

# *I Love the Lord:*

## *Psalm 116*

By  
Dr. Dallas R. Burdette

Website: [www.freedominchrist.net](http://www.freedominchrist.net)

**Psalm 116 is a reminder of redemption from the kingdom of darkness.** This psalm is one of the six Egyptian Hallel psalms that Jesus and His twelve disciples sang during the Passover meal. Psalm 116 was sung following the eating of the Passover lamb.<sup>1</sup> The author of this psalm describes his deliverance from a near death experience. As a result of God's rescue, he breaks forth with the phrase, "I love the LORD" (Psalm 116:1a). The author expresses his thanksgiving for God's response to his call. He paints a picture of God's gracious character and righteous purposes. We cannot read his statements without reflecting upon his urgent call—dependence upon God. This writer shuns self-reliance and invites total trust in God. When we exercise this kind of conviction, we find the ability to tolerate every strain of hardship.

We may discover this psalm rather strange as one of the Passover hymns. But the Jews adopted this psalm of relief and applied this deliverance to their Exodus from the land of Egypt (1446 BC). On the other hand, early Christians also read or recited this psalm during the Eucharist (thanksgiving)<sup>2</sup> as a reminder of their Exodus from the kingdom of darkness. Today, we read this psalm with the Atonement of Jesus in mind. We cannot help but praise God for such a wonderful gift—the gift of eternal life through His Son. Will we look upon the writer's biographical statements and emulate His cry: "I love you LORD"? Are we willing to entrust ourselves to Him without reservations?

### **I LOVE YOU, LORD**

As we reflect upon this psalm, we learn that this inspired literature consists of beautiful words of thanksgiving. We cannot read this poem without counting our blessings. We dare not

---

<sup>1</sup>See A. A. Anderson, *Psalms (73-150), The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), where he writes: "Traditionally these Psalms were used at the great annual festivals which included the Passover. On the latter occasion Ps. 113—114 were sung before the Passover meal, Ps. 115—118 after it (cf. Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26)."

<sup>2</sup>See J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *Psalms, in 1 & 2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, Psalms, The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol., 4* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 1149.

hold back our gratitude when we contemplate the promises of such a bountiful Giver. Have we counted the many blessings that God has extended to us “in” and “through” His Son Jesus? Do God’s blessings encourage us to respond with our hearts, our minds, and our souls? Do we cry out as the psalmist: “I love you LORD”? Psalm 116 is a song of praise and a prayer for help. This psalm is not only a monument to the gracious character of God, but it is also a testimony to God’s loving kindness.

Do we feel the love of God glowing in our souls? The psalmist felt it glowing in his soul. Do we experience the tenderness of God in our daily walk with Him? Do we sense the peace of God that passes all understanding? Do we consider the kindness of God as we ponder upon redemption? Do our souls overflow with love for God? Well, the psalmist felt all of this in his soul. Listen to him as he sets forth his reasons for his feeling of love:

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. <sup>2</sup> Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. (Psalm 116:1-2)

The author of this psalm expresses his reason for the love he felt toward God. Jehovah “turned his ear” toward him. This act of God, no doubt, was but one of the many motives that prompted the psalmist’s love for God.

## **PAUL AND HIS THORN IN THE FLESH**

Has not God turned His ear toward us, too? Has not God showered many spiritual blessing upon us through faith in His Son? Has not God answered our prayers concerning sickness? Has not God answered our prayers regarding our afflictions? If God has not answered our prayers pertaining to affliction, are we still willing to praise God for His gift of eternal life through His grace? Are we prepared to praise Him for all His spiritual blessings in Christ? Paul, too, prayed for relief from his thorn in the flesh, but to no avail. Listen to Paul as he reveals his inner thoughts about his sufferings: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). How did Paul act in response to the Lord’s answer? Again, in spite of his difficulties, he still praised God. Paul related to the Corinthians his personal mindset:

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (12:9b-10)

The author of the Book of Hebrews also reveals the plight of many believers—some delivered, others not. We should praise God whether He delivers us from tragedy or does not deliver us from misfortune! The eleventh chapter of the Book of Hebrews is a chapter that captures graphically the faith that individuals manifested in the face of trouble:

