

## “Reasons to Bless the Lord”

### Psalms 103

I am currently reading a book entitled, *Why God Calls us to Dangerous Places*, about a woman who served as a missionary in Afghanistan for several years just after 9/11, when the Taliban’s reign of terror was at its peak. During those years she faced incredible peril—she was under constant surveillance from the men at a nearby mosque; there were massive explosions in her neighborhood that rocked her home, there were numerous threats to kidnap her, some of her ministry colleagues *were* kidnapped and others were executed.

She said that one of the ways she handled living in a perpetual state of exposure to danger was that she would intentionally remind herself who God is and what He was all about. And so, for example, sometimes she would take a whiteboard and a marker and start writing the names of God and the attributes of God until there was no room on the board left to write. And she said that as she mused on these truths, in the midst of her turbulent circumstances, her heart would be calmed and quieted, and she would be able to sleep peacefully.

When Jesus said that truth sets us free, part of what He meant was that truth sets us free from fear and worry and doubt and despair. In other words, truth’s effect upon our lives is very practical. It gives us a different perspective—God’s perspective, which enables us to be content and joyful and peaceful even when our circumstances are just the opposite.

I believe this is the primary purpose of many of the psalms in Scripture. They declare truth in such a way that as we sing these psalms, as we mull them over and take them to heart, we are elevated to a higher plane of thinking, which profoundly changes our attitudes, and ultimately our actions.

The psalm that we are going to be looking at this morning is one of these psalms, and it happens to be my favorite. It declares several wonderful truths about who God is and what God is like and what God does for us personally, each of which is a reason to bless the LORD, and, taken together, are cause for profound celebration.

I am going to preach this psalm a bit differently than I have some of the other psalms in this series. Expository preachers like me who typically dissect words and analyze grammatical nuances can ruin an exquisite piece of poetry like Psalm 103 if we’re not careful. We have to be mindful that in our analysis and exegesis we don’t obstruct the beauty or flow or symmetry of the poem, and that we preserve its original purpose—which is to facilitate worship. So I’d like to explore it this morning in a way that facilitates worship, while helping us to appreciate its theological richness and beauty.

As you can see from the heading, this is a psalm authored by David. It is a psalm of praise because it begins and ends with imperatives to “bless the LORD”. To bless the LORD means simply to celebrate who He is, to revel in His wonderful attributes and marvelous deeds. David begins the psalm by commanding his own soul to bless the LORD, and he ends by commanding all God’s works everywhere to bless Him. In between he states many reasons why it is appropriate to do so.

Let’s stand and read the psalm together.

<sup>1</sup> *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*

<sup>2</sup> *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,*

<sup>3</sup> *who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,*

*4 who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
5 who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

*6 The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.*

*7 He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.*

*8 The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

*9 He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.*

*10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

*11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*

*12 as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

*13 As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.*

*14 For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*

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

*16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.*

*17 But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,*

*18 to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.*

*19 The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.*

*20 Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word!*

*21 Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will!*

*22 Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!*

What an amazing psalm! Isn't it wonderful how many different attributes of God are proclaimed in it? In fact, I don't know of another passage of Scripture where more attributes of God are featured than are in Psalm 103. And isn't it marvelous how many of God's wondrous deeds are declared in this psalm, and how David shows us *how* God performs these deeds on *our* behalf?

Truly, this psalm contains some of the most encouraging and uplifting truth in all of Scripture. And so the first thing I want to encourage you to do is to read this psalm every day for thirty days. It would be a good thing for couples or families to do together. If you can memorize it, that would be terrific! If you can figure out a way to sing this psalm, better yet. The reason I'm encouraging you to do this is so that your mind and heart will be marinated with this truth, and you will become so familiar with it that you can, for the rest of your life, meditate on it while you're driving, or washing dishes, or working in the garden, or chopping wood. I guarantee, you will be better off for it.

Three thousand years ago King Solomon said, "*As a man thinks in his heart, so is he*" (*Prov. 23:7*). What we choose to think about, to ponder, and to dwell upon actually determines who we are, how we feel, what we do, and how we react and respond.

And here's why Psalm 103 can make a real difference in our lives. Many of us have a steady stream of negativity flowing into our lives. Some of us live with family members who are constantly critical or crabby or caustic. Some of us have jobs or go to schools where

we are surrounded by co-workers and classmates who are ill-tempered and foul-mouthed, creating a toxic atmosphere that we can't get away from even if we wanted to. And when we turn on the television and watch the news or listen to the politicians, we are inundated with divisiveness and hostility and acrimony.

Whether or not we realize it, this takes a toll.

