

A Prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving

Psalm 116:1-19; Romans 12:1-2

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Beloved Congregation of Christ: This Thanksgiving Day, what are you most thankful for? But on Thursday, most Americans will be focused on turkey, football and alcohol.

Last year's celebrity tweets were good examples of this focus. Singer Bruno Mars posted on Twitter a picture of himself soaking in a bathtub with champagne in his hand and wrote, "If this don't look thankful I don't know what does." Ellen Degeneres sent a picture of her and her two dogs with this greeting, "Happy Thanksgiving! Here's a photo of some of the things I'm most thankful for." But there's hope in some of these tweets. Quincy Poindexter, an NBA player, wrote, "Unbelievably thankful and blessed . . . Happy Thanksgiving from my family to yours. God bless." Gisele Bundchen, a model married to football star Tom Brady, sent a picture of their two children sampling the Thanksgiving table, with a greeting, "Thank you God."

Our text today, Psalm 116, is a psalm of both lament and thanksgiving, showing us what we as God's people are to be thankful for. The author of this psalm, unlike most of the psalms, is unknown, but he is someone who was near death and was thankful to God for saving him. We will meditate on this psalm today as we look forward to Thanksgiving Day, one of the great American holidays. The Lord's Day is the only "holy" day of the church, but Thanksgiving Day is given special attention by Christian churches. The other days are Christmas, Good Friday, Easter (which is always a Sunday), and Ascension Day, which are the greatest events in Christian history.

The first four verses are the author's prayer for God's mercy. Then in verses 5-11, the writer affirms God's mercy and is confident that God will be merciful to him. Finally, in verses 12-19, the psalmist tells us of his response to God's mercy.

Prayer for God's Mercy (verses 1-4)

The first thing that the psalmist says is, "*I love the LORD.*" Why does he love the LORD? Because, he says, "*he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy*" and "*inclined his ear to me.*" This love arises because God has answered his prayers for mercy. Note the plural "pleas" or "prayers." He prayed not just once or twice, but he was persistent in his prayers, until God answered him. That's why he says he will pray without ceasing, "*as long as I live.*"

Scripture commands us to pray. When Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer, he said, "When you pray . . ." He didn't say, "If you pray . . ." The Heidelberg Catechism tells us that we need to pray because of two things. First, "because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us." When we pray, we express not only our requests and supplications, but

we also give thanks to God in our prayers. Remember the acrostic ACTS as the content of prayer? Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplications. So Paul says, *“pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”* (1 Thess 5:17-18). Praying with thanksgiving is God’s will for us.

Second, we need to pray “because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who earnestly and without ceasing ask them of Him, and render thanks unto Him for them.” We need to pray because it is God’s commandment. Jesus commands us, *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you”* (Matt 7:7). And be persistent, like the widow in Jesus’ parable. She was persistent in asking the judge to hear her case, so the judge finally granted her request. Jesus told this parable to his disciples in Luke 18:1-8 so *“that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”* So Paul commands, *“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving”* (Col 4:2). Notice that prayer includes being watchful and thankful.

Affirmation of God’s Mercy (5-11)

What was the petition of the psalmist? We read in verse 3 his circumstances. He was surrounded by death, the grave laid hold of him. He was distressed and anguished. So he prays, *“O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!”*

But God delivered him from death and anguish, because he says in verses 5-7 that the LORD is *“gracious . . . righteous . . . merciful.”* This is God’s unchanging character. His response was not like Stoics who say, “grin and bear it” under difficulties, and his patience will be rewarded. Nor was the psalmist complaining against God, “Why are you sending me these sufferings, when I’ve been faithful to you”? Some preachers today will tell you that your sufferings are the result of your weak faith. Just name it and claim it, they will tell you.

But the psalmist had persevering faith in the gracious and merciful God. He affirms that *“the LORD preserves the simple”* (helpless). When the psalmist was down in the pit of suffering, God saved him. So he says to himself, “Rest in God, for he will reward your faithfulness in suffering.” Even when he was complaining and grieving and groaning in his great affliction, he still says, *“I believed in God.”* He learned to put his trust in God and not in man, saying, *“All men are liars.”* He learned this the hard way, as his trust was betrayed by both friend and enemy.

Paul had joy even when he was in prison with Silas in Philippi. In Acts 16:25, we read what they were doing in prison, *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.”* Paul exhorts us today in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”* We often think that we can rejoice only in good times, but we can also have joy in bad times. Rejoice in bad times? Some of your friends may think this is crazy. But Jesus himself teaches that when you are persecuted and ridiculed, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds”* (Matt 5:11). So Paul echoes the Lord’s

words, *“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope”* (Rom 5:3-4; see also Jas 1:2-4). Our joy is not the same as that of sadomasochists who enjoy torturing themselves. No, our joy is in the Lord, because sufferings produce endurance, character and hope in our future blessing and glory in heaven.