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets,<sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,<sup>34</sup> quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.<sup>35</sup> Women received back their dead, raised to life again. **Others were tortured and refused to be released,** so that they might gain a better resurrection.<sup>36</sup> **Some faced jeers and flogging,** while still **others were chained and put in prison.**<sup>37</sup> They were stoned<sup>f</sup>; they were **sawed in two;** they were **put to death by the sword.** They **went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated**—<sup>38</sup> the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.<sup>39</sup> These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.<sup>40</sup> God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:32-40)

## THE THREE HEBREW CHILDREN

As Christians, we should worship God whether or not He hears our prayers for the liberation of our miseries. We should serve God whether or not He sends joys or sorrows. We should praise God whether or not He favors us with prosperity or allows deep hardships. Every believer should exhibit the attitude of the three Hebrew children (**Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego**) that were taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel (605 BC) leaves for posterity their encounter with the king. In this story, we notice that the king had built an image of himself and required that when certain instruments be played, then everyone should bow before the image. But these three men refused to bow. And, as a result of their refusal, they were called in and given a chance to repent and bow or suffer the consequences for their actions. But the three Hebrews spoke to the king in forceful words about their faith in the God whom they worshipped. We should pay careful attention to Daniel as he discloses the reaction of the king to the conversation that took place among Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, concerning the king's demands:

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king,<sup>14</sup> and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?<sup>15</sup> Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"<sup>16</sup> **Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.**<sup>17</sup> **If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king.**<sup>18</sup> **But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."** (Daniel 3:13-18)

---

<sup>f</sup> Some early manuscripts *stoned; they were put to the test;*

## Serving God in Spite of Misfortune

Do we really and truly believe that the God we worship can free us from our problems? What if he does not lighten or alleviate our difficulties. Are we still willing to serve Him? Can we still say, “I love the LORD”? The psalmist not only knows that he loves God, but he knows the reason why. If we actually know the basis of why we love the Lord, then our love will be deep, strong, and abiding. John, one of the Twelve Apostles, says, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Jesus also calls attention to God’s love in His conversation with Nicodemus: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

### WHAT SHALL I RETURN TO THE LORD?

As we reflect upon this Egyptian Hallel Psalm, we view an individual who ponders over his past predicament of life-threatening trouble: “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow” (Psalm 116:3). His thinking upon the past and the Lord’s deliverance caused him to sing a song of thanksgiving to the LORD. He expresses himself this way as he meditates upon God’s goodness: “For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling” (116:8). Again, the psalmist enters into his soul and exclaims: “O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains” (116:16).

### I Am Your Servant

When we look upon our past life of sins, we cannot help but recognize the hand of God in our redemption from condemnation. Since God has offered forgiveness of sins through Jesus, then we, too, should say, “Truly I am your servant” (116:16). Are we servants of God? Is there commitment and loyalty and dedication from us to serve Him? Even though this psalm had its original *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life, or life situation) in the psalmist’s personal sickness that brought him near death, nevertheless, we can also observe how the Jews in a second *Sitz im Leben* employed this psalm as a psalm of thanksgiving to God for His response to their plight in Egypt. Then a third *Sitz im Leben* can be observed as we sing a song of thanksgiving for our salvation. We, in reading Psalm 116, should reflect also upon the Good News of God—salvation by grace through faith in His Son Jesus. Peter, in his sermon to the household of Cornelius, explains something of God’s mercy exhibited in the Gospel:

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that **everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.** (Acts 10:42-43)

As we meditate upon the psalmist’s question—“How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?”—we are immediately awakened to a sense of consciousness of God’s mercy.

Since God has exposed so much mercy, so much kindness, and so much love, we should look at the world within which we live to find ways of expressing our gratitude to God for such blessings. We should also look within our own souls to see what we can do to manifest appreciation to God for His grace so that others can identify the great God whom we serve. We should use whatever talent God has given us in order to honor and glorify Him.

## THE CUP OF SALVATION

The psalmist, after contemplation upon his liberation from sickness, naturally wondered about how to express his thanks: “How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?” (Psalm 116:12). Do we, too, wonder how we can express our admiration and joy for what God has done for us in our feeble, wretched, and lost condition? The psalmist tells how he will lift up “the cup of salvation,” that is to say, the offering of libation, or sacrificial offering. He raises the question of an appropriate expression of gratitude. How can he repay the LORD? He says that he will lift up “the cup of salvation.” But what does this mean? This lifting up of “the cup of salvation” was a means of expressing his thanksgiving for his blessings from God.

