

Bless His Holy Name Psalm 103

Main Idea: In this beloved hymn of praise, the Psalmist blesses the Lord for the many redemptive benefits displayed to God's people.

- I. What benefits! Forgiven, healed, redeemed, crowned, satisfied (103:1-5)**
- II. The Lord's character: righteousness and justice, grace and mercy, magnified (103:6-10)**
- III. The Father's love – like immeasurable distances – so high and wide (103:11-14)**
- IV. The King's people, though feeble, because His love endures, they will survive (103:15-19)**
- V. Bless the Lord, in heaven and on earth; Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and be revived! (103:20-22)**

A few years ago, a group of us traveled to Nigeria. One night our local leader introduced me to Nigerian minister. His Nigerian name was difficult to pronounce, and so the leader gave me the meaning of it. He said, "It means 'Bless His Name.'" I was a bit jealous of this name! I said, "It's nice to meet you Reverend Bless His Name!"

In Psalm 103, David calls himself and others to bless the Lord for the many redemptive benefits the Lord has displayed to His people. This Psalm introduces a series of psalms of praise grouped together in Psalms 103-107 (Allen, 21).

David begins and ends the Psalm by preaching to himself about the need to praise God, using in the expression, "O my soul" (103:1-2, 22b). This inward dialogue, or "gospel self-talk," appears in various places in the Psalms (Ps 42; 43; 62:5; 116:7; 146:1). In Psalm 42, the Psalmist preaches to downcast soul; in Psalm 103, David's focuses on the mind and memory in this self-exhortation.

We too may shake off gloom and apathy by reminding ourselves about the nature and work of God. When we think rightly about God and consider His grace, it engenders gratitude. If we aren't praising God truly, then that means we aren't thinking about God rightly and deeply.

In between these self-talk bookends (103:3-22a), David preaches to the community and all creation. With echoes from the book of Exodus, David reminds everyone about who God is, and what God has done. He provides numerous reasons to bless the Lord. So then, while he begins with himself, this Psalm isn't individualistic. It's personal and communal, just like authentic Christianity is.

Inspired by H.F. Lyte's famous hymn "Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven," I put together a few lines to serve as our outline:

What benefits! Forgiven, healed, redeemed, crowned, satisfied;
The Lord's character: righteousness and justice, grace and mercy, magnified;
The Father's love – like immeasurable distances – so high and wide;
The King's people, though feeble, because His love endures, they will survive;
Bless the Lord, in heaven and on earth; Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and be revived!

My son Joshua said I don't need to write a poem about this Psalm since it's already a poem in the Bible! I told him that I wrote it not to impress but to help us remember this amazing Psalm. I'm

trying to draw attention in particular to the glory of God's *complexity*. God is Lover, Judge, Father, and King. Some people have a vision of God that's only one-dimensional. But Psalm 103 shows that God is each of these. Moyter comments, "The blend of changeless fatherly care and endless sovereign rule is the distinctive stress of this psalm" (552).

What benefits! Forgiven, healed, redeemed, crowned, satisfied (103:1-5)

David begins exciting his affections with a three-fold call to bless the Lord: "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" (103:1-2, ESV). Twice he calls his "soul" to bless the Lord. He knows the Lord, whose name is "holy," deserves *whole person worship* – "all that is within me" (103:1). The Psalm begins with a call to our inmost being, and it ends with a four-fold call to the uttermost of beings (20-22).

David adds, "forget not all his benefits," the first phrase of many that has echoes of Moses (cf., Deut 6:12; 8:11). It's vitally important for believers to remember the blessings of God, and to live in constant gratitude to God. Ingratitude flows from an arrogant heart, and is something for which we should repent (see for example, Hezekiah in 2 Chr 32:35).

We often talk about the "benefits package" when discussing jobs. If you do the work, you get the package. Here, we find undeserving people receiving the most important and most glorious benefits package ever! These benefits don't come from a heavenly employer, but a heavenly Father. Consider this list of "hymnic participles" (Allen, 19):

who forgives all your iniquity,
 who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
 who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (103:3-5, ESV)

What benefits! We need to constantly remind ourselves of these blessings, for David tells us that by doing so, we will experience eagle-like spiritual renewal (5b).

