

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, October 18, 2015**

CRY OUT!

Psalm 116:1-19

We live in a society that prizes, above all, what works. If something is practical, if it returns immediate or foreseeable results, if it offers tangible benefits, then it is pronounced good and valuable, or even true. America has even produced its own national philosophy called pragmatism, associated with the names of Charles Pierce and William James and John Dewey. It's a philosophy and a mindset behind it that Christians have often been tempted to buy into. In fact, much of what goes under the name of the "church growth movement" has been built on it. Has been built on the idea that what works and what is practical is therefore good and right. The one big problem with this approach, however, is that if we take Scripture for the norm of Christian faith and practice we have to recognize that perhaps the most important element of Christian life and the life of the church is imminently impractical. That element is prayer, which I'd like for us to focus on this morning through the lens of the 116th Psalm.

This Psalm poses to us, without doing so in the actual form of a question, four questions that I'd like for us to take a look at. The first question is this: Are we willing to call on Him in any situation? In verses 1-4 the psalmist says that he loves the Lord and that he loves the Lord, "for He heard my voice. He heard my cry for mercy. 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!'"

Now you might say this is about as practical a situation as you could possibly hope for, right? My life is in danger. God has to do something. He has to save me from the snares of death. And yet the interesting thing is that nowhere in this Psalm does the psalmist say, specifically, what it is that God does. Yes, it's true, as we're told in verse 8, that the Lord delivered his soul from death. We don't know how. We do know that something happened. We do know that there was a change in the life of this unknown psalmist. And yet, when he was *in extremis*, what did he do? We're not told that he devised a way out of his dilemma. We're not told that he saw a doctor. We're not told that he fought his way out of a life-threatening situation. We're told that he prayed. We're told that he spoke to God.

You know they say that there are no atheists in foxholes. It's not true. There are atheists in foxholes. There are plenty of men and, in these days, women who even under the stress of combat with their lives in danger will not turn to God but will instead try to figure out how they can get out of the situation that they're in. How can they stop the enemy from shooting at them? How can they escape from the trap that they're in? Calling on God? What would be the point of that? There would be no point in talking to God at that moment. God's not the problem. The enemy is the problem. That's who we need to focus on. And our situation. That's what we need to focus on.

It leads me to ask, are we more likely, in terrible situations, in extreme situations, are we more likely to turn to prayer or are we more likely to lapse into helplessness or hopelessness and to assume that there's nothing that can be done. The psalmist did not assume that there was nothing to be done when his life was threatened. Instead, he spoke to God. And he basically placed his life in God's hands. My suspicion is that if God had not spared him from death that he would still have praised God once his death had come about.

I'd ask, too, not just in extreme situations, not just when our lives are threatened, because the fact of the matter is that most of us don't find ourselves in those kinds of situations very often. Even the kind of extreme situation that our brother George found himself in this summer. Do we find ourselves in those kinds of situations very often? No. Most of the time the problems that we deal with are kind of ordinary. We have a fight with our spouse or our kids are disobedient or our boss is an irritant or the bill collector is getting just a little too close. So what do we do? Well, it's easy in those kinds of situations. We handle it ourselves, right? We do what needs to be done. If I'm having some kind of conflict with my wife, we talk it out or maybe, if we feel like we can't do it entirely by ourselves, we go to a marriage counselor and between the three of us we'll figure out what needs to be done. If my kids are being disobedient, that's what this is for [raises his cane]. If my kids are being disobedient, there are a hundred ways to modify behavior. I don't need to ask God about that. The fact of the matter is that if I'm having trouble in my marriage I can see a marriage counselor or I can read Gary Smalley's books. He has all the answers, right? Or if I need help with raising my children then James Dobson is wonderful. I'll just get a couple of books from *Focus on the Family* and I'll be set to go. Even in the church, maybe especially in the church, we have a tendency to do that. Do we want our church to grow? I tell you what, if you go over to *Lifeway*, if you trip and knock over a bookcase you'll be covered with books about how to grow your church. Hundreds of them. An entire industry built on the premise that with the right technique, with the right approach, your church can essentially do anything. We have average attendance here of about 215. Well, we'd like to triple that. Go over to *Lifeway* and find out how.

