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## Bless the Lord, O My Soul

### Psalm 103

Pastor Bryan Clark

In one of his books Chuck Swindoll tells this story:

Late one spring he was praying about having a significant ministry the following summer. He asked God for a position to open up on some church staff or Christian organization. Nothing happened. Summer arrived, still nothing. Days turned into weeks, and Aaron finally faced reality—he needed *any* job he could find. He checked the want ads and the only thing that seemed a possibility was driving a bus in southside Chicago . . . nothing to brag about, but it would help with tuition in the fall. After learning the route, he was on his own—a rookie driver in a dangerous section of the city. It wasn't long before Aaron realized just *how* dangerous his job really was.

A small gang of tough kids spotted the young driver, and began to take advantage of him. For several mornings in a row they got on, walked right past him without paying, ignored his warnings, and rode until they decided to get off . . . all the while making smart remarks to him and others on the bus. Finally, he decided that had gone on long enough.

The next morning, after the gang got on as usual, Aaron saw a policeman on the next corner, so he pulled over and reported the offense. The officer told them to pay or get off. They paid . . . but, unfortunately, the policeman got off. And *they* stayed on. When the bus turned another corner or two, the gang assaulted the young driver.

When he came to, blood was all over his shirt, two teeth were missing, both eyes were swollen, his money was gone, and the bus was empty. After returning to the terminal and being given the weekend off, our friend went to his little apartment, sank onto his bed and stared at the ceiling in disbelief. Resentful thoughts swarmed his mind. Confusion, anger, and disillusionment added fuel to the fire of his physical pain. He spent a fitful night wrestling with his Lord. *How can this be? Where's God in all of this? I genuinely want to serve Him. I prayed for a ministry. I was willing to serve Him anywhere, doing anything . . . and this is the thanks I get!*

On Monday morning Aaron decided to press charges. With the help of the officer who had encountered the gang and several who were willing to testify as witnesses against the thugs, most of them were rounded up and taken to the local county jail. Within a few days there was a hearing before the judge.

In walked Aaron and his attorney plus the angry gang members who glared across the room in his direction. Suddenly he was seized with a whole new series of thoughts. Not bitter ones, but compassionate ones! His heart went out to the guys who had attacked him. Under the Spirit's control he no longer hated them—he pitied them. They needed help, not more hate. What could he do? Or say?

Suddenly, after there had been a plea of guilty, Aaron (to the surprise of his attorney and everybody else in the courtroom) stood to his feet and requested permission to speak. “Your honor, I would like you to total up all the days of punishment against these men—all the time sentenced against them—and I request that you allow me to go to jail in their place.”

The judge didn't know whether to spit or wind his watch. Both attorneys were stunned. As Aaron looked over at the gang members (whose mouths and eyes looked like saucers), he smiled and said quietly, "It's because I forgive you."

The dumbfounded judge, when he reached a level of composure, said rather firmly, "Young man, you're out of order. This sort of thing has never been done before!" To which the young man replied with genius insight, "Oh, yes, it has, your honor . . . yes, it has. It happened over nineteen centuries ago when a man from Galilee paid the penalty that all mankind deserved."

And then, for the next three or four minutes, without interruption, he explained how Jesus Christ died on our behalf, thereby proving God's love and forgiveness.

He was not granted his request, but the young man visited the gang members in jail, led most of them to faith in Christ, and began a significant ministry to many others in southside Chicago.

Charles Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve*, p. 54

When those gang members stepped into that courtroom, they got what they expected from the judge—justice. But what they didn't expect was what they got from the victim—grace, a very unexpected grace.

When we say the words "God's ways are not our ways" and that there are many things in this life we cannot figure out or understand, questions we will not have answered, we often think in terms of suffering. That's what we talked about last week from Psalm 88: the fact that God's ways are not our ways and there are things that happen that can't be explained. There are questions that will not be answered.

