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Psalm 116:1-9,12-14. English Standard Version

- I love the LORD, because he has heard my
voice and my pleas for mercy.*
- 2** *Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.*
- 3** *The snares of death encompassed me; the
pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I
suffered distress and anguish.*
- 4** *Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!”*
- 5** *Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.*
- 6** *The LORD preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.*
- 7** *Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.*
- 8** *For you have delivered my soul from death, my
eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;*
- 9** *I will walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.*
- 12** *What shall I render to the LORD
for all his benefits to me?*
- 13** *I will lift up the cup of salvation and
call on the name of the LORD,*
- 14** *I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.*

Rendering.

I chose Psalm 116 to talk about today because a couple of years ago when I was reading the English Standard Version translation of our Bible, I found an intriguing word in verse 12. It had a special meaning to me as a Professor of Computer Science. In truth, I am retired, and am an Emeritus Professor now. The appearance of this word caused me to remember this Psalm when I went to write this message. I'd like to reflect on the Psalm as a whole and specifically on that word. There is historical and literary evidence that the Psalm was once two Psalms that were then blended into one, probably after some ancient Scripture writer noticed that two short Psalms shared a common theme. 116 is a Psalm of thanksgiving for what the Lord has done for the Psalmist. Someone has been greatly afflicted, by what we don't know. Sickness? Injury? The threat of an enemy? What we do know is that the Psalmist was near death. Early in the Psalm, we read:

*The snares of death encompassed me; the
pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I
suffered distress and anguish.*
4 *Then I called on the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!"*

The author had been in the grasp of Sheol, which is the Hebrew word for the underworld, the spooky place where the dead reside. The Israelites differed in their views about eternity, and the people as a whole didn't have as strong a notion of a pleasant afterlife as

we have. They often saw the place where all of us go after death as something somewhat frightening. Interestingly, picking up on this notion, when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek in the 200's A.D., "Sheol" was translated into "Hades", the word for the Greek underworld. The Greeks didn't believe in an eternal life with God; even more than the Israelites, they saw death as a terrifying experience that delivers us to a shadowy, eerie place. We tend to translate Hades as Hell – but this is not accurate. Hell is the opposite of Heaven, not Sheol or Hades, the dim underworld where all dead people go. So, the Psalmist is thanking God for not sending him to the dim underworld where the dead reside. The Psalmist goes on to say:

*For you have delivered my soul from death, my
eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;
9 I will walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.*

The Psalmist is saying that he will remain in the land of the living, and he means it literally, not spiritually. He will not physically die. But when we read this Psalm today, we think of thanking our Lord, Jesus Christ, for saving us from spiritual death through his sacrifice on the cross and his subsequent resurrection. That's why this Psalm is often used as a communion prayer in modern churches.

What struck me a couple of years ago is something that appears later in the Psalm.

Remember that this was apparently two Psalms at one time. One dealt with a person giving thanks to the God who saved him from Hades, from a literal, eternal death. The second Psalm, which forms the last part of Psalm 116, contains this:

*What shall I render to the LORD for
all his benefits to me?*

13 *I will lift up the cup of salvation and
call on the name of the LORD,*

14 *I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.*

The Psalmist is wondering how he or she can give thanks, what to offer to God, as a result of being rescued. When Christians use this Psalm in a communion service, we lift up the bread and wine, as a symbolic statement that we need to thank God in some appropriate way for the sacrifice Jesus made for us. By the way, before Christians came along and picked up on Psalm 116 as a communion prayer, ancient Jews used it during Passover, to thank God for the escape of God's people from slavery in Egypt and into an eventual, earthly life in the Promised Land. But the precise wording that struck me about this Psalm is the English word that we see in some translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically in the English Standard Version: "What shall I *render* to the Lord?" I used to teach students how to build 3D models with an extremely complex application that is used in making many 3D motion pictures. In this context, I used the word *render* many times a day. I should note that other translations use different

words. The New Revised Standard Version, updated edition says: “¹² What shall I return to the LORD?” The New Living Translation says: “¹² What can I offer the LORD?” But the word “render” is a very good translation of the original Hebrew work in Scripture. That word is “*shub*” (Shoube).

In English, the word “render” has two meanings. The first is what is implied in this Psalm, and that is to give something or to deliver something.

Remember that line from Matthew, the Gospel. The Pharisees ask Jesus: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?* Then Jesus says to them: *“Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax. Whose likeness and inscription is this?”*

Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. Jesus is telling people to *render* or to give to Caesar what is his, this earthly thing called money that should not command our lives. But there is a second meaning of the word *render*, and it is related to the first meaning. It means to create or craft something or to make something real that has only been mentally visualized. It also means to bring something into existence. We use the word *render* in this context in 3D modeling and animation. Many of you have probably seen images of 3D wireframes models in movies and on television and on the Web. You might have seen a car or a house or a human drawn as a 3-dimensional system of lines. In 3D modeling, we build these wireframe models of things inside computers. Everything that appears

in an animated scene is constructed out of these 3D wireframes. When you see the final movie that the models appear in, they have surfaces on them. The car might be a reflective red, the house might be made of brick, the human has skin and clothing. We take the wireframe models that are inside the computer, and we turn them into colorful images on a screen. The screens you watch movies on, like the screens on computers, are not 3D. They are 2D. Video is in truth a 2D grid of pixels, rows of colored dots. So, we must take a 3D wireframe scene inside a computer and turn it into a 2D grid of colored pixels that appears to be 3D in nature, but the 3D aspect of it is an illusion. This process of rendering is a dramatic change in representation. We render an internal wireframe scene into a visual, 2D grid of pixels that looks 3D so that we can see what the animator built inside the computer. On the screen are two pictures. The first is a wireframe model of a church that I designed with software. Below it is the rendering that you see on a computer display. You can see that the wireframe model of the church has been transformed into a full color, 3D appearing church interior. By the way, a variation on this second meaning of the word “render” that many of you are probably familiar with is to melt down and extract something from a substance, such as rendering fat into lard by boiling and straining it.

Getting back to today’s message, rendering is what we do when we give thanks to Jesus for what he has done for us. His death was real, but it was done for symbolic

reasons. Jesus came to Earth, was gruesomely tortured, died, and was resurrected so that we would know that we are forgiven. We are justified; that is, we are no longer in a place of moral death. Hades and Sheol were thought of as literal, physical places. But after we are forgiven and justified, we are no longer spiritually in Hades, or in Sheol, that place of eternal shadows where we reside before we have accepted God into our hearts. Then, after we are justified, we begin the process of sanctification, of devoting our lives to incrementally becoming better people who live according to the laws of forgiveness and love, as taught by Jesus. When confronted with this incredible gift of forgiveness, justification, and eventual sanctification, we wonder how we can craft a worthy offering of thankfulness. What can we, as humans *render* to God? How do we take what is inside us and transform it into a worthy gift?

Before we accept the gift of forgiveness, we are like those wireframe models inside a computer. We are hollow, colorless objects that can't even be viewed in the light of day. Jesus renders us into children of God, full of true life and color. What can we do in return? How can we take the sanctity that God placed inside of us and render it back to God as something literal and meaningful?

Our Psalm today is in a group of Psalms, from 115 to 122, that thank God for his incredible faithfulness to the Israelites, largely here on Earth in this life. The Psalmist is

declaring that through many centuries, through enumerable wars, acts of colonial oppression, and periods of enslavement, God has stayed true. God has kept his word. God has kept his part of the Covenant of Moses: if his people live by his laws, he will give them the promised land. Our covenant with God, the New Covenant, is brought to us by Jesus Christ. It is a moral, spiritual, and eternal guarantee: if we accept God, if we have faith, we will be forgiven and justified here on this earth, and we will live forever with God. So, what do we offer in return? The answer is that we can reach inside of us and take that rendered existence we have, of being hollow wireframes that have been transformed into visible, full-color children of God, and render it back. What do we render for God? We can render what is in our hearts into real lives dedicated to living the way that Jesus Christ taught us to live. That's how we can give a true gift of thanks to God. We can render this gift of thanks in many ways.

We can first, pray to God, connect with God. We can spend time in contemplation, reaching out for the God who, because of the sacrifice of his son, is our friend. Second, we can serve others. People who are in this congregation operate a food bank, and this is a great way to serve other people. We can also serve others every time we have an opportunity to forgive, to help, or to offer comfort. There's more we can do, as we render that gift for God. We can worry less. We can acknowledge that

God is in charge, not us and not our fellow humans, not even those who hold earthly power. Yes, we can show our trust in God simply by worrying less. We can also spread the Word of God whenever we get a chance. One way to do this is to invite others to visit this church. We can also have the courage to always do what is right, even when it means passing up an opportunity to make our earthly situation more pleasant. We can do even more. We can refuse to judge others and simply leave the judging to God.

There's one last thing, of course. We can truly accept Jesus as our savior. It's something that isn't talked about much in our culture today. Many people consider this a silly concept; they see it at best as a symbolic way of describing true faith. People don't see a savior, a messiah as something literal. But he can be literal. He can be real. We can take what God rendered us into, and then render it back as a true acceptance of Jesus Christ as the being who walks with us every day, who helps us grow kinder and more forgiving, just like him every day, and who reminds us that we will live with God forever someday. Most of all, acknowledging that Jesus is our Savior means we realize that he is the reason we are not in Sheol, in Hades spiritually, forever separated from God.

So, on this regular Sunday, when we are tempted to forget about the death and resurrection of Jesus, each of us can ask ourselves this question:

*What shall I render to the LORD for
all his benefits to me?*

Then we can work on rendering the appropriate gift of thanks. One last thing – Hades was in truth a Greek god who was in charge of the underworld and of death. He was also the god of riches. There is one last way that we can render a gift to God: by never letting riches corrupt us, and by remembering that all that we have comes from God. And since all that we have comes from God, the least we can do is to share with those who have less. Giving what we can – even if it is only a little – to charity is an incredible way to thank God.