Response to God’s Mercy (12-19)

In view of God’s deliverance, how does the psalmist respond? We read his response in verses 12-19. So he asks, *“What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?”* He answers his own question in three ways. First, he vows, *“I will lift up the cup of salvation.”* What is this cup of salvation? The psalmist obviously refers to his salvation from death. However, in both the Old and New Testaments, the cup is used as a figure of both God’s wrath and salvation. In Isaiah 51:17, God prophesied that he will punish rebellious Israel by making them drink *“the cup of his wrath.”* All unbelievers will drink this cup of wrath unless they believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Why? Because Jesus drank this cup on the night before he was crucified on the cross. On that same night, Jesus was in anguish over drinking God’s cup of wrath, *“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me”* (Matt 26:39). But Jesus did drink the cup. And this cup of wrath became for us, who believe in him as Savior, the cup of salvation from all our sins.

Second, the psalmist promises, *“[I will] call on the name of the LORD,”* the name of the LORD God of Israel. To call on the name of the LORD is to believe in him and to trust that he would fulfill his promises. In the New Testament, Paul says in Romans 10:13, *“everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”* Who is this LORD? In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul answers as he greets the church in Corinth as *“saints who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.”* (1 Cor 1:2). Therefore, we who call upon the name of Christ are those who believe and worship Jesus as the LORD God.

Third, the psalmist resolves in verse 14, *“I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.”* In the Old Testament, these vows refer to offerings and sacrifices not only for atonement for sins. They are also offered as signs of thanksgiving to God for his benefits, and of consecrating oneself to God.

In the New Testament, Christ our Savior fulfilled all these sacrifices with his once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. What kinds of sacrifices do we now offer to God? One type of offering is our monetary offering to support the church’s mission to preach the gospel to all the nations. This offering includes supporting the pastor, the maintenance of the church property, and worship activities. It also includes benevolent giving to the needy inside and outside the church.

Another type of offering is what Paul calls *“a living sacrifice”* in Romans 12:1. Now that Christ has abolished all animal sacrifices with his own sacrifice, Paul calls us *“to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”* Our

spiritual worship of God and Christ consists in our holy living as Christians. This holy living flows out of our salvation because now the Holy Spirit indwells us. It is the Spirit who gives us good fruits of righteousness and holiness (Gal 5:22-24).

The psalmist repeats those three vows in verses 17-19 to emphasize his commitment to them. But notice the place where the psalmist promises to pay his vows to God: *“in the presence of all his people”* (verse 14) and *“in the courts of the house of the LORD”* (verse 19). Those three vows are made in the context of public worship in the temple. We declare publicly the gospel of Christ that saved us from sin. We call on the name of the LORD who made heaven and earth in an act of adoration and worship. And our offerings are part of our worship service.

Dear people of God: Today, we give monetary offerings to God during our worship services every Lord’s Day. Why on the first day of the week? We read Paul’s instruction to the church in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, *“Now concerning the collection for the saints . . . On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper.”*

Why do we give our offering publicly, not privately? To gain praise from the congregation? No, for it is a testimony of our thanksgiving to God. It is also a testimony of God’s provisions for us. And it is a testimony that we trust God to provide for our needs, even if we gave generously of our resources. That is why the writer of Hebrews exhorts us, *“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’”* (Heb 13:5). When our resources are low, and we have little to give, trust the Lord’s provision.

God is gracious, merciful and righteous. He delivers us from our troubles, perhaps not in this life, but surely in the life to come. What are you thankful for this Thanksgiving Day? Let us encourage one another with our thanksgiving to God this last year.

Let us pray: God our Father, we thank you for all your gifts you so freely bestowed upon us: for the beauty and wonder of your creation, in earth and sky and sea; for our daily food and drink, our homes and families, and our friends; for health and strength to work, and leisure to rest and play; for the communion of saints, in all times and places. But we give you thanks not only for the good things in our lives.

May we also give you thanks for sending us trouble. Many of us are suffering chronic physical aches and pains. Daily, we face doubts and temptations in our Christian lives. Some of us are lonely, desperate, downtrodden, even angry as we face life’s difficulties. Some of us are financially strapped because of fixed income and unexpected medical and household expenses. May we be able to please you by counting it all joy when you send us troubles, for they produce strength in faith, character, endurance and hope. Above all, we give you thanks for the great mercies and promises given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord; to him be all praise, glory and thanksgiving forever. Amen.

