

Psalm 116

- 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.*
- ³ *The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.*
- ⁴ *Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, save me!”*
- ⁵ *The LORD is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.*
- ⁶ *The LORD protects the simplehearted;
when I was in great need, he saved me.*
- ⁷ *Be at rest once more, O my soul,
for the LORD has been good to you.*
- ⁸ *For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,*
- ⁹ *that I may walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.*
- ¹⁰ *I believed; therefore I said,
“I am greatly afflicted.”*
- ¹¹ *And in my dismay I said,
“All men are liars.”*
- ¹² *How can I repay the LORD
for all his goodness to me?*
- ¹³ *I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.*
- ¹⁴ *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.*
- ¹⁵ *Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.*
- ¹⁶ *O LORD, truly I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant;
you have freed me from my chains.*
- 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.

God Delivers Us from Death

How many of you saw the Captain America movie this weekend? I haven't gotten to see it yet, but I'm looking forward to it. Of course, it's a superhero movie, so I'm sure that one way or another, Captain America is going to save the world. Along the way, he and the Black Widow and the Falcon will rescue all kinds of people from imminent death or dismemberment. That's just what happens in a superhero movies. Saving the world and rescuing people in danger are common themes in fiction, and not just in movies based on comic books. How many times has James Bond saved the world? How many adventure stories come down to a race against time to save someone who's in danger? Whether it's a police officer or a knight in shining armor or a superhero, we all love a savior. Of course, you all know where I'm going with this, right? There is no better Savior than Jesus. He saved the world and he rescued each and every one of us personally. That truth lies at the heart of our psalm for this week. Psalm 116 reminds us that **God delivers us from death.**

I.

For the last several weeks, we've been meditating on the psalms appointed for each Sunday in Lent. The psalms we've considered so far have focused on how hard life is. They've reflected on the guilt of our sins and on the opposition we face to our faith. The psalms are prayers and the ones we've looked at have been prayers for God to rescue us. Today is a little different. Psalm 116 is a prayer, but it's not a cry for rescue. It's a celebration of being rescued. **God delivers us from death. He rescues us from harm and danger here.**

Of course, the fact that the man who wrote this psalm celebrates being rescued means that he was in trouble. And that trouble did hurt. Now, we don't know who that was. We don't know when this psalm was written. It could've been at any time during the thousand years from Moses to Malachi. But the man who wrote it was in danger. He says, "**The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.**" "The cords of death" picture death binding us. You can't escape and your time has come.

But death didn't win. Somehow, this believer escaped. He says, "**For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.**" How it happened, we can't say. Maybe someone helped him. Maybe he managed to find a way out of whatever danger he was in. Maybe God sent an angel or did a miracle and rescued him. However it happened, he knew that God was responsible. And he knew why. He said, "**Then I called on the name of the LORD: 'O LORD, save me!'**" God answered his prayer.

Why did God do that? I mean, in the great scheme of things, how important was this man? God didn't even bother to tell us his name. We know nothing about his life, except that he was a Jewish believer some time during that thousand years when God was sending prophets to Israel. Yet, God intervened in this world and rescued him from whatever it was that was tormenting him. Why? It really has nothing to do with him or how important he was or how good he was or how faithful he was. The psalmist said, "**Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.**"

What does that mean? The Hebrew word is the one you would use if you were holding a diamond in your hand. So in what sense is our death precious to God? Not in the sense that he enjoys our deaths or anything like that. But rather, to God, our death is something that has his undivided attention. It is precious to him in the sense that it is the instrument he uses to bring us home to heaven. But it is also precious to him in the sense that he carefully regulates our world and only allows it to happen when he chooses to have it happen. To God, the death of a believer isn't something that's just a part of the cycle of life. It's a momentous occasion, one that requires careful planning and loving, deliberate execution. You and I will not die until God determines that our death is the best thing for our lives.

That means that God will rescue us whenever it is *not* time for us to die. He may use ordinary things like doctors or police officers or firemen, or he may send an angel. But like he did for this man, God will hear and answer our prayers. During these last several weeks, we've talked about God answering our prayers in different ways. Sometimes, he says no. Sometimes, he calls us to wait until it's the right time to get what we pray for. Sometimes, God answers our prayers in a different way than we expected. All those answers are examples of his love for us. When what we pray for isn't good for us, God tells us to wait until it is or he

modifies the prayer and gives us the good in it without the bad. Even when he says no, he does that because he loves us.

But let's not forget that many, many times, God gives us exactly what we pray for and he does it right away. When we're in trouble and we cry out to him for help, our God in heaven is there to rescue us, every day of our lives. How do we know that's true? Because the God who rescued this man is the God who sent his Son into this world to die and rise for us. The love he showed in Bethlehem and on the cross and in the empty tomb is the guarantee that he loves us now. No one who loves us that much can ignore our cries for help. He will answer, and swiftly, in the way that does the most good for us.

II.