I'm not denigrating James Dobson or Gary Smalley. I'm not denigrating those who write books about how to grow the church. But what I'm suggesting is that we don't have to look at the foxhole to ask the question, "Is it time to pray?", as opposed to improving our technique. Or even seeking help. Once again, I'm not suggesting that there's anything wrong with marriage counseling. But in addition to the human stuff, and above and beyond the human stuff, perhaps the answer is to ask the Lord to be at work. I have a suspicion, just because I've gotten to know the Rouses very well this summer, that they didn't do anything, make any decision, put any part of George into any doctor's hand without praying about it first. They wouldn't dream of doing that. And it's not just because it was an extreme situation. It's because that is the way they are. And the question that the psalmist asks us, at least implicitly, is, "Is that the way we are?" Are we willing to call on the Lord in any situation, no matter how mundane, much less extreme, and ask Him to enable us to overcome the trouble and the sorrow that comes to us?

The second thing that this Psalm addresses is who does the Lord really hear in prayer? In verses 5-7, particularly in verse 6, “The Lord protects the simplehearted. When I was in great need He saved me.” The ESV puts that slightly differently. I think it’s a little amusing. The ESV says that “the Lord preserves the simple.” That doesn’t mean the stupid. That’s the way I always heard that. The Lord helps even stupid people deal with the problems of life. The people who just can’t deal with them themselves, He’ll take hold of them and He’ll grab onto them. But that’s not what verse 6 is saying. “The Lord protects the simplehearted” is another way of saying the Lord protects those who are humble enough that they will be willing to receive the protection that He offers to His people who do not say, “I’m smart enough. I can handle this. I know where all the answers are. I’ve been on the Internet. And I know they can’t put anything on there that’s not true. And since they can’t, I know where I can find the answers. Or I can come up with them myself. I don’t even have to go to the Internet. I don’t have to go to anybody else. I have all the answers within myself.” That’s not the kind of person that the Lord is offering His protection to here. The Lord protects the simplehearted. The Lord protects those with the humility to say to Him, “I’m not self-sufficient and I can’t ever be. I can’t rely on my superior knowledge or my brilliant analytical skills or my extraordinary intuition.” Even though he may have all those things, nevertheless the humble person says that’s not enough. That can never be enough, because we all come to places where we are defeated by life, where we just don’t know what to do.

Back in 2000 my mother was coming to the end of her life. My brother very much wanted me to come out to California to pay her one last visit. At that same time Maryanne and I were getting ready to move. We were supposed to move during the week after Christmas to Greensboro. So I told my brother, “I’m sorry. There’s just no way I can do that. As much as I might like to, I just really can’t. It’s December. It’s Christmas. I work in a church. I’m getting ready to move. I’m saying goodbye to people and let’s face it. My mother doesn’t like me anyway. What difference would it make?” I told him all of that and he agreed with all of that, including the last part. But he still very much wanted me to come out there and he was mad at me when I didn’t. I thought about it for a while. What am I going to do? My brother and I have always had a good relationship and I really don’t want something like this to come between us, so how do I fix this? After thinking about it for a few weeks it finally dawned on me. You know what? You can’t fix this! So instead I started praying for my non-Christian brother who was mad at me for something I didn’t do. I simply gave him into God’s hands and said, I can’t fix this. I’m not smart enough. Maybe I’m not brave enough. I don’t know what the deficiency is. But for some reason I just can’t. I’m too limited to have any idea what to do about this. So I gave it into God’s hands. Then my father died about six months later. When my brother called me to tell me about that, it was as though the stuff that happened at the end of the previous year had never happened. He gave no sign of being upset or angry with me. All he wanted was to tell me that our father was gone and to ask if I might be able to come to California now to go through their home. Which I was able to at that point. I went out there and everything was fine. I don’t know what happened in the course of those six months, but I believe that at some point, whether my brother realized it or not, God worked on him in a way that enable him to let go of his anger at me so that our relationship then would get past the sorrow and trouble that it had had.

Why was God willing to listen to that prayer? Because at that point, instead of being the professional who had done lots of counseling and knew all about human relations and the reality of forgiveness and how you bring that about, I just said I can't do it myself. And I simply laid myself before Him in humility. Not an easy thing to do. But I did it because I had nowhere else to turn. And He heard. And He answered.

