

“Bless the Lord, O My Soul!”

Psalm 103

November 21, 2021

This is one of my favorite Sundays of the year to bring God’s word to you. Many years ago, I resolved to make it my habit to preach on the theme of gratitude or thanksgiving each year on the Sunday before thanksgiving. While the Thanksgiving holiday marks our rich American heritage, which I deeply love, my drive to preach on gratitude is driven by a superior inspiration. What drove me to really value gratitude was seeing in the Scriptures that gratitude and thanksgiving are among the most valued qualities in a believer’s life from God’s perspective. Gratitude is the aroma of grace-filled believers.

Ps 103 does not use the word gratitude or thanksgiving, yet this Psalm *does* what thanksgiving *is*. It ascribes praise to the Lord, it makes much of God, it takes the posture of humble rejoicing. It stands in the aroma of God’s undeserved goodness and mercy, and breathes it in as deeply as it can, and then sings! Thanksgiving sings the song of praise from lungs filled with the oxygen of grace! When you inhale grace, you exhale gratitude.

Ps 103 has 4 stanzas, and although the themes overlap, I will identify the major theme of each stanza in an attempt to organize our thoughts. Yet, attempting to outline Psalm 103 is a bit unnatural because it is not meant to be read as a treatise but as a prayer and a song of praise.

1. **Bless the Lord for His mercy to forgive** (Ps 103:1-5).

The theme of these first 5 verses is that the mercy of God to forgive replaces sin’s judgment with divine favor. [vs. 1-5] Psalm 103 opens with the Psalmist commanding his soul to bless the Lord. That is, he is commanding his inmost being which leads his *whole* being, emotions, mind, and body, to praise God with a heart of rejoicing. But what does it mean to bless the Lord? We can understand how God blesses us—He does good unto us, He provides for us, He answers prayer. But how might we bless Him? The word “blessing” (Heb: *barak*) literally means “to speak well.” It can be translated as “praise.”

So God blesses people by speaking and thereby imparting “blessing” (good things) to them. People bless God by speaking well of Him, attributing “blessing” (good qualities) to Him. In other words, God blesses us by [bestowing] good on us while we bless God by praising the good in Him.¹ The word *barak* can also carry the sense of bowing.² Thus, praise is an act of humbling ourselves to honor God and give Him His proper place in our lives.

In particular, the Psalmist blesses God’s name as holy, set apart, recognizing that God is in a category all His own (1). There is no one like Him, no one to compare to Him. He is the Most High. And the Most High, the one and only living God, has a disposition of blessing toward us. And so He says, “forget none of His benefits, soul! Remember how good God has been to you. Recount the innumerable ways He has showered you with mercy and blessing.”

As we walk through Ps 103, we must see it in the rich context of the Old Testament while at the same time seeing it most fully understood and fulfilled in Christ. When David calls us to forget none of His benefits, we hear echoes from Deuteronomy where Moses exhorted the Israelites to not forget the Lord who brought them out of slavery once they enter the blessing of the promised land (Dt. 6:12; 8:11-14). Yet as believers today, we can’t possibly heed these words (“forget none of his benefits”) without first thinking of the cross where the sufferings of Christ secured for us every divine blessing.

The first benefit that the Psalmist rejoices in is God’s forgiveness: “who pardons all your iniquities” (3). Forgiveness is mentioned first because it’s the key that unlocks the door to the treasure house to God’s blessing. Without forgiveness, we forfeit all other divine benefits. And note that God is not halfhearted in His forgiveness. To say that He forgives generously is still inadequate. He is perfectionistic. He forgives *all* your iniquities. So sufficient is the redeeming blood of Christ, that no sin confessed is left unforgiven.

The second benefit mentioned here is that He “heals all your diseases.” Certainly, there are many times we have reason to thank God for physical

¹ Willem VanGemeren, Gen Ed. Michael Brown, NIDOTTE, pg. 764.

² Logos Bible Software

healing, whether through natural or supernatural means. But David has something else in view here. Remember he is speaking to his soul about the benefits of God's forgiveness. The phrase "heals all your diseases" is sandwiched between "pardon's all your iniquities" and "redeems your life from the pit." The OT often used the language of healing for the soul in terms of God's forgiveness. Ps 41:4: "O Lord, be gracious to me; heal my soul for I have sinned against you." Isaiah spoke of those with sin-hardened hearts as having dull ears and dim eyes whose only remedy was spiritual healing (Isa 6:10).

Furthermore, physical diseases (i.e. plagues) were often a means of divine judgment. In Ex 15 just after the Israelites were delivered from Egypt through the 10 plagues, the Lord said, "*If you give earnest heed to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His sight, to give ear to His commandments, to keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I am the Lord your healer*" (Ex 15:26). Deut 7:15: "*The LORD will remove from you all sickness; and He will not put on you any of the harmful diseases of Egypt which you have known, but He will lay them on all who hate you.*" (cf. 28:60).

