answering our prayers as much as when He brings a miraculous healing or when we see something remarkable happening in our lives.

So then again the question, what is your relationship with God? Can you come to Him knowing that He is your Heavenly Father and that He has your best interests at heart and present all your desires to Him, knowing He'll answer?

Second thing we want to look at is the salvation that God gives to us. And two things in that, we want to look at God's character and we want to look at God's actions.

So in verse 5, it says, The Lord is gracious and righteous. Our God is full of compassion. God is gracious.

[13:47] What does that mean? It means that although God is so much superior to us, although He is the all-powerful creator of the universe and we are just a tiny, tiny part of His creation, God still shows love to each one of us and so cares about each one of us, even though we don't deserve it.

God is gracious. God is righteous, says the psalmist. He does what is right for His people. He is never unjust in the way He does things.

He always knows what is right and He always does it. And He's full of compassion. He understands our concerns and He acts on them.

Several times in the Gospel, it talks about Jesus having compassion on groups. For example, in the feeding of the 5,000, He had compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He understood where they were.

He understood what was difficult in their lives and He acted on it. That is our God. And our God in particular showed His salvation through what He has done for us.

[15:01] The psalmist says in verse 6, He protects the unwary. Now the unwary, we could translate as being maybe just the simple. Those who aren't very sophisticated in their thinking, those who just trust in a very simple way in God.

And He saves the lowly. Those who are humble, those who are maybe discouraged, God is there for them. God acts in their lives.

We have a God who really cares for us. And of course, He cared particularly enough to give His Son to die on the cross at Calvary to take the punishment for our sins.

And as we think of that, if we're Christians, we should be drawn into a greater love for Him, a greater appreciation of all that He has done for us. And as we'll think now, a greater desire to obey Him and to serve Him.

So we come on to the last part of the psalm, which I think is talking about service. The psalmist has thought about what God has done for him.

[16:09] He's thought about the character and the actions of God. And now he says, well, what can I do for God? What shall I return to the Lord for all His goodness to me?

Now, the short answer to that is God doesn't need anything from us. God doesn't need our efforts. He doesn't need our help to do anything.

And we could never hope to repay God in any meaningful way for everything that He has done for us. And yet our gracious God takes delight when His people obey Him and serve Him and recognise Him for who He is.

So though He doesn't need it, our God longs for His people to understand just how great He is and to bring their praise and their service to Him.

And the psalmist talks about three things in particular that he is intending to do. The first thing he says in verse 12 is that he will, no, verse 13, is that he will lift up the cup of salvation.

[17:22] Later on in verse 17, he says, I will sacrifice a thank offering to you. Now, he's probably thinking particularly of a sacrifice of the drink offering that was given by people as an appreciation of what God had done.

But perhaps also, he's thinking about the Passover feast and the fact that during that feast, they took cups and they gave thanks to God as they drank them.

And of course, for us, we have something similar. Later on, those of us who are in the church here will have the opportunity to take communion, to remember the Lord Jesus together. As part of that, we will be drinking from the cup.

It's an act of obedience. It's an act of recognising what God wants us to do and of doing it. I think above all, when we take communion, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we do it to obey the Lord Jesus and his command that we remember him and to be drawn out in praise and worship to him.

Now, of course, there's great benefit for us in it too, but primarily, it's an act of obedience to the Lord Jesus. Second thing the psalmist does is he is going to call on the name of the Lord.

[18:39] That again is verse 13. And I think he's thinking of that in two senses. One is the sense in which he has called on God's name, that he has been in a sticky situation, he's been desperate, doesn't know what to do, and all he can do is cast himself on God in prayer.

By calling on the name of the Lord also at the thought of praising God and recognising him. So that once we have received from him and we have all received, if we have our trust in the Lord Jesus, once we have received from him, he wants to receive our praises and our worship and our recognition of who he is.

And then the third thing the psalmist says, I'm going to fulfil my vow. Fulfil my vow, he says, in the presence of all the people. And I think that's a key thing in this.

The psalmist wanted to make clear to everyone how much God had done to us. He wanted to be God's servant, following the example his mother had set him, he says in the psalm.

But he is witnessing to others, telling them about what the Lord has done. And by his obedience to God, he is drawing others to come to know him.

[19:55] And if we're Christians, if we're followers of the Lord Jesus, that is a really important thing that we need to do. To be obedient to God because we want to serve him, we want to demonstrate our love to him.

But also to show others just how much our faith means to us. Just how much it means to us that Jesus died on the cross for us, is with us every day, and helps us through the most difficult situations in life.

And all the psalmists, I said at the beginning, in some ways, is a very personal psalm. It's also a psalm to encourage us to look outwards and to think, how can my life be helpful in drawing others to know God, in attracting others to the Lord Jesus and bringing them to faith in him?

As we share what God has done, we can be an encouragement to each other. We can also be an encouragement to those who don't know the Lord Jesus yet to come and to put their trust in him. Let me finish with someone else who suffered a lot. The Apostle Paul, during his ministry, during his missionary journeys, he suffered an enormous amount.

[21 : 10] He lists them in some places, the shipwrecks, the stoning, he was bitten by a poisonous snake, all sorts of things that Paul went through in many ways similar situations to what the psalmist is talking about here.

Near-death experiences for the sake of the Lord Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 4, he writes this, We're hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body.

And then he quotes from Psalm 116. He quotes from the Greek version, so it's slightly different from what you have in front of you, but the Greek version says, I believe, therefore I have spoken.

That's verse 10. The Greek version says, I believe, therefore I had spoken. And he follows that up by referring to the great hope we have as Christians.

[22 : 23] He says, We know that the one who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.

There is the confidence that we can have in God as we reflect on his goodness to us. Paul believed in Jesus. He was desperate to tell others about him, to share the good news with them.

And the great news that he shared with everyone was whether in life or in death, we can experience God's presence. While we're in this world, we have the opportunity to praise him, to enjoy all that he is giving to us.

Beyond death, if our faith is in Jesus, we can be confident that as Jesus was raised from the dead, as the psalmist here came back almost from death, so there is life beyond the grave.

There is life with Jesus. There is life forever in heaven. The challenge for us, first of all, is do we have that hope? Do we have that knowledge of God that the psalmist did?

[23 : 35] And if we do, how is your relationship with God? Do you recognize all that he has done for us? Do you come to him with every need, big or small?

Are you sharing with others what the Lord Jesus has done for you? May the testimony of this ancient believer in God be of relevance to us today and encourage us in our walk with the Lord Jesus.

Let's join together in prayer. Father, we thank you for this psalm. We thank you for the experience of the writer, for the fact that in spite of everything that has happened to him, you had brought him through.

And that gave him the real confidence that you are the God who saves and the desire that he should be your servant. We pray that you will help all of us to understand that you are the God who rescues us from the pit of sin, who stands us on a rock, who gives us forgiveness and hope for the future.

We may all trust in you. And when we do, help us to have strong relationship with you, to come to you with our prayers and our praise as our heavenly Father and to seek also to help others to understand just what you mean to us.

[24 : 55] We thank you for your presence today. We commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.