Scripture shows us numerous examples of the how the Lord's *forgives* and *heals*. In the days of Moses, rebellious Israel certainly needed to be forgiven of wicked idolatry (cf., Ex 32). In the days of David, the king certainly needed pardon (e.g., 2 Sam 11; Ps 51). In our day, we need forgiveness repeatedly. In Psalm 25, David reminds us of the God-glorifying nature of divine forgiveness saying, "For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great" (Ps 25:11, ESV, cf., 18). God forgives, and God gets the glory for granting it.

In the Exodus narrative, God declares that He is "The Lord, your healer" (Ex 15:26b, ESV). From the story of the paralytic in Mark 2, we find that Jesus both forgives and heals (Mk 2:1-12). He priorities forgiveness, and previews the day in which all the lame our healed in the new heavens and new earth. In His kindness, the Great Physician sometimes provides a foretaste of that great day by touching the sick and restoring their health.

In thinking of David's sin with Bathsheba, we find a difference between the way God forgives and the way God heals (Kidner, 364). God granted forgiveness to David immediately, but the healing of his son was denied (2 Sam 12:13-14). God invites sinners to repent and find immediate forgiveness. But while sinners may fast and pray for healing, they aren't necessarily granted it. The timing for healing is up to God – and sometimes that means healing is delayed until the life

to come (Wilcock, 118). But this fact shouldn't discourage the believer. Instead, it should point us to what matters most: *our relationship with God*. Sin *destroys our relationship with God* – but God stands ready to forgive (Neh 9:27); sickness may *deepen our relationship with God* (Heb 5:8; 12:11; Rom 8:23) – and so in seeking healing and strength we enjoy the grace of knowing God better (cf., Phil 3:10-11).

Next, David reminds us that the Lord **redeems** our lives from the pit (103:4). At one level, this expression could refer to rescue from deadly dangers in life, but David probably has the idea of being rescued from death (resurrection) in mind. We find examples of this longing in Psalm 49 (7-9; 13-15) and Psalm 16:9-11. As widen our gaze even more fully to the New Testament, the redemption experienced through Jesus Christ gives us an even greater appreciation for the Lord who redeems sinners from the pit (Col 1:13-14; Rom 3:24).

Not only does the Lord redeem, but he also **crowns** us, exalting us with undeserved royalty. Even though we deserve humiliation because of our sin, our gracious redeemer makes us part of His royal family. Such an act is attributed to the Lord's "steadfast love [*hesed*] and mercy ["compassion, HCSB]" (4b). It's not attributed to our goodness, faithfulness, or achievements. In our culture, one gets crowned for exceptional performance; in the kingdom of God, we get crowned because of Jesus' performance and His bestowal of grace (cf., Eph 2:7).

David rounds out the opening section by reminding himself and the community that even the Lord **satisfies** and **renews** His people (103:5). He satisfies us with the best of things; that is, forgiveness and a right relationship with Him. He satisfies our thirst for joy, meaning, significance, and beauty. He renews our spirits, like a strong eagle (Isa 40:31), us as we ponder what who He is, and what He has done for us. The eagle is a picture of buyout tireless strength – quite a picture of renewal!

The Lord's character: righteousness and justice, grace and mercy, magnified (103:6-10)

After speaking of the Lord's goodness (2-5), David now reflects on more attributes of God. He makes a general statement first, with a probable allusion to Israel's bondage to Egypt, "The Lord executes acts of righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" (103:6). The Lord doesn't tolerate injustice, but executes perfect righteousness and justice. His rule is just and righteous, and He rights wrongs. The Lord's righteousness "is the stamp of all his actions" (Moyter, 552). He considers the plight of the oppressed, comes to their aid, and deals with the oppressors justly.

In verse 7, David reflects the works and ways of the Lord revealed to Moses. These works weren't limited to in the Exodus miracles, but all throughout the wilderness experience, and at Mount Sinai. Through this journey, the Lord trained His people (Kidner, 366; cf., Deut 8:2).