But those words apply equally to God's goodness. I think oftentimes we struggle every bit as much with God's goodness as we struggle with God in times of suffering. We apply our human reasoning and we wonder, *Why would God do this? There's got to be a catch. There's got to be some fine print. There's got to be a hook in there somewhere.* And because of that, we don't really open up our arms and just receive—because we can't understand it; we can't figure it out.

As dark and gloomy as Psalm 88 was, Psalm 103 is a celebration. It's at the other end of the scale. David celebrates God's goodness, grace and mercy—but really celebrates that God's ways are not our ways. God operates at a whole different level, and David is learning to understand what that means and to receive it and to celebrate it.

Turn to Psalm 103—A Psalm of David. He opens this psalm with very familiar words, "Bless the LORD, O my soul." The Hebrew word for *bless* means "to kneel in adoration." As he opens up this psalm, he's calling himself to kneel in adoration before God.

Most of the psalms are either prayers directed toward God or toward the congregation. What's unusual about this psalm is that David is talking to himself. He's having a dialogue with his own soul. So he says "Bless the LORD, O my soul." This is a very introspective, very personal psalm where David is dialoging with himself.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits” (vv. 1–2). What’s implied in those words is that we have a tendency to forget. We have a tendency to forget God’s goodness. We begin to take it for granted. We begin to expect it. Pretty soon we get to thinking we deserve more grace, and somewhere along the way we begin to lose sight of God’s goodness.

We forget His benefits, and the psalmist is really calling his own soul to kneel before God and remember what God has done for us. Then he begins to just list off the benefits, beginning in verse 3: “Who pardons all your iniquities.” He forgives our sin. We come before God and we stand before Him as the judge—just as those gang members did—and we know our behavior, our sins, our attitudes. What we expect is condemnation, because we know that’s what we deserve. If we were the judge, that’s what we would give us. But it’s not what we get. We get pardon; we get forgiveness. We get a very unexpected grace.

But the psalmist goes on from there: “Who heals all your diseases.” Now I don’t think he’s talking about physical diseases here; for one reason, because that just isn’t the case. There are many godly people who have placed their trust in Jesus as Savior, who have experienced forgiveness of sin, but who still suffer disease. But if you look at the pronoun, he says “heals all *your* diseases.” Who is he talking to? He’s carrying on a dialogue with his own soul. He’s talking to himself, so the “your” is in reference to his soul.

He says to his soul, “God heals your diseases.” What are the diseases of the soul? Hatred, anger, guilt, shame, fear, anxiety—whatever the list might be—those are the diseases of the soul. In the language of the New Testament, when we place our trust in Jesus’ death on the cross as payment for our sin, we stand before God and there’s no more condemnation. We don’t get what we deserve, but rather we get a very unexpected grace. And that unexpected grace, that pardon for sin, brings healing to my soul. It brings healing to these diseases of the soul that otherwise would make me a very miserable person.

It goes on in verse 4, “Who redeems your life from the pit.” That word *pit* is an interesting word. It was used to describe a hole that would have been dug to create a trap for an animal. As a matter of fact, that is the primary usage of this term. They would have called it a “snare.” The animal comes along, falls in the snare and remains there until it dies. So this Hebrew word was a word that meant to fall into a snare and there you would die.

That is the picture of all of us in our sin. Because of our choices, our attitudes, our behaviors, we have fallen into this pit—and there we should die, a death sentence. The New Testament calls it being enslaved to sin. But rather than just leaving us there and allowing us to die, God in His goodness purchases us, redeems us out of that pit and sets us free.

One of the commentaries was commenting on this very verse and creates this scene:

The psalmist now takes us into the pawnshop. Here comes a wretched man, utterly destitute. Over the years he has had one prized possession, a ring perhaps, or a necklace. Through all of life’s hardships he has managed to keep it because of the memories it holds, memories of better days. But now he has come to an end of all other resources and needs money. There is only one thing to do if he does not want to sell it. He must pawn it. Then perhaps he can get it back along with his self-respect when better times come. So the destitute man goes into the pawnshop and offers the ring to the broker who appraises it in his mind as a very valuable item indeed.

