

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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Psalm 116 — Help of the Helpless

1.0 Introducing Psalm 116

- As we study Psalm 116, we must observe that “the intensely personal faith and love which mark this psalm are not in competition with the public, formal and localized expressions of godliness. This flame is not withdrawn, to burn alone. Placed in the *midst*, it will kindle others, and blaze all the longer and better for it.” — Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 411.
- Psalm 116 is the fourth psalm in the “Egyptian Hallel” (Pss 113–118, see notes on Ps 113), traditionally recited at Passover.
 - ✓ That which is even more significant than national deliverance is personal faith and salvation.
 - ✓ Remembrance of the Passover, focusing on deliverance from Egypt, should never overshadow the personal and individual implications.
- Jesus and His disciples sang this psalm following the Last Supper prior to going out to the Garden of Gethsemane. Read its words carefully in light of what this psalm signified to Jesus Himself at that time.
- The Greek Septuagint (250 B.C.) and the Latin Vulgate (A.D. 400) divide Psalm 116 into two psalms (vv. 1-9 and 10-19) to compensate for their joining of Psalms 114 and 115 into one psalm.

2.0 Reading Psalm 116 (NAU)

116:1 I love the LORD,
because He hears My voice *and* my supplications.

116:2 Because He has inclined His ear to me,
Therefore I shall call *upon Him* as long as I live.

116:3 The cords of death encompassed me
And the terrors of Sheol came upon me;

- I found distress and sorrow.
- 116:4** Then I called upon the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, I beseech You, save my life!”
- 116:5** Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
Yes, our God is compassionate.
- 116:6** The LORD preserves the simple;
I was brought low, and He saved me.
- 116:7** Return to your rest, O my soul,
For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
- 116:8** For You have rescued my soul from death,
My eyes from tears,
My feet from stumbling.
- 116:9** I shall walk before the LORD
In the land of the living.
- 116:10** I believed when I said,
“I am greatly afflicted.”
- 116:11** I said in my alarm,
“All men are liars.”
- 116:12** What shall I render to the LORD
For all His benefits toward me?
- 116:13** I shall **lift up the cup of salvation**
And **call upon the name of the LORD.**
- 116:14** I shall **pay my vows to the LORD,**
Oh may it be in the presence of all His people.
- 116:15** Precious in the sight of the LORD
Is the death of His godly ones.
- 116:16** O LORD, surely I am Your servant,
I am Your servant, the son of Your handmaid,
You have loosed my bonds.
- 116:17** To You I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
And **call upon the name of the LORD.**
- 116:18** I shall **pay my vows to the LORD,**
Oh may it be in the presence of all His people,
- 116:19** In the courts of the LORD’S house,
In the midst of you, O Jerusalem.
- Praise the LORD!**

3.0 Understanding Psalm 116

3.1 Outline

- I. The Psalmist’s Prayer (vv. 1-4)
- II. The Psalmist’s Praise (vv. 5-11)
- III. The Psalmist’s Promises (vv. 12-19)



3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “I love the LORD, because”
 - Answered prayer was the catalyst for the psalmist’s love.
 - James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 371, makes the following observations:
 - (1) Love calls out (prays) to the Beloved (v. 4).
 - (2) Love finds rest in the Beloved (v. 7).
 - (3) Love lives always as if in the presence of the Beloved (v. 9).
 - (4) Love fulfills its vows to the Beloved (vv. 14, 18).
 - (5) Love serves the Beloved (v. 16).
 - Compare Psalm 18:1. There are a number of parallels between Psalms 18 and 116.
 - See, also, Deuteronomy 6:5; Psalm 31:23; and 1 John 4:19.
- **vv. 1-2**
 - “The singer is not only remembering a past occasion but is drawing a lasting assurance from it (‘he hears my voice’) and making a lifelong resolve (‘I will call . . .’, 2).” — Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, 408.
- **v. 3** “The cords of death . . . the terrors of Sheol”
 - These two phrases are the center of a chiasm in this verse’s first two lines.
 - “Terrors” is literally “straits.”
 - ✓ The first phrase is also found in Psalm 18:4; the second phrase is found nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible.
 - ✓ The psalmist felt trapped in a life-threatening situation.
- **v. 5** “Gracious . . . righteous . . . compassionate”
 - “Gracious” = dispensing unmerited favor. This corresponds to “my supplications” (v. 1), which are literally “my pleas for grace.”
 - “Righteous” = acting with justice and rightness in full accord with divine standards (in other words, above and beyond mere human standards) in keeping His covenant.
 - “Compassionate” = being merciful out of love.
 - These three attributes governed the Lord’s response to the psalmist in his or her time of need (v. 6).
 - In Psalm 112:4 the same three terms appear in the description of a godly person.
- **v. 6** “the simple”
 - The “simple” or “naïve” individual, although ignorant, unbelieving, and easily seduced, is receptive to and capable of learning.
- **v. 7** “Return to your rest, O my soul”
 - The psalmist instructs himself to cease being anxious and to regain his former tranquility.



- “Rest” is literally “rests,” a plural expressing “full, complete rest, as it is found only in God.” — Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols., trans. by Francis Bolton, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (reprint; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 3:217.
- Similar soliloquies occur in Psalms 42, 43, and 103. A godly person must occasionally exhort and encourage himself or herself on the basis of God’s Word and deeds.
- **v. 8** “For You have rescued”
 - “For” is not causal here, but emphatic (= “Indeed” or “Yes”).
 - Deliverance came in three areas:
 - ✓ “my soul from death” — The psalmist’s life was endangered (cf. vv. 3, 4, 9, 15), but the Lord preserved his life.
 - ✓ “My eyes from tears” — Sorrow and/or fear caused the psalmist to weep.
 - ✓ “My feet from stumbling” — In Psalm 56:13 (the only other use in the Old Testament of this word for “stumbling”) David uses the same imagery when describing the way the Lord preserved his life from the Philistines at Gath.
- **v. 9** “In the land of the living”
 - As in Isaiah 38:11, the meaning is to be alive physically.
 - ✓ Cp. Psalms 27:13; 52:5; 142:5; Isaiah 53:8.
 - Literally, the text reads “lands” or “regions,” perhaps indicating wherever the believer might live or go.
- **v. 10** “I believed when I said”
 - Different possible translations:
 - ✓ “I believed **when** I said” (NAU, NET [“had faith”])
 - ✓ “I believed **even when** I said” (ESV, NRSV)
 - ✓ “I believed **even though** I said” (Leupold)
 - ✓ “I believed **for** I said” (ERV, ASV)
 - ✓ “I do believed, **so** I said” (NLT)
 - ✓ “I believed; **therefore** I said” (KJV, NKJV, NIV)
 - See 2 Corinthians 4:13 — “But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, ‘I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE,’ we also believe, therefore we also speak.”
 - Faith survives even in the midst of the pressures and pains of disillusionment, disaster, disease, and dread.
- **v. 11** “All men are liars”
 - Human beings are unreliable and the psalmist cannot depend upon their help.
- **v. 12** “What shall I render”
 - This rhetorical question expects a negative answer: “I cannot ever repay the LORD.”

