

“Powerful Protector Forever”

Psalm 116

¹I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.

²Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.

³The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.

⁴Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, save me!”

⁵The LORD is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.

⁶The LORD protects the simplehearted;
when I was in great need, he saved me.

⁷Be at rest once more, O my soul,
for the LORD has been good to you.

⁸For you, O LORD, have delivered
my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,

⁹that I may walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁰I believed; therefore I said,
“I am greatly afflicted.”

¹¹And in my dismay I said,
“All men are liars.”

¹²How can I repay the LORD
for all his goodness to me?

¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁴I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.

¹⁵Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.

¹⁶O LORD, truly I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant;
you have freed me from my chains.

¹⁷I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁸I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,

¹⁹in the courts of the house of the LORD—
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD.

[NIV]

HOPE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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I. Introduction

Do you ever wonder what it feels like... to "make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence"?^{1Pe3.15} I recommend finding out what it feels like, next time someone asks. But if nobody seems to be asking right now, here is another way you can find out: read Psalm 116.

Psalm 116 is the account of one who believes and embraces the truth that God is God; God's Law is God's Law; man is man; Christ is Christ; we have nothing to add and everything to receive; and as we receive the Head, we are received into the Body. Psalm 116 is someone giving account for the hope that is in them. Psalm 116 is proof that you have quite a lot of liberty in how you communicate those six truths we've been studying in Sunday school.

Psalm 116 can free your mind to put your heart into words. The psalmist is not presenting a didactic lecture with complex Aristotelian cognitive logic that only a cerebral-type intellectual can follow. The psalmist hardly classifies himself as such. This is a song for the "simplehearted."^{v6} Psalm 116 shows that you have quite a lot of liberty in how you communicate the truths of salvation. Yes, if you like, you can even sing them in a song.

II. New Life!

Four and twenty years ago, I come into this life;
my flesh and my spirit then began to live in strife.

My respectful plea for forbearance goes to Stephen Stills if he ever hears this.¹ But I do "pray God that not only [Stephen] but all who are listening to me today may become what I am..."^{Act26.29} New life! For me it was, in fact, four and twenty years ago that God gave me this new life.

¹"I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. ²Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live." Do you hear the inviolability, the untouchable nature of this devotion? This is between the psalmist and the Lord. This is transcendent. This is on another plane. Nevertheless there is a power in this that touches you whether you, too, love the Lord or not.

You are hearing the heart of the psalmist. You are hearing a transaction between the Lord and the psalmist. This transaction does not involve you, yet something overflows from this transaction *to* you. If you love the Lord, then that something strikes you and your heart resonates in harmony like a tuning fork. If you hate the Lord, then that something sounds to you like fingernails scraping across a blackboard. If you don't know the Lord, then perhaps that something compels you to inquisitiveness about this door you've heard of but have never strayed too near.

Whatever the case, something has taken place between the Lord and the psalmist; something that has locked in a two-way devotion. Hearing and calling, loving and living... deep spiritual sweetness standing firm in resolute strife with the bitter clamoring of the flesh, which still finds that in the world it "can't get no satisfaction."

¹"I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. ²Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live." You can't touch this. The world can't touch this. Your friends, your family, your foes can never take this away from you. It is between you and

¹ A variation on "4 & 20" written by Stephen Stills, ©1970 by [Gold Hill Music, Inc.](#)

the Lord. And since God is God, when He turns his ear to me, nothing in all the world—not even my own pigheadedness—could ever turn his ear away.

III. Old life

I was tired of being poor,
and I wasn't into selling me door-to-door.
I'd been working like the devil to be more.

Six and twenty years was enough of that harlotry. There was never a lack of doors through which I could sell my soul. Every one of those doors stood wide open; though I thank God for the countless tempting doors He shut against my will as I approached, to protect me from myself. Every one of those doors lured me with promises of satisfaction, of completeness, of wholeness. Promises of power, of security, of stability. Promises of happiness, of fulfillment, of contentment. Promises that bid me follow as an ox goes to the slaughter or as a fool to the correction of the stocks, till an arrow struck my liver.^{Pro7.22} False, empty promises of the world.

³"The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow." Lies mounting upon lies; excuses upon excuses, appeasements upon appeasements. Here a little, there a little; cover your conscience here, insist upon its folly there. Remind yourself that you don't believe in all that "Jesus stuff" you've heard throughout your life—what could that have to do with you, anyhow? Surely the experts know more clearly; surely the novel writers think more deeply; surely the atheists and evolutionists have a lock-tight case.

