

2. When God has saved you, what have you done in response? Has it changed your life in some way, or affected your worship of God?
3. How can God's people help each other to celebrate the good things that God does in people's lives, and honour the testimonies of faith that people have?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I am moved to suggest that most churches go from Sunday to Sunday with little attention to the real lives of those who attend worship. The services themselves often reflect the personal lives and experiences of preachers and worship leaders, who speak about themselves as a part of their routines for conducting services. Really, it would be far more important for the worship to reflect the experiences of members of the congregation, through the use of testimony and sharing, and a more responsive approach to the conduct of services. The psalm we have read has a great deal to offer us as we think about it and what it means!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *How can people make changes to the routines of worship? How can we give thanks to God for the special acts of deliverance and salvation which happen in people's lives on a regular, if not daily basis? Discuss this with people in your church who are in a position to make a difference.*
- *Pray for those who seek the Lord's deliverance from some situation, but do not find it. Pray that they accept the Lord's love for them and learn to understand how and why God has led them through the troubles they have experienced.*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, You came to earth as a baby boy bringing such hope and joy to so many. Yet at the end, You died for us all so that our sins might be forgiven, and Your death was terrible and cruel. Teach us the meaning of these things so that we do not turn away from either the truth of our redemption or of God's love. AMEN

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have been very gracious to us over the season of Christmas, may we not ignore You in our New Year as we get back to work after the holidays or plan our coming year. Give us a heart to honour You in everything we do during 2009, so that our faith may be evident to all around us, and our testimony to the God of all Creation be real and full of integrity. We praise You, Lord God: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Coming Year

Ask the Lord to help you look back on the last year and work out whether there should be some changes in your life. This may or may not be the case, but let the Lord tell you.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the on-going strife between Israel and Palestine*
- *Pray and give thanks for those who work in Christian missions*
- *Give thanks for God's blessings for you and your family in 2008*

Meditation

I didn't think that God would really care enough for people like me; Everyone said that he didn't care and wouldn't do anything to help. Then my heart was warmed by the simple truth of the Christmas story For God had come as a baby; doing nothing, it seemed, but everything.

I didn't think that some Messiah would come and change the world; There are always those who claim that, like politicians. Don't believe them! Then my mind was challenged by the power of all Jesus said and did; It was all either fake or real, but then, He died to prove them real.

I didn't think that the baby born at Bethlehem could be the Son of God; Why be God and man together? But the more I thought about it, That's the only kind of God worth believing in; one who knows real life. He may not give me what I want, but He knows in truth what I really need.

I didn't think that I could hold belief in God, religion has done such wrong; So when I held my breath and went to church, I surprised myself, and others: There's too much I fail to understand, but I had come to know for sure That a baby born in Bethlehem revealed a God who cared, and came for me.

Bible Study - Psalm 116

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| ¹ <i>I love the LORD, for He has heard my voice and my cry for mercy.</i> | <i>I was seized by trouble and distress.</i> |
| ² <i>He turned His ear to me, on the day I cried out.</i> | ⁴ <i>Then I called on the name of the LORD:</i> |
| ³ <i>The deadly cords entangled me, the anguish of the grave took hold of me;</i> | <i>'O LORD, I pray, save my soul!'</i> |
| | ⁵ <i>The LORD is gracious and righteous, and our God is full of compassion.</i> |

- ⁶ *The LORD protects the simple;
when I was brought low, He saved
me.*
- ⁷ *Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has been good to you.*
- ⁸ *For you have delivered my soul from
death,
my eyes from tears and my feet
from stumbling,*
- ⁹ *I will walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.*
- ¹⁰ *I believed that I would perish,
for I was greatly afflicted.*
- ¹¹ *So in my dismay I said,
'All men are failures!'*
- ¹² *How can I repay the LORD
for all His goodness to me?*
- ¹³ *I will raise the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD!*
- ¹⁴ *I will now fulfil 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 ones.*
- ¹⁶ *O LORD, I am truly your servant;
I am your servant, the child of
your servant girl;
you have freed me from my
chains.*
- ¹⁷ *I will offer You a sacrifice of
thanksgiving
and call on the name of the LORD.*
- ¹⁸ *I will fulfil 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, O Jerusalem.*
- Praise the LORD.*

Review

Psalm 116 is characterised as an 'Halleluiah' psalm (as with the previous two we studied, psalms 111 and 113) because although it does not have this word at the beginning of the psalm, it does have it at the end! It is certainly a psalm of praise to God, and it is particularly relevant to us at Christmas time because in a profoundly straightforward way, it tells the story of salvation. In verse 1 to 4, the writer of the psalm appeals to the Lord for help and the Lord listens, then something terrible happens but the Lord responds to the request 'O Lord, I pray, save my soul!' (116:4). In the next group of verses 5-9, the saving work of the Lord is described; 'You have delivered my soul from death.' (116:8) which results in the joyful proclamation; 'I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living!' (116:9). The writer then ponders on the salvation he has received and asks 'how can I repay the Lord?' (116:12) being conscious of his debt to the Lord. Then the last verses (116:14-19) describe the offering of praise and worship given to the Lord for His salvation.

