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*Psalms of Life, VI*

## **Free to Live**

### **Psalm 116**

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Suppose that today you go out to eat with some friends of yours. Everything is going fine and you're having a lovely meal together. All of a sudden you start to choke on a piece of meat. Or for you vegetarians, a cucumber in the salad or something. You're locking up and you start to think, *Maybe this is it*. You can't breathe. You can't do anything about it. One of your friends jumps up and gets in behind you and does the Heimlich maneuver. Out pops whatever it is, and you realize this person has saved your life. So of course you're very appreciative and you express that a number of times.

You go home, and that week you get to thinking about it. You're so appreciative of what this person did that you send them a card and a gift. They respond very humbly saying, "It was nothing. Forget it!"

But as the weeks start to pass, there's a certain tension in that relationship that starts to build. As a matter of fact, you start to feel this sense of obligation—that you owe this person. It's kind of subtle at first, and they hint around at some things they could use some help with. So you gladly jump on that because you're appreciative. You jump in and help; and boy, you're glad to do it.

But after the weeks pass, it starts to get a little bit old. You're talking with your friend, and he says he's leaving for a couple weeks and he sure could use his basement painted. You mention you're pretty busy in the next couple of weeks. He says, "Oh, that's all right. Don't worry about it. I mean, I did save your life." (You know, it's one of those deals.)

It continues on, and pretty soon you're starting to think, *Maybe it would have been better just to have died there in the restaurant*. Eventually it would destroy the relationship. You would reach a point where you don't want to even see that person, because you are just tired of hearing it. You can't make a relationship work that way.

A couple of years ago Patti and I built a house, and we tried to do what work we could to help with the cost. But we also had friends who came and did quite a bit of work. We didn't ask them to, and they didn't feel any obligation that they had to do that. But they just did it because they were our friends. Since that time, we've never felt any obligation to try and repay, to try and keep score, or to try and even the score. We're just friends. If we can help them, we're glad to do it. If they can help us, they're glad to do it. That's how a healthy relationship should work.

Thinking about all of this, let me ask you a question: What is it that motivates your relationship with God? What motivates your worship? What motivates your obedience? What motivates your service? Do you feel a sense of obligation—a sense of needing to repay God for what He has done for you? If that's what motivates you, it will destroy the relationship. It will take all of the passion out of your relationship and it will become a duty. It will become a drudgery and eventually it will just kind of fall away.

The psalmist has a whole different idea and he talks about it in Psalm 116. We don't know who the psalmist is and we don't really know any background, other than just what's told in the psalm itself.

Psalm 116 is a little hard to organize, so we will break it into two sections. You have verses 1-11, which is the psalmist's experience; and then verses 12-19, which is his response to his experience. That's really an oversimplification, because all the verses don't fit nicely into that. But in 30 minutes that's about as good as we're going to do and it's how we're going to approach this.

He opens with the statement, "I love the LORD [I love Yahweh: the God of the Hebrew people, the God who's personal, the God who's the covenant-keeping God]." We're very familiar with this kind of language. But when you stop and think about it, we're much more familiar with it in the New Testament. It's much more unusual in the Old Testament. This type of personal, intimate expression was not common, so it jumps off the page.

As a matter of fact, that statement is in the emphatic, which means at the beginning of the sentence it's a way of saying this is the most important thing in this opening sentence. "I love the LORD, because He hears my voice and my supplications." The word *hears* that is used in this verse is the Hebrew word that means "hears *and answers*." We might say, "...because He *listens* to me."

Verse 2: "Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live." That word *inclined* is an interesting word. It means "to bend down." When my kids were little and they'd come up to talk to me, sometimes I'd stand there and listen. And that's okay. But other times I would bend down to listen, so that I could be at their level and look them right in the eye. That says to them, *You matter to me. What you're saying is very, very important. And I want to get down here where I can hear you.*

That's what the word *inclined* means. It means that God, in a sense, stooped down and looked me in the eye so He could hear me and communicate to me, *I want to hear what you have to say.*

Have you ever thought about what an amazing thing that is: that when we talk to the God of the universe, He doesn't just tolerate us. He doesn't just put up with us. He doesn't even just kind of listen to us. He actually stoops down and looks us in the eye and says, "I want to hear what you have to say." That has been the psalmist's experience.

I happen to be an introvert; and we introverts don't talk a lot. As a matter of fact, I say more on the weekend than I do the rest of the week put together. I kind of save up, and then that's it. When we introverts talk, it's very important that the people we're talking to are listening. We cultivate these little antennae that go up. And if I'm talking to you and you're not listening, I'm going to stop talking. Or if I'm talking to you and I can tell in your eyes that you're bored, I'm going to stop talking. Now some of you are thinking, *Pastor, get a clue.* I'm talking about one-on-one here. (You can't stop me up here; I'm getting paid for this.) But one-on-one, that's a characteristic of an introvert. We cultivate those skills.

