

**Songs of the Heart:
THE MOVEMENT OF GRACE**

Psalm 116

*In every season of life,
the grace of God is at work.*

A sermon preached by
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One of the privileges of being a pastor is to be with people in many of the seasons of their lives. When a baby is born, I get to bless the child sometimes before he or she is hours old. Then I get to baptize the baby in church. I get to see the faces of a bride and groom up close when they are joined in holy marriage. When there is a medical crisis, I am there in the hospital room to pray and offer words of help, comfort, and encouragement. When there is a death, I get to lead a family through the process of saying good-bye to their loved one.

Earl Nelson was a pastor in Iowa who had gone to be with a family where there had been a tragic death of a young man who was a husband and father. When Nelson got to the house and sat down, the man's four-year-old daughter came up to him, and Earl picked her up and put her in his lap. With a straightforward look, she said to him, "My daddy's dead. Will God have supper for him tonight?"

Earl replied, "Yes, he will."

The little girl continued, "You know, I love God. How did he make us?"

The pastor said, "With skin and bones, and breathed into us the breath of life that helped us get started when we were born."

"I'll get to see my daddy again someday," the child observed.

"Yes, you will," Earl said.

Then with a faith much older than her four years, the little girl said, "I love God."

Earl just hugged her and said with a smile, "Honey, God loves you, too."

There are many seasons in our lives, and we can see God's love at work through many different situations.

The Psalmist in Psalm 116 has known God's love through the seasons of life. James L. Mays characterizes this whole psalm as "a declaration of love."¹ The writer announces the theme of the psalm in the first two verses: "*I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.*"²

Every Psalm was originally a song, and I want to think about this psalm today as a song about God's love through the seasons of life. Better yet, let's think of more than a song; let's imagine a symphony of grace, a symphony with three movements of life.

The symphony/psalm starts with the theme of God's love, but it soon becomes apparent that the first movement of grace is trouble. Before we can know the depth of God's love, we have to go through some difficulties. As another songwriter put it, "You cannot see the rainbow until you've had some rain."³

The Psalmist acknowledges that he was near death and despair: "*The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish.*"⁴ We don't know what he was suffering; it really doesn't matter. We can fill in the blanks with our own troubles and difficulties: devastating illness, grief over the loved ones we have lost, worries about our families and marriages, kids, parents, jobs, finances, personal sins, loneliness. We can all make a list. Sometimes the season of life we're going through is a hard one.

This week I read an article from our United Methodist News Service about a youth in Honduras named Fernando. He is 18 years old, a Methodist, and plays in the worship band at his church. A few months ago, he began to be recruited by the infamous MS-13 gang to sell drugs in his high school. He refused, but had to endure abuse and threats to the extent that his family moved. The gang found him again, but Fernando's family could not go to the police, because the police in Honduras are more corrupt than the gangs. So it was decided that Fernando would make a break for America. His parents put him on a bus in April with the equivalent of \$125, and he made it into Mexico before he was beaten and robbed of everything but his clothes.

Fernando managed to earn enough to get transportation back home. He arrived back in Tegucigalpa May 26, alive but no better off for his journey. He told the Methodist missionary that wrote the article, "Staying might kill you, but leaving might also."⁵ Like thousands seeking to cross our borders, Fernando is seeking safety and a life with

some sort of hope, but finding only obstacles and despair. It's a troubled season in his life.

When we endure a troubled season in life, we turn to God for mercy. Like a drowning man crying for help, we cry out to God. That's what the Psalmist did: "*Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I pray, save my life!'*"⁶ The second movement of grace is the deliverance of God. God listens to us when we call. God hears the cries of God's people. But God doesn't stop there. Then God acts to save us. When we turn to God in our times of trouble, God will give us what we need—rescue, strength, comfort, courage, whatever it takes to overcome the difficulty.

As soon as the Psalmist cried out to God, he began to tell what God had done for him: "*Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.*"⁷

We turn to God in our time of need, and God delivers. God acts to save us. We don't always understand God's actions. Sometimes they seem gracious and merciful. Sometimes they seem like judgment. But in faith we know that God always acts for our good. The Scripture promises: "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*"⁸ Not all things are good, but in all things, God is good—all the time!

One of a long series of tragic acts of violence in our country was a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, on December 2, 2015. A married couple attacked the husband's office Christmas party and killed 14 people and wounded 22. One of the survivors was 27-year-old Denise Peraza. Her life was spared because a valiant man named Shannon Johnson shielded her body with his own and saved her life. Later Denise recalled:

Wednesday morning at 10:55 a.m. we were seated next to each other at a table, joking about how we thought the large clock on the wall might be broken because time seemed to be moving so slowly. I would have never guessed that only five minutes later, we would be huddled next to each other under the same table, using a fallen chair as a shield from over 60 rounds of bullets being fired across the room. While I cannot recall every single second that played out that morning, I will always remember [Shannon's] left arm wrapped around me, holding me as close as possible next to him behind that chair. And amidst all the chaos, I'll always remember him saying these three words: "I got you."⁹

Shannon Johnson did not survive the attack. He gave his life to deliver Denise. No matter what, remember these three words: "I got you." These are God's three words to you. When you experience a season of trouble, God's grace works to deliver you. God says to you, "I got you, I got you, I got you."

