



Central Peninsula Church

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Psalm 116

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What is God Doing in My Distress?

SERIES: Songs for the Hungry Heart

This is a wonderful time of the year. Thanksgiving is the beginning of the holiday season. Coming up are numerous opportunities both to spend time with family and friends and to consume many more large meals than our bodies need or can handle. Thanksgiving Day itself has a special feeling to it. It doesn't carry much of the commercialism that's so prominent with the rest of the holidays. We see it as a chance to reminder what we have received and what we are thankful for.

Wasn't that how the Pilgrims viewed their first Thanksgiving meal? Wasn't it a celebration of their deliverance from the fierce storms at sea and their first deadly winter in their New World? Of the 100 that landed, less than fifty were alive a year later. All most half were under the age of 16 and only 4 adult women had survived. They were joined by 90 Indians. That's about the same scenario as today...4 women to feed 150 guests. Bradford wrote later that they thanked God for sparing their lives, for the food, and their Indian friends. They believed that if they survived that first winter, then God would carry them through any other hardship or distress that would come their way. It was several years before they experienced abundance. That's what the holiday commemorates. Wouldn't it be great to have that same attitude?

And yet, during the holiday season we are often hard pressed to identify things for which we are grateful. In these challenging economic times, some of us may have lost our employment or our retirement. Others are experiencing difficulties in their relationships or loneliness due to the lack of relationships. Still others are forced to deal with painful even life-threatening health issues. The holiday is called "Thanksgiving" but the reality of our life seems to offer little to be thankful for. What we are experiencing and struggling with is the "distress" of life. And by distress, I mean being in a state of danger or critical need.

Life is filled with distresses. They come in all forms and all sizes. It's a pretty safe bet that everyone here is experiencing distress in one form or another. Life isn't fair and often it isn't fun.

I have a favorite story when I think of life's distress. It's a response from a British bricklayer who was asked to provide additional information for his

Workman's Compensation Claim. I'm told it's a true story.

Dear Sirs...I am responding to your request for additional information to the accident report I submitted. I put "Poor Planning" as the cause of my accident and you asked me for more details. I hope this explanation will be sufficient.

On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six-story building. When I completed my work, I had some bricks left over which, when weighed later, were slightly in excess of 500 lbs. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel using a pulley attached to the side of the building on the sixth floor. After I secured the rope at the ground level, I loaded the bricks into the barrel, then went down and untied the rope, holding tightly to ensure a slow descent of the bricks.

You will note on the accident report that my weight is 135 lbs. Due to my surprise at being suddenly jerked off the ground; I forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded rapidly up the side of the building. In the vicinity of the 3rd floor, I met the barrel, now proceeding downward at an equally impressive speed. This explains my fractured skull, minor abrasions and the broken collarbone listed in the report.

Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to hold on tightly to the rope; in spite of the excruciating pain I was experiencing. At approximately the same time, the barrel of bricks hit the ground and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Now, without the weight of the bricks, that barrel weighed less than 50 pounds. Remember, my weight is 135 pounds. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent, down the side of the building. In the vicinity of the 3rd floor, I met the empty barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles and broken tooth.

Here my luck began to change slightly, for the encounter with the barrel slowed me enough to lessen my injuries, cracking only three vertebrae, when I fell on top the pile of bricks. However, as I lay there, I was in such pain that I could not move nor could I hold onto the rope any longer so I let it go. The last thing I remember before waking up in the hospital was watching the empty barrel begin its descent down the building ending its

journey by landing on me. I am told; this resulted in my two broken legs. Regards, George Smith.

Ever had a day like his? Well hopefully not but we each have to deal with our own private distress. Sometimes they are due to our own habits or mistakes, sometimes they stem from the relationships we are in, and still other times they are thrust upon us from the outside. In times of distress, I want to ask God, "Lord, is this really necessary? Why do I need to go through this?" Psalm 116 will give us some answers.

The author of Psalm 116 knew something about distress and God's purpose for them in our lives. He is anonymous but many believe the events of his story parallels those of King David's life. At any rate, it is written as an "intensely" personal psalm of thanksgiving". It may have come into use for corporate thanksgiving and praise, at a later time. It is a model for each of us to follow so we can understand and respond correctly to life's distress.

