

BaptistWay Bible Series for October 29: Offer thanks to God for his abundant gifts

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Offer thanks to God for his abundant gifts

- Psalm 116

By David Wilkinson

Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth

In her spiritual autobiography *Traveling Mercies*, author Anne Lamott writes, “Here are the two best prayers I know: ‘Help me, help me, help me,’ and ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’” That sentiment captures the spirit of the Psalter’s prayers of thanksgiving.

A cry for help

The simple yet profound formula for the group of psalms often classified as songs of thanksgiving is expressed in a single sentence of Psalm 34: “This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble,” (v. 6). The series of three clauses summarizes the testimony of

Psalm 116 and similar psalms: I cried out to the Lord; the Lord heard my plea; and the Lord delivered me from my trouble.

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This public testimony of God's acts of grace and mercy leads to an expression of thanksgiving or gratitude, often in the form of a presentation of a sacrifice in worship in fulfillment of promises made in the prayer for help.

In this sense, the hymn of thanksgiving serves as the liturgical counterpart to the prayer for help. (See Psalm 13 for a model of the lament of an individual.). In contrast to the prayers for help, which constitute by far the largest category in the Psalter, these songs of thanksgiving are few. That ratio may reflect our experience in prayer and worship: We tend to come to God to ask for help much more than we come in thanksgiving to offer our gratitude to God.

A hymn of thanksgiving

Psalm 116 offers an excellent example of songs of thanksgiving and the ways these hymns were woven into the liturgical practice of the worshipping community. This wonderful psalm gives us a picture of a worshipper who has come to the temple to pay his vow to God and to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the Lord's deliverance, which may have come in the form of healing from a grave illness. Now, he is fulfilling his promise

to offer his sacrifice to God in the presence of others.

The elements of the hymn follow the pattern described earlier:

- The psalmist prayed to the Lord (Yahweh) for help, and the Lord heard and responded (vv. 1, 2, 6, 8, 16).
- Now, the psalmist comes in worship to offer sacrifices (vv. 13-14, 17-19).
- He sings a song of thanksgiving to the Lord (vv. 8, 16).
- He offers public testimony about God's goodness to God's people (vv. 5, 6, 9, 15).

The singer begins with the notes of a love song, giving voice to those three words that are crucial to any intimate relationship: "I love you." In the entire Psalter, only Psalm 18, "I love you, O Lord" (v. 1), begins with such an intimate expression of love for God.

The psalmist lifts his song of petition and praise to a God who hears. The wooden idols the ancient Hebrews encountered in other religions had ears but could not hear. Not so, declare the psalms, with the God of Israel. The psalms of thanksgiving praise a God who hears and cares, a God who not only speaks but listens to his people.

The psalmist offers thanksgiving for God's deliverance from a crisis that had brought him to death's door. God has rescued him from the "snares of death" and the "pangs of Sheol" (v. 3). For the Hebrews, Sheol was the shadowy abode of the dead, a place devoid of God's life-giving presence and steadfast love. God's deliverance had rescued the psalmist from the clutches of death (v. 8), enabling him to walk again in the "land of the living" (v. 9).

Serious, life-threatening crises tend to remind us of our mortality, forcing us to confess we are not masters of our fate. In those situations, often we

find ourselves making a deal with God. These are our “if only” prayers—“O God, if only you will get me out of this mess somehow”—often accompanied by a promise—“then I will . . .”

We also must confess, however, that the difference between the psalmist and most of us is the composer of this hymn actually keeps his promise to God.

The story of Hannah provides a striking example of such fidelity to a vow. If God would answer her prayers for a child, Hannah vowed to offer the child for life-long service to God. Her prayers were answered, and, sure enough, Hannah showed up one day at the temple with little Samuel in tow, entrusting him to Eli’s care and guidance in fulfillment of her promise to the Lord (1 Samuel 1:26-28).

A toast to God

This commitment to keeping one’s promises compels the psalmist to present a public offering of praise and thanksgiving to God in worship (vv. 13-14, 17-19). In Hebrew culture, someone delivered from illness or affliction was expected to offer a public expression of thanks. The “cup of salvation” (v. 13) may be a reference to wine offered in a religious ceremony of thanksgiving.

This act of worship found expression in the observance of Passover, where Psalm 116 was among the psalms recited as the fourth and final cup was raised at the meal, and was later adapted and incorporated by the early church into the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. When in our worship we raise the “cup of salvation” heavenward in thanksgiving for our salvation in Christ, we in essence are offering a reverent “toast” to God.

Fittingly, this song of thanksgiving offers an appropriate conclusion to our

brief, nine-week journey into the rich territory of the Psalms. The opening notes, “I love the Lord” (v. 1), end with the exultation, “Praise the Lord!” (v. 19).

In our love for God, with thanksgiving for all God has done, and with gratitude for the gift of the Psalter, we joyfully sing, “Praise the Lord!”

Discussion questions

- Note the three attributes of God included in verse 5. In what ways does our trust in God relate to these attributes?
- In the psalmist’s confidence in God, he finds “rest” (v. 7). This may refer to the sense of safety and security he found in worshipping in the temple. It may also be a reference to the inner peace that only God can provide (Psalm 4:8). This kind of inner restfulness characterizes the faith of my mother-in-law. As she lay on the examining table in the doctor’s office, awaiting a biopsy report, she offered a prayer and then quietly fell asleep. That inner peace was unshaken when the doctor returned to awaken her with the news that the biopsy was positive. Have you experienced this kind of confidence and trust in God’s loving care?
- In what ways does your church’s worship reflect the spirit of thanksgiving expressed in Psalm 116?



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