So, David is likely saying to his soul in vs 3, "He forgives all your sin and in so doing, He has removed all the judgment of His discipline!" There are times when sin results in physical illness or disease (1Cor 11:30), yet Jesus went on to clarify in John 9 that not all physical sickness or disease is a direct result of a specific sin (Jn 9:3). And yet there is an application here to physical illness that should encourage us. The redemption of Christ is not just for our souls, but for our bodies as well. When Mt 8:17 says that Jesus "took our infirmities and carried away our diseases" it was in the context of physical healing, even though the quote from Isa 53 is in the context of removing our sin. The point is that Christ's redemption impacts our whole being. There is no part of the curse that is not reversed by the cross. There is coming a day when we will be with Christ, fully healed—body, mind, and soul—no sin, no sickness. So forget none of His benefits! He answers prayer today and He will fully restore us when we see Him face to face.

Next David instructs His soul to bless the Lord for redeeming his life from the pit (4). The Hebrews used the term pit to refer to destruction. But God

not only *delivers* our soul from destruction. He *redeems* it! Redemption was done by a close relative (kinsman) by absorbing the cost of redemption personally. Beloved, forget not that our souls have been redeemed from the pit of eternal destruction, saved from the wrath of God by Christ as our kinsman Redeemer!

And yet it gets better still! Vs. 4: He "crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion; [He] satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle." Jesus not only redeems you out of poverty and indebtedness, He crowns you—a term of royalty. He gives you dignity by showering you with His lovingkindness—His covenant love (an adoption term). He makes you His own, a member of His royal family and along with all the blessings of being a child of God. He "satisfies your years with good things." Every good thing in life is a gift from God's hand (James 1:17). Not only those things we consider good, but also the good that God works through our trials and afflictions. Even in the midst of our sufferings, Jesus crowns us with compassion (Mt 11:28-30).

Finally, the Lord's mercy to forgive not only forgives your iniquity, heals the disease of judgment, redeems your life from the pit, crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion, and satisfies your years with good things; it also renews your youth like the eagle (5). Eagles rise above and soar. And though our bodies age and our physical strength deteriorates, Paul could say, "We do not lose heart, though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day" (2Cor 4:16). The blessings of godliness continue to refresh the soul even into old age (Tholuck).³ Your body may deteriorate, but your enjoyment of God need never fade.

Short-sighted as he was, I don't think David could have preached the gospel of Jesus Christ any better than he has in these first 5 verses of Psalm 103. Beloved, consider how wayward our souls have been on the road of sin. In the days of Spurgeon, Thomas Fuller said of the soul that grief grows where joy should, and joy grows where grief should. We love what we should hate and hate what we should love. We fear where no fear is and fear not Him who ought to be feared. And all our affections either mistake their object or exceed their due measure (Thomas Fuller).⁴ In other words, we set our

³ W.S. Plumber, *Psalms* (Geneva Series), pg. 918.

⁴ David Fuller, *Spurgeon's Treasury of David*, vol. 2, pg. 75.

hearts on any and everything else but God. How undeserving with are of such mercy, that Christ should exchange our judgment for God's favor through the redemption-cost of His own life! Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is with me, bless His holy name!

2. Bless the Lord for His infinite compassion (Ps 103:6-14).

The theme of this second stanza of the Psalm is that the anger of the Lord against sin is momentary, but the compassion of the Lord is infinite. **[vs. 6-9]** We must see the heart of God here. He acts with mercy and justice toward His people when they are oppressed, just as He did for the Israelites enslaved in Egypt (6). He made known His ways to Moses in Exodus 33 when Moses pleaded to see God's glory. He put Moses in the cleft of the rock, covered him with His hand and passed by declaring, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps His lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on their children and their grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Ex 34:6-7). It was in this context that the Lord gave Moses His law. Not only because God is just and righteous in His character, but also because His heart is one of compassion and lovingkindness.

The Lord is compassionate and gracious and slow to anger. Still, we provoke His discipline in our lives with our sin. And though God will address our sin, even if it takes 40 years in the wilderness or 3 generations, He will not hold a grudge forever. Vs. 9 says He will not always *strive* with us, meaning He will not always *contend* with us or *make a case against us*. He does not give His children the judgment they deserve, but gives them compassion *beyond* what they deserve through His intervening grace.

[10-14] God has not dealt with us according to our sins. "Our sins have been *many*; His judgments have been *few*."⁵ "Our sins they are many, His mercy is more." Charles Spurgeon said about vs. 10:

⁵ W.S. Plumber, *Psalms* (Geneva Series), pg. 916.

⁶ David Fuller, *Spurgeon's Treasury of David*, pg. 76.

