

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 13, 2019)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Bless the Lord, O My Soul!

(Psalm 103)

Study #6

Sermon Series: Learning to Pray
(Studies in selected Psalms)

Introduction: Happy birthdays...

Birthdays were red-letter dates in our family when our kids were young. One of the traditions we observed on birthdays was an activity centered around the table at dinner time.¹

It was a time of blessing. Those of us who weren't having a birthday took turns blessing the one who was.

This *blessing* could be an expression of appreciation, it could affirm something positive, or it could be vision-casting for the future of the one being blessed.

During those years, the time of blessing was a hit. We were all eager for that special day when the rest of the family lavished praise.

When I turn to the Psalm in front of us today, I imagine King David sitting at the dinner table with the Lord at a heavenly birthday party, because Psalm 103 is, start to finish, a blessing ceremony from David to His God.²

This morning, we're going to work our way through this Psalm and bring our own blessings to God as we listen to David bring his.

Background to Psalm 103:

Over the last few Sundays, we have been exploring a few of the Bible's Psalms to help us develop a life of prayer. Each one of the one hundred and fifty Psalms has something to teach us about how to approach God.

Some of them show us how to pray when we're confused and doubting, others when we're upset, others when we're suffering, and others when we're sorry for what we've done.

Through the centuries, Christians and Jews have paid a lot of attention to this morning's Psalm. They have meditated on it, studied it, and set it to music, because the words of Psalm 103 provide a template for prayer when we find ourselves in a specific season.

This Psalm has always been a favorite because it gives us guidance in the fine art of praise. How can we best express ourselves in prayer to God when our hearts are bursting with gratitude for who He is and for what He has done for us? Check out Psalm 103.³

A season of gratitude to God is very different from what we saw last Sunday when we were looking at a very challenging Psalm.

Psalm 103 and Psalm 51

Psalm 51 was one of the Psalms David wrote after he had sinned against God by, first, sexually violating Bathsheba, and by next sending Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband, to his death in battle.

It was a dark, dark season for David, and he suffered earthly consequences for the rest of his life because of it.

³ C.S. Lewis once wrote, "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely *expresses* but completes the enjoyment; [praise] is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed... The catechism says that the chief end of man is to 'Glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him." (from Reflections on the Psalms)

¹ From a book by Gary Smalley and John Trent entitled The Blessing.

² "Bless" simply means "praise" carrying the ideas of strong emotion and devotion.

But his confession to God was genuine. His repentance was real. And the Lord showed amazing grace to David. He forgave David for these terrible sins. So, while scarred with consequences, David continued to live and reign, to grow and learn.

Following the season of moral failure, David once again began to follow the Lord. He worshiped his way back to a passionate pursuit of a life-changing relationship with his God, the one trait that had marked him as a young man before he became king, and during the early years of his reign.

So, by the time David wrote Psalm 103, he is an older man who has *experienced* a lifetime of God's goodness. He has *watched* God bless the nation of Israel. And, he has *heard* the stories of God's provision for His people his whole life. That is all fodder for this Psalm.⁴

Psalm 103 is especially written for the worshipping community and it is a Psalm tailor-made for you and me this morning.⁶ The first lines of this worship Psalm are self-talk.

David calls himself to wholehearted praise and worship.

First thought: Bless God with Your Whole Heart (v. 1)

[1] Bless the Lord, O my soul.

And all that is within me, bless His holy Name.

He is speaking to his own soul. And by turning to this Psalm, we are joining him. We are exhorting ourselves to praise God.

We aren't going to simply passively listen to David. We are entering into the exercise. We're going to be fully absorbed in it.

What David has in mind, is not a hobby or a leisurely distraction - ***"Let ALL that is within me bless His holy Name."***

When I read these words, I imagine *enthusiasm*. The mental image of a *fan* (which, as you know, is short for "fanatic") appears.

In American culture, enthusiasm is mainly expressed in the arenas of sports, politics, and entertainment.

We get excited about certain political races or candidates. We cheer in the middle of a long march downfield by our team in the waning moments of the game. We can get fanatical at the most exciting parts of the movie, or when a famous star comes to town.

And there's not a thing in the world wrong with any of that. For all we know, David may have gotten stirred up by what went on in the ordinary events of his world.

But, the fullest involvement of his soul - ***"ALL!"*** - was reserved for God. When it came time to worship. He held nothing back.

He had a heart to praise God the way an Olympian runs (all out!), the way a child plays (all in!) - and he wants us to join him.

So, here at the front end of our time together, we unpack the baggage we've carried in from last week's busyness, we put aside the load of the week to come, and we ready ourselves to give God our undivided attention.

Where David leads, we will follow. We're going to shake off apathy and bless God with ALL that is within us.

The first positive move we make in that direction is to remember.

The Lord BENEFITS His People (vv. 2-5)

*****The high and holy call to remember**

[2] Bless the Lord, O my soul.

And forget none of His benefits;

Forgetfulness is the secret spring of so much ingratitude. Forgetfulness explains so much of our praiselessness.

⁴ While we don't know much about the setting for this Psalm, we are confident that King David wrote it, and that he probably wrote it somewhat late in life.

⁶ Because of his heart for God, one of David's first moves upon becoming king was to set up choirs to foster worship in Israel.

If, right now, any of us aren't drawn to worship, memory failure is likely a factor, and if our days are more marked by complaint than by praise, we can probably chalk it up to forgetfulness.

David is not talking here about common memory loss, or the more serious diseases of the mind. And a little forgetfulness here and there is normal. It is bound to happen. (at least, I hope it is...)

No, in these words - "**forget none of His benefits**" - he is calling us to a kind of remembering for which we are responsible.

It is not memory loss that results in a child not thanking Mom or Dad for a wonderful meal.

The child knows full well who cooked the food and who earned the money to buy the food. The child simply doesn't stop, consider all of that, and say, "*Thanks, Mom, Dad, for providing a great meal for me.*"

Lapse of memory isn't what causes husbands and wives to withhold gratitude for little acts of kindness.

But gratitude is often rare in a marriage. A common complaint of married partners is, "*I feel taken for granted.*"

Husbands and wives and friends and children and parents are called to remember. We are wrong if we don't. That is part of what keeps a relationship fresh and alive.

And if gratitude is critical in our relationships with each other, it's also critical in our relationship with God. We are responsible for something more than oblivious absent-mindedness.

So, David calls to mind - he remembers; he forgets not - some of the benefits of God in his life and he says them out loud to God.

Remember How He Pardons and Heals (v. 3)

***[3] Who pardons all your iniquities;
Who heals all your diseases;***

Striking, isn't it, that David mentions forgiveness first?

It's as if, all these years later, he still can't get out of his mind the beauty of the grace he received from God after his terrible season of sin.⁷ Forgiveness tops the list of the benefits David appreciates.

And in the same verse, he mentions "**diseases.**"

In the original language, this word doesn't always refer to cancer and flu. David is talking here about the sickness of heart that comes when we are convicted of the awfulness of our sin.⁸ He knew this kind of "dis-ease", firsthand.

***[Psalm 32:3] When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.***

***[4] For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.***

During the year after his season of sin, David "**wasted away**" internally because he refused to deal honestly with God. But, when he confessed, he experienced what he calls "**healing**".

King David's sins have been plastered on the pages of the Bible for thousands of years. Very likely (hopefully), your sins and mine won't receive such broad exposure.

But that does not mean that our sins are any less damaging than David's were. We need cleansing forgiveness just as desperately as he did, and when we receive it, that forgiveness is just as precious.

So, we join David today in blessing God for forgiven sin.⁹

⁷ Remember 2 Samuel 11 and Psalm 51.

⁸ It is found in Deuteronomy 29:21 where "**sicknesses**" are considered together with plagues that come from God.

⁹ The prophet Micah wrote something similar to what we find in this Psalm.

[Micah 7:19] He will again have compassion on us;

He will tread our iniquities under foot.

Yes, You will cast all their sins

Into the depths of the sea.

No matter what is in your past, your faith in Jesus guarantees the wonder of forgiveness. You were **“dead in your trespasses and sins.”** (Ephesians 2:1) No more. You are clean, justified, free from condemnation.

And your moment-by-moment walk in the truth, where you honestly confess known sins and come clean before God, brings the joyous experience of that forgiveness.

So, let’s all **“forget not”** the grace of God’s forgiveness. And let’s also **“forget not”** how God rescues.

Remember How He Rescues and Exalts (v. 4)

**[4] Who redeems your life from the pit;
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;**

Here, David is reflecting on God’s goodness as it has played out over the course of his long life.

Some time soon, read through the parts of the Bible that tell David’s story - the second half of 1 Samuel and most of 2 Samuel. You will find rescues and triumphs galore.

David’s story takes us from his early life as the runt of a litter of eight brothers to a surprise anointing; from victory over Goliath and friendship with the king’s son to ten years of running from the king; from victory over enemies, kingship, and the consolidation of the nation to defeat by his own doing.

David’s life was a journey of rescues and crownings of epic proportions.

We view David and are tempted to think, *“What’s my life compared to that?”* as if our lives are any less “epic.”

They are not. Each of us is on a journey through life with God, and what could be more epic than that?

If there is one thing I have learned by serving as a pastor for lots of years, it is that there are no ordinary stories and there are no ordinary people.

In each of our stories there are deep longings and great potential, deep passion, and great struggle.

Each us has a life assignment to locate God’s fingerprints in our story. We are to find the “rescues” and “crownings” that we have experienced while walking with Him. We are to *read* our life stories in the context of the larger, biblical story.

