



PSALMS

The Prayer Book of the Bible

Bless the Lord, O My Soul

Psalm 103

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First Presbyterian Church - Colorado Springs, CO

Jim Singleton

Preface

In our summer series on the psalms and prayer we have now taken you through several different kinds of psalms. We began in June with Psalms of Praise. The invitation to us from those three psalms was to grow more comfortable in the aspect of praise in our prayers. In July, after studying one national Psalm near July 4, we turned to the Psalms of Lament. We read three different Psalms of Lament. Each of the three psalms was an invitation to tell God our struggles. And in each lament, there is a hope or an expectation that life won't end in lament – that we will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Now in August, we turn to thanksgiving and trust. Many of the psalms are expressing our deep thankfulness to God and our trust in him. Let us listen to Psalm 103.

Introduction

When I read Psalm 103, I see a parade of people pass through my mind whose lives were like this Psalm. I can picture delightful, free spirited Christians I have known through the years who are certain of God's delight in them. John Stoneman was nearly 90 when I met him. He was a small man with a big heart for Jesus. He expressed so much delight in knowing Jesus and being loved by Jesus. Every time I saw him, he marveled about Jesus' love for him. He had lived through earlier years of singing Laments, but he really knew that he was forgiven and free, and he died in that delight.

Jim Willis had lived a tough life in lots of ways. He had made some amazing wrong turns in life. His years of lament were Psalm 51 kinds of laments. But by the time I got to know him, he was a big, bold, loud lover of God. Almost every time you reminded Jim of God's forgiveness, he would tear up. Until his death, he remained stunned by God's free grace. Some people just know how much God loves them. And they trust that love. Jim died of a debilitating cancer, but knew of God's love to the end.

Brennan Manning writes in Ragamuffin Gospel about an Irish priest who was praying in praise by the side of the road one day. A man came along and saw him. The man said

to the priest, "You seem to be engrossed with God." To which the priest said, "Oh yes, he's very fond of me." How many of you know that God is very fond of you?

To know you are forgiven and loved by God is so fulfilling. It is the essence of delight. Psalm 103 is chocked full with all kinds of forgiveness and love. We call this a Psalm of Thanksgiving – perhaps the best known of that type of Psalms. I know that you are not full of thanksgiving every day – but this prayer is an invitation to remember those things for which to thank God daily.

1) Bless the Lord, O My Soul (vs. 1-2)

The first word of this Psalm needs a little translation explanation. In the NIV the word is "Praise" – but in most other translations it is "Bless." The word in Hebrew is "Barak" – which means to "bend the knee." To bless is a kind of praise – but it is one in which we express our dependence. Presbyterians usually sit – but it wouldn't hurt us from time to time to kneel. How would you feel about bending the knee to the one you adore?

When the Psalmist says "Bless the Lord, O My Soul" we need to remember that "the soul is the seat of understanding and affections" (Calvin). It is the place where our real core lives.

Then he adds, "And all that is within me, bless his holy name." All that is within me is literally, "all my inward parts." By his inward parts he is thinking of things like lungs, hearts, and kidneys. He is imagining a whole body experience of praise. I haven't seen much of that around Presbyterians – but it would be exciting. Can you imagine feet, knees, wrists, gall bladder - even artificial hips - everything praising God?

I thought of this as I watched a bit of the US Senior Open on Thursday. Golf is such a polite and understated game. I watched as golfers hit incredible shots – shots I have never hit. If I had hit a drive 300+ feet and then chipped on the green within 3 feet of the flag, I would be dancing and yelling with joy. These guys just politely nodded their heads and walked on. No wonder – Presbyterians invented golf in Scotland. In the Hebrew mind when you had joy you let it out. You praised God with all you had in you.

And forget not all his benefits – this reminds me of the old hymn "count your blessings, count them one by one." "To forget not" is not so much a slip of memory, but an act of ignoring the goodness of God. Are you around people who just forget all his benefits? Being a part of worship is to remember what God has done for us and express it with joy.

2) What God Does for Us (vs. 3-7)

The reason that you praise God is that he has fixed our major problems. Four big problems are listed here – Sins, Diseases, The Pit, Oppression. Sins are a real problem – most of us get cozy with sins over time. Sin has brought disease of physical and spiritual types into this world. The Pit is the place where our sin and disease brings us – a horrible and dark place – a place usually deeply connected with laments. And that pit is usually entrapping and it has taken us to oppression. The oppression is not always of a physical kind – but of a very real kind.

Eight solutions are presented in this section of what God does – Forgives, Heals, Redeems, Crowns, Satisfies, Renews, Releases, Reveals. God forgives – he wipes away our record of

sin. He does not carry it any longer. God forgives all our sins – moves those transgressions far away. Have you stepped into that real sense of forgiveness?

Last week my son and I were traveling through Ohio for the first time. East of Cleveland we passed through a place and saw a sign for the birthplace of James Garfield, the 20th President of the United States. You may remember that Garfield was president only a short time as he was assassinated in 1881. He was shot a couple of times - the most serious injury being a bullet near his spine. But doctors could not find the location of the bullet. They searched and searched in hopes of getting it out. But after repeated attempts they simply could not find it. Yet, doctor after doctor stuck his hand in the wound to probe and try to find the bullet. Garfield died several months after the bullet wound - not from the bullet, but from infections inflicted by the repeated searches. Lots of Christians spend their lives regretting bad decisions. They probe the wound and keep going over it. You have been forgiven – and this communion table declares it. Trust it and give thanks.

This God redeems your life from the pit – resurrection from the grave is the first step of the spiritual life. He crowns your head with steadfast love and mercy. Your youth is renewed like the eagles. This fully happens in heaven; but on earth, there are people who are so delighted in the Lord that they just seem forever young. He satisfies us with good things – a buffet of grace (vs. 5). Every time we come to the table, think about what God has done for you – remember his benefits. In a mysterious way, Calvin believed that communion was medicine for the soul. But don't stop with what God has done for us – look at who God is for us.

3) Who God Is for Us (8-14, 17-19)

I love the way this section begins, “The Lord is . . .” Following this opening, is a cascade of qualities that we treasure: compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever. Within this Psalm there are three measures of God's love for us. His love for us is as high as the “heavens are above the earth.” His forgiveness for us is as vast as the distance the “east is from the west.” His love is from “everlasting to everlasting.” This is the way God deals with his people. He is like the best father. God lasts forever – and he keeps his covenant.

4) Who We Are? (vs. 15-16)

God knows how we are formed. We are just dust – not really all that much. Made from dust and to dust we shall return. Our life is transitory – here today, gone tomorrow. We are fading. We won't last forever. So thank God and trust him.

5) Conclusion - Response of Praise (20-22)

All heaven praises. All his creation praises. There is no corner in the universe where God is not praised. In our thanksgiving we are invited to join the chorus.

Last Sunday I was in the Glenville New Life Presbyterian Church in East Cleveland. It is a church comprised of folks for whom life has been hard – yet such praise was evident. These folks believed that God had set them free and redeemed them. In their bulletin there are words of a song they sang, “Such Joy, Such Unspeakable Joy.” When we know we are loved it is unspeakable joy. That is what this communion table tells us – it is a place where we are loved.