Verse 8 contains is almost a direct quote of Exodus 34:6-7. After Israel worshiped the golden calf in wicked idolatry, The Lord spoke these words about Himself. The Lord passed before Moses, revealing His name/character to him. David summarizes the Lord's self-portrait here with four attributes: "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps 103:8, ESV). These four perfections are repeated throughout the Scriptures (cf., Ps 86:15, 145:8; Neh 9:17; Jer 3:12; Joel 2:13). This statement, given first to Moses, is one of the most important statements in Scripture about the character of God.

God defines who He is. No one else gets to decide what He's like. He revealed Himself to us. We must resist the temptation of worshipping the God of our imagination; and instead worship the God of revelation.

Further, notice that David doesn't simply pull this statement out of the air. He proceeds to list four corresponding acts of God in verses 9-10 that are tied to these attributes of God:

He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities. (103:9-10, ESV).

God didn't simply say that He is merciful and compassionate; He shows that He is! As you read the book of Exodus, for example, you find this to be the case.

Contrast this with Islam for a moment. In the Quran, each of the 114 chapters (with one exception), begins like this: "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate." While Allah may be called this, the fact is, in Islam, Allah deals with people on the basis of their performance, not according to grace. You may call Allah "merciful and compassionate" but does he actually show mercy and compassion in the Quran itself? The Bible is very clear about the nature of God. He is redeemer. He is forgiver. He is lover. These attributes are displayed with *actions* throughout Scripture, and across human history. He has dealt with us on the basis of grace. God revealed the magnitude of His love by sending His Son to die for sinners (cf., Rom 5:8). He didn't merely declare that He was gracious; He demonstrated it!

David says in verse 9 that Lord will "not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever" (103:9, ESV). "Chide" translates a term used for disputes and for nursing grievances (Kidner, 366). The Lord is justly angry at sin, but He doesn't maintain His anger forever. Have you known of people who just look for reasons to be angry? They nurse grievances. They stay mad all the time. God isn't like that, though He actually has good reasons for being angry. Marvel at the reluctance of His anger (Duncan, "Grace").

Recently, my favorite basketball team, the UK Wildcats played the Duke Blue Devils. The Cats triumphed, and this game was particularly sweet for me since two Duke fans watched the game with me! One of these guys happens to live with me (only the gospel could bring us together!). I told this "Dukey" that the replay would be shown all week long in the living room. It would be a festival of sorts. Now, why do UK fans dislike Duke so much? There are many reasons, but it began in the days of Duke superstar Christian Laettner. In 1992, played a perfect game against UK, and did so with his typical bully-like behavior. In the final seconds, he beat UK with an unbelievable last second shot, which sports networks repeatedly play during basketball season. The phrase "I still hate Laettner" appears today in various places, like in documentaries and printed on t-shirts. My son even went around class the day after our recent victory over Duke telling his classmates "I still hate Laettner." This funny example illustrates the idea of "keeping your anger forever." Kentucky fans can't let it go. Do you have ongoing bitterness or anger against someone? How would you fill in the blank, "I still hate _____." Learn from the character of God here. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; He doesn't keep His anger forever. Praise God.

Further, in God's mercy, He doesn't "deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (103:10, ESV). This truth reminds us of Psalm 130, where we read that if God kept a record of our iniquities, we couldn't stand (130:3-4). Can you imagine if all of your sins were displayed for all to see? Today people talk about police wearing cameras in order to hold them accountable. Imagine if we had a camera on us at all times, and people could just watch us all the time (a recent novel called *The Circle* includes this kind of concept). Here's the deal: God knows it all. We hide nothing from the One who matters most. And yet – He doesn't deal with us according to our sins! He doesn't give us what we deserve! Kidner says, that God tempers not only his wrath (103:9), but He also tempers His justice (103:10) – and that at great

cost to Himself, as the New Testament reveals in the death of Christ (366). In His holiness, God dealt with our sin; in His love He provided His Son as atonement.

Bless His holy name for such patience, mercy, and grace. May the Lord empower us to imitate His mercy with others! May the Lord make us slow to anger, and abounding in love for others!