We don't know what crisis caused God to inspire this psalm of praise. But it's one of six consecutive psalms known as "the great hallel" or song of praise. Jewish believers sang them every year for Passover to celebrate God rescuing his people in Egypt. On the night of the first Passover, God sent the Angel of Death to pass over Egypt. The Angel killed the firstborn child of every Egyptian household. But he spared the life of the Jewish children when he saw the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts. Maybe the ancient Jewish believers knew that this psalm was written at that time by Moses or by some other Israelite who marched out of Egypt the next day. Certainly, to them, God rescuing this psalmist's soul from death and his eyes from tears and his feet from stumbling made it an appropriate hymn to sing on the day they celebrated God's greatest Old Testament rescue. That makes this psalm a fitting celebration of all that God does for us in Christ, because the Passover was all about him. **God delivers us from death! He rescues us from eternal death.**

That is the true message of the Jewish Passover because it is a visual prophecy of Christ. In the original Passover, the blood of the lamb rescued the people of God. It gave life to their children. The blood of Christ rescues us from physical death. When these bodies die, our souls will live with Jesus and these bodies will rise because of Christ. The death of Christ gives life to us and our children. The Passover lamb was a substitute for the firstborn child. In fact, God commanded the Jews to redeem – to buy back from him – the firstborn child of every womb, a law that observant Jews still follow to this day. They had to do that because the lamb took their child's place in death. Jesus took our place in death and hell. He suffered what our sins deserve. And he rose from the dead to give us life.

Now we belong to God forever. So it's only natural that God has a deep and abiding interest in our lives. But while it's true that God watches over us and answers all our prayers, that is only a temporary remedy to what sin does to us here in this world. We're still going to die, unless Jesus comes back first. We're still going to need to cry out to him, because life is still going to hurt here. You see that in the first Passover, too. On the day after the Angel of Death passed over Egypt, the Egyptians drove the Israelites out. They gave them treasure and supplies and anything they wanted or needed just to get them to go. The Israelites marched out in triumph. But almost before they were over the horizon, the Egyptians changed their minds and sent their army to bring them back as slaves by force. The people of God faced a new danger and they huddled in terror by the shores of the Red Sea. But God opened the Red Sea and they marched across safely while God destroyed the army of Pharaoh. But that still didn't end the trials and sorrows of this life. For forty years, they faced thirst and hunger and miles of empty desert. They faced snakes and scorpions and enemy armies. They endured rebellion and temptation and false believers. Every time, God rescued them. But the next day brought new trials.

That's the way it will always be for us until Jesus brings us home. God does hear our prayers. More times than we can possibly count, God rescues us from disease and disaster. He protects us from the power of the devil and the wrath of unbelievers. He keeps away those temptations that would destroy our faith. He preserves us again and again. And it's right to celebrate those moments, just as the man who wrote this psalm did. Seeing God's love and care encourages our faith here. But what will come tomorrow?

Until the Lord returns, sin rules this world. Sin will always hurt. And our own sin hurts most of all. Again and again, we damage our own lives because we disobey God. How many of our marital problems come from our own pride and selfishness? How much discipline do our children get at home because they don't want to obey or respect their parents? How many stupid things do we do and then have pick up the pieces? Christ still hears our prayers when the hurt in our lives comes from our own sinful stupidity. The consequences that he sends only serve to build up our faith and bring us to repentance. So often, he spares us the consequences that should by all rights rain down on our heads. That is his grace, his undeserved love.

Jesus died and paid the greatest consequence of all. We all deserve to die and go to hell for every moment of selfishness and pride. We all deserve to be abandoned by God for all eternity for a lifetime of serving ourselves instead of him. But Jesus went to that cross and suffered hell and died there for us. Then he rose and set us free from death and hell. And he promised to be with us and to hear our prayers and to take care of us all the days of our lives here. That death and resurrection is the guarantee. The guarantee of forgiveness and life in heaven and our resurrection. But also the guarantee of all that we need here. Of his endless love and constant care. Of his wisdom and power applied every day to keep us safe and bring us home.

Christ saved us. He is the perfect hero that we all need. But he will never be the kind of hero that captures the imagination of sinful man. We sinners want big, bold heroes. We want Captain America overwhelming his foes and winning the fight. We want parades and background music and cheering crowds. But that's not how Jesus won. He won by losing. After three years of frustrating his enemies' every attempt to stop his preaching, they finally got their way. They arrested and tortured and killed him. Jesus won by being convicted in a Roman court and sentenced to die. Jesus won by letting his enemies mock him even while he was dying for them. Jesus won by taking our beatings and our scourgings, by suffering our thirst on the cross and above all else, by letting his Father pour our hell down on his head. Jesus won by dying. Every person there that day thought he had lost.

But he hadn't lost. His resurrection shows us that truth. The devil lost because Jesus' love put him in our place. Jesus won by satisfying God's anger over our sin. When it was over, you and I were bought and paid for. All our sins – all the sins of all the world – were washed away. The devil lost us forever. That makes Jesus our true hero. That hero will continue to love us and watch over us and even work through hurt and loss in this life to bring us home to heaven. May God remind us of that truth every day. May he build our faith through those promises. May we celebrate that love every day of our lives here, because we will most certainly do it in heaven. Let's celebrate now by singing Psalm 116.