An extrovert is very different from that. An extrovert has a lot that they want to say. And there have been many times when I've been seated with a group and the extrovert is just talking away. My antennae go up and I'm looking at the group. And it amuses me because nobody's listening. Nobody's listening; but the extrovert doesn't care and just keeps on talking! Well, that's all right...we're all different.

But *nobody* listens to me like God listens to me. Every time I have something to say, He's down on His knees looking me in the eye. And He's listening. It's very important for a

healthy relationship that there's communication. The psalmist says, "I love the LORD because He listens to me." "Therefore," he says, "I'll call upon Him as long as I live."

Verse 3 describes his experience. He's kind of going back and saying, "This is an experience I had that illustrates what I'm talking about." He said, "The cords of death encompassed me, and the terrors of Sheol came upon me [two very graphic lines]." "The cords of death"—cords, snares, ropes, chains... whatever you like there—that's the imagery. And he's saying that basically he was caught in a snare of death. He was near death—probably from a disease, although we don't know that for sure.

He says "the terrors of Sheol [the terrors of the grave]..." The word *terrors* is a word that means "to be constricted." It's almost the imagery of these arms coming out of the grave, and death has got its bony fingers around his neck and he's squeezing the life out of him. He's as good as dead—that's the imagery here. "I found distress and sorrow. Then I called upon the name of the LORD: 'O LORD, I beseech Thee, save my life!'" He's begging God. He's dying.

It's interesting that everybody has their gods. *Everybody* does. Even the atheist has his or her god. And people live for their gods. But when it comes to matters of life and death, it's interesting how many people call out to *the* God. In those moments, people don't call out to their bank account. They don't call out to their new car. They don't call out to their friends they party with. They don't call out to the great athlete or celebrity. They don't—because they know deep down that those gods have no ability to do anything. But they call out to God, because He's the only one who can deliver.

He says, "Then I called upon the *name* of the LORD." Whenever the Bible talks about the name of the Lord, it's not talking about God's title or just a name He goes by. *Name* is in reference to the fullness of who God is: all that He can do, all that He is. So he is saying, "I really called out to all that God is, in my hour of need."

Starting in verse 5, then, he begins to describe what he means by that. I think he's defining the fullness of God, and he starts to go through some of God's attributes. He opens by saying, "Gracious is the LORD." In other words, He's a God of grace.

*Grace* is one of those terms that we talk about a lot, but I don't think we understand it at all. It's an undeserved favor. Once in a while things happen to us in our life and we get hurt. And we have the opportunity to turn around and respond with love. That's hard to do. As a matter of fact, most of the time people say, "I just can't. They don't deserve that." That's right; they don't. It's grace. But when we have that tested, we struggle.

Grace is a very difficult concept. But if we don't understand grace, we'll never really be people of prayer. Often what limits what we ask for is the fact that we just don't think we deserve it; so we find ourselves holding back. And that's right—we don't deserve it. But God is gracious and that's the basis of the whole thing. It was Jesus Himself who said, "You have not because you ask not." Why aren't we asking? Because we don't deserve it. If we don't understand grace, we'll never be people of prayer, because we just don't think we deserve an answer.

One of the things that really helps me in my understanding of grace is to spend some time meditating on the reality that, apart from Jesus Christ, I deserve eternal judgment in hell. That's hard for me to come to grips with. Basically I think I'm a pretty good guy. (I have my problems, but I'm a pretty good guy.) I just don't think of myself in those terms. But the more I

understand the holiness of God, the more I understand that is what I deserve. And the more I come to grips with that, the more I start to understand grace. Every day God lavishes His goodness upon me. I don't deserve any of that. God is "gracious."

He's "righteous," which means what He does is always right. We may not always understand it, but it's always right.

"Yes, our God is compassionate." Have you ever thought about the compassion of God? Stop and think about it. For thousands of years people have laughed at God; they've mocked God; they've denied God; they've tried to manipulate God; they've rebelled against God; they've lied to God. If any one of us had the things done to us that people did to God, we wouldn't have an ounce of compassion left in us. We would be so hard, we wouldn't have even the slightest compassion. Yet God continues to be a compassionate God. He's gracious; He's righteous; He's compassionate.

Verse 6: "The LORD preserves the simple." The word *simple* there isn't a positive word. It's the same word that's used throughout the Proverbs. It means "to be foolish; to be seducible." It basically means "to make stupid choices." Let's just put this one on the table, shall we? Sometimes we just act like idiots. That's what the word means. And we do. Sometimes don't you find yourself just making the most idiotic choices? We sometimes do the stupidest things. And the psalmist is saying, "He preserves; He guards; He protects—even the people who are doing the dumbest things." In other words, God protects me from myself. Every day He does, because that's who He is.