## FIRST AND SECOND BACKGROUND FOR PSALM 116

In the **first** *Sitz im Leben*, the psalmist lifts up “the cup of salvation” as a demonstration of his thankfulness for God’s response. In the **second** *Sitz im Leben*, Psalms 116 was employed in the Passover as a psalm of thanksgiving. During the course of the Passover meal, four cups were raised and blessed in its progress. The first cup was called “The Cup of Consecration”; the second cup was called, “The Cup of Proclamation”; the third cup was called “The Cup of Thanksgiving” and the fourth cup was called “The Cup of Hallel.” The third cup was also called “The Cup of Redemption.”<sup>3</sup> Did not the phrase, “the cup of salvation” make this Psalm an appropriate psalm for the Passover?

Following the Passover meal, the guests recited Psalms 115-118. This recitation of Psalm 116 reminded the Jews that they had been brought from bondage to freedom, from sorrow to gladness, from mourning to a Festival-day, from darkness to great light, and from servitude to redemption (*Pesachim* 10:5). This psalm became the thanksgiving of everyone who participated in the Passover. In the singing of this psalm, each participant acknowledged salvation in his or her deliverance from Egyptian bondage.

---

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed study of the four cups, see Dallas Burdette, “Passover Traditions in the Time of Christ,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL.: Xulon Press, 2008), 181-195. See also Dallas Burdette, “Meaning of the Eucharistic Sayings in the Gospels,” *Ibid.*, 383-439.

## THIRD BACKGROUND FOR PSALM 116

### The Lord's Supper

In the third *Sitz im Leben*, Jesus took the third cup—"The Cup of Thanksgiving"—and said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). In the specific phrase of the psalmist, "the cup of salvation," we cannot help but recall "the cup of thanksgiving" ("the cup of blessing,") [1 Corinthians 10:16, KJV] that Paul mentions in his letter to the Corinthians. **Just as Jesus and the Twelve sang Psalms 113-118,<sup>4</sup> so, we, as Christians, have also adopted Psalm 116 to be recited or sung during the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup>** Today, it would also be appropriate for us to recite or sing Psalm 116 as an expression of appreciation for our salvation through the shedding of the blood of Jesus. James L. Mays, Professor of Hebrew and the Old Testament, says, "This Psalm becomes the voice of Jesus and the congregation, the one providing the cup and sacrifice, the other united by them with him in his death and resurrection."<sup>6</sup>

### Confessing the Name of Jesus and Doing Good

As Christians, we reflect upon the words of Psalm 116, which psalm reminds us of "the cup of salvation" that was offered up as a sacrifice. This particular cup elicits from God's people an expression of thankfulness for redemption. When we assemble to break bread in our commemoration of Jesus, we cannot help but remember "the cup of blessing/thanksgiving." The cup of blessing constantly calls attention to redemption from sin. When we share in the "cup of blessing," then that participation should ring-a-bell in the mind of us all to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. Paul, in calling attention to true worship, expresses the height of appreciation of the believer by serving God. Listen as he captures graphically the core of Christian worship and thankfulness:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual<sup>a</sup> act of worship.<sup>2</sup> Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

Just as the psalmist offered up "the cup of salvation" as a libation, so we offer up our bodies as living sacrifices. The author of the Book of Hebrews expresses it this way:

---

<sup>4</sup>Psalms 115-118 were sung following the drinking of the fourth cup—"The Cup of Hallel." Matthew reports this incident of the Passover: "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30).

<sup>5</sup>See James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 371-372.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>a</sup> Or *reasonable*

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. <sup>16</sup> And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:15-16)

As believers in Christ, we “confess his name” and we “do good” and we “share with others.” These sacrifices are the means by which God’s people lift up “the cup of salvation.”

### **Extending Forgiveness**

Another way we can lift up “the cup of salvation” (Psalm 116:13) is by extending forgiveness to others. Paul encourages us to eliminate the works of the flesh from our lives. He writes with passion as he seeks to remold the lives of God’s peoples. Listen to him as he writes:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31-32)

Are we kind and compassionate to one another? The psalmist shouts, as it were, “The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion” (Psalms 116:5). Do we recall the story of Jonah and Nineveh? When God spared the city, Jonah was extremely displeased and angry (Jonah 4:1). Jonah wanted God to destroy the capital, but God had other thoughts in mind. After God spared the city, Jonah complained in his prayer:

O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. <sup>3</sup> Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live. (Jonah 4:2-3)