The Father's love – like immeasurable distances – so high and wide (103:11-14)

How can one describe God's great love? David attempts to use immeasurable distances to get the point across. Paul does something similar in the New Testament (Eph 3:18ff.). First, David goes **vertical**, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him" (103:11, ESV). Words fail to convey the magnitude of God's love. So the massive love of God, the loyal love of God, displayed to unworthy Israel is compared to the grander of the heavens. Whenever you look into the clear blue skies, or behold a distant star, remind yourself that God's mercy is greater still (Williams, *Kindle*).

In Jesus' high priestly prayer, before going to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that believers would experience the greatness of God's love (Duncan). He asked the Father that the world would know that the Father loves us even as He loves the Son" (Jn 17:23). We're in Christ, and so we're loved with a love that surpasses explanation. For all eternity, we will marvel at the magnitude of God's love.

But be warned, though, this love must not be taken lightly. Recipients of this love respond in awe and holy respect. We read of this response three times in the Psalm, with the phrase, "those who fear Him" (11, 13, 17; cf., 34:7, 9; 85:9; 102:15; Rom 8:28). Don't presume upon God's love; stand amazed by His love. Respond with a life of worship and obedience (cf., Rom 12:1-2).

The Lord's pardoning love for Israel needs another directional illustration, so David goes **horizontal**: "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (103:12; cf., Ps 36:5; 57:10; Isa 55:9). Remind yourself daily of the comprehensiveness of God's forgiveness.

Sometimes wounded people constantly bring up past offenses with others. They play the "past offense trump card" in present conflicts. They may say things like, "Do you remember when you... I can't believe you..." David tells us here that God – though God's memory is perfect and though He's never at fault – He never plays this card. He doesn't say to forgiven people, "Do you remember that time you turned your back on me? Do you remember that time you ate that fruit?" (Duncan). Praise God, He removes our sin as far as the east is from the west!

Once again, we need only to look at the New Testament to have an even greater appreciation for the immeasurable love of God, experienced through Jesus Christ. The Savior has removed our guilt. There is no condemnation. We are free and forgiven forever. May our gracious Savior enable us to forgive others the way we have been forgiven (Eph 4:32)!

From great distances, David turns to the Lord's **nearness** in verse 13-14. The Lord not only liberates, He draws us in as family. David says, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (ESV). The word "compassion" here (translated sometimes as "pity") is a very emotional word, a visceral term. It conveys the deep feeling of a true parent (Kidner, 366). Isaiah uses it to speak motherly-love (cf., Is. 49:15). It's also used in 1 Kings 3:26 in a story displaying the emotional intensity of a mother. God isn't distant and detached, but filled with emotion for His kids.

The Lord adopted Israel (Rom 9:4). He made them His children. The New Testament unpacks the doctrine of adoption even more gloriously (cf., Rom 8:12ff; Gal 4:4-7). J.I. Packer states, “Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers” (*Knowing God*, 206). Such a privilege should cause us to praise Him (1 Jn 3:1). Even if your earthly father wasn’t or isn’t compassionate to you, your Abba Father is. If your earthly father was or is compassionate toward you – it’s only a shadow of the Heavenly Father’s compassion (Duncan).

The next verse magnifies another feature regarding the Father’s tender love. Here it is: The Father knows us completely yet He still loves us! If you ever think that no one knows you – He does. He who knows us the best, loves us the most. While the Father calls us to holiness, He knows our weaknesses. He knows that we are but “dust” (14; cf., Gen 2:7; 3:19). We’re broken, needy sinners – but we’re still loved. Lest we doubt such love, we need only look to the cross (Gal 2:20). There, we’re reminded that we’re more broken than we’ve realized, but more loved than we have ever dreamed.

The King’s people, though feeble, because of His love endures, they will survive (103:15-19)

The Psalmist now considers an even broader vision of God. He considers the everlasting nature of God in verse 17-18, and portrays Him in verse 19 as the great King over all. He also reminds us of our frail state in verses 15-16, but reminds us of the hope that we have in the everlasting love of God.

Regarding our transient nature, the Psalmist says, “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more” (103:15-16, ESV). Like a wildflower, we flourish, but we fade (cf., Matt 6:28-30; Isa 40:6-7; Job 14:2). We’re here like the grass, and then we’re gone (cf., Ps 90:6; 92:7; Isa 51:12). If we’re so fleeting and fragile, what hope do we have? The next two verses tell us.