Why then am I so compelled to deny the joy I see in the face of the Christians? Why am I so driven to condemn their faith as a crutch for the foolish? Why do I struggle so hard to convince myself that the cord of death entangling me just isn't real—though that's not the way I feel? How is it that deep inside I know that God's Law is God's Law, and the laws I insist on making for myself will never change or displace His? Why is my soul so full of frustration and shallow consolation?

I saw my soul was empty and there were devils in my head.
I embraced the many-colored beast.
I grew weary of the torment, could there be no peace?
And I found myself just wishing that my life would simply cease.

³"The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow." I'm a man, yes I am, and I loved and hated myself so. Man is man. He is not God. God's Law binds man to the grave on account of man's sin and rebellion against God who is God. The man who is not thereby overcome with trouble and sorrow is ignorant, insensitive, or unutterably arrogant. I employ those words not pejoratively, but literally and pitifully.

IV. The Call

⁴"Then I called on the name of the LORD: 'O LORD, save me!'" Night after sleepless night, I walked the floor and I wanted to know—why am I so alone? Overcome by trouble and sorrow, I called on the name of the LORD: 'O LORD, save me!'" I could not tell you why I finally called, though I now know. He started it, not me. It was His initiative, not mine. It was His time, and He made it mine. Unbeknownst to me, He stole into my heart and a seed of faith grew into a call. A call out loud. A call to no one, if not to Him. A hope heretofore unknown in my soul. The call sprang up from the bottom of my heart to the tip of my tongue and flew off into space... and I found the space was not empty.

"O LORD, save me!" ... "Jesus, I do not know if you're real, but if you are, save me!" The seed was small. That was hardly a very confident call. But I called with faith—a saving grace given me by him—and He heard.

V. His Response

Yes, He heard. Christ is Christ. He is Savior. He is Messiah. He is Love. He is the one anointed to be both Judge and Redeemer. He is a PERSON. He is God and he is Man. ⁵"The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. ⁶The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me." ⁷"Return to your rest, O my soul, For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you."

This simplehearted man found himself immediately in the strong embrace and protection of Jesus full of compassion. As real as the room I was in... yet more real. As strong as the steel girding that hotel in St Charles... yet stronger. His compassion did not sweep away his righteousness. The Law was still the Law. Compassion... Righteous. Righteous... Compassion. I could not put it into words on that night, but grace was the solution I received and then sought.

His strong embrace and compassion came not without his tears, not without his suffering, not without his sacrifice, not without his satisfaction, not without his cross. The cords of my death had bound him to the cross. The anguish of my grave had swallowed him whole. But the belly of that great fish named 'death' could neither hold him nor keep him in the deep, any more than the belly of the huge fish could keep Jonah when God said "Let him arise." ^{Mat12.40; Jnh2.10}

When he rose up from the dead, he was not alone. United to him in his resurrection, is every soul whose sins he nailed to the cross and buried in the tomb. United to him in his resurrection, is every soul whose iniquities he washed away with his blood.

United to him in his resurrection, is every soul who is willing to cry, "I can add *nothing*... I must receive *everything!*" That is to say, united to him in his resurrection, is every soul who calls on the name of the Lord: "O Lord, save me!"

⁸"For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, ⁹that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living." To deliver your soul from death means to give you the gift of eternal life walking before the Lord in the land of the living. Now and forever. Has He given you that gift? Are you walking in the land of the living? Are you walking as if you are walking in the land of the living?

United to him in his resurrection, embraced by him in his strong arms, cloven to him by his affectionate eyes and adopting purpose, you can't help but repent. ¹⁰"I believed; therefore I said, 'I am greatly afflicted.'" ¹¹And in my dismay I said, 'All men are liars.'" Having believed in His lovingkindness and grace given to you, you find yourself greatly afflicted by the sins you had to give to him.

You find yourself dismayed that for so long you believed the lies of the world, the lies of men, the lies of your own dead soul; the lies that said "God is bad; God is the reason for all wars; God is impotent to stop evil; God is merely an imagination of foolish men." You have found that all God's precepts are trustworthy... but your own heart is not. You have found that the works of His hands are faithful and just... but the works of your hands are not.

And you have found that God loves you not a bit less on this account. So much does he love you, that he gives you the grace of repentance following the grace of faith. In your faith you want to turn from your sins to Him... in your repentance you can and do. In the work of your salvation, you have nothing to add, and everything to receive.