Assuring himself he can buy it back, the pauper makes a deal. He gets a pittance for his ring and a ticket to certify the transaction. Up to the date on the ticket he can buy the ring back for the amount of the loan plus interest.

The date for the redemption of the ring draws near, but the pauper has been foolishly optimistic. The date arrives. He goes into the pawnshop, pleading for more time. He pleads for better terms, baring his soul and weeping. He tells the pawnbroker of the happy days when he first received that ring. He pours out all his good intentions. But the pawnbroker has heard such stories before—too many of them. He eyes the plaintiff in contempt: his ruin of rags, his drink-sodden face, his unwashed body, his unkempt hair, his broken old shoes, and he refuses to modify the original terms. The next day the derelict passes the pawnshop and he sees his ring in the window gleaming under bright lights on a background of black velvet. It has a different price tag now, one which represents its real worth, a hundred times the pittance for which it was pawned. He has thrown away his ring the same way he has thrown away his life. It is lost beyond recall. It can be redeemed, but at what a cost, and certainly not by him.

John Phillips, *Exploring the Psalms*, Vol. 2, p. 125

That is the plight of each of our lives as we have taken our lives, enslaved to sin, and we have found ourselves in the pit—the pit of despair, the pit from which there is no escape apart from God’s willingness to send His own Son to die on the cross, to reach into the slime of that pit and to set us free.

What would you do if you were God, and this person you had created continually offended you and sinned against you and went his or her own way, and ultimately the consequences were to find himself enslaved in this pit? Over and over again it happens. I think maybe if I were God, I would just kind of kick the dirt in the pit: *You made your bed!*

But that’s not what God does . . . because His ways are not our ways. He has reached in the pit and pulled us out. But he goes on. There’s more to it than that. “Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion.” God not only reached into that pit and pulled me up out of the muck and mire, the enslavement of my sin, but He cleaned me up. Then He placed a crown on my head and made me part of the royal family—out of His compassion and His lovingkindness.

Why would He do that? I don’t know. But He did, because His lovingkindness and compassion are so far beyond ours. Sometimes it’s just hard to accept the goodness of God, because in our own human reasoning it makes no sense. The Creator God of the universe created a race that continually offends Him, continually rebels against Him. Because of our choices we end up in the pit. Why doesn’t God just let them die and start over . . . start a new race? Why keep messing with these same sinful people? The answer is, I don’t know.

But I do know that God in His goodness, compassion and lovingkindness didn’t turn His back, didn’t leave us to die in the pit. He reached in, pulled us out, cleaned us up, put a crown on our heads and made us part of the royal family. Those are the benefits that we have received.

He goes on in verse 5: “Who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.” This is a God who satisfies—who satisfies our desires. Whatever

we need, whatever we long for—God is there to satisfy. When I’m thirsty, He’s the living water. When I’m hungry, He’s the bread of life. When I’m lost, He’s the light that lights my path. The word *years* there could be translated “old age” in the Hebrew. David may be referring to the fact that in his old age, God continues to satisfy.

When many people are looking back on their lives with regrets and what could have been, he says because of God he looks back and is content—because God has satisfied and continues to satisfy. It may even be a reference to the fact that in old age, the culture comes along and says: *You know, you’re past your prime. I’m going to ask you to sit on the sidelines. I’m going to ask you to kind of step aside. You’re no longer of much value to us.* David says even though that’s what the culture does, that’s not what God does. In your old age He continues to satisfy. He continues to say: *You are of great value. You have a role in My kingdom.* And it renews your strength like the eagle.

He goes on in verse 6 to say: “The LORD performs righteous deeds, and judgments for all who are oppressed.” In short, he says God does what is right; God does what is fair. You have no guarantee of that from any person on this earth—except God. God always does what is right. He always does what is fair.