"I was brought low, and He saved me. Return to your rest, O my soul." Look at that in response to what he said in verse 3. He was in distress and sorrow, but now he has found rest. Why? Because he has reminded himself of who God is. He has called out to God, so there is rest for his soul.

"Return to your rest, O my soul, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. For Thou hast rescued my soul from death." In other words, God has healed him. God has heard his cry and has healed him.

"My eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I shall walk before the LORD in the land of the living." Notice verse 9 is future tense, meaning this is his response. Because God has healed him, he is going to walk before the Lord. That's a way of saying, "I'm going to walk in obedience."

"...in the land of the living." He is saying that every day that he breathes life he's reminded this is a gift from God, because God has healed him. This isn't a foxhole conversion where, in his trauma he cries out to God and God answers his prayer, and then he's going to just go back to his old ways. How often that happens. We're going through something difficult and we're really focused on God, but then after a while the difficulty kind of dissipates and we drift back to the old ways again. The psalmist is saying, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to walk before God in the land of the living." Every day is a reminder of what God has done for him.

Verse 10: "I believed when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted.'" There's a lot of debate about what's meant in verse 10. I think (based on verse 11) that he is saying, "I believed *even* when I said 'I am afflicted.'" In other words, even when he said "I am afflicted" he still believed that God heard him when he cried. He still believed that God is gracious; God is righteous; God is compassionate...and that God could heal him.

Contrary to that, look at verse 11: “I said in my alarm, ‘All men are liars.’” (You ladies are snickering at that.) It doesn’t mean “men” that way. It means “mankind.” Apparently what was happening was that the people around the psalmist were saying, “You’re doomed; it’s hopeless; you’re going to die.” Maybe they were even saying, “God doesn’t hear you; God doesn’t care.” And he is responding to that by saying, “They’re all liars; and I believed. Even when I was afflicted, I believed. I believed that God did hear me, and I believed that God had the power to heal me.” He says, “I believed.”

In verses 1-11 he’s talking about this near death experience, and it’s very graphic. The grave had him by the throat and was pulling him in, and he cried out to God—because he knew that God would hear him. He knew that God was gracious and righteous and compassionate. God heard his cry and He brought him back to life.

Now in verses 12-19 he talks about how he is responding to that. Verse 12, I think, is the key: “What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me?” “What shall I render?”—in other words, how can I repay the Lord? What he’s asking in verse 12 is: “How can I pay Him back? God heard my cry. God has healed me. How can I pay Him back?”

We’ve all struggled with those feelings, haven’t we? When we understand Christ died for us and we understand our salvation, we find ourselves saying, “How can I say thanks? How can I pay Him back?” The answer is: we can’t.

Verse 13: “I shall lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD.” That’s not paying Him back—that’s taking more. And the psalmist is saying, “I can’t. I can’t pay Him back.” “Lifting up the cup of salvation”—of course that cup is symbolic of the cup of wine, which was symbolic of the blood of the Lamb. It was the blood of Jesus Christ Himself that would be shed for the sins of the world; and he was realizing there’s nothing he could do. So when he says, “I lifted up” it’s almost as if he’s making a toast to God and saying, “God, there’s nothing I could do to repay. I just simply lift up and acknowledge my salvation. You’ve done it all.”

He says, “I’m going to call upon the name of the Lord.” Spurgeon, the great British preacher, in commenting on these verses said that the best way to respond to what God has done for us is to reach up and take some more. He’s right about that. We make a huge mistake when we get into this mindset where we think we have to pay God back—to somehow demonstrate that we are worthy. We can’t pay God back. It’s simply a gift of God’s grace and He wants us to receive it. We hold up the cup of salvation and we drink freely.

Let’s imagine that I bought you a present and gave it to you. I just did it because I wanted to. I was excited to see you open it. But then the strangest thing happens: you start trying to pay me back. You offer me money. I say, “I don’t want it.” So you start buying me gifts. Then it gets to be like this Christmas thing where I buy you one and you’re obligated to buy me one, and neither of us really wants to do it—we just do the dance every year. I don’t want that. As a matter of fact, you’re ruining the whole thing. All I wanted was for you to receive it and enjoy it. Don’t try and pay me back. That’s exactly what the psalmist is saying.

I think one of the things that disappoints God the most is when we try to pay Him back. We try to somehow merit or earn or deserve—we just feel this obligation somehow to pay God back. Because of that, we don’t drink freely from all He offers.

Do you know what God wants us to do? The more we receive, the more He wants us to open our arms and receive some more. Just take what He has given and celebrate it. Enter into it. Enjoy it. That's what the psalmist is saying.

