

Week 14 – Psalm 116

A Psalm of Thanksgiving

Psalm 116:1-2 – An Introduction to Thanksgiving

- This is a Psalm of Thanksgiving that describes a past encounter with life-threatening trouble (vv 3, 10, 11); a prayer for help (v 4); and the Lord's rescue (vv 6, 8, 16).
- The Psalm begins by declaring "I love the Lord."
- The Psalmist's strong declaration is a response to God's saving help.
 - o He had cried out to God for mercy.
 - o The Lord heard his voice and turned his ear to him.
- In response to God rescuing him from death, the Psalmist promises to call on the Lord as long as he lives.

Psalm 116:3-7 – Delivered from the Cords of Death

- While the Psalmist does not tell us the details of his trouble, he emphasizes the depth of the crisis by noting the "cords of death entangled" him and that he was overcome by "the anguish of the grave" (v 3).
- Death and Sheol are used as synonyms for one another throughout the Psalm.
- His only hope in this terrible situation was to call on the name of the Lord for salvation (v 4).
- To call on the name of the Lord is to call on his character (v 4).
 - o The Lord, after all, is gracious and righteous and full of compassion – see Exodus 34:6.
 - o The Lord protects the unwary/simple, that is, those who are unable to care for themselves.
- When the Psalmist was brought low and unable to help himself, the Lord saved him (v 6).
- The Psalmist discovers rest in the saving, bountiful grace of God (v 7).

Psalm 116:8-11- Walking in the Land of the Living

- The Psalmist describes the pragmatic results of his salvation.
 - o He is saved from death, tears, and stumbling (v 8).
 - o He is saved so that he might continue to walk before the Lord in the land of the living (v 9).
 - In the Bible, walk is often used as a metaphor for life itself.
 - To walk before the Lord is to be in a relationship with him.
- The Psalmist recounts the fact that he continued to trust in the Lord even when he was being greatly afflicted (v 10).
- Verse 11 is a challenge for interpreters. The Psalmist may have found support from friends to be lacking or ultimately unhelpful during his crisis, another reminder that the Lord alone could help him.

Psalm 116:12-19 – A Vow Fulfilled

- The Psalm transitions with a question, "What shall [the Psalmist] return to the LORD for all his goodness to [him]?"
- Three actions are mentioned.
 - o He "will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord" (v 13).

A Song for Every Season: A Study on the Psalms

- “Cup” has many rich associations in the OT including friendship, provision, or even wrath.
- The most likely reference is to the drink offering that accompanied the burnt offering (see Numbers 28:7).
- He would sacrifice a thanksgiving offering to the Lord (v 17). This was a tangible way to say thank you to the Lord.
- He will fulfill his vows to the Lord (vv 14, 18).
 - The ancient Hebrews often made vows along with thanksgiving offerings as a sign of their gratitude and commitment to the Lord.
 - See Jacob’s vow at Bethel (Gen 28:20) and Hannah’s vow in 1 Samuel 1:11).
- All three of these actions were to be done in the temple court (v 19) and in “presence of all the people” (vv 14, 18).
- We have here the balance between God’s personal care for the individual, and the individual’s place in the larger family of God.
 - God cares individually over every believer.
 - Verse 15 anticipates Jesus’s words about the “one sparrow who falls to the ground” (Matthew 10:29-31).
 - Each individual is a servant of the Lord with their own particular story. Notice the Psalmist’s story is connected to the faith of this mother (v 16).
 - Every individual’s story can and does have a place in the larger worship of the believing community.

Psalm 116 – A History of Liturgical Use

- Psalm 116 is considered part of the “Egyptian Hallel,” Psalms read during the Passover Festival.
 - It’s mention of a cup (v 13) found connection to the four cups of wine raised and blessed during the Passover meal.
 - At the raising of the fourth cup, Psalms 115-118 were recited by the worshipers.
- Psalm 116 then began to be used by Christians during observances of the Lord’s supper, especially on Maundy Thursday.
- In Christian use, Psalm 116 speaks not to rescue from physical death, but from Death itself through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Other Salvation History Psalms

- Psalm 28 – David calls on God for mercy and then thanks him when the Lord responds.
- Psalm 30 – The Psalmist thanks the Lord for turning his “wailing into dancing.”
- Psalm 107 – An invitation to give thanks for what God has done for the nation of Israel.

Sources

- Davidson, Robert, *The Vitality of Worship* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
- Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 1: Psalms 90-150, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008).
- May, James L., *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1994).