Verse 7, “He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel.” What he’s talking about there is that David lived in a culture where he was surrounded by pagan gods—gods made of wood, stone or steel; gods that were manufactured, that were made up. They had no power. They didn’t do anything; they didn’t say anything. They were worthless. But these people worshiped them.

But the God of David was different from that. The God of David spoke; the God of David communicated; the God of David wasn’t silent. The God of David acted. Over and over again He intervened in the life of His people and demonstrated His commitment and His love and His power. David specifically refers to Moses. When Moses went up to Mount Sinai, God had a relationship with him. God spoke to him. God gave him the Law. God communicated.

Sigmund Freud said that God is a figment of our imagination, in order to help us just feel better about life. David is saying that isn’t true. This isn’t a God that’s just made up to make us feel better. This is a God who speaks. This is a God who acts. This is a God who is at work in people’s lives. We look around and we see lives consistently being changed, and we realize this is a God who is real . . . a God who is alive . . . a God who is at work in people’s lives. There’s no question about that.

He goes on with the same theme in verse 8. “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” He has just talked about Moses when he went up on Mount Sinai. And that’s still what he’s talking about. When Moses came down the mountain (you remember the people had turned away from God, were having this great party and worshipping this golden calf and just basically offending God in every way they could think of), and Moses gets angry and he breaks the tablets. God is going to step in, wipe out these people and start over. He’s going to pick a whole new people. And Moses intercedes on behalf of the people and asks God not to do that but to forgive these people and lead them to the land of promise.

God says, “Moses, because you asked for that, I’m going to give you that.” And He invites Moses to come back up the mount. Moses comes back up the mountain, and God once again gives him His commands. In the process of that, God Himself describes Himself in exactly these words: “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” Moses cried out on behalf of His people because he knew what they deserved. By all accounts of logic and reason, these people deserved condemnation. But Moses said, “God, don’t give them what they deserve, but respond to them out of who You are.” And God says, “This is who I am: I’m loving, gracious, compassionate.” So He’s going to respond in that way.

“He will not always strive” could be translated “quarrel with us.” “Nor will He keep His anger forever.” Basically what he’s saying in verse 9 is that God doesn’t bear a grudge. God doesn’t hold on to His anger. He doesn’t continue to quarrel. When God granted forgiveness to these rebellious people, He granted them forgiveness and it was over. The very next thing you see is God again pouring out His blessing on a very undeserving people.

You know, we really struggle with this. We really do, because we are not like that. We cannot offer forgiveness at that level. We do not offer grace and mercy at that level. We do our best to grant forgiveness . . . but we remember what was done to us. It’s a hard thing to get over, and we treat people accordingly. We assume if that’s true of us, it’s got to be true of God. In a sense what we do is limit God to what we can understand, to what we can reason out, to what we can figure out. We fail to realize that in God’s goodness, His ways are not our ways. God is at a whole different level. God grants forgiveness, and when He does, it’s over.

Some of you struggle with all kinds of shame and guilt from your past. You’ve come before God over and over and over again: “God, please forgive me.” What you’re doing is you’re failing to realize that God’s ways are not our ways. Just because *you* can’t let it go doesn’t mean God can’t let it go. That’s what the psalmist says. He has granted forgiveness . . . and it’s over . . . and God will continue to pour out His blessing. We say, “Well, I don’t deserve it; I just can’t imagine that could be true.” But it is.

He continues on that same theme in verse 10: “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” He has not given us what we deserve—even though we may feel like we deserve condemnation; we have sold out; we don’t deserve God’s blessing; God could never use us—the psalmist is saying that’s not the way God operates. He does not give us what we *think* He would give us. Instead He gives us a very unexpected grace.

Verses 11–13, “For high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.” The psalmist says, “If you cannot understand how far God has forgiven your transgression, it’s as high as the heavens are above the earth—which is unlimited. It’s as far as the east is from the west. There’s no way to measure it. It’s just gone.”