Verse 14: "I shall pay my vows to the LORD, oh may it be in the presence of all His people." We need to understand that what he's talking about there is worship. Probably when he was on his deathbed he said, "God, if You heal me I will praise You to the people." When he's talking about paying his vows, he's just simply saying, "That's what I want to do: I want to celebrate; I want to worship." He says, "I want to do it in public for everybody to hear." He's not trying to pay God back. He's just expressing his excitement over who God is.

Verse 15, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His godly ones." It's an interesting verse, and I hear it quoted often at funerals. But what does it mean? One of the interesting things about this verse is that the psalmist didn't die. The psalmist didn't die—nobody died here. So what does he mean, "Precious in the sight of God is the death of His godly ones"? The word *precious* is the Hebrew word that could also be translated "costly." I think that's what he is talking about. The psalmist realizes that it costs God something when His godly ones dies. It's a way of saying that he's important—that he matters to God and he has a purpose for being on this earth.

When a godly one dies, God loses a servant. God loses a worshiper. God loses someone who's passionate about the mission. And that costs God something. It's like having an All-American on the football team and the coach reaching out and pulling him off the field. That's going to cost the team something. So the psalmist is saying that he was on his deathbed, but God has a plan for him. God has a purpose for him, and God is not done with him. It would have cost God something for him to die, so God has left him on the playing field. That does translate, then, into meaning it is precious when a godly one dies, because it costs God something. Therefore, God had a very good reason, even though we don't always know that reason. God would never allow a godly one to die without a very strategic purpose for that, because it did cost Him something to lose that player on the field. That's what he says as a reminder that he matters to God. God has a purpose for him.

"O LORD, surely I am Thy servant, I am Thy servant, the son of Thy handmaid, Thou hast loosed my bonds." When he says "bonds" he is going back to verse 3. He was in the snare, the bonds of death. God has set him free and he says, "I want to serve You. I want to live for You."

Verse 17: "To Thee I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and call upon the name of the LORD. I shall pay my vows to the LORD, oh may it be in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the LORD'S house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!" In the last couple of verses he is saying he's so excited about his relationship with God that he wants to worship with the people. He wants everybody to know who God is.

If you were to casually read Psalm 116, you might get the impression that the psalmist is saying, "Because God healed me, then I'm doing all these things." I don't think that's what he's saying at all. I think he is saying that in the midst of that experience, he was reminded anew and afresh who God is. He was reminded that God hears us when we call. He was reminded that God is gracious, righteous and compassionate, and that God is the God of unlimited power. He was reminded of who God is, and he fell in love with God all over again. That's why he opens this psalm by saying, "I love the LORD." That's what is motivating his service and what's motivating his commitment.

Sometimes it is in those valleys when we really experience God in a deep way. If we come out of those valleys and feel like somehow we have to pay God back, that will never work. But if we come out of those experiences knowing God in a new and a fresh way, we come out of that celebrating our relationship. We fall in love with Him all over again. That is what God wants.

You see, if I live my life to somehow try to repay God, I can never do that. Every day I'm the recipient of more and more of God's goodness. I can't possibly repay Him, so I'm losing ground every day. God doesn't want that from me. God doesn't want me to feel obligated to try and pay Him back. He wants me to just take it in, to celebrate who He is and what He has done for me—to drink it all in. He wants me to fall in love with Him all over again.

This need we have to somehow try to pay God back, to somehow demonstrate that we are worthy, really comes out of our pride. Instead, we need to humble ourselves and realize who God is and what He has done for us.

Let's go back to the opening illustration. What if you were that person who constantly felt like you owed your friend because that friend saved your life? Every time you're around that person you feel that tension and you start to feel like it will never be enough. It would ruin the relationship. Pretty soon you would stop being around that person, because you're just tired of hearing it.

That's exactly how a lot of Christians feel about God. At first they're very excited and they're walking the walk. But pretty soon they just get tired of hearing it. They're tired of this sense of obligation—feeling like they have to do this and they have to do that. And it takes all the passion out of the relationship. It becomes a duty, an obligation, and it starts to feel like they are just cranking it out.

There has never been one time in Patti's and my marriage where I've done what I've done out of a sense of obligation. There's never been a time when Patti sat me down at the table and said, "Listen, Buster, these are the rules you agreed to when we got married. You have to do this. You're obligated." That's not a relationship. I do what I do because I love her. That's what motivates me.

And that's what God wants with us. He wants us to be motivated because we love Him—because we're just drinking in all that He has offered us. The more He gives, the more we reach out and take. We serve Him; we obey Him; we worship Him...because we love Him. That is what sets us free to live.

*Father, we're thankful for your amazing love: that you gave your Son to die on a cross that we might drink of the cup of salvation—freely given. Lord, you don't want us to pay you back. You don't want us to try and earn it or deserve it. You just want us to receive it, to celebrate who you are. The more we learn who you are, the more we fall in love with you. Lord, may that be the motivation of our Christian lives.*