

Psalms 116:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me?

Analysis

What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me? After recounting deliverance from death and declaring divine attributes, the psalmist asks how to respond appropriately to overwhelming grace. This rhetorical question acknowledges both indebtedness to God and inadequacy of any human response.

"What shall I render" (מה־אֶשִׁיב/mah-ashiv) uses shuv (return, restore, repay, render). The question form indicates the psalmist feels obligation to respond but struggles to find adequate response. How do you repay God who owes nothing, needs nothing, yet gives everything? The question implies: nothing I can give equals what I've received.

"Unto the LORD" (לַיהוָה/laYahweh) directs the response to covenant God. This isn't impersonal universe or abstract providence but personal Yahweh who entered covenant relationship with Israel and maintains faithful love. The question concerns relationship, not transaction. What response honors this relationship and acknowledges grace received?

"For all his benefits" (כָּל־תַּגְּמוּלוֹהִי/kol-tagmulohi) catalogs received blessings. Gemul means recompense, dealing, benefit—what God has done for the psalmist. The plural "benefits" and totality word "all" emphasize abundant grace: not one favor but countless blessings, not minimal help but overwhelming generosity. The psalm has detailed specific benefits: hearing prayer, delivering from death, preserving life, comforting in trouble, turning mourning to joy.

"Toward me" ('לִּי/alai) personalizes the grace. Not generic providence toward humanity generally but specific grace toward me personally. This moves from theology to testimony—these aren't abstract doctrines but lived realities. God has dealt bountifully with ME. His benefits came to ME. Therefore I must ask: what shall I render?

The following verses answer the question: "I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD" (v.13); "I will pay my vows unto the LORD" (v.14); "I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving" (v.17). The response isn't earning God's favor or repaying debt but worship, testimony, obedience, continued trust. God doesn't need our gifts but desires our hearts, praise, and faithful living.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern religion operated on quid pro quo basis—offerings given expecting divine favors returned. Worshipers believed proper rituals and sacrifices obligated gods to respond favorably. If gods blessed, worshipers owed thanksgiving offerings. If gods didn't bless, worshipers might withhold offerings or turn to other gods.

Biblical faith fundamentally differs. God cannot be obligated or manipulated. He gives freely, acts graciously, blesses abundantly not because humans earned favor but because of His covenant love and faithful character. Micah 6:6-8 satirizes ritualistic religion: "Wherewith shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old?" Answer: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

Sacrificial system provided legitimate way to express thanksgiving (today/ thanksgiving offerings, Leviticus 7:12), but God desired heart worship more than ritual observance. David declared: "thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:16-17).

New Testament radicalizes this further. Christ's once-for-all sacrifice eliminates Old Testament sacrificial system (Hebrews 10:1-18). Believers respond to grace not with animal sacrifices but with "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1)—offering themselves wholly to God in grateful worship and obedient service. Paul writes: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

Church history records debates about grace and works. Pelagius taught humans could earn salvation through moral effort. Augustine countered: salvation is wholly by grace; good works follow as grateful response, not meritorious cause. Reformers echoed this: sola gratia (grace alone), yet genuine faith produces works (James 2:14-26). This psalm models the pattern: overwhelming grace received produces question "What shall I render?" Answer: not payment but worship, obedience, testimony.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. Why does the psalmist ask 'What shall I render?' when God needs nothing and cannot be repaid?
2. How does responding to God's grace differ from attempting to earn God's favor through religious performance?
3. What does it mean to offer oneself as 'living sacrifice' (Romans 12:1) in response to grace?
4. How can gratitude for God's benefits avoid becoming transactional religion (blessing received = offering owed)?

Interlinear Text

מָה	אֲשׁוּב	לַיהוָה	כָּל	תַּגְמוּלוֹ וְהִי	עָלַי:
H4100	What shall I render	unto the LORD	H3605	for all his benefits	H5921
	H7725	H3068		H8408	

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 103:2 (References Lord): Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:

1 Corinthians 6:20 (Parallel theme): For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

Romans 12:1 (Parallel theme): I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

2 Chronicles 32:25 (Parallel theme): But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up: therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem.