

Sunday 14th August 2022 – HALLEL PSALMS (3) – Psalm 116 ‘The Lord who hears and delivers’

The life of faith is both a corporate thing and an individual thing – in other words, it’s about us and it’s also about me. In our very me-centred Western culture we tend to put too much emphasis on the personal side of it: we forget, for example, that most of the ‘you’ references in the New Testament are plural!

And over the last two weeks, the focus in these amazing Hallel psalms has very much been on *us* – on the whole community of faith. As Israel celebrated and sung these psalms every Passover, the emphasis is very much on how God saved a whole people. And so the people respond as a community: ‘Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.’

However, in Psalm 116, things get personal. The song of the whole community which we saw in Psalm 115 changes in Psalm 116 to one individual: one person whose life was saved by the Lord. We don’t know if this person was a woman or a man, if they were young or old; we don’t know what exactly they were saved from, though it was certainly life-threatening – it could have been an illness, an accident or a violent mob. What we do know is that they cried out to the Lord, and the Lord saved them – and so the Psalm begins with another famous verse: ‘I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.’

Over the centuries, countless people of faith have treasured this Psalm. Anyone who has been rescued from a perilous situation or has experienced a miraculous answer to prayer can read this psalm and know what it feels like. They can pray it from experience. But even those who have not experienced something quite that dramatic can use it, because, in spiritual terms, the Lord has saved all of us from death – if we extend the meaning to God’s rescue of all of us in Christ, then we can all find great comfort in it. And, in its very personal perspective, it is an intimate and healthy counter-balance to the big picture community psalms that have come immediately before it.

Yes, it’s vital to keep a sense that God saves a whole community: but this psalm reminds us that we also need to reach out to the Lord personally. **We need a personal connection to God**, and God’s promise of the Holy Spirit to each follower of Jesus means that God engages with us individually. We don’t just encounter God in community, God’s desire for us is that we walk personally with him all the time.

So for all these reasons, this is special psalm. And before we look at the detail of it, we should acknowledge that **it is a beautifully structured piece of writing**. It’s basically a ‘perfect 7’ – the psalm is in seven sections, which all cluster around the central verses. The psalm begins with the writer calling on the Lord in the day of trouble, and ends with the psalmist calling on the Lord in the day of deliverance: so ‘I will call’ in verse 2 is mirrored by ‘I will call’ in verse 17.

Likewise, the cords of death entangle the writer in the second section (v3) who is then freed from the chains of death in the sixth section (v16). In the third section, the writer reminds him- or herself that the Lord has been *good* to them, and as a result their soul can return to its *rest*; and in the fifth section, asks the question: ‘what shall I *return* to the Lord for all his *goodness* to me?’

The very centre of the psalm – the middle of the fourth section is this verb: ‘I trusted’. Everything else fans out around that, and it is the two-word summary of the psalm: ‘I trusted’. That is its primary message to us: this is psalm that invites us to trust. **If Psalms 113 and 114 were about praise, and Psalm 115 about glory, Psalm 116 is about trust.**

But what’s so important about the message of this psalm is that when the writer is in desperate trouble, they don’t bargain with God. It’s tempting for many of us in a crisis to say: ‘God, if you get me out of this, I’ll do this for you, or give that to you.’ But the Lord doesn’t need us to bargain with him: notice here how the psalmist simply cries out: ‘Lord, save me!’ **He or she doesn’t bargain, they simply appeal to God’s very character: his grace, righteousness and compassion.** That was enough – and there’s a great lesson for us here. It’s always grace that saves us. Not how hard we work or what we can offer God: like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable, it’s grace that moves God’s heart towards us.

When the psalmist makes promises and vows in the second half of the psalm, he or she only does that *after* their salvation. So the promise to keep celebrating God’s salvation privately in v13, to make vows publicly in v14, to serve in v16 and offer sacrifices in v17 – **that’s all a response to grace, to God’s initiative.** We don’t have to earn God’s love: when we make promises to God, it’s only *after* the Lord has already listened to us, delivered us and restored us into his rest. Only then do we ask the question: ‘What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?’

There’s one other gem in this psalm, tucked away in the middle (v10): ‘I trusted in the Lord when I said: “I am greatly afflicted.”’ **This is a psalm rooted in real life. To be honest about our afflictions is not a lack of trust, it’s a sign of trust.** The psalmist trusts God’s goodness enough to be honest about how difficult their life is. They don’t have to pretend, or wear a mask. They can even pour out their disillusion with other people: ‘Everyone is a liar.’ (v11)

Fans of the brilliant medical series ‘House’ will know this is Dr Greg House’s catchphrase. But it’s not his, Psalm 116 coined it 2,500-3,000 years ago. ‘Everybody lies!’... but God doesn’t: ‘The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.’ Not just to clever or talented people, or powerful people, or even organised people: this God ‘protects the unwary’ – and unwary can be translated simple or foolish. In other words, God saves ordinary people: people like us.

So I love this psalm – I’m sure many of you do too – and if it’s new to you, I hope and pray you’ll come to love it. **It is an invitation** to call on a God who hears. To cry out to a God who saves. To trust in a God who sees our affliction. ‘Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.’

And in turn, we can respond to this great God by **offering ourselves wholeheartedly to him.** What will each of us return to the Lord today, this week, this year, for all his goodness to us?