

Debtors to Grace

Our second Scripture reading is the 116th Psalm, which was perhaps a personal testimony before the congregation in the temple in preparation for a thanksgiving festival or meal. The psalmist is sharing with the congregation his gratitude to the Lord for his deliverance from death.

Follow as I read **Psalm 116**:

*I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.*

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

³ *The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.*

⁴ *Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, I pray, save my life!”*

⁵ *Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.*

⁶ *The LORD protects the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.*

⁷ *Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.*

⁸ *For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.*

⁹ *I walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.*

¹⁰ *I kept my faith, even when I said,
“I am greatly afflicted”;*

¹¹ *I said in my consternation,
“Everyone is a liar.”*

¹² *What shall I return to the LORD
for all his bounty to me?*

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

¹⁴ *I will pay 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 faithful ones.*

¹⁶ *O LORD, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.
You have loosed my bonds.*

¹⁷ *I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD.*

¹⁸ *I will pay 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!*

Even secular publications, such as *Psychology Today*, extol the benefits of gratitude, not only for relationships, but also for personal mental and physical health. One suggestion, to enhance sleep is to write a list of things you're grateful for as you prepare for bed. Remember the old song, "Count Your Blessings Instead of Sheep"? Most of us could write a substantial list for blessings most of the world knows nothing about.

The psalmist, following his experiences of tragedy, near death, bitterness and anger, testifies of God's grace in his life. He shared his testimony of thanksgiving, and then reflected, "*How can I repay the Lord?* (12, NIV)" He knows he can't fully repay the One who owns all things and who's given us all things far beyond our deserving. Yet, although we can't compensate him, we're nevertheless called upon to respond to his grace and goodness. This we do with our gratitude and our best attempt to express love for him for all he's done for us.

The psalmist catalogues what God has done for him and assesses the debt he's incurred. Apparently he was on the brink of mortal death when God intervened miraculously. Each one of us must acknowledge our dependence on God for all the times he's delivered us, sometimes unbeknown to us, from temporal death. Jesus spoke about the role of guardian angels. Parents and grandparents will aver their existence and the part that guardian angels play in behalf of our children (Matt. 18:10-11). Some of us here this morning are dealing with or have recently struggled with life-threatening illnesses. And how often I've thought how unintended delays in traffic spared me from a serious accident (or spared others from my driving!). We've had to face our mortality. Our mortal lives at their best, even the youngest and healthiest, are still very fragile and temporal.

This psalmist, facing his own death, was in a desperate situation. But because he had grace to call upon the Lord he was healed. The psalmist came to know the Lord, not as a remote being but as the God who comes to our aid.

Jesus told a parable to an ungrateful Pharisee, who was offended that Jesus allowed a woman of doubtful reputation to anoint him with her tears and an expensive jar of perfume. In this story Jesus contrasted the attitudes of two men whose debts had been cancelled. One was forgiven a huge debt and the other a much smaller debt. Jesus asked which would love the forgiving master more and the Pharisee was forced to give a self-indicting answer. Jesus then made the application that the woman who anointed Jesus' feet obviously realized the enormity of God's grace in forgiving her because of the way she responded to Jesus with grateful love and extravagant devotion (Lk. 7:36-50).

Our heavenly Father paid an invaluable price for our salvation through the suffering and death of his only Son. He's continued to pour out upon us his grace, his undeserved but desperately needed goodness, day by day and in every way (including through our suffering). Grace doesn't stop with our initial deliverance. Rather, we continue to incur our debt to grace. Every answered prayer, every experience of comfort, provision, direction, all the good things in life, all relief from pain, grief and trouble—all are expressions of the grace of God. In fact, the testing of our faith is an expression of the grace of God. The psalmist said: "*I believed even when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted'*" (v. 10).

The psalmist also experienced grace to deliver him from his anger against those who had wronged him. Because of his having been mistreated or betrayed, he became cynical and bitter, saying, "*Everyone's a liar*" (v. 11). Only grace can deliver us from bitterness over our enemies and unjust circumstances, and enable us to trust that God is sovereign even over personal disappointments and tragedies. God can even use even evil people and experiences for our good and his glory, causing us to be thankful.

Chuck Colson, serving his Watergate prison sentence, said he could relate to the late Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, who wrote from the Gulag prison, "God bless you, prison." It was in prison that his heart was turned to the grace of God. Some of us also could find freedom from bondage to bitterness if we could, by his grace, thank God for past suffering and adversity.

As gratitude and unselfishness are marks of maturity, selfishness and ingratitude are evidence of immaturity. A baby, a precious little bundle of lovable joy, has been described also as "a bundle of unmitigated selfishness." If you doubt this, then you haven't taken care of one lately. Their demands are constant. A beautiful, seven-month old baby is focused on her care and feeding and she cares about little else. And not once, after the times spent on feeding and strolling will she say "Thank you." Maturity is the process of learning to care about the needs of others, and to be grateful for what they have done for us. As we grow in our spiritual maturity, we learn to ask, "How can I repay the Lord?" (v. 12).