- **vv. 13-14, 17-18 Refrain**
 - Paying vows publicly testifies to one's responsibility before the Lord.
 - ✓ Vows are promises made to God regarding service to be rendered to Him and for other people.
 - ✓ A godly individual fulfills such vows.
- **v. 13 "the cup of salvation"**
 - Since this thanksgiving is given publicly in the Temple (v. 19), it cannot be the cup of the Passover meal, which was observed within individual homes (Exod 12:24-27, 46; cp. Matt 26:17-19).
 - The cup is most likely the drink offering (libation) associated with the daily morning and evening sacrifices (Exod 29:40-41) or a drink offering associated with thanksgiving similar to the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev 23:10-13).
- **v. 15 "Precious . . . is the death of His godly ones"**
 - "Precious" — i.e., not taken lightly, but valued highly.
 - "His godly ones" = "His loyal ones" or "His committed ones" (the same word used for *Hasidic Jews*; related to *hesed*, "loyal love").
 - Why is the death of a believer "precious" to God?
 - ✓ The death of the Lord's godly ones is precious because His Son died for them (Gal 2:20).
 - ✓ The death of the Lord's godly ones is precious because He gave them the days of their life (Ps 139:16-18).
 - ✓ The death of the Lord's godly ones is precious because they go to Him (2 Cor 5:1-8).
- **v. 16 "I am Your servant"**
 - Literally, "I am Your slave."
 - Twice repeated, back-to-back, this statement emphasizes the psalmist's humble submission to and dependence upon his or her sovereign Lord.
- **v. 17 "To You"**
 - Placed first for emphasis, such thanksgiving belongs to God and God alone.
- **v. 17 "a sacrifice of thanksgiving"**
 - Thank offerings were associated with the so-called "peace offerings" (Lev 7:11-15).



4.0 Singing Psalm 116

I Love the Lord, for My Request (vv. 1-11)

(Tunes: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" or "Just As I Am, Without One Plea")



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|---|--|
| <p>1 I love the Lord, for my request
And humble plea He makes His care;
In Him through life my faith shall rest,
For He both hears and answers prayer.</p> <p>3 Most kind and righteous is the Lord,
Our God is merciful indeed;
Delighting ever to afford
His help to me in time of need.</p> <p>5 Since He has freed mine eyes from tears
And kept my feet from evil ways,
Redeemed from life's distressing fears,
With Him I walk, and Him I praise.</p> | <p>2 Brought nigh to death and full of grief,
The Lord's salvation I besought;
He heard my cry, and sent relief,
My soul from depths of woe He brought.</p> <p>4 Return unto thy rest, my soul,
The Lord has richly dealt with thee,
Delivered thee from death's control,
From sin and sorrow set thee free.</p> <p>6 In my affliction and my pain,
When fears alarmed and hopes deceived,
I found all human helpers vain,
But in the Lord my soul believed.</p> |
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— Author unknown

What Shall I Render to My God? (vv. 12-19)

(Tunes: "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" or "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee")

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|--|---|
| <p>1 What shall I render to my God
For all His mercy's store?
I'll take the gifts He hath bestowed,
And humbly ask for more.</p> <p>3 My vows I will to His great Name
Before His people pay,
And all I have, and all I am,
Upon His altar lay.</p> <p>5 Thy hands created me, Thy hands
From sin have set me free,
The mercy that hath loosed my bands
Hath bound me fast to Thee.</p> <p>7 Praise Him, ye saints, the God of love,
Who hath my sins forgiven,
Till, gathered to the church above,
We sing the songs of Heaven.</p> | <p>2 The sacred cup of saving grace
I will with thanks receive,
And all His promises embrace,
And to His glory live.</p> <p>4 Thy lawful servant, Lord, I owe
To Thee whate'er is mine,
Born in Thy family below,
And by redemption thine.</p> <p>6 The God of all redeeming grace
My God I will proclaim,
Offer the sacrifice of praise,
And call upon His Name.</p> |
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— Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

5.0 Praying Psalm 116

- I love You, Lord. [v. 1]
- Thank You for saving me. [v. 6]
- Father, help me to walk obediently before You all my life. [v. 9]
- Lord, I offer You all my thanks in the presence of Your people. [vv. 17-18]
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6.0 Applying Psalm 116

- The most effective prayers are intense and concise.
- We must express our creed in our conduct.
- "The *saint* is the *servant*, and is never so saintly as when he is serving." —
W. Graham Scroggie, *The Psalms*, 4 vols. in 1 (reprint; Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming
H. Revell Co., 1973), 3:137.