VI. Our Response

In response, these words of the psalmist automatically well up from your heart to your lips: ¹²"How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?" More accurately and more genuinely, the psalmist was actually saying, "What shall I bring back to the Lord considering all his benefits toward me?"

You realize you cannot "repay" the Lord; so great is this salvation. But you love Him because he heard your voice, your cry for mercy. You love him because he turned his ear to you. You love him because he first loved you, and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for your sins. ^{1Jo4.10,19} You cannot "repay" the Lord, because Jesus Christ has already paid in full.

¹³"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD." This cup Jesus drank, yet for Him it was the cup of anguish, the cup of God's fury for our sins against Him. ^{Jn18:11}"Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" ¹⁴"I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people." Jesus had vowed to do the will of His Father. ^{Heb10.7NKJ}"Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God." It was the Father's will that Jesus offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice to satisfy the perfect Law of the perfect God.

How, then, are we to love him? ¹³"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD." You love him by receiving His love for you... love which cost Him his precious blood. Every time you partake of the Lord's supper, you ^{1Co11.26}"proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." You proclaim that He died for you and you proclaim that you have died in Him, crucified with Christ. You proclaim that the life which you now live in the flesh you live by faith in the Son of God. ^{Gal2.20}

¹⁴"I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people." Here is how we are to love him: *As we receive the Head, we are received into the Body.* After enjoying the eternity of His embrace in that timeless intrusion of faith, hope, and love; of love, joy, and peace; there was one thing I had to do: *go and share it with the Body of Christ.* All I knew was to go and tell my Christian boss who was in his room across the hall. So I went and pounded on his door, and upon gaining entrance I blurted out all that had transpired.

I was slow to learn, but soon it became more clear how loving Christ must include being loved by him through the body—the Church. It is in the Church that we lift up the cup of salvation, that we partake in the sacraments, being baptized into the body, sharing in the communion of the saints all saved by the same Lord through the same faith. It is in the church that we fulfill our vows. It is in the church that we are shepherded and disciplined to follow His precepts with great delight in his Law.

Yes, in the Church, united to Jesus Christ in his resurrection, is every soul who follows his precepts with great delight in his Law. The Law is still the Law. But the Law no longer rewards or condemns us according to our obedience. The Law now leads us as to how we may love the Lord who heard our voice and heard our cries for mercy.

As we receive the Head, we are received into the Body of Him who died on the cross for our sins so that he might give to us his life. The Lord who died understands death. He understands death very personally. There is nothing more contrary to His nature than death. That is why the psalmist finds relief in knowing that ¹⁵"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." He finds relief in knowing that God ^{Pss72.14}"will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight."

He knows that in God's uprightness, the works of his hands are faithful and just, and all his precepts are trustworthy. He knows this held true when Jesus ^{Act2.23} "was handed over to the Jews by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and they, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead..." He knows this holds true even when wicked Hophni and Phineas, sons of Eli the priest, ^{1Sa2:25NAU} "would not listen to the voice of their father, for the LORD desired to put them to death." He finds relief in hearing the Lord GOD declare, ^{Eze33:11} "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live."

Yes, the psalmist knows that ^{Rev14.13} "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on... Yes, they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." The Lord has freed us from the chains of the fear of death. Knowing that He holds our life and our death precious, we are free to say, ¹⁶ "O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains."

Thus we join in the chorus, ¹⁷ "I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD. ¹⁸ I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, ¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD—in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD."

We love him by submitting to his discipline according to the vows we made to the Lord, when we joined the church or when we were ordained to ministry in the church. We love him by receiving the counsel of the elders, and by working out our salvation with fear and trembling. We love him by questioning ourselves severely, when we find ourselves severely questioning those who minister in the courts of the house of the Lord.

This is the life that lives the song, ¹ "I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. ² Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live." This is the life that is secured by a powerful Protector forever. Four and twenty years ago, I come into this life. While the Lord is pleased to leave me on this earth my spirit and my flesh will remain in strife. But my wish has come true: my old life has simply ceased. Through the blood of the Lamb I truly do have peace.

A different kind of poverty now upsets me so; but it is the poverty of impurity that remains by which ^{Rom7.15} "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Yet, ²⁰ "it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it..." ²² "For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He is my powerful Protector forever, and I will gladly make a defense to everyone who asks me to give an account for the hope that is in me. Will you join me? Let our song begin this way:

¹ "I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. ² Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live."