Some time ago, our Care Group spent a few weeks telling each other our “life with God” stories. It was an amazing experience for all of us to hear our friends tell how they saw God in their lives.

We all got to know each other better and we all got fresh reasons to bless the Lord for how He had worked to rescue, to train, to comfort, to mature each of us.

Psalm 103 tells us to learn how to tell our own epic God story to ourselves. We are to look for open doors to tell our God story to others.

Remember His work in your life and bless the Lord for them. And remember how God has satisfied you and renewed you when you were ready to throw in the towel and quit.

Remember How He Satisfies and Renews (v. 5)

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

The roughly annual molting of an eagle is probably what David has in mind here, whereby an older eagle maintains fresh feathers for flight. The eagle regularly rubs its beak and talons against rocks to sharpen them for hunting and for battle.

On the first day of the Jewish year (Rosh Hashanah), Jews read these words from Micah and then empty their pockets, casting the contents into a body of water. By this act they are saying that God has cast their sins into the sea - and posts a *“No Fishing!”* sign. The tradition is called *Tashlich* (Hebrew for *“You will cast”*).

And that is the story of our life with God.

Abundant, satisfying life with Jesus includes ups and downs, highs and lows. There are seasons of victory and there are seasons of replenishment; there are times of defeat and struggle and times of spiritual rehab.

We don't get sustenance for a lifetime all at once, but day by day. We are strengthened as the need arises and as we turn to God to receive that strength.

If you're a young adult now, you're handling things that you couldn't have handled when you were fifteen. If you're in your mid-thirties, God has equipped you to deal with challenges you couldn't have before.

And on and on it goes.

Near the end of a long, full life, David's testimony was that God had renewed him time after time and that God had satisfied him with everything he needed.

Our Psalm continues with a more detailed focus on God's work of lavishing us with grace. David starts with a look at law, justice, righteousness.

The Lord Is GRACIOUS to His People (vv. 6-14)

The Lord is Holy (vv. 6-7)

He performs righteous deeds (v. 6)

***[6] The Lord performs righteous deeds
And judgments for all who are oppressed.***

God has set a standard. It is a righteous standard and everything He does is righteous. He executes judgments and these judgments bring relief to the oppressed and they punish the oppressor.

The nations that set themselves against Israel were judged by a righteous God.

He judged Egypt at the Red Sea; He judged violent tribes in the Sinai wilderness who opposed Israel during their trip to the Promised Land; He judged sinful nations within Palestine.

God is holy. Everything He does is holy. And He has always expected holiness from His people.

He expects righteousness from His people (v. 7)

***[7] He made known His ways to Moses,
His acts to the sons of Israel.***

God didn't play a game with His people, making them guess what He wanted them to do and how He wanted them to live. He revealed His ways to them. He was perfectly clear.

So, as the Jews wandered in the wilderness, God revealed His power by miracles and words. He gave them a detailed set of commands at Mount Sinai in the Mosaic Law. They knew exactly what He expected, what He required, demanded of them.

And then, we read this.

The Lord is Loving (vv. 8-14)

He is compassionate and gracious (v. 8)

***[8] The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.***

We have just read of a God who is holy and righteous and who commands His people to be so, too. Here, He is described as soft and tender and gentle.

This is our God.

There are dozens of stories in the Old Testament that might have been in David's mind as he wrote these words. But I wonder if he was thinking of one particular event that happened not long after the Jews escaped from Egypt. (See Exodus 32)¹⁰

Moses was up on top of Mt. Sinai receiving the Law from God, in God's presence, preparing to bring this revelation of God's will to the people.

While Moses was there and doing that, these people - who had just crossed through the dry Red Sea bed to safety - turned to idolatry and worshipped a "god" in the form of a golden calf.

End of story, right? End of Israel!

No. God put up with them, forgave them, and showed them compassion and grace. (And this may just be THE ultimate example of human sin being overshadowed by God's mercy.)

God never violates His justice in dealing with His people. He does, though, look for ways to satisfy justice without having to bring the hammer down.

God put up with Israel at Mount Sinai and He kept on putting up with them in the five hundred years between Sinai and King David.

He is a holy and righteous God whose posture toward His people is that of grace and mercy.

His mercy is out of proportion to our sins (vv. 9-10)

***[9] He will not always strive with us,
Nor will He keep His anger forever.***

***[10] He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.***

Given what was written in the Mosaic Law, we might not have expected such gracious treatment.

Oh, sure, He (often, but not always) disciplined them when they went astray. He judged them (but not all the time) for disobedience.

But His mercy was way out of proportion to their sin.

Images of grace (vv. 11-13)

Distance (v. 11)

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

Go outside tonight at look at the sky and marvel at the nearly full moon. Or on some moonless night, take a drive way out into the country and stare at the Milky Way. It's great beyond description.