This Psalm can be divided into two distinct sections. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, breaks this psalm into two separate psalms, the second beginning with verse ten. But, taken as a whole, there is a unifying thought that runs throughout. And it will answer the question, "What is God doing in my distress?" and what their value and benefit is to me.

The first nine verses help us see how my **Distress Reconnects Me To Grace**. The key to discovering what God wants me to learn through my distresses is to understand that they are allowed, yes even provided, to benefit me. In other words, I should see them as a positive rather than a negative. The question is, "How can I do that?" How can my distress reconnect me to grace?

Well, one way is that **Distress Deepens My Intimacy With God**. In verses 1 and 2, the psalmist says, **"I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live."**

In his distress, he says he "loves" the LORD, or Yahweh, the personal and intimate name of God. This is the love one has for a friend and an ally. God is his friend. He says that the basis for this loving friendship is the fact that God has heard his voice. God doesn't just listen to us, He hears us when we cry out to Him. He gives us His full attention without distractions. Aren't you glad He doesn't listen to us like our spouse listens to us sometimes? I have to confess, there are times when I'm listening to Diane and responding "yeah" and "uh-huh" but then, when she asks me to repeat what she just said, I can only come up with a blank stare. I know no one else has had that problem. When we know

someone hears us, we love them more. We feel we can be more open and intimate with them.

Verse 2 gives a dramatic picture of the fact that God hears us. He says that God "turned" or as the King James says "inclined" his ear to him. We need to know that when we cry out to God, He stops and does this. (Turns His head to hear more clearly). It's like a parent straining to understand the need behind the cry of their newborn. They want to hear so they can meet that need. The attention God gives to the psalmist creates in him a desire to continually return and call on God for the rest of his life. Sometimes our cry will be for God's mercy, meaning we're asking that we not get what we deserve, and sometimes cry for God's grace, or ask to get something we don't deserve. It depends on the distress we are in.

Sometimes we act like God can't hear us. We act like the man who called his wife's doctor with a concern that she was losing her hearing. The Doctor said he could do a simple test to see if she actually had a problem.

"Here's what you do," said the doctor, "Stand about 30 feet away and in a normal speaking tone ask her a question. Then see if she answers you. If not, move closer and repeat your question. Keep moving closer until she answers you."

That evening, his wife was in the kitchen cooking dinner while he was sitting in the living room. So in a normal tone he asked, "Honey, what's for supper?" No response.

Then he got up and moved to the kitchen doorway and asked, "Honey, what's for supper?" Again he got no response.

So now he walks right up behind her and asks, "Honey, what's for supper?"

"Good gracious," she says. "For the third time, CHICKEN!"

Sometimes we think God doesn't hear us but it's really the other way around. We don't hear Him. Through the psalmist, God tells us that He wants to use our distress to deepen our intimacy with Him... to move closer.... to trust Him more. The question is, "Will we hear Him?"

The author suggests three ways God uses my distress to reconnect me to His grace. One is that my **Distress Drives Me to Pray**.

Let's read verses 3 and 4: **"The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, save me!"**

This is our first glimpse of the psalmist's condition, his distress. Distress comes in big and

small challenges. The specific trouble is not clearly defined but it was so intense that he even feared his death. The “cords” here refer to how death is like a snare or noose. His distress has “entangled” or surrounded him. He feels “anguish” and the helplessness of one who watches an overwhelmingly superior army surrounding his city. His fears have caught up with him. It’s as though he had been fleeing death but it has steadily been gaining ground. He pictures his ultimate death and destruction.

When the author talks about “trouble” he is referring to being harassed. Perhaps it was something, one of his habits, or perhaps it was someone, a relationship. We don’t know what had a grip on his life but it was producing sorrow and grief. He is in mentally distress. He is second-guessing himself, doubting, and questioning, “Why me?” But it is at this point of total fear that he makes a break through. He calls on the name of the LORD with a specific request, “Save me!”