The story of salvation How is this relevant to Christmas? At Christmas time, each church has its traditions, but one of the most widespread is that of the service of worship called 'Nine Lessons and Carols'. The point of this service is not simply to give a congregation an opportunity to sing a good number of carols or to hear a choir sing them; it is crucially to hear readings from the Bible that describe the 'salvation story' of the entire Bible, starting with Creation and the Fall in Genesis, continuing with the great Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah to resolve the break between God and humanity created by the Fall. The readings then pick up the story of Jesus' birth and the connections with Old Testament prophecy provided by the birth of John the Baptist, and Jesus is born 'Immanuel', or 'God with us' (Matt 1:23). Finally, from the Gospel of John, the highlight of the service is the reading of John's great description of why Jesus came into the world as the 'Word' incarnate, God's own means of salvation for all people.

This great event is not to be missed at Christmas because it is one of the few occasions in the life of the church when people hear a planned and specially arranged set of readings which illustrate the whole Bible and the salvation story of the world. It is a magnificent story

of course, but how do we apply it to ourselves? The answer comes in a psalm like this, which takes us through a simple and general, yet personal story of salvation.

Calling on the Lord for salvation, and receiving it! Our psalm begins with a phrase which tells us immediately where we are going; 'I love the Lord'. Already, we know that whatever gloom and doom we read in the psalm, God has overcome it and the purpose of the psalm is to give thanks for salvation from such trouble. In words which remind us of Jonah's song (Jonah 2), the psalm describes some event in which the writer felt the 'deadly cords' and anguish of 'the grave' (in Hebrew, 'sheol'). Whatever happened it was a perilous situation, but as we have seen in recent studies, the specifics have been removed so that we can apply its words generally to almost any kind of perilous situation in which we find ourselves. Certainly, the psalmist prayed to the Lord in faith (116:4), and that faith was rewarded (116:5f.).

Speaking again in the most general terms, the psalm tells us that God is gracious and protective of the 'simple' (116:6), and has indeed saved the writer out of his stressful situation. 'Return, O my soul, to your rest!' he says, knowing that God has indeed been of help; 'you have delivered my soul from death' (116:8). This is the cry of one who knows that God intervenes in the world to help His people, and the writer has confidence in this characteristic of God (116:9). In the last stanza of this part of the psalm (verses 10-13), the writer reflects on what has happened. Clearly something perilous happened which brought him to a place of despair; he felt let down by other people ('all men are failures!' – 116:12) but in gratitude, the writer declares that God does not let people down; 'I will raise the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord!' (116:13)

Fulfilling vows When you have been to worship God at a good church service and heard the story of salvation, how does that make you feel? Most people feel grateful that God has worked throughout history to send Jesus into the world for our salvation and redemption. In the same way, when we hear a personal testimony whether from a friend or in a psalm, we also feel grateful for what God can and will do. However, there is more for us to do than merely feel good. An Israelite of Old Testament times would feel it necessary to perform some real and practical service of worship to celebrate what God had done.

So it is that in verses 14 to 19, the psalmist speaks about 'fulfilling his vows' to the Lord not just privately, but 'in the presence of all his people.' (116:14). He does this by making a personal confession that he is God's and the Lord is responsible for his life (116:16), and the strange phrase 'precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His faithful ones' is a way of saying that death (for someone who trusts God) is something that the Lord is responsible for, and all the powers of evil in the world will not force death on someone who is safe in God's hands. Salvation itself is an expression of God's defeat of evil and death.

For the psalmist, to fulfil his vows means that he rededicates his life to the Lord God in praise and worship, accepting the Lord's salvation with great thanksgiving. Perhaps this is how we should respond to the great news of God's coming salvation in the birth of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem. Indeed, some Christians hold a special service of rededication just after Christmas in the New year (called a 'covenant' service by Methodist people who use it) for this very reason. It is held not simply because it is the new year, but because after the coming of Jesus, it is wise for us to respond personally to the news of God's coming into the world to save His people from their sins.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What perilous situations have you found yourself in, and in what ways has God saved you?