We see this work of God most clearly in Jesus Christ, who is God's answer to the cry of humankind. He is God's solution to the problem of sin and despair. He took the bullet of death for us. In Jesus we see the goodness of God in human form. He is the ultimate movement of grace. He wrote the symphony of salvation.

So the third movement of grace is our response to what God has done for us. How can we repay God's love and grace? As the Psalmist asks, "*What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?*"¹⁰ The last third of the Psalm talks about our response to grace.

One response is worship: "*I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, ...I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord.*"¹¹ Worship is the response of relationship. We affirm and strengthen our relationship with God every time we worship.

Another response is to keep our promises. The Psalmist sings twice, "*I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.*"¹² He was probably talking about making an offering in the Temple, but in a

larger sense, I think it means that when we experience the grace of God, we respond by keeping our promises. We remain faithful to God. We don't abandon our faith once the crisis passes.

It's very tempting to be a "foxhole Christian." We can be surrounded by the snares of death, and we cry out to the Lord. We make all kinds of promises if God will just get us out of this mess. God is gracious and delivers us from our distress. Then we're OK, and we can forget about God until the next crisis comes along. Without faithfulness, life is a repetitive series of tragedies, a rollercoaster of drama, as unstable as a boat on a stormy sea. It's better to keep our promises, to stay faithful, and to avoid some of the trouble in the future.

When we respond in worship and faithfulness, then we find the power and the opportunity to serve the God who has been gracious to us. The Psalmist sings, "*O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds.*"¹³ God's grace sets us free to serve God, to work for the Kingdom, to be in ministry. For as sure as we come out of a time of trouble, someone else is in a season of need and could use our help.

When 13-year-old Lauren Blakemore was newly diagnosed with cancer, she felt a call from God to do mission work with cancer kids. She wanted to give them hope by sharing her story. Lauren was afflicted with a rare and aggressive form of cancer, but after 14 rounds of chemotherapy and 25 radiation treatments, she made a remarkable recovery.

One of the most comforting things Lauren had during her illness was a baby quilt that had been given to her by a neighbor named Mildred. Her "Miss Mildred" blanket gave her warmth and comfort and security through the nausea, fatigue, and sleepless nights of cancer.

Lauren's dad went on a mission trip to India with their church and visited a children's cancer ward. When he returned home, he told Lauren about it, and she knew what she wanted to do. Chemotherapy makes you cold all the time, so couldn't the children use their own "Miss Mildred" blankets? Lauren spoke to civic clubs and church

groups to raise money for her project. Her church had another mission in Bosnia that employed women making cloth goods. Perfect! Lauren sent the money to Bosnia and asked the women to make blankets for the sick children in India. Before long, every child's bed in the hospital in India was covered with a "Miss Mildred" blanket to help them through their season of trouble.

Lauren said, "When I was first diagnosed with cancer, I knew God had a plan for my life. This is part of that plan."¹⁴

In all the seasons of life, God's grace is moving. When we are in trouble, God is there. By God's grace, God's mercy, God's protection, and God's providence, we are delivered. As people redeemed from the snares of death, we respond by being faithful to and serving the God we love and worship. In whatever season of life, in whatever way we need it, God's grace is at work.

Richard Selzer was a surgeon who wrote about the spiritual depth of the medical profession. In one of his books, he gave a perfect description of how God's grace works. He had removed a tumor from a woman's cheek and was there to witness as she woke up from anesthesia and saw her husband. Selzer wrote:

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks, "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles.

"I like it," he says, "It's kind of cute."

All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.¹⁵

Are you in a troubled season of life right now? Have your circumstances taken away your smile and twisted your life in the grip of despair? Are you tangled in the snares of death? Let me remind you today that God wants to kiss you with his grace. God wants to fit his love into the twists and turns of your life and deliver you. God wants to loose your bonds so you can be free to worship, to be faithful, and to serve your Lord. Whatever your season of life, God's kiss still works.

¹ James L Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 370.

² Psalm 116:1-2.

³ Jim Croce, "Tomorrow's Gonna Be A Brighter Day," Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, 1972.

⁴ Psalm 116:3.

⁵ <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/united-methodists-in-honduras-struggles-with-migration-deportation...>

⁶ Psalm 116:4.

⁷ Psalm 116:5-9.

⁸ Romans 8:28.

⁹ Todd Wilson, "The Gift of the Son: Everlasting Father," *PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁰ Psalm 116:12.

¹¹ Psalm 116: 13, 17.

¹² Psalm 116:14, 18.

¹³ Psalm 116:16.

¹⁴ Ruth Schenk, "Lauren's Mission," *The Southeast Outlook* (11-24-05).

¹⁵ Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, 1978, pp. 45f.