Something happened in the midst of his terrible distress. Something triggered him to pray. The psalmist stopped and remembered that God was always there to hear his cry for salvation...to be delivered. In his distress, as he is unable solve it by himself, he called on the name of God. Calling on the name of God, his friend, meant that he acknowledged God’s existence, His character, and His reputation.

Do you have prayer trigger? What does it take to switch your attention from your distress to your Lord? When will you recognize you’re in a God-sized distress that’s happening in your life? Why do we wait so long to pull the trigger? When we finally do go to God in prayer we start to experience His grace.

He was asking God to save or deliver his soul, his body, mind, and spirit, his entire person from his distress. He asked God to design his escape. A way to slip away from all that was threatening him. He has finally realized that his only possible escape or deliverance was in God’s strength and protection. And, as we will see, God did not disappoint him.

Another way I am connected to grace is that my **Distress Highlights God’s Character**. The psalmist may have known of God’s character from studying about God but now he knows these truths by experiencing them personally. **“The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The LORD protects the simple hearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.”** Verses 5 and 6 describe what the writer has discovered about the character qualities of his LORD. God is gracious in taking action to deliver him from his distress. He also acknowledges that God is righteous that is; He always acts rightly and in keeping with His unchanging character. He describes God as being “full of compassion”. In other words, God is merciful. God shows

compassion and mercy in the same way we would care for a child or someone in a helpless condition.

God also protects. He does this by exercising great care over a person. It’s the same care that a gardener gives to a roses bed or a pristine lawn. We act the same way when we lock up our homes for the night, making them secure. We check the doors and windows a second time to insure our family is protected?

God says he’ll protect everyone, even the “simple hearted.” He’s not only interested in protecting the wise and strong but the naïve or innocent, as well. I don’t mind admitting that many times God has protected me, the simple hearted, in my distress. God is telling us that He’s got all of us covered. It is when I am in great need or lowness of mind or condition that I need help. God’s help moves me from my distress to safety. He helps me to be sufficient endure and have victory in my distress. So in my distress I see God’s character highlighted and I am moved to a deeper understanding of His grace for me.

A third way distress reconnects us to His grace is that each **Distress Ushers Me To God’s Deliverance**.

“Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you. For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before LORD in the land of the living.” Verses 7 through 9 give us one more way God uses my distress to reconnect me to grace. For when I finally receive His deliverance, I see His grace in a tangible way. The fact of the matter is that I can’t be delivered from distress until I have been in distress. I know It’s obvious yet we often forget it. Being delivered from distress reveals and reconnects me to God’s grace more than if He withheld distress from my life. Without distress, I wouldn’t need a Savior and I wouldn’t need grace.

God’s deliverance returns me to rest. My soul, my whole being, is settled and distractions and disturbances to that peace are eliminated. I am brought back to a stable place. Not through my own efforts but rather through a reliance on God’s care and strength. I see that God has been good to me and brought “bounty”, as the King James describes it, into my life.

God changes my situation from being identified by death, tears, and stumbling to a confident and consistent walk before Him and others. In delivering us from our distress, God confirms to both the world and me how much He cares for those He loves. In receiving and experiencing God’s

deliverance, I become reconnected to His grace.

In these first 9 verses, we have seen how our distress reconnects us to grace but the psalmist wants us to see something else he learned from his distress. There was something else that had added value to his life. In the second part of this Psalm, we discover another benefit from our distress. We can see that, understood properly, **Distress Rekindles My Gratitude**. The psalmist presents four ways gratitude is a natural result of my distress. He begins with the insight that **Distress Reinforces My Dependency on God**.

“I believed; therefore I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted.’ And in my dismay I said, ‘All men are liars.’ How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?”

In Verses 10 through 12, the psalmist shifts from describing what he has learned to do during his distress to what he has learned to do after his distress. Even though he was greatly afflicted or forced to endure pain, he always maintained his belief in his forthcoming deliverance. He acknowledges his confusion and dismay. He couldn't make sense out of what God was doing or why. We should be real about our dismay and confusion too. God doesn't want us to live in denial. He does want us to live by faith in Him and His promises.