It might interest you to know that in recent years neuroscience has reinforced Solomon's ancient truth with quantifiable results. Renowned neuroscientist, Dr. Andrew Newberg, who has done extensive research on brain function and faith, says that what we think about makes a profound difference in the physiological functioning of the brain. His research shows that praying and meditating regularly on Scripture actually changes the brain over time. It produces increased activity and stimulation in the frontal lobes, one of the areas of the brain involved with compassion and positive emotions.

On the other hand, when we are exposed to and then dwell upon negative things, violent things, evil things it stimulates activity in another part of our brain, the amygdala, the part from which fear and anger and anxiety and aggression emanate.

And so becoming really familiar with a passage of Scripture like Psalm 103, and meditating on it will positively affect our attitudes, emotions, moods, desires, perspectives, and behavior. It will open the door for us to experience joy and peace. For, "*As a man thinks in his heart, so is he*" (Prov. 23:7).

We're going to look at this psalm in sections for the next few minutes, and because of its length and because I don't want to over-analyze and run the risk of obscuring the psalm's intent, my comments will be fairly minimal. But as we look at each section, let it lead you to worship our great and awesome God.

**Verses 1-5.** <sup>1</sup> *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*

<sup>2</sup> *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,*

<sup>3</sup> *who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,*

<sup>4</sup> *who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,*

<sup>5</sup> *who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

David begins the psalm by commanding his own soul to bless the LORD—to celebrate who He is, to revel in His wonderful attributes and marvelous deeds. The reason that David has to command himself to do this is that it is not automatic. It should be. We ought to naturally and spontaneously bless the LORD, and we shouldn't need any reminders or any prompts.

But one of the most unpleasant realities of being human is our tendency to forget and, consequently, our failure to appreciate and even to take for granted the profound significance of things and persons that have changed our lives and made us what we are. Oh, we don't forget them completely—they're still there, tucked away in some remote corner of our memory. But they don't surface very often—at least, not as often as they should.

As human beings we need to be reminded, so that we can once again be impacted and affected by the truth.

That's why David, in verse 2, would say, "*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits...*" Then he talks about some profound, life-altering things that God had done for him, that if He had *not* done, would surely have left him in a miserable state of existence. He forgave all his sins. Not some of them. Not just the ones he felt really, really sorry about. Not just the ones where no one else got hurt. Not just the ones that didn't have terrible,

lifelong consequences. He forgave all of them, and David had a pile of sins, just like you and me.

What is more, the LORD healed all his diseases. I don't know what kind of diseases David had, but apparently he had some that God, in His kindness and generosity, healed him of. And David was conscious that it made his life better.

As you know, God doesn't heal everybody's diseases. He didn't heal all the Apostle Paul's diseases, and He had good reasons for it, because there are lots of things that are more important than our physical health and well-being, and God can use sickness and disease to accomplish those things. But at least in David's case He *did* heal. And that was a reason for David to bless Him.

The LORD also redeemed David's life from the pit. This could be a reference to when David was literally hiding from Saul in caves in the wilderness, it could be a metaphorical reference to his emotional despair, or it could be a reference to His deliverance from death itself. Whatever it was, David was mindful that *God* was his Savior. *God* rescued him. It wasn't that David picked himself up by his own bootstraps and saved himself. As he said in Psalm 62, "*He alone is my rock and my salvation*" (62:1).

David was also crowned with steadfast love and mercy. I believe what David meant by this is that these were the two qualities that were on the forefront of his mind as he thought about God. Not God's transcendence; not His holiness; not His justice, all of which are wonderful attributes and are very consequential. But for David to be crowned with God's love and mercy meant that he was acutely aware that God was approachable and personable and inviting and endearing. These are the qualities that drew David into His presence, rather than kept Him at arms-length.

Finally, the LORD satisfied David's soul with good so that his youth was renewed like the eagle's. David's existence wasn't full of dullness and drudgery. Because of the Lord's goodness to him it was buoyant and energetic. He was always able to look forward to new things, always able to anticipate spring after seasons of winter. And it was because he was aware that God kept lavishing him with blessings because of His goodness.

But David is just getting started. It's as though he is saying, "I'm going to remind my soul of all the LORD has done for me personally, each of which I would liken to a firework. And once he does that it's like it sets off in his mind a chain reaction that results in multiple explosions of praise. And here's where he proclaims so many of God's wonderful attributes.

