

Lyrics for His Life, Pt. 9
I Love the LORD!
Psalm 116: 1-9

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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What a great opening line to this psalm. “I love the LORD.” Boom. Mike drop. That’s all there is about it. I love the LORD. That’s the heart of me. That’s the truth of me. I love the LORD. There’s no question about where this psalm is going. Deep into heartfelt praise. I love the LORD. That’s bold. Can you and I say that? Do we say that enough?

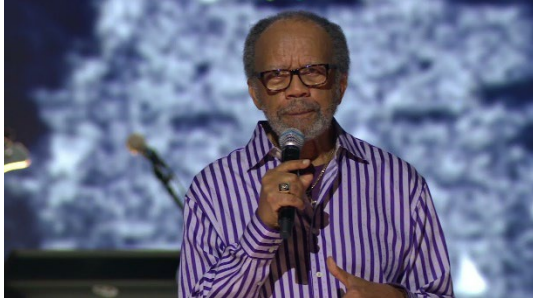
Ten years into ministry, I did not expect the spiritual transformation that hit me. I was in my mid-thirties in the mid 90’s. I was the senior pastor of a different First Presbyterian Church, this one in a small western North Carolina town. The people were kind and welcoming. We had four young children whom Rhonda was homeschooling. Every dog in the neighborhood, including strays from over the mountain, congregated at our house. Life was full and rich. I didn’t know how my heart’s affection for Christ had grown cold.

For the last decade, my friend Stevie and I had been taking time away together to work through great Bible stories and how we could teach them to children. So I wasn’t surprised when I got his call. “Palie,” he said, “We’re going on a road trip!” Great. Where are we going? “Atlanta. I’ll drive down and pick you up.” Terrific, Atlanta is a fun town. What’s the plan? “We’re going to a pastors’ conference in the Georgia Dome.” No we’re not! I don’t want to hang out with a bunch of goober pastors. “Sure you do. I’ll pick you up at noon on Tuesday.” Click

We stayed in a suburb and took the subway into town. The train was packed with pastors. Pastors with huge Bibles in leather cases. Pastors with goofy smiles on their faces. Pastors totally out of shape and unfashionably dressed. It was so embarrassing. Do we have to do this? I don’t want to hear sappy, sentimental Christian pop music. Or guilt trip talks. I made Stevie sit in the top row of the upper deck. At least I could look down on people from there.

But by the middle of the next day, we had found seats as close to the field as we could get. I was on my knees, crying like a fool. Christ had melted my heart. I surrendered to him anew. I realized I had lost my first love for Jesus. I thought I was better than other Christians, especially the ones who were overly emotional

and liked simplistic messages with ridiculously obvious stories. I wasn't better. I was *behind*. I had forgotten how to tell Jesus how much I loved him. He let me know he missed me. I realized how I missed him.



One of the worship leaders those days was Pastor Joe Garlington. Several times, his rich baritone voice led us in the song "Knowing You." Based on Philippians 3, the song unashamedly expresses ardor for Christ. "Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you. There is no greater thing. You're my all, you're the best, you're my joy, my righteousness. And I love you, Lord." Each time, I felt the doors of my heart fling open wider. I sang with all my might. These guys around me were no longer goobers, but 40,000 brothers, fellow warriors for Christ. It reached the point where all that had to happen was for Pastor Joe to come up to the podium and I was balling. I honestly would never be the same. *Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you, there is no greater thing.*

My earlier fears, of course, proved totally unfounded. Having a pulsing heart for Jesus did not cause me to shut down my brain. Actually, the exact opposite was the case. That same year, I came awake again to the beauty of Trinitarian theology. I yearned to explore the ancient and deep treasure trove of teachings about Christ. Once you strip off pretension and pride, you can pass through the eye of the needle, which surrender. Strangely, when your heart is stripped of everything but Jesus, you don't end up in a narrow, constricted place. A vast, colorful, vivid kingdom opens before you. The joy is electric. Mind and heart expand. Purpose fires up the days. The battle with darkness clarifies. The war of love for the lost world engages. Connecting with other believers becomes vital. Living with integrity becomes a mission. "I love the LORD" deepens all other loves and sharpens the point of every moment.

So how do we get there? To that simple, yet ocean-deep passion? Let's see how Psalm 116 does it. And thereby what it meant for Jesus to pray Psalm 116. It all has to do with passing through deathliness. With crying out to the LORD for deliverance. With enduring the wait for his reply in faith. For marking the salvation that comes and letting it propel hope for the future.

Imagine Jesus praying Psalm 116 during Easter week:

I love the LORD [my Father], because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.

Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

The prayer describes how Jesus feels in the *present* moment. Right now, I love my Father. I feel and express affection toward him. The prayer also gives us the reason for the present bright love. It's something that happened in the *past*. Once upon a crucial time, my Father *heard* me. He cocked his ear my way. He answered. I feel love right now because of what happened when I was in dire straits. Thinking *now* about what the LORD did *then* leads to a *hope* for the future. I *will* call on him.

So he goes on to tell a bit more of his story. Surely these words find their deepest purpose in Jesus. The psalmist a thousand years before left lyrics for the journey of Jesus to save us. He recalls,

The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“O LORD [my Father], I pray, deliver my soul!”

We're taken back to Gethsemane. “Father, take this cup from me.” Three times Jesus prayed in anguish to be delivered from the suffering to come. Three times he was not granted his request. Three times he said into his Father's silence, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” The answer to his cry for deliverance was suspended while he passed through the torture and death he shrank from, then embraced. Truly on the cross, the forsaken Son felt the snares of death trap him. He felt the sharp pangs of death spasm through his body. He called upon his Father. But it seemed, hopelessly, that he was not heard as his soul departed his body in death.

But out of death came resurrection. The risen Jesus could, three days later, continue praying the words of this psalm:

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
The LORD preserves 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 *will* walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

He cried out. He waited in faith. He passed through deathliness. Then, beyond hope, Jesus was delivered. He returned to life. Jesus experienced the worst physical and spiritual torment, despite his prayers to be spared. But on reflection, he could look back even upon the pain and say, “The LORD, my Father, *my Father!* has dealt bountifully with me.” The final disaster became the beginning of a new, remade humanity.

Now look what happens. Reflecting on the *past* deliverance, Jesus feels joyful love for his Father in the *present*. But more. Based on his Father’s past faithfulness, Jesus expressed hope for the *future*. More is to come. I *will* walk before the LORD in the land of the living. After rising, Jesus did indeed walk again in the land of the living. But the phrase means more than just a return to this earth. Jesus became the first born of a new creation, the new man in whom we can all be remade. More, much more is to come. He will make all things new (Rev. 21: 7).

Do you see the pattern? We are not spared the deathliness that is part of life in a broken, fallen, mortal world. We cry out. We wonder if we are heard. For the time between our prayer and God’s answer can seem awfully long. But then, the strangest thing happens. Months, years later, we look back. And we see how God was carrying us all along. We see how the Father was answering us. We see how life has come from deathliness. And realizing what God was up to in the *past* gives us hope for the *future*. And together, the past deliverance and the future hope awaken *present love* and joy in us. We are able to say, beyond our wildest dreams, “*Return O my soul to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.*”

As I read last week, I noticed I had written a date below this verse. From an October more than a decade ago. I took some time to think about those days. Among the worst in my life. A child could have, should have died. The family could have blown apart. A dire, false accusation against me could have become public rumor and destroyed my career. It was so heavy and daunting. How we cried out to the LORD for wisdom and stamina and clarity. I realized I made that note in the following summer, as I reflected on the events of the previous fall.

“Return O my soul to your rest, to your peace, to your contentment, to your trust, because the LORD--your heavenly Father who loves you and his Son who offered his life for you and the blessed Spirit within—he has dealt bountifully with you.

The worst days were marked as the days of God’s bounty toward me. Worse could happen. There have indeed been harder days since and I’m fairly sure harder days will come. But the past bears witness to the Father’s faithfulness. I remember. I called out to the LORD. And he heard me. That doesn’t mean he’s a genie to do my bidding. Or a Santa Claus who wants to fulfill my list. Oh no, he’s the King who is fitting me for communion and everlasting life. He’s the King who’s deploying me in his service to win back his world. He’s not afraid of my suffering. He brings resurrections out of deathliness.

Perhaps the greatest apologetic for Christianity is the startling witness to this paradox. We declare in faith in the midst of darkness so thick it seems it could never lift that the LORD has dealt bountifully with us. We remember what he has done in the past for his people, for Jesus, for us. And we give thanks. Even as we wait for the deliverance we still need. We wait in hope and thanks. And that gives us present peace and joy. Even more, that gives us the urgency of our mission to bring such hope to anxious, despairing people.

“I love the LORD.” Have you said that to him lately? He longs to hear it. Have you reflected on what he has done for you? In Christ? In your particular life? Loving the LORD is not just an optional accent for when your distractions don’t keep you distracted. It is the very fuel for life. It is the very reason for hope. It is the key to mission.

For me all those years ago, it took a dramatic three days to recover my love for Christ. I had to face all the ways I had become callous, proud, neglectful, and contemptuous. I had to cry out for deliverance. And he answered me! He melted my hard shell He cracked open my heart. And ignited me in mind, soul, and mission. He still leads us through death to life. Call out to him. Remember. Have hope. And worship right now with all your heart!