

Introduction:

A. Illus.: Meghrik was on a full bus traveling from Aleppo, Syria to Al-Qamishli. Several hours into their trip they came to a checkpoint controlled by ISIS. Three fighters entered the bus and began checking IDs. Meghrik shrank in his seat because his is a Christian name. He'd been raised in a Christian home but he didn't believe in God anymore. He thought Christianity was ridiculous. "Are you a Christian?" the soldier asked.

"No," Meghrik replied.

"You're lying. Your name says you're a Christian. Come with me."

Meghrik was paralyzed with fear. He—and every other passenger on that bus—knew what this meant. By evening he was standing before an ISIS judge, who looked at his name. "You're sentenced to death," declared the judge.

"But I am not a Christian. I don't believe what my parents taught me."

It didn't matter. "This is the verdict," said the judge. Only a few hours later he was thrown in a car and brought to a place with open dugout graves. Two of the fighters pushed him in to one of the holes. He heard the sound of loading weapons.

In that awful moment Meghrik remembered a conversation from a month earlier. A friend challenged him to pray and ask God to show him that he really exists. They'd talked a long time about the existence of God and who Jesus Christ was, and what Jesus has done for mankind. So in that awful moment, Meghrik cried out to God, "If you exist, let me live. Please give me a chance to get to know you."

Seconds passed and then a voice shouted, “You can live and be free when you convert to Islam.”

“I will convert,” blurted Meghrik, seeing no other way out.

They took him back to his cell but another prisoner said, “Converting is of no use. They’ll kill you anyway.

The next day he was beaten badly. It went on for three days. Meghrik continued to pray, “God, you saved me the first time, so why do you let them torture me again? Please, Lord, get me out of here so that I can search for you and learn about you.”

Then on the fourth day one of the men said, “Tomorrow, we will kill you.”

But that day one of the ISIS leaders came to the prison. He said they would not execute him. They took him to another judge who inexplicably said, “You will be freed within some days.” And so it was, ten days after he was captured.

Now Meghrik says, “It was an indescribable moment when I finally left that place, a moment of happiness and a fulfillment of God’s promises. He heard my prayers. I had denied Jesus … But God didn’t leave me or let me down. He stayed with me until the end to show me his existence.”

[Open Doors Persecution Report, March 2017]

B. There’s a song for that:

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.

[I love the LORD,] Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.

The complete lyrics of that song are found in **Psalm 116**, p. 457 in the pew Bibles. The psalms are songs and prayers for God’s people. **Psalm 116 are the lyrics for a love song to God.** We’re looking at them because we want to know

what the Bible says about how we come to love God. This person starts his song, “*I love the LORD*,” so how did that happen. **How did he fall in love with God?**

Well, apparently, it grew out of a terrible time. We don’t know what it was but this is what it felt like: **vv.3-4:**

The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“LORD, save me!”

I. LOVE FOR THE LORD GOD IS OFTEN BORN IN OUR MOST DESPERATE TIMES

- A. We don’t have to face execution like Meghrik to feel desperate and helpless. We have times when it seems like we’re completely tangled in trouble, when we feel dead on the inside, “overcome by distress and sorrow.”
- B. It takes a time like that for some people to pray their very first honest prayer. It’s obvious from the rest of this psalm that this psalmist had a lot of life experience with God but still, for a lot of people, their very first serious prayer is, “*LORD, save me!*” Illus.: Anne Lamott is a fascinating writer. She has a book about prayer entitled, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. She says “*Help! Is the first great prayer.*” Her own version of vv.3-4 is this prayer:

Hi, God. I am just a mess. It is all hopeless. What else is new? I would be sick of me, if I were You, but miraculously You are not. I know I have no control over other people’s lives, and I hate this. Yet I believe that if I accept this and surrender, You will meet me wherever I am. Wow. Can this be true? If so, how is this afternoon—say, two-ish? Thank You in advance for

Your company and blessings. You have never once let me down. Amen

- C. She writes, “*Sometimes the first time we pray, we cry out in the deepest desperation, ‘God help me.’ This is a great prayer, as we are then at our absolutely most degraded and isolated, which means we are nice and juicy with the consequences of our best thinking and are thus possibly teachable.*” [loc.67]

Teachable. This songwriter was teachable when he cried out to the LORD. And what he learned might surprise you: **vv.5-9....** If someone saved you from, say, a burning car or from drowning, you might tell others how brave your rescuer was, how selfless, or how modest that she wouldn’t even give you her name. But what this person learned about God is completely different.

II. WHEN WE CRY OUT TO THE LORD WE BEGIN TO LEARN JUST HOW WONDERFULLY GOOD HE IS.

- A. We have many students here who study theology—what we can know about God—but this guy’s theology lessons didn’t begin in a classroom. They started when he was tangled up in death. And what did he learn about God when God rescued him?
1. “The LORD is gracious” – grace-giving; he does good for us what we could never earn nor deserve. He does more than we could ask or even think. He doesn’t just pull us out of the pit, he sets us on a rock. Then he gives us a song to sing. And a family to sing it with.
 2. “The LORD is... righteous.” He rescues us, not because we’re righteous, but because *he* is. Because God is love and for him, to rescue is the righteous thing to do.
 3. “Our God is full of compassion.” God rescues us because he cares for us. He’s not neutral. His heart goes

out to us. He knows how frail we are. Incredibly, his heart is touch by our grief, even when the trouble we're in is our own fault.