*"We ought to praise the Lord for what He has not done as well as for what He has [done] for us; even the negative side deserves our adoring gratitude. Up to this moment at our very worst estate, we have never suffered as we deserved to suffer; our daily lot has not been apportioned upon the rule of what we [earned], but on the far different measure of undeserved kindness."*⁶

The irony of vss. 10-12 is that though we have sinned against an infinite God, He is infinitely compassionate toward us and has infinitely removed the guilt of our sin from us. **[11⁷-12]** Those who "fear Him" are not those who are scared of Him. The fear of God is the kind of fear that is motivated by love *for* God. Fearing God means that we submit our will to His because we are intent on pleasing Him and intent on not displeasing Him out of love for Him (George Bowen).⁸ It's the love of a child for a good father.

God loves us with a compassion that exceeds the best of fathers. "*He knows our frame. He is mindful that we are but dust*" (14). His expectations are not overbearing. His compassion leads Him to be kind and considerate. I'm so thankful that Jesus came in flesh and blood and can sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15). And therefore, He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Through the cross, Jesus made God's wrath momentary so that God's infinite compassion could be ours eternally. Bless the Lord!

3. Bless the Lord for His eternal lovingkindness (Ps. 103:15-18).

The theme for this 3rd stanza is that man's life is mortal, frail, and momentary, but God's lovingkindness is eternal. **[15-18]** Here David is contrasting the brevity of man's life with the everlasting faithfulness of God. Man is mortal, frail, and transient. If God should give you 80 years, the closer you get, the shorter you realize life is. But the lovingkindness of the Lord has no beginning and has no end for those who fear Him, those who love Him.

The word *lovingkindness* here in vs. 17, as earlier in vss. 8 and 11, is the Hebrew word *hesed*. It can also be translated as *steadfast love* or best as *covenant faithfulness*. It's one of the most important words in the OT in

⁷ How far is that? Where do the heavens stop? The Hubble telescope takes the human eye 13.4 billion light years into the heavens and cannot see their end. The point here is infinity.

⁸ David Fuller, *Spurgeon's Treasury of David*, pg. 77.

terms of the character of God. God's love for His people is a covenant love of faithfulness and lovingkindness that He refuses to let go of. God's *hesed* includes all of the positive attributes of God toward those He devotes His favor to—mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, and generous benevolence. And David is saying that that large-hearted kindness toward His children that as always been and will always be, will spill over on future generations.

And yet it's even better than David could articulate from his point in history. God's covenant-faithful love is anchored by the cross of Jesus through which we enter into the new covenant in His blood. And Ephesians 2 tells us that God poured out His mercy and love on us through Jesus "so that in the ages to come [all eternity], He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (2:7). Bless the Lord O my soul, and whatever the fire of affliction you may need to walk through, cling to the hope and promise of God's everlasting kindness.

4. **Bless the Lord for His sovereign rule over all** (Ps 103:19-22).

[vs. 19-22] David now ends on a climactic note of praise. Earlier in the Psalm David rejoiced as the beneficiary of God's mercy, compassion, and faithfulness. But now David's praise turns purely to God alone and His greatness. One puritan wrote, "*His kingdom [rules] over all. There is none above it, none with it, none like it, none helping it, none hindering it, none without it.*"⁹ This is good news in a day when the world is careening out of control. While every kingdom of man will fall, God's kingdom will endure through them all.

And so the Psalmist reaches as far as he can, exhorting now not only his own soul, but the angels of heaven to join in blessing the Lord. He calls on the Lord's hosts—this could be another reference to angels, or it could be referring to the sun, moon, and stars to bless the Lord. He calls on all of God's works, creation in all its expanse and the renown of all that God has done, to show forth His praise. And then as but a living speck of dust in a vast universe in song, He once again tells his sleepy soul to awaken and bless the Lord!

This is what you were created for. To know and rejoice and be satisfied in the greatness of our God and the tender mercy by which He draws near to us in covenant faithfulness.

Will you put off such an offer of mercy? Will you delay to receive such compassion and forgiveness? Will you persist in living in opposition to God, provoking His wrath? Will you not surrender to the lovingkindness of God? All that Psalm 103 delights in can be yours in Jesus. Abandon your sinful independence and embrace the forgiveness of Jesus by surrendering to His loving authority and mercy as Savior and Lord.

Taking God's Word to God's Throne Psalm 103

Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, *bless* His holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget none of His benefits;
Who pardons all your iniquities; Who heals all your diseases;
Who redeems your life from the pit; Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;

Who satisfies your years with good things, *So that* your youth is renewed like the eagle.

The LORD performs righteous deeds, And judgments for all who are oppressed.

He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel.

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.

He will not always strive *with us*; Nor will He keep *His anger* forever.

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.

As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Just as a father has compassion on *his* children, So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.

For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are *but* dust.

As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.

⁹ W.S. Plumber, *Psalms* (Geneva Series), pg. 917.

When the wind has passed over it, it is no more; And its place acknowledges it no longer.

But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children's children, To those who keep His covenant, And who remember His precepts to do them.

The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; And His sovereignty rules over all.

Bless the LORD, you His angels, Mighty in strength, who perform His word, Obeying the voice of His word!

Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, You who serve Him, doing His will.

Bless the LORD, all you works of His, In all places of His dominion; Bless the LORD, O my soul!