But even in the face of his confusion, the author never gave into the bogus advice and solutions that men offered. He calls them “liars”. They may have said they would be there for him but when he needed them but, in his true need, they were nowhere to be found. Another possibility is that they may have given him their insights and wisdom on why he was in his distress. We all know people who are willing to do that for us. Or it could have been that they recommended a good “self-help” book with a solution that relied on his strength and craftiness.

We are not to give into the popular or easy answer. The psalmist learned that no one else but God is to be trusted in our distress. We need to learn to wait for His deliverance and to trust in His timing. We dare not point someone else or move ourselves away from trusting God alone. He is trustworthy and dependable. Whatever man's input is, the psalmist discovered the only truth for him was to maintain his trust and belief in God's deliverance.

He asks, “How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?” It's another affirmation that he knows who delivered him. And in the question, it is obvious that he understands the impossibility of being able to repay God for what He has done. But he does understand that he needs to respond. What he says is not only because he has been delivered from his distress but also because of what he has learned about God in the process.

You see, we don't have to wait for deliverance before we can show our gratitude. Rather, we should express gratitude in anticipation of our deliverance.

Verses 13 and 14 show us that **Distress Prompts Me To Proclaim My Gratitude**.

“I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.” This appears to refer to the final part of the Thank Offering mentioned in verse 17. It is out of order but serves to emphasize that the palmist acknowledges God's deliverance and blessing in his time of distress. The cup is raised and poured out, representing God's pouring out of His blessing on the one making the offering. It is not done for show but it is done in the presence of others as a declaration of God's goodness and as a means of encouraging others to trust God in their distress. In calling “on the name of the Lord” here and in verse 17, he is not a praying for deliverance, as in verse 4, but he is proclaiming God's answer to his earlier call.

We are also reminded that we need to follow through on the commitments we have made to and for God. This includes what we understood and promised as we began our relationship with Him and what we have committed ourselves to since that beginning. Our sincere gratitude will be reflected on how we honor those commitments. Was it to spend time with Him in His word or in prayer? Did we commit to give back to Him out of our financial blessings? Our example here is that gratitude will include a rededication to the commitments we have made to our deliverer. We do this in light of His goodness to us.

There is another benefit. **Distress Motivates Me To Demonstrate My Gratitude**. We've already seen this in the previous two verses but let's read on in verses 15 and 16:

“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints. O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains.”

These two verses show the balance between God's role and our role in our relationship with Him. The death of one of His saints is significant to God. He doesn't allow that or anything else to happen in our lives, without great concern. We are always in His sight. He's keeping His eye on us and paying close attention to our well-being. In His wisdom and foreknowledge, He brings us good. Isn't that the truth we heard in verse 12? And because of this truth we can be assured that God is always acting in our best interest, regardless of our situation or distress.

In verse 16, we pick up on our role in our relationship with God. Like the psalmist, we should demonstrate our gratitude by serving Him. He calls himself a servant or slave. The Jewish practice of

slavery was not irksome and usually brought protection. A servant or slave often held a position of trust. There were two ways to become a slave. One was to be born into slavery and the psalmist calls himself the “son” of God’s maidservant. Another way was to be purchased or redeemed. In saying he has been freed from his chains, he emphasizes that he is doubly God’s servant. He acknowledges that, from God, he has “truly” been freed to serve...to serve God’s as a humble servant.

So one of the ways can we show our gratitude is to be involved with what God is doing, to serve Him and not just my own goals. We need to find opportunities in our church family and in neighborhoods to allow God to work his plan and power through us. Our first step in that direction is to acknowledge that we “truly” are His servants.

John Piper, the Pastor and author, writes, “The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won’t enlist you unless you are healthy and Jesus won’t enlist you unless you are sick. What is God looking for in the world? Assistants? No. The gospel is not a help wanted ad. It is a help available ad. God is not looking for people to work for him but people who let him work mightily in and through them.”

You don’t have to do something for God; He wants to do something through you. We need to demonstrate our gratitude by committing ourselves to serve Him. There are many ways you can show your gratitude to God by serving Him. I encourage you to pray about how and where He might include you in His work here at CPC and the Bay area.

Now, I need to take a moment and talk about a nagging question. The question that often plagues us in our distress is seen in the psalmist’s statements that he “believed” but that he was also “dismayed”. The dismay comes from believing that our lives are “precious” in His sight and yet that He is allowing distress in our life. Our question often is, “How long will we have to wait for God’s deliverance?” We want to know, “Why does He wait so long to deliver us?” I heard someone say once that, “God’s timing is always perfect but sometimes it appears that He misses some choice opportunities to be early.” Some of our distresses are not short lived. Some are so intense and so prolonged that we don’t think that we can bear it. Does God’s Word offer any insight or hope? I think it does.

Let me step out of Psalm 116 for a moment and offer some thoughts from Hebrews chapter 12. Verse 7 says, **“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?”** Enduring hardship or discipline are the distresses we have been discussing in Psalm 116. We are told that they should be viewed as the normal

experience of a child who is loved by their father. So, first, I need to see that distress is the norm for all believers. We are not being punished or singled out.

But there is another insight that should help us endure patiently and expectantly in our prolonged distress. In verses 10 and 11 we read, “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” Do you see God’s purpose for distress in your life? It’s to develop or train you up in righteousness and to bring you to peace. Distress is designed to bring us closer to Him and to enjoy a fuller more abundant life. You know God is very honest with us; He doesn’t try to kid us into believing that hardship and discipline are fun. They are not fun they are painful and “unpleasant”. But we need to look past the distress we are in and anticipate the goodness, blessing, and reward that will be ours in God’s timing.

Let’s return to last three verses of Psalm 116 and look at one more way **distress rekindles my gratitude**. It is this, my distress Persuades Me To Praise God.

“I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD. I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the LORD — in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.”

The thank offering was a tangible and public expression of the psalmist’s need to say thank you. It was a confession of God’s character and work in his life. In the Jewish culture, an individual, in recognition of God’s deliverance from peril or distress, often made this offering. It was made publicly so that all could hear how great God is. In praising Him, he expresses the superior character and actions of God, in his behalf.

Diane and I saw a great news story Friday night. It was about Bethany, the up and coming 13-year-old surfing champion who lives in Hawaii. If you’re not familiar with the story, let me just say that about three weeks ago she suffered a shark attack and lost her left arm at the shoulder. I would say that would qualify as one of life’s long-term distresses. And yet, in her hospital bed and in her interview with the reporter, she was calm, cheerful, and optimistic. I thought, “What an amazing kid!”

At one point, the reporter asked her if she had a sense that God was protecting her. She answered, "No. I didn't have a sense...I knew He was." Later in the interview, the reporter asked why she was so positive and optimistic. Her response was that she had a strong faith and she knew God had some special plan to use her. She said that two of her friends at school had already come to a saving knowledge of Christ, through her situation. In her distress, she learned more about God's grace and she was using her distress to praise and serve Him. I was moved by the faith and wisdom of this 13 year old.

So, "What Is God Doing In My Distress?" The answer is, He is reconnecting me to His grace and rekindling my gratitude for Him. Don't let the distress of your life confuse or defeat you. God is doing a good thing. He wants you to experience His grace, first hand, and to enter into a life long relationship with Him of gratitude and praise. Use this Thursday, this day of thanksgiving, to thank God for who He is and what He's done and is doing in the distress of you life. Don't forget, that first Thanksgiving meal was preceded by great distress, even death. And more distress was in their future. But they expressed their gratitude for God's protection and His provision. We need to do the same, as well.

Let me end with the Apostle Paul's encouragement from Philippians 4:6-7: **"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**

Let's close our time together with prayer. Father, thank you for who you are and what you are doing and have already done in the life of each person here today. I don't know the distress that they are going through but you do. I ask that you enable them to recognize and experience your grace in their situation. I ask that they learn and trust in you for your deliverance. I ask that you help them to celebrate this Thursday with a true sense of thanksgiving. Not merely for what they have but even more for whom they have received it from. Help us a church family to encourage and support each other. And at each step of the way, we will praise your name before each other and the world. Thank you Father. We ask all this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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