4. "The LORD protects the unwary." The idea behind that Hebrew word is *the simple, the naïve, the oblivious*. It seems to be a picture of someone who got into deep trouble because they were foolish and immature. And yet the great Almighty God cares about them and comes to save them.

Our songwriter learned all that when he cried out to God and God saved him from death and distress.

- B. When we call out to God we also learn that he gives rest to our souls (vv.7-9). "*Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.*" **The turmoil that really damages us in terrible times is within us, in our hearts and souls.** But this man learned that when God saves someone he's not content to just get us out of trouble. He gives rest to our souls. What does it look like when "*the LORD has been good to you*"? He tells us here:

1. "For you, LORD, have delivered me from death." A better translation would be "*you have delivered my soul from death.*" I don't know just what crisis this man was facing but the wonder isn't that God rescued him from bad people or a terrible circumstance. In fact, we know that God does not always take us out of hard trials. **The wonderful thing here is that God rescued his soul from death.** Not his outward self but his inner self. Who else can do that but God!

That is the essence of our Christian faith—that when we cried out to God, turning from our pride and sin, he *delivered my soul from death* because Jesus died in our place and offers us his eternal life.

2. *My eyes from tears.* His heart isn't breaking anymore. In fact, he's got a love song for God. He's a man enamored and enthralled with God. No more tears!
3. *My feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.* When he was in desperate trouble he was in danger of falling into sin. That's what he means by *stumbling*. In terrible times we're so likely to hurt people, to escape into dangerous things, to grow hard and cynical. All that is sin. That is what stumbling looks like, and it only makes terrible times even worse. *But when he cried out, "LORD, save me!"* God gave him his spiritual footing back. So not only was he rescued from his crisis, but he walked onward under God's watchful eye.

C. I think **vv.10-11** describe one more thing he learned when he was in such desperate trouble. This is a difficult verse to translate from Hebrew but I think this is the sense of it:

I trusted in the LORD [even] when I said,
"I am greatly afflicted";
in my alarm I said,
"Everyone is a liar."

This writer learned that when he was under terrible pressure and when it seemed like he couldn't trust anyone he actually still trusted in the LORD. We wonder, don't we, if we really trust God. One writer paraphrased it this way: "*In my crisis I discovered I was a real believer. That faith enabled me to verbalize my distraught emotions to God. I told him how miserable I was, how hurt I'd been.*" In other words, *When my world collapsed I found myself calling out to God because I really do believe he is there and that he hears when I pray.*

This singer found himself wanting to express his love for the LORD, which is the point of the remaining verses: **12-19...**

III. “WHAT SHALL I RETURN TO THE LORD FOR ALL HIS GOODNESS TO ME?”

He decides to respond to God’s salvation in three ways:

- A. *I will lift up the cup of salvation.* He pictures God’s salvation as wine in cup, raised in a celebration toast. This, of course, is a cup that God himself has filled. God gave him a cupful of salvation. Remember the 23rd Psalm that says, “*my cup runs over*”? Picture a man, heart full of joy, taking up a chalice full to overflowing with wine and holding up in a kind of toast to the God who saved him.

The cup of salvation holds all the benefits of God-given salvation—the soul delivered from death, the eyes delivered from tears, the feet kept from stumbling; it is knowing God to be grace-giving, righteous, full of compassion, and protective even when we’re immature and careless. *I honor you, O LORD, by drinking from this cup of salvation. You are the Giver!*

- B. *I will call upon the name of the LORD.* He called on the Lord in crisis and in joy. He called on the Lord to sing of his love. He is saying that the LORD’s name will always be on his lips, in good times and bad, in this life and the next. God never expects us to live lives independent of him. Nothing pleases God more—nothing is more right or natural—than for us to call on God all the days of our life.
- C. *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.* Most of us have heard of foxhole prayers, when someone is in desperate danger, like a soldier in a foxhole while under fire from the enemy, and they pray, “*Lord, if you get me out of this I’ll...*” and they make some promise they hope God will accept in trade for his rescue. That’s *not*

what this guy did, but I suspect that when he was in such trouble he thought about where he was with God and resolved to renew his commitments, that he'd make his faith more public, perhaps that he'd bring special thanksgiving offerings to God. So now he determines to do just that. He repeats this in **vv.18-19...**

Since this song is one all of us who love God can sing, since all Christians have cried out, "*LORD, save me!*" **we gather together as a choir of salvation singers.** We constantly are adding stories of salvation.

- D. Note one more thing: **v. 15**, "*Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.*" Or "*his saints.*" Christians sometimes read this verse at funerals. Remember the context—a man who felt he would have died if God had not saved him. His point here is this: God never takes the death of one of his servants lightly. It isn't all the same to God whether you live here or in heaven. Life here is precious to God, which is why he rescued this person.

Why? Because God gives us the wonderful privilege of serving him here. **V.16**, "*Truly I am your servant, LORD; I serve you just as my mother did; you have freed me from my chains.*"

Conclusion

Christians start their life with God by praying, "*O LORD, save me!*" Save me from my guilt, from my powerlessness to be deeply good, from death. When we cry out to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, he delivers our souls from death and gives us eternal life.

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.

[I love the LORD,] Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.