The third question: Do we really believe that He hears us and that He deals with us graciously? In verses 8-11, the psalmist says, "For You, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling." You've done what I couldn't do. You've saved me "that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I believed; therefore I said (to God) 'I am greatly afflicted.'" Men around me are lying to me. I have nowhere else to turn and so I turn to God. Have you ever been in that kind of place, where you felt like you were all alone, like there was no one you could turn to, no one who could help with whatever problem you were having, that something was going on that was just so big and you desperately needed another voice, another pair of eyes, another mind, and there was nobody there? What did you do? He, the psalmist faced that kind of situation and so he said to the Lord, "Here's my situation." In a way that's kind of silly because God already knew what his situation was, right? He knew he was afflicted. He knew that people were lying to the writer. He knew what the problem was. But the psalmist was willing to say, "I can't do it." And he gave it into His hands and lo and behold He answered. "I believed," he says in verse 10, "that God would hear when I spoke. I believed therefore I said." That's a variation on Descartes, right? Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." Here's the psalmist saying, "I believed, therefore I said. I believed that God would hear me. I believed that He would deal with me graciously. I believed that He would deliver me. And so I spoke to Him and I put myself in His hands."

Is that what we're willing to do? Are we willing to pray not to simply pour words into the air but to go to the Lord in genuine faith, knowing that regardless of the nature of the affliction that He will hear and that He will deliver us? That doesn't necessarily mean that He will give us exactly what we want. We all know people who have prayed, in the case of someone who is going to be going under surgery, and we've prayed that all would be well and that they would come through it and things didn't turn out the way they turned out for George. I will never forget a time in Greenville, N.C., there was a gentleman who had gone in for surgery. It was routine. It was not a big deal. I forget now what it was, but it was something that he should have been up and out of the hospital in three days and back to his normal life. And guess what? He died in the surgery. Something went wrong. He had a stroke, I think, and there was nothing they could do for him. I came home that night and I was mad! I was really mad! I remember punching a door. And I hit it so hard – it was one of those hollow doors – that it hit the spring on the back of it that's supposed to prevent it from hitting the wall and that rubber spring made a hole in that hollow door. That's how hard I hit it. Because I was so mad that God didn't listen to me by bringing that man through that surgery. And it took me a while after that until I realized, wait a minute, this man was a Christian. Upon his death he was received into the immediate presence of God, there to live for all eternity in joy and peace and

perfect life. What exactly is the down side of that? I realized yes, God answered my prayer. My prayer was for this man to be healed. And he was. My prayer was for him to be able to leave that surgery and live a full and joyful life, and he is. Did it go exactly the way I had planned? No. Did God give me exactly what I wanted? No. Was that a situation in which there was great pain for his family? Yes, there was. And they were the objects of prayer and they were delivered. And they were healed even through a wholly unexpected and from a purely human perspective tragic circumstance. That kind of faith can be hard under those circumstances. So that's when we hear what the psalmist has to say and believe and, therefore, say.

Finally, and quickly, what does God expect of His people? He expects *believing* prayer. Not just words poured into the air. He expects *believing* prayer. Verse 10: "I believe, therefore I said." And in verse 13: "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." Remember, this is the same person who had just said, "I am *in extremes*. My life is threatened, but I will lift up the cup of salvation and I will call on the name of the Lord." He expects obedience to His Word and sacrificial living in response to His gracious goodness. "I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." Even if the psalmist had died, he would still have been in the hands of the one who was delivering Him. He expects gratitude for all His blessings. Verse 17: "I will sacrifice a thank offering to You and call on the name of the Lord. Even as I pray I will give You thanks. Even in a time of trouble and sorrow." And He expects this, furthermore, to be not only individual but corporate. In the presence of all His people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O church. In the midst of God's people.

George and Alice Jane did not go through what they went through this summer by themselves. God was with them first and foremost. He brought them through and at no moment were they alone. But they were never alone in human terms as well, because as part of the body of Christ they had brothers and sisters here praying for them every day, visiting them, calling them, sending cards to them, letting them know in a thousand ways that they were on their minds and that they were being lifted up before the Lord. They were truly in the courts of the Lord all summer and into the fall and will be for all eternity. Just like us.