Our God endures. His love is permanent. In Psalm 90, we read, “from everlasting to everlasting, you are God” (1b, ESV). Here in Psalm 103:17-18, God’s everlasting love shines with glory:

But the steadfast love 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 remember to do his commandments. (103:17-18, ESV)

Our lives are brief and unpredictable. God’s steadfast love lasts forever. His righteousness is unchanging. All who respond to Him in fear, that is, who know Him in a covenant relationship, who live under His Word, have the assurance that they will dwell with Him forever.

Have your friends ever let you down? Have ever been betrayed? Forgotten? People will let you down and hurt you – sometimes even when they don’t even intend to do so (Duncan). David tells us God never let’s His people down. He never betrays His people. He will not – forever. From everlasting to everlasting He is our faithful, loyal, Father.

This promise of life forever with God is also held out to the generations to come, “to children’s children” (17b). Mary declared, “And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (Lk 1:50). Though our lives are transient, and though salvation is owing to the mercy and grace of God ultimately, we can impact the coming generations by living godly lives and by faithfully teaching the gospel (cf., Ex 34:7a; Ps 100:5; 102:28).

In verse 19, the Psalmist takes up the subject of God's kingship. Psalms 93-100 expounds this theme powerfully. Here the Psalmist says, "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (ESV). Marvel at the breadth of His kingship. He rules over all. Because our God is King, He deserves whole-hearted worship and total allegiance. Because He rules over all, we can rest peacefully. Spurgeon rightly says, "This matchless sovereignty is the pledge of our security, the pillar upon which our confidence may safely lean." (Spurgeon, 282)

Bless the Lord, in heaven and on earth; Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and be revived! (103:20-22)

David concludes his meditation by calling upon all of heaven and earth to praise God. He gives a four-fold call to praise in verses 20-22.

With language similar to Psalm 148:1-4, he begins by addressing the angelic host: "Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word!" (103:20, ESV). These supernatural beings surround the throne, and do the Lord's bidding. They worship Him day and night, and obey His word (cf., Lk 1:11, 19; 2:9; Ps 148:1-4).

David continues: "Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will!" (103:21, ESV). The angelic armies of God are part of the celestial court (Lk 2:13; Matt 26:53). They exist to do *the Lord's will* for His glory. Jesus echoes this idea in "The Lord's Prayer" (Matt 6:10), saying that we should pray for the God's will to be done "on earth *as it is in heaven*" (ESV, my emphasis). So then, this angelic army serves as an example to us. We exist to do God's will for God's glory.

Next, the Psalmist calls the rest of creation to follow suit: "Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion" (103:22a, ESV). In Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem, the people declared, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Lk 19:38). The Pharisees were upset by this action, and told Jesus to rebuke His disciples. Do you remember what Jesus said to them? He said, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out" (Lk 19:40, ESV). Creation exists to magnify the King.

Finally, David returns to his original audience, namely, himself: "Bless the LORD, O my soul!" (103:22b). Thus every creature in heaven and on earth, including himself, is charged with the same assignment: to bless the Lord. In light of who He is, and what He has one, how could we not join in this chorus of praise?

Learn the importance of reflecting on the character and work of the Lord, that you may truly and deeply bless the Lord.

Reflect and Discuss

1. What does this Psalm teach us about both the "personal" and "communal" nature of our faith?
2. What does it mean to "preach the gospel to myself?" Why is this beneficial?
3. This Psalm shows that statements about God's *attributes* correspond with God's *actions* in history – why is this significant?
4. Why is an "eagle" a fitting analogy for spiritual renewal? How do we experience such renewal?
5. Go back and read Exodus 34. Consider the surrounding context. How does this context shed light on Psalm 103?
6. How are the characteristics of God revealed in Psalm 103 reflected in Jesus' life and ministry?

7. How should you to imitate the characteristics of God revealed in Psalm 103 in your own life and ministry?
8. What does this Psalm teach us about our weaknesses? How does this impact you?
9. What does this Psalm teach us about the permanence of God's love? How does this encourage you?
10. What does this Psalm teach us about God's sovereignty? What are the implications of His sovereignty for your life?