

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, February 12, 2012**

**QUESTIONS**

**Psalm 116:1-19**

Over the last six months or so as I've been preaching from the Psalms, I have grown to love them passionately. The Psalms are amazing. They're not just Israel's hymnal. They are also Israel's way of expressing what the people of God feel, what they think, what they experience, their highs and their lows. It is maybe more than anything else in Scripture the way that the people of God relate to Him. Psalms is a relational book and Psalm 116 is no different in that regard. In fact, it does a marvelous job of showing us that God does love us and is merciful and gracious and compassionate with us. One of those implications is that when we speak, He listens. And He speaks in return. Prayer is at the heart of the Christian life and it is at the heart of our relationship with Him. I'd like for us to look at Psalm 116 now and to do so in terms of four questions that are implicit in this text and four questions that I think are answered in it.

The first is in verses 1-4. The question there is: "Are we willing to call on Him in any situation?" The psalmist says that he loves the Lord "for He has heard my voice. He heard my cry for mercy." Of course, if you are going to cry for mercy you have to recognize that you need it. Right? "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 and said 'O, Lord, save me.'" Sound familiar? Not necessarily the words, but the sentiment. Is that familiar? "I'm in trouble, Lord. I'm in deep, deep, deep trouble. I need Your help. I can't do it by myself." You know, it is true: There are no atheists in foxholes. At least there aren't supposed to be. But the question I want to ask is: Do we really call on God when things are going bad? "Of course, pastor, at the drop of a hat. If things are going bad, if things are rough, I'm right there on my knees." Are we really? Some of us, not all of us, but for some of us, I suspect that we are especially inclined to forget about Him when something seems like a human matter that we should be able to handle on our own, even if things aren't going very well.

Many years ago, back when I was a Methodist minister in North Carolina, Marianne and I received one day, out of the blue, a letter from the IRS, which is kind of akin to getting a love note from Satan. That letter said "You have been filing your income taxes incorrectly, for these many years, along with all the rest of your Methodist brethren. Now we want you to correct that. And we want you to pay back taxes and interest on what you haven't been properly paying before." Now did I get down on my knees and say "Lord, the gates of hell are assailing me. I need Your help. I need You to get me out of this"? No, I didn't do that. I talked to an accountant. Then I talked to a lawyer. And then I tried to find out what ticket prices to Barbados cost. It wasn't really that much money. We didn't make that much in those days. It turned out – this was really incredible – there were 40,000 Methodist ministers in the United States. The IRS picked 35 to use as a test case. I was making, I don't know, about \$4.90 a week. And for some reason I was one of the 35. Where's the fairness in that?

Well, that dragged on for about 3 years. In the end we finally lost and we did have to pay up. I don't remember that I ever prayed about that. I don't know that I ever gave that to the Lord. That's what accountants and lawyers are for. That's what the Methodist annual conference is supposed to be for. I didn't bother God about that. That was a bad situation, I don't mind telling you. Being dealt with by the IRS that way is not fun. If you've ever been audited you know that – if you've ever had the IRS come after you for back taxes. Those are scary people. Even when they don't want to be. Even if you're not talking about that much money it's terrifying. And yet, I was not at the point of death. I was not sick. This was something I could handle. So there was no particular need to go to God with it.

Unfortunately churches can be the same way. Especially in a time when there is so much information out there about technique and practices and stuff that you can do and “this is what worked for us.” Here at Faith we have been going through some difficult days. Would you all agree with that? We've had some difficult times. Giving has been off, attendance has been off, and that's the reason why we had to dissolve the relationship with Bob Barnett and nobody is happy about that. We haven't grown the way we should. We haven't reached out to the neighborhood and community in ways that have seemed successful. And it's always the temptation for pastors or leaders of the congregation to want to go read the latest books, we want to find out what the techniques are that work, and we want to put them into effect because “there is a right way to do this and once we do it the right way, everything will be okay.” Right? You weren't supposed to agree with that! Listen closely. Just because the preacher says it doesn't mean it's true. All the technique in the world is of no consequence whatsoever if God is not behind it. The truth of the matter is, we could easily be filled to a 10,000 member church here, complete with a gymnasium and four Starbucks outlets and all the stuff that's supposed to make up a good church these days, and it would all be for naught. We would've done nothing more than build a really, really big club unless God is in it.

So, if the subject is the finances of the church, outreach, evangelism, or how to reach people with the gospel, the answer is not necessarily going to be found in what other people have done. That's not to say that that cannot be helpful, because we're not the only people in the world to whom God speaks. But it is to say that first and foremost the difference is going to be made by listening to Him, by speaking to Him, by pouring out our hearts before Him.

So that's the first question: Do we really call on Him in any situation? The answer to that *has* to be “Yes.” If it's not, then in whatever situation we are *not* calling on Him, that's where we're going to have problems.

The second question is in verses 5-7. The question here is: “Who does the Lord really hear in prayer?” I'm not suggesting that there are classes of people that God doesn't listen to. That's not the case. And yet, there is something to be said for humility. The psalmist writes: “The Lord is gracious and righteous. God is full of compassion and therefore the Lord protects the simple-hearted. When I was in great need He saved me.”

Please be careful here. It does not say the Lord protects the simple-minded. The Lord protects the simple-*hearted*. And even if we don't put "minded" there and just use the word "simple" we have the tendency to think "stupid" or "unsophisticated" or maybe "child-like." While the first two of those are not necessarily what I'd like for us to grab hold of, the last one might be – child-like. Children, when they are in need, go to their parents. And they speak to them. Sometimes their parents anticipate their needs. They know their needs even before they ask. And what do they do? If they're good parents they make them ask anyway. It's not the asking that's the important part. It's the relationships. It's having your child know that he or she can come to you and lay anything that's on their heart or mind before you. That's not going to happen if you're always anticipating what they're going to say and doing it before they ask.