Then he uses the metaphor of a father to his child. There’s nobody that I have extended more grace to than my kids. That’s just part of parenting. Parenting is almost a constant outflow of grace. But we don’t resent that as parents. We don’t grow bitter over that

as parents—because we have the heart of a parent, the heart of a father. It’s filled with compassion, and that’s part of the process.

I’ve extended a lot of grace to my kids; and if I had to, I would die for them in a heartbeat. That’s just a little peek at the heart of God. The next time you think God is bearing a grudge, the next time you think God won’t let this go and God couldn’t possibly bless you, think of the heart of a parent, think of the heart of a father, who one moment forgives his child and the next moment pours out a blessing—because that’s who God is.

In verses 14–18 he says, “For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust. As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. When the wind has passed over it, it is no more; and its place acknowledges it no longer. But the lovingkindness 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 who remember His precepts to do them.”

There is an emphasis in these verses that these blessings come to those who fear Him, to those who trust Him. In the language of the New Testament, to those who have trusted Jesus as Savior, for those who walk in obedience to Him, He pours out His righteousness, His kindness, His compassion, His mercy.

But in the process of that, David reminds us that God knows exactly what we are. The problem is that sometimes we forget what we are. We start to think that we’re gods ourselves. We start to think that we can run our own lives; we can call our own shots. And it gets us into all kinds of trouble. But God never loses track of the fact that we’re really just well-formed dust. That’s what he says: “God knows.”

This idea that somehow we can be gods is scoffed at with the reality of the God of the universe versus some well-formed dust. As a matter of fact, he says, “You know what your life is like? Your life is like a blade of grass.” It’s not terribly impressive. Your life span is about like Saturday to Saturday. On Saturday the grass gets mowed, whoosh. Your life span is that degree of grass that grows before next Saturday and, whoosh, there it is. Somebody comes along on Wednesday and they say, “My, the lawn looks nice.” That’s your moment of glory before Saturday, whoosh. Yesterday I wiped out a whole generation!

What the psalmist is trying to say is really, in the perspective of an eternal God who has been forever, that’s about as impressive as our life is. It’s like a week’s worth of growth of grass. There it comes, whoosh, mow it off—that’s it.

The reasoning would be: *Then why would God care at all?* Yesterday I wiped out a whole generation of grass, and I didn’t mourn for one of those blades of grass. I just didn’t. I didn’t care. Our human reasoning thinks that’s *got* to be the way God looks at us. I mean, this is a God that has spanned all of eternity, and we’re a blip on the screen. So why would God do this?

What David is trying to say is this: God knows what we are—we’re well-formed dust. We’re just grass that comes and goes. Yet He has poured out His benefits on us, for reasons we cannot understand or explain. But God has chosen to do that. From everlasting to everlasting, from generation to generation, from children’s children to children’s children—He just keeps pouring out His goodness.

What He wants from us is not to understand it, not to figure it out, but to open up our arms and to receive it—to forget not any of His benefits. So the psalmist just unleashes into these words of praise: “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all. Bless the LORD, you His angels, mighty in strength, who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word! Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, you who serve Him, doing His will. Bless the LORD, all you works of His, in all places of His dominion; bless the LORD, O my soul!” (vv. 19–22).

He cries out to the heavens and the hosts of heaven to praise this God who is so unbelievable. But it ends back with a very personal dialogue with his own soul—right back where it started. Praise the Lord. Bless the Lord. Kneel in adoration, O my soul.

This psalm is like a round. The very last phrase of the psalm is the very first phrase of the psalm. It almost makes a circle that takes you right back to the beginning and you just start over again. It is a way of life—to kneel in adoration, to celebrate, to praise God because of His goodness—that goes beyond human reasoning, that goes beyond our ability to figure out, that goes beyond our questions of why: *Why would God do this?* The answer is: I don’t know, but He does. He does! His ways are not our ways, and we open up our arms and we receive it and we celebrate it.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not any of His benefits.”