

God's Great and Wonderful Character

Psalm 103

Psalm 103:1-5 - *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with loving-kindness and tender mercies, who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

Background Notes

This well-known psalm glorifies the Lord for His great and wonderful character. Some commentators have argued that Psalm 103 is the best known and best loved of all the psalms. Probably Psalm 23 and Psalm 100 are better known, and maybe better loved. They are shorter psalms and are easier to memorize. However, Psalm 103 is right up there in the "Top Ten," to use a figure of speech.

This psalm of David begins and ends with the phrase, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." To bless the Lord means to show adoration for the Lord as we thank Him and praise Him. The idea is that David wanted to praise the Lord with more than just his lips. He wanted to praise the Lord with every ounce of his body, soul, and spirit. He did not want to just go through the motions of religious practice, using a prayer book and lip service, as many people do today. No, David wanted to praise the Lord with all that was within him. Our doctrinal points discuss three areas in which we should praise the Lord with all that is within us.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers should praise the Lord for His personal benefits.

In verses 1-5 we see five personal benefits the Lord gives to us as His beloved people.

a. Salvation – He pardons all our iniquities (v3).

What a benefit! As Micah 7:18 says, "*Who is a God like Thee who pardons iniquity?*"

b. Healing - He heals all our diseases (v3).

You may say, "Wait! Why do we still die if the Lord heals all our diseases?" There's more than one part to the answer. Right now, we're healed of the spiritual disease of sin in line with the pardoning of all our iniquities, and ultimately we will have disease-free physical bodies forever. Another part of the answer is that the Lord can heal our present bodies if He so chooses. Yet another part of the answer is that the disease may be disciplinary, and may be taken away when a believer confesses his or her sin (James 5).

c. Rescue - He redeems our life from the pit (v4).

We are saved, not only from eternity in hell, but for protection in this life from the pitfalls that could lead to a premature death.

d. Reward - He crowns us with loving-kindness and tender mercies (v4). We're not only forgiven sinners, but we are crowned with the loyal love and tender care of the God of the universe.

e. Renewal - He satisfies us with good things; our youth is renewed like the eagles (v5). Two other scriptures come immediately to mind. Psalm 84:11, "*No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly,*" and Isaiah 40:31, "*Those who wait upon the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles.*"

As verse 2 says, let us not forget the Lord's benefits. Believers should praise the Lord for His personal benefits.

2. Believers should praise the Lord for His gracious loving-kindness.

The Hebrew word for loving-kindness is *hesed*. *Hesed* is used four times in this psalm (v4, 8, 11, & 17). *Hesed* is hard to translate into English with just one word, so the translations vary, using "loving-kindness", or "mercy" or just "love." The Hebrew word conveys the idea of the loyal love, steadfast love, merciful love, and covenanted love that God has for His people. Do you see why it's hard to translate it with one English word?

Look again at the fourth personal benefit: "*Who crowns you with loving-kindness and tender mercies*" (v4). The Lord loves us with a loyal, and steadfast, and merciful, and unconditional covenanted love.

In verses 6-18 we see details of that gracious loving-kindness that the Lord shows us. "*The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed*" (v6). Let me ask you, are you oppressed unrighteously in some way at this present time? Turn your case over to the Lord and wait for Him to act on your behalf. He will.

Verse 7: "*He made known His ways to Moses;; His acts to the children of Israel.*" If we walk with the Lord, we will not only see His hand at work as Israel did, but we will be given insight like Moses into the ways of God.

Verse 8: *“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.”* We are loved with a love that is loyal, and steadfast, and merciful, and covenanted, and unconditional. Aren't you glad that the Lord is slow to anger?

Verses 9-12 elaborate and illustrate the truth of verse 8: *“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 punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”*

The reason why God has not punished us according to our iniquities is because the Lord Jesus took the punishment for our sin when He died on the cross as our Substitute. I'm so glad that our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west, rather than as far as the north is from the south (v12). Why? Because you can only go north so far before you begin going south! You automatically go south when you pass the North Pole. But when you're going east or west, you can keep on going in that direction forever. Whether the psalmist had that in mind or not, I'm not sure, but it's true!

“As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him.” (v13). Every father who has seen his children struggle with a physical or emotional burden, or bear up in an unfair situation, can certainly identify with verse 13. In the same way, the Lord knows our problems and our weaknesses, and He is there to help us in His gracious love and kindness. *“He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.”*

Verses 15 and 18 contrast the brevity of our lives with the infinite and permanent nature of God's gracious loving-kindness for His people. *“As for man, his days are like grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them.”*

The phrase *“and His righteousness to children's children”* at the end of verse 17 is certainly an encouragement to parents and grandparents of children growing up today in this world of ever decreasing moral and spiritual values. Wouldn't you agree? Believers should praise the Lord for His gracious loving-kindness.

3. Believers should praise the Lord for His total sovereignty.

Verses 19-21: *“The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all. Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word. Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, you ministers of His, who do His pleasure. Bless the LORD, all His works, in all places of His dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!*

Verse 19 says that God's sovereignty rules over all. It is total. **Total sovereignty!** Everything is included. Ephesians 1:11 says that God works **all things** after the counsel of His will. All created beings, including angels (*"His hosts"* v21), and all created things (*"His works"* v22). As I've said so often, **"There are no maverick molecules in the universe!"**

I don't know about you, but I love the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. When all is said and done, God is in total control. Nothing happens that He does not allow, even though we may not be able to understand why at the present time. It is a great comfort in times of stress to know that He is in control. Believers should praise the Lord for His total sovereignty.

Practical Applications

1. Don't remember what God forgets.

One of the blessings of the new covenant that God extends to all believers is, *"I will remember their sins no more"* (Jeremiah 31:34, and quoted in Hebrews 8 & 10). He no longer remembers our sins! Verse 12 emphasizes that truth: *"As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."* If God has forgiven our sins, and removed our sins, and doesn't remember our sins, let's not be morbid, constantly mulling over past sins. Don't remember what God forgets!

2. Don't forget what God remembers.

Verse 14: *"For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust."* This verse should not only be an encouragement to us, but it should be a challenge to us as well. We should not forget what God remembers. Failure to remember and realize that we are but dust leads to pride and overconfidence on the one hand, or burnout and breakdown on the other. Don't forget what God remembers!