Child-like is not just that. It's also a matter of humility. Being child-like is recognizing that you can't do it all yourself. As a matter of fact, there's very little you can do. And if you're 3 years old most of what you can do is going to get you in trouble. There aren't that many things you can do that are just exactly what somebody in your situation should be doing. The Lord hears. Be at rest once more, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you. The Lord has listened. The Lord has heard. And the Lord has replied. The humble are those who are not self-sufficient. The humble are those who don't rely on their own knowledge. The humble are those who don't boast of their achievements. The humble are those who recognize their limitations. The humble are those who are not convinced that they can handle what life throws at them. Instead, it's those who are defeated by it. Those who know they can't change themselves. Those who know they don't have all the answers. Those who realize that the go-it-alone, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps attitude that has characterized Americans in every generation since Europeans first set foot in the western hemisphere is nothing more than worldly knowledge that bears no resemblance to reality. We can't do it ourselves. And when we recognize that, that is when the Lord begins.

The third question, in verses 8-11 is: "Do we really believe He hears us and deals with us graciously?" The psalmist in these verses offers us a marvelous testimony to God's goodness. In verse 8 he says, "For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling." And He's not just swept aside the problems. He's done better than that. In verse 9 he says, "And so I walk before the Lord in the land of the living." It's not just a question of saving me from the traps that life lays before me. He also enables me to walk upright and live as a servant of His. Even through troubles, even through the tribulations.

Then the psalmist offers his response to what God has done. "I believe, therefore I said 'I am greatly afflicted.'" That's an amazing thing to say, isn't it? I believe that God is gracious and compassionate and merciful. I believe that God delivered my soul from the snares of this life. And because I believe, I said I am greatly afflicted. What's he mean by that? He means that with the Lord by his side he didn't need to sweep these things away and act as if everything was rosy. Or that there were no problems. Or that life is just a bed of roses. Do any of you know anyone who lives like that? There are no problems. There are no difficulties. Life is wonderful. I've never had anything happen

that I can't handle. Must be nice to be able to delude yourself so thoroughly. The psalmist recognizes that he's afflicted. He's got problems. He's got enemies who wish him ill. He lives in a day when there's no health insurance and medicine is purgative. He lives in the day when highway robbery is not something you say about the guy who cheats you at Best Buy. It's when somebody comes at you with a sword and threatens to cut off your head if you don't turn over your valuables. He knows he lives in a time when life can be short, it can be ugly and it can end abruptly. And yet he believes that God has saved him, that God has wiped the tears from his eyes, that God has kept him from stumbling and in the process enabled him to stand in the face of what afflicts him and say, "The Lord is on my side, whom shall I fear?"

One final question, in verses 12-19: "What does our compassionate, loving, merciful, provision-filled God expect from His people?" In verse 12 the psalmist says that himself: "How can I repay the Lord for all His goodness." In one sense, the answer is: "You can't." You can't possibly do enough to pay God back for all He's done for you. If a person saves your life, you hear this kind of thing all the time, in literature and over and over again: "Oh, you saved my life. I'm forever in your debt." How are you going to pay that back? I suppose you could pay it back by saving that person's life in return. But the truth of the matter is that the debt that we have can never be repaid, but can be responded to. So the psalmist responds in verse 13 by saying: I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. In gratitude for what God has already done for me, I will go back to Him again. Think about it. The bank loaned you \$100,000 and then they forgave your debt. So what's your response? You ask them for \$200,000. And you never know, in this day and time you might just get it. Anything's possible. But with God there's no question. He expects that having given us more than we can possibly repay we will come back to Him over and over again. In that regard we're just like our own children. We have already given them more than they can ever repay us for. We have given them life. But they come back to us over and over again. Don't they? And we willingly, joyfully, give. Not in such a way as to spoil them. I know none of you would ever do that. Not even those of you who are grandparents. But you expect them, you want them to come over and over again.

The second thing he mentions in verse 17 is: "I will sacrifice a thank offering to You and call on the name of the Lord." When somebody does something for you, you say thank you. I'd like to think we teach our children that. Sometimes they're not very good at it. Neither are we. But it's something that the Lord looks for from us. Not just because it's a legalistic requirement, but because that's part of what people do when they are in a relationship with one another. They express their gratitude for what the other one has done.

The third thing he mentions in verses 14 and 18: "I have fulfilled my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people." Then he repeats that in verse 18. He has fulfilled his vows in the presence of God's people. What God expects is for the people of God as a whole to come together in worship of Him in gratitude for all He has done for them. Think about it. So far we have been talking in terms of "I". Everything that is in this psalm applies to every single person here. In our own homes and in our own hearts we

can readily offer God our hearts, we can readily speak to Him with love and thankfulness. But He also wants us to come together because He hasn't saved us just as individuals. He has saved us as members of a family. And it is as a family that we come before Him.

One final thing: He expects us to be both individual and corporate. Our worship should be both individuals and as a body. As I mentioned at the outset, the psalms are amazing testimony to the ways in which Israel and individuals related to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That was then. This is now. And guess what? In the intervening 3,000 years absolutely nothing has changed. The Lord is still gracious and compassionate. He still hears our voice when we lift it. He still desires to relate to us as His children.

Thanks be to God.