As we reread this psalm, is it any wonder that this psalm was sung during the time of the Passover? This Holy Spirit inspired poetry is an unveiling of God’s compassion. We cannot participate in the observance of the Lord’s Supper without reflecting upon the compassion, sympathy, empathy, and concern of God. God’s mercy flashes like neon lights throughout this meal. Paul, too, in his Epistle to the Christians in Rome, set forth the magnitude of God’s love for humanity: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

### **THE PSALMIST COULD NOT KEEP SILENT**

When we are conscious of what God has accomplished for the salvation of the world, we cannot keep silent. The psalmist could not keep quiet as he reflected upon God’s response to his call. The psalmist looks back over his experiences and says, “I believed” (Psalm 116:10). The psalmist lets his readers know that he did not put his trust in man, but rather he placed his conviction in God. He portrays his confidence in God when he writes: “I believed; therefore I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted.’ <sup>11</sup>And in my dismay I said, ‘All men are liars’” (116:10-11).

## Paul's Employment of Psalm 116:10

This confession of the psalmist is not a statement of despair, but rather it is a statement that he did not place his hope in human help. Faith was the foundation of his recovery; he was now reaping the fruits of faith. Do we have faith? Are we ashamed to speak when we are suffering? Is affliction a sign of not being in favor with God? Paul borrows this language of the psalmist to express his confidence in the truth of the Gospel. He cites this passage in his Second Epistle to Corinth to bolster his determination to speak about his faith in Jesus, despite despair:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. <sup>8</sup> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. <sup>11</sup> For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. <sup>12</sup> So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. <sup>13</sup> It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken."<sup>b</sup> With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, <sup>14</sup> because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. <sup>15</sup> All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:7-15)

Even though Paul and his fellow ministers suffered for Christ, nevertheless, they were not ashamed to speak of God's salvation in spite of sufferings. When we believe in God, we must address ourselves to God. We can hardly reflect upon Paul's citation of Psalm 116:10 without also calling to memory the words of Paul in his Epistle to the Christians at Rome:

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. <sup>11</sup> As the Scripture says, "**Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.**"<sup>f</sup> (Romans 10:9-11)

## The Psalmist a Servant of God

The psalmist came to the realization that he owed his pious efforts to his mother: "O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains" (Psalm 116:16). This psalm should be a psalm that every Christian mother should read. It appears that he is giving his mother credit for his service to God—"the son of your maidservant." The word *servant* should remind us of the words of Jesus as reported by Luke: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Again, the words of Paul also ring loud and true:

---

<sup>b</sup> Psalm 116:10

<sup>f</sup> Isaiah 28:16

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup> you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

The church of Jesus is God's new Temple. Not only are we servants of Jesus, but we are also informed friends: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, **I have called you friends**, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). We are to serve the Lord, not blindly, but understanding what is the will of the Lord. It is in this vein that Paul encouraged the Ephesians: "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Ephesians 5:17). **The Bible is where we find what God demands of us.** The Bible (Old and New Testament writings) is an unfolding of the mind of God. Jesus tells how we can be restored to God: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29).

## CONCLUSION

As we mull over the last half of Psalm 116 (vv. 12-19), we are immediately confronted with the question: "**How can I repay the Lord?**" How can we repay the Lord for our salvation? We can repay the Lord by presenting our bodies as living sacrifices. Paul goes right to the heart of admiration, as stated above, when he writes: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1). **This psalm is a psalm of thanksgiving.**

Do we thank God for salvation made available by faith? Are we willing to lift up the "cup of salvation"? Are we ready to accept the many spiritual blessings from God through Jesus Christ? Are we disposed to "call on the name of the Lord" (Psalm 116:13, 17)? Psalm 116 is a call for devotion: "I love the LORD" (v. 1); Psalm 116 is an expression of dependence: "I will call on him" (v. 2b); Psalm 116 is a reminder of our daily behavior: "that I may walk before the LORD" (v. 9). Are our lives, lives of devotion, lives of dependence, and lives of good behavior?

**What does Psalm 116 mean to us?** The psalmist was fully committed to the walk that would please the One who had done so much for him. Are we enthusiastic to please the Lord for what He has done for us? Are our lives worthy of the Gospel of Christ? The words of Paul to the Ephesians capture graphically this perception of the psalmist:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. <sup>2</sup> Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. <sup>3</sup> Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)