

WALKING IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING

A Meditation on Psalm 116

Psalm 116

¹ I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.

² Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.

³ The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over
me;

I was overcome by distress and
sorrow.

⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“LORD, save me!”

⁵ The LORD is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.

⁶ The LORD protects the unwary;
when I was brought low, he saved me.

⁷ Return to your rest, my soul,
for the LORD has been good to you.

⁸ For you, LORD, have delivered me from
death,

my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,

⁹ that I may walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁰ I trusted in the LORD when I said,
“I am greatly afflicted”;

¹¹ in my alarm I said,
“Everyone is a liar.”

¹² What shall I return to the LORD
for all his goodness to me?

¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁴ I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.

¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful servants.

¹⁶ Truly I am your servant, LORD;
I serve you just as my mother did;
you have freed me from my chains.

¹⁷ I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁸ I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,

¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the
LORD—

in your midst, Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD.

MESSAGE:

Many of the Psalms of the Old Testament are the personal reflections of people whom God has brought low and then raised up again. As such, they are paradigms or models of Christian life. It's not so much that they show us HOW to live as that they show us what to expect out of a life lived in faith. Tonight's Psalm, *Psalm 116*, is a wonderful example.

The first thing we learn from *Psalm 116* is that a life lived in faith involves DYING and BEING REBORN. Listen to vss. 1-3 [read].

First of all, every human being is born spiritually dead. Paul wrote, *“You were dead in your transgressions and sins...”* and David said it even more vividly: *“...I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”* When we are born, we are born into death and we have to be REBORN in order to come to LIFE. As Jesus said to Nicodemus: *“No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again of water and the Spirit.”*

After we are reborn, our Christian life is characterized by conflict, because those who are born again of water and the Spirit are born into warfare. As Christ said: *“I did not come to bring peace, but a sword, for I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother...a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”* A Christian is at war with the world AND a Christian is at war with himself. Listen to Paul describe the battle that raged within him: *“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do...I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out....the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing...What a wretched man I am!”*

The born-again Christian dies many “mini-deaths” in the course of his Christian life. The Good News, however, is that each time he dies, as long as he calls on the name of the Lord, the Lord will raise him up to new life. *[read vss. 4-9]*

Did you notice what it is that we have to do in order to be raised up to new life? We need TO CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD. God will do everything else. God is gracious, righteous and full of compassion. He protects the simple hearted and saves those in need. And why does the Lord save us? Vs. 9: *“...so that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living.”* What is the land of the living? It is a land where continual showers of God’s grace bring about the continual springing forth of new life.

But there is another side to Christian living in THIS world which the contemporary Church all too often sweeps under the rug for fear of turning off potential converts before they can be turned on, or, for that matter, for fear of turning off current members: WALKING IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING INVOLVES SUFFERING. Not only is the believer at war with himself and the unbelieving world; he bears the name of Christ which carries with it the cross, the cup of suffering.

Listen to the Psalmist: *[read vss. 10-11]*

The Christian sees with clearer vision than the unbeliever because the Holy Spirit has opened his eyes to reality. And more often than not, what he sees is ugly—after all, we live in a fallen world. Moreover, the Christian is an ambassador of Christ: if he is true to his commission, he bears the imprimatur of Christ—his seal and his marks, the marks of suffering. As Paul wrote: *“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”* And as Jesus said, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*

From the blood of Abel to the exile of John, the character of God’s people is formed through suffering. God says to Ananias concerning Paul: *“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”* Saints of God are warriors from the future who are called to be salt and light in this world—not couch potatoes who spend their lives rearranging

furniture to suit their pleasure. God isn't interested in making us comfortable; he wants to recreate us *in the image of Christ*.

I'd like to tell you about the experience one of the members of the church I used to serve had with suffering, and how it increased her faith. Anita had experienced a violent, negative reaction to some whitening strips she used on her teeth. She developed intense pain and sensitivity in her teeth to the point where she could not eat even bread without it setting off a painful reaction. No dentist or doctor was able to do anything for her. The company that made the whitening strips would not even return her calls or respond to her letters. Her teeth felt like raw, exposed nerves that were continually throbbing.

Anita experienced some very, very dark days when it seemed as if she would have to live with chronic, intense pain for the rest of her life. But she—and others who knew her—continued to pray day after day, week after week and month after month for her mouth to heal and the pain to subside. It took four years, but the pain slowly subsided and finally went away. Sometime after, Anita sent me a letter and at the end of it she wrote the following: *“I no longer feel like I have a live electrical wire in my mouth and vibrating teeth; God has graciously healed me of the worst of my symptoms....I wanted to share with you a passage God showed me earlier this month, when I was doing a Bible study entitled **“Lord, Where Are You When Bad Things Happen?”** The passage is from the prophet Habakkuk:*

‘Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.’

It is obvious that Habakkuk has learned the lesson of faith—to trust in God's providence regardless of circumstances. God wanted me to learn this valuable—yet extremely painful, discouraging and frustrating—lesson as well.”

Anita went through a mini-hell, a little death. But she emerged with a deeper and stronger faith today than she had before her suffering.

There is a story about a technique used by Basque shepherders to control wandering sheep. If a lamb keeps wandering off and can't be trained to stay with the flock, sometimes the shepherd will break its leg and then nurse it back to health. In the process, the sheep learns to love and trust the shepherd and to depend upon him for care and protection.

So, it would appear, does our Shepherd sometimes deal with us. In the *Book of Job*, we read: *“Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal.”* Or, in the words of Hosea the prophet: *“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us.”*

Christian life is about more than being fine-tuned.

It's about more than being overhauled.

It's about even more than being demolished and rebuilt.

Christian life is about dying and being reborn, time and time again. That is why the Psalmist writes; "*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.*" To God, our "little deaths" are just prologues to lives lived in a deeper and truer faith. We have to go down into the anguish of the grave so that we can be raised up to walk in the land of the living. *[Read Psalm 116:15-19]*

Amen.