That's what God's lovingkindness (mercy) is like. Grander than anything you could hope for.

As far as God's work of grace and forgiveness? If what follows isn't Post-It noted to the fronts of our refrigerators, bathroom mirrors and dashboards, they should be at least plastered to the front lobes of our brains.

Direction (v. 12)

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

The thought is that, having receiving mercy from God, we and condemnation for our sins will never intersect. Go around the globe to the north and you'll eventually run south. But start and continue going east and you'll never go west. We and our sins never meet up.

Or think of it in terms of human relationship.

¹⁰ The images from this section of Psalm 103 all seem to be taken from that historical slice of Israel's story: the Exodus itself, the golden calf incident, Moses receiving revelation about God and being led by God in the wilderness.

Relationship (v. 13)

**[13] Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.**

I know that some people have or have had fathers whose hearts are not for you. If that's you, I'm so sorry, because within the heart of every child - young and old, guy or gal - is a hunger to know that their father is for them, devoted to them, even willing to die for them.

That's compassion, and compassion is normative fathering.

David says that's the posture of your God toward you. God's love for us is exactly what we all want with all our hearts from a father.

You may be like me in that when I hear that somebody feels that way toward me, I have this sneaking suspicion that they don't know me all that well.

I am tempted to think, *"If that person knew me as well as I know myself, they wouldn't be so quick to love me."*

But, from beginning to end, the Bible tells me that God's knowledge of me is encyclopedic.

There is nothing about me that He doesn't know. He knows more good things about me than I am aware of on my best day and more sinful stuff about me than I am aware of on my worst day.

And...He loves me. Wonders and weaknesses and warts and all.

He knows us (v. 14)

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

God knows me and He knows you, inside and out. We need have no nagging fear that He might learn something about us that would cause Him to turn away.

One day, will God condemn us for our sins? No. We have been forgiven. Will He eventually get tired of us, needy people that we are? No. He has compassion on us.

This morning, we **"Bless the Lord"** because He made us, knows us intimately, AND is still crazy about us.

And there is more. David lists one more reason to bless God. That reason is the rock-solid stability of God. Us? Not so much...

The Lord Loves His People (vv. 15-18)

The Fleeting Nature of Every Person (vv. 15-16)

**[15] As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
[16] When the wind has passed over it, it is no more,
And its place acknowledges it no longer.**

The Hebrew word used here for **"man"** identifies humanity in its mortality. The term carries with it the sense of being weak and delicate.¹¹ We are, by nature, impermanent, unsubstantial, dependent.

The strength of the strongest man is a relative thing, and it fades. The most dependable person you know may prove not to be so dependable next week. The impact of the most influential person rests on the cooperation of others.

All of us in the human family are as transitory and fleeting as the grass of the field. But God...

The Steadfast Nature of God's Lovingkindness (vv. 17-18)

**[17] But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,**

¹¹ So, Brown, Drive, Briggs lexicon. Also, Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.

**[18] To those who keep His covenant
And remember His precepts to do them.**¹²

We are *weak* - He is *strong*. We *pass on* - He *remains forever*. We *change* - He *remains unchangeable*. We are *fragile* - He is *indestructible*.

This morning we **“*bless the Lord*”** not only for what He has done, but for being the faithful, loving God-over-all that He is.

Last Thought: Worship the Sovereign Lord! (vv. 19-22)

God is Sovereign Over All. (v. 19)

**[19] The Lord has established His throne in the heavens,
And His sovereignty rules over all.**

The Lord God is merciful, but He is also a Sovereign. He is able to fulfill His promises and to execute His purposes. He is omnipotent.

He rules with unfathomable wisdom. He maintains control of His universe while allowing autonomy to free-will agents like us.

And, in the face of all the turmoil we face in our world today - politically, financially, internationally, personally - David's message to us is:

“Your governmental leaders may not know what they are doing - but God knows what He is doing. You may not understand the course of your life - but God does, and He can turn the biggest mess into a beautiful mosaic. You may be frightened and anxious as you look to the future - but there is a God in Heaven who loves you AND who reigns sovereign. You can trust Him.”

This morning, we **“*bless*”** THAT God.

David started off with some self-talk, exhorting himself to shake off apathy and, **“*Bless the Lord, O my soul.*”**

Now, as he wraps up, he doesn't want to sing a solo. He invites us to join him.

God Is to be Blessed. (vv. 20-22)

**[20] Bless the Lord, you His angels,
Mighty in strength, who perform His word,
Obeying the voice of His word.**

**[21] Bless the Lord, all you His hosts,
You who serve Him, doing His will.**

**[22] Bless the Lord, all you works of His,
in all places of His dominion.**

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

¹² Grass and wildflowers are often contrasted with the rock-solid certainty of God's word (Is. 40:6-8), and of His covenant love (here).