Look at **verses 6-7**. *<sup>6</sup> The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.*

*<sup>7</sup> He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.*

It's one thing for *David* to be able to rattle off God's blessings. After all, he was a king. He led a life of privilege. He never went hungry. He was always first in line and always had the best seat in the house. He lived in a palace; he had servants; he snapped his fingers and got whatever he wanted.

But David wants us know that God is not just the God of the privileged, but of the oppressed. He watches over the ones who get the raw end of the deal or the short end of the stick. He cares about the ones who are unfairly treated, and who are exploited by those who have means.

He is a righteous God, who will ultimately make sure that justice is done. Nothing escapes His notice, which is why He called Moses to lead His people Israel out of bondage

in Egypt. He had heard their cry, and He was determined to do something about it. And what He did not only brought *Him* honor and glory, but it proved to Israel that He saw their affliction and had compassion on them.

And speaking of compassion, look at **verses 8-14**. <sup>8</sup> *The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

<sup>9</sup> *He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.*

<sup>10</sup> *He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

<sup>11</sup> *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*

<sup>12</sup> *as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

<sup>13</sup> *As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.*

<sup>14</sup> *For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*

There are some who think that the God of the Old Testament is austere, harsh, unapproachable, and impersonal and that He is not the same God as in the New Testament. That's not true! These verses in Psalm 103 declare who God is and what He has *always* been like. He has always been merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love. He has always been softhearted toward the penitent sinner, and eager to forgive those who confess their sins. He has never held a grudge, but has always forgiven completely. He has always been compassionate like a father, knowing our weaknesses and frailties and taking them into consideration in His dealings with us.

This is who He is. And we would do well to think about these things often. Because we as human beings *are* sometimes weak and inept and we *do* fail with a disturbing degree of frequency. And, at such times, we can succumb to wallowing in guilt and shame and self-loathing and self-condemnation. But we can turn to our God who is compassionate, merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. And we can go to that God and confess our sin and failure and be forgiven and restored and reconciled to Him, and experience the joy of our salvation.

And that's not because God exists for us or for our joy and pleasure. It's because of who He is, and because we exist for Him and His pleasure. Look at **verses 15-18**. <sup>15</sup> *As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field;*

<sup>16</sup> *for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.*

<sup>17</sup> *But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,*

<sup>18</sup> *to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.*

Life is not about us. It's not about how happy we are or even about how many blessings we get to enjoy from God. Our lives on this earth are like a breath. It's all about God and what He's like and what He has done and how He has given us the privilege of being in relationship with Him. But don't forget, He's in control. Look at **verse 19**.<sup>19</sup> *The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.*

The God David described throughout most of the psalm as so personal and so endearing, is now described as the sovereign Lord of the universe—the One whose dominion

is not confined to a realm or a race or a species, but whose dominion is over all. Once again, this is our God!

And it compels David to command creatures from these other realms to bless Him as well, for He is worthy of all praise, from every creature and thing in His creation. Look at **verses 20-22**. *Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word!*

<sup>21</sup> *Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will!*

<sup>22</sup> *Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!*

What a psalm! What a God! What a privilege to worship Him! So, take the challenge: read this psalm every day for thirty days. Memorize it if you can. Put it to music if you can. Marinate your mind and heart with this truth, and see what a difference it makes in how you think, how you feel, and how you live.

## **“Reasons to Bless the Lord”**

### **Psalm 103**

**Main Idea:** Everyone should bless the Lord because of how wonderful He is to us and how many marvelous things He has done for us

**Command to personally praise the Lord (1-5)**

**With all one’s heart and soul (1)**

**Not forgetting His blessings (2-5)**

**Forgiveness of sins (3a)**

**Healing diseases (3b)**

**Redeeming from the pit (4a)**

**Showers with love and mercy (4b)**

**Satisfies desires with good things (5)**

**The Lord’s righteousness and justice (6-7)**

**The Lord’s mercy and grace (8-18)**

**His anger is temporary (9)**

**His mercy prevents our certain doom (10)**

**His love is infinite (11)**

**His forgiveness is complete (12)**

**His compassion is fatherly (13)**

**His love is everlasting (15-18)**

**The Lord’s sovereignty (19)**

**Command for every creature to praise the Lord (20-22)**

# Family Life Groups

## Sermon Discussion Questions

### “Reasons to Bless the Lord”

#### Psalm 103

**Main Idea:** Everyone should bless the Lord because of how wonderful He is to us and how many marvelous things He has done for us

How many attributes of God can you find in this psalm? Have those attributes affected you personally? How?

List all the marvelous things the Lord has done that are mentioned in this psalm that He has done for you personally. When did He do these things for you? Why did He do these things for you? Why is it good to remember these things? What is your response to Him?