

PSALM 116: 1-15

- ¹ I love the LORD, because God has heard
my voice and my supplications.
- ² Because God inclined God's ear to me,
therefore I will call on God as long as I live.
- ³ The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
- ⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD:
'O LORD, I pray, save my life!'
- ⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
- ⁶ The LORD protects the simple;
when I was brought low, God saved me.
- ⁷ Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
- ⁸ For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.
- ⁹ I walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.
- ¹⁰ I kept my faith, even when I said,
'I am greatly afflicted'...
- ¹² What shall I return to the LORD
for all God's bounty to me?
- ¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,
- ¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all God's people.
- ¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of God's faithful ones.

This psalm invites worshippers into a very personal journey. It's a journey of someone who was clearly very ill, over a prolonged period of time, and perhaps close to death at a certain point, who experienced healing and wholeness. And the wholeness was not just physical. They speak of offering up thanksgiving to God both privately and publicly. They will "pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all God's people." A vow is like a promise. Was this about some promise made to God in prayer for healing, a promise to publicly thank God before everyone in the worship gathering should they be healed? Probably so. God has answered prayer, and the answer is the healing and wholeness of the psalmist.

So what if the psalmist was not healed? What about all those who have never composed a psalm of thanksgiving because they died in their affliction? Is prayer for healing a hit and miss kind of thing, or is the healing somehow contingent on the worthiness of the person praying or the quality of the praying?

But what if the questions we're asking are taking us down the wrong direction to an answer? The kind of healing the psalmist is reflecting is not just physical. Even as there is reference of healing bodily, the language is also suggestive of inner healing, whether it's the courage and grace of acceptance or the gratefulness of having come through an ordeal victorious or at peace on the other side, even when that other side may be death ("Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of God's faithful ones" (v.15)).

What if prayer is like a dance we do with "God", with words often enough, but much beyond words? We are seeking a way to live whatever we're living and we're seeking to maximize the healing streams flowing through us so that healing is manifest in some way physical, mental and/or spiritual. If the "answer" to prayer is not physical healing, may it be about coming to deeper faith, hope and love in our lives? We come to a place where we are not afraid to die because we live more firmly in eternity and the love in us has a fresh quality to it that may bless those who will survive losing us in the flesh.

A psalm like this one invites us beyond a narrow and simplistic understanding of healing into a richer, full-person appreciation of it. I will always receive an answer to my praying and the answer is never just "no." There is always a pathway that will open up if I'm given the faith and hope to get there, and it's always about growing in love and gratitude. If I'm not healed in a physical way, I don't need to fall into the simple alternatives of anger at God or despair (although my journey may take me through these for a time). Rather, I may be inspired and empowered with fresh courage of faith and hope to enter a new adventure, and my gift to those I leave behind is a love for them I share with them in some way. That love will be a treasured gift, for people are often prepared to pay attention and absorb what the dying have to give more so than the living, because they know the time is short and every moment counts.

How I live through and pray through my illness may bear wonderful testimony of courage and grace to those who are not going through what I am going through. But one day as they have their cross journey to go through, they may remember and give thanks for what I was able to give them in my time of trouble, whether I am alive to see this or not. They may give public thanksgiving because of the courage to faith and hope in love I gave to them.

Psalms like 116 have blessed, strengthened and comforted not only those who have experienced victory in a tangible, physical way. No. They have also been powerful supports to those who live through chronic conditions, health vulnerabilities, and a future uncertain or limited in duration. May this be a psalm for you at this time of your life?

PRAYER: Thank you, O God, for being above me, beside me and within me... Even when I cannot feel your presence or trust you are with me, and even when I question what you have done or can do for me, you continue to send spiritual feelers my way seeking connection. May healing connection be something fresh coming into my life right now, O God. However the healing may come or however I may be a channel of your healing for others, may you come alive again and in a whole new way... I seek this in sincere petition and humble gratitude, trusting you always provide an answer. Give me the inner eyes to see it and the heart to accept and channel it... Amen.