In my college days, one of my mentors was our dean of men, James Bergman. The good dean and I were walking across campus one day as I related to him my recent awakening to feelings and thoughts of gratitude for my parents. For the first time I was no longer thinking of my mother and father as sometimes unreasonable, restrictive and out-of-touch authorities, but as very responsible people who did a credible job in teaching their children to be responsible human beings. Dean Bergman then affirmed my gratitude for my parents as a sure sign and reward of maturity.

This psalm begins with the simple statement, "I love the Lord." He seems particularly to declare that he will seek to repay the Lord through his love in turn. He lifts up a cup of sacrifice and offering to God. Our lifting the cup of Communion is a reminder of his great covenant love for us. When we lift that cup that symbolizes his shed blood, we realize we love only because he first loved us (1Jn. 4:19).

The psalmist refers to himself as the Lord's servant and also as the son of the Lord's maidservant (v. 16). We show our love for Christ through our practical acts of obedience and humble service to him. We live in community with his Body, the church, and minister to one another within that fellowship. Love for the Lord is expressed by service to his children.

Ted Farris tells of a visitor to a mission leper colony in Africa, who watched while a missionary nurse was treating and bandaging the wounds and sores of the lepers. He replied in his reaction of aversion and repulsion, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." "Neither would I," responded the nurse. Farris reported that the missionary nurse felt more true pity toward the visitor, who obviously didn't share her love for the suffering lepers. She pitied the materialistic, shallow visitor who was obviously a stranger to grace and the love of God that had compelled her to serve needy lepers (2 Cor. 5:14).

This reference to fulfilling vows is an important part of the psalmist's seeking to repay the Lord. He says that the Lord delivered him from death, not simply to survive a few more years, but to live his life before the Lord, to please and to honor him and to be conscious of our indebtedness to him.

Emery Parks tells about the impossibility of ever repaying God's grace:

"When the books of a certain Scottish doctor were examined after his death, it was found that a number of accounts were crossed out with a note: 'Forgiven—too poor to pay.' But the physician's wife decided that these accounts must be paid, and proceeded to sue for the money. The judge asked one question: 'Is this your husband's handwriting?' When she replied that it was, he said: 'Then there is no tribunal in the land that can obtain this money when he has written the word 'Forgiven.'"

We are forever indebted to God for his saving grace. He has written over our sin and guilt with the blood of Christ the words, "Forgiven—too poor to pay." The only way we can repay God is to lift/take up (AV) the cup of salvation, and we forevermore continue to take from the Father's hand (Spurgeon). All we can do is remain forever in God's debt. Like an irresponsible spender swimming in debt, we're daily going deeper into God's debt.

There are people who stand outside God's saving grace because they refuse to admit they are "too poor to pay." I visited with an unbelieving friend in Belgium who said she could never believe that God should ever have to suffer for her. Her goal is to make her own way to "heaven," even if she has to be repeatedly re-incarnated to achieve enough merit to earn her own way. I told her the cross was the only way that God could save us. Sadly, as far as I know, she has yet to understand grace.

Although we can't do anything to earn God's favor or deserve his grace and goodness to us, we're worth to him all he has paid for us. As Peter said, we were not purchased by God with perishable things such as silver or gold, but rather with the precious blood

of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect (1 Pet. 1:18-19). God paid the supreme price for us—the precious blood of his Son.

Why does the psalmist say that God delights in the death of his people?. Death as a reality that separates us from those we love is an occasion of grief, which also causes the Lord Jesus himself to weep (Jn. 11:35). But in our psalm, this word “precious” could refer to the fact that our death is not capricious or accidental, but comes only in his perfect time and with his sovereign permission. Because of his compassion for us God doesn’t enjoy the death of his people but rather holds our death under his sovereign control.

The death of God’s saints, that is, his people, is cherished by God. Death for us, because the cross of Jesus overcame the curse of death, is a victorious passing from this life into the glory of the heavenly paradise. Even and especially in the new heaven and earth we’ll be the recipients of God’s goodness and favor in a way we can now only imagine.

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Paul reminded the Corinthians:

*“No eye has seen,
No ear has heard,
No mind has conceived
What God has prepared for those who love him”* (Is. 64:4; 1 Cor. 2:9).

God delights in us his people, and longs to love us in heaven in ways he cannot love us here because of our sin and lingering unbelief. He longs for us to be in his fully glorious presence of unmitigated love. In paradise and the new heavens and earth he will have us totally undivided and undistracted.

On special occasions in my ministry as a pastor, I’ve been privileged to stand at the bedside of those who’d been faithful Jesus followers, and had just been called into his presence. How precious to the Lord were these “home-goings” of faithful saints and servants!

Our psalm ends with the words, “*Praise the Lord.*” This is the summation of the purpose of God in creation and in salvation. His purpose is that he be glorified by all he has made. “*Praise the Lord!*” (Ps. 150:6). Like this psalmist, we’re to glorify God through our lives that have been delivered from the Enemy and the power of sin and the penalty of eternal death. We’ve been set free. We’re now to glorify and praise him with thankful hearts.

You and I have a testimony of gratitude for God’s grace. We all have a great debt we ought to be trying to pay back to God. We’re too poor to pay. True saving grace makes us forever grateful and allows us to find healing from all bitterness and resentment and sets us free to truly live and walk before the Lord in the land of the forgiven.