

Praise the Lord, My Soul  
Psalm 103:1-22  
Key Verse: 103:1-2

by Kevin Albright

1 Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

2 Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits--

I remember the day my first child was born. It was an awesome, wonderful experience to be there at my wife's side at the moment of birth. I also remember what I said: "Praise God! Praise God! Praise God!" It was a wondrous moment. It is good and right to praise the Lord, and not only in great or successful moments, but all the time, moment by moment. This is why Paul wrote, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1Thess 5:16-18) But how can I praise the Lord when I don't feel like it? How can we praise Him when our circumstances are not favorable? This psalm shows us how.

Praise the Lord, myself (1-5)

The psalm begins with the words, "Praise the Lord." The usual way to say, "Praise the Lord" in Hebrew is "Hallelu Yah." But the Hebrew here is the word for "bless," so many English translations say, "Bless the Lord." However, that sounds strange to many of us to say, "Bless the Lord." After all, the usual meaning of "bless" is "to wish well." When we say, "God bless you," it means, "I wish you well. I hope, want and pray good things for you." But we don't need to wish good to God for God is good, all the time, by his very nature. There is another way to understand "bless" here. It is the acknowledgement of good. For example, if a child humbly says, "I'm sorry" after doing something wrong or lovingly forgives an offender, we are inclined to say, "How wonderful! Bless you, child!" We are acknowledging the goodness in the child. This is more the meaning here in this psalm. "Bless the Lord" or "Praise the Lord" means here, "The Lord is good, and worthy of all blessing and praise!" One pastor explained that to bless God means "to recognize his great richness, strength, and gracious bounty and to express our gratitude and delight in seeing and experiencing it."

The psalmist says, "Bless the Lord, my soul." This is interesting. The psalmist is talking to himself. If people talk to themselves often, they might need to see a psychiatrist, or at least find a friend to talk to. But more important is not the fact that we talk to ourselves but what we actually say to ourselves. If we repeatedly berate ourselves for our sins saying, "Why did I do that?" or "I wish I hadn't said that," it doesn't benefit us at all, if we stop there. Rather, it weighs our souls down with guilt. When we feel guilty, it is much better to confess our sins in prayer to God. Or, as another example, if we replay in our minds over and over something that made us angry, that also will not benefit our souls. Rather, when we feel angry, we must forgive those who hurt us and also bless them from our hearts with our words and our prayers.

"Bless the Lord, my soul" or "Praise the Lord, my soul" is a charge then to myself to bless and praise God. It's a personal pep talk. We could call it self-speak. The psalmist is reminding and urging himself to bless and praise the Lord. He is telling himself to do so. He is commanding himself to do it. This is similar to what Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:5, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Like the psalmist, we need to take captive our thoughts and our feelings and direct them to praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, my soul! Let's say it together.

One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 42. I will read the first 5 verses of Psalm 42:

1 As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

3 My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

4 These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?

There is one more sentence, but I want to stop here for a second. Notice that the psalmist spoke to himself saying, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?" He spoke to his own soul. He spoke to himself. Have you ever spoken to yourself like that? Have you ever felt downcast or disturbed and wondered why or how you could get out of that dark place? After his question, the psalmist answers it, commanding himself: "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." This is the first secret we have to praising God: catch my own thoughts and feelings which do not please or glorify God and surrender them to God. In other words, I am to tell my soul: Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, my soul! Let's say it again together.

We are still on verse 1 of Psalm 103. I have two more things to say. He says, "all my inmost being." This is how he defines his soul. Our soul is all our inmost being. He calls his whole inmost being, not just his lips, to praise the Lord. This reminds me of Deuteronomy 6:5, which Jesus said is the greatest and most important commandment in the Law. It says: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Lastly, in verse 1, the psalmist says, "praise his holy name." The name of the LORD is to be praised. The name of the LORD not like any other name. "Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Ps 124:8). "The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Prov 18:10). Isaiah tells us: "trust in the name of the LORD" (Isa 50:10), "love the name of the LORD" (Isa 56:6), and "fear the name of the LORD" (Isa 59:19). Jeremiah says: "all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD" (Jer 3:17). Joel says: "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved" (Joel 2:32). Micah says: "walk in the name of the LORD" (Mic 4:5). Our Lord Jesus taught us to pray, "hallowed be your name" (Mt 6:9). The name of the Lord is mighty. The name of the Lord is holy. Praise his holy name! Let's say that together.

Okay, that was verse 1. Let's review verse 1 by reading it together: "Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name." Perhaps some of you are thinking: "At this rate, his message will be 44 pages or 3 hours long. And you would be correct. But don't worry; I'm going to go much faster through the remaining verses. Are you ready for verse 2? There are only two points I want to add from verse 2. Let's read verse 2 together. "Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits." He says "forget not." The usual way to say "forget not" is with the positive word "remember," which is used 3 times later in the psalm. But here he uses a negative form, "forget not." Forget not means "don't forget." We human beings tend to forget good things and to remember bad or painful things, which causes us to live in sorrow, anger or bitterness. That is the primary reason that we don't feel like praising the Lord at all times: we have forgotten his manifold blessings and grace.

The psalmist uses the word "benefits." We are to forget not all his benefits. Did you know that you have received many benefits from God? What benefits have you received? Have you forgotten? Here benefits has the meaning of good things done by the Lord on your behalf, which you don't deserve, like graces or gifts.

The psalmist lists these benefits in verses 3-5. He says that these are all things that God does for his soul (he is still speaking to his soul in these verses): he forgives all your sins, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with love and compassion, he satisfies your desires with good things, he renews your youth

like the eagles. Notice these are all in the present tense. These are things that the Lord does or is doing right now. Of course, these are also things that God has done (past tense, v.7) and that God will do (future tense, v.9). The Lord has done (past), the Lord is doing (present), and the Lord will do great things (future).

The Lord forgives all your sins. This is a dominant theme in this psalm. Verse 10 says, "he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities." Verse 12 says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." The Lord forgives all our sins. For that we must praise Him! Have you praised him for that today? Let's praise him for forgiving our sins every day! Repeat after me, "The LORD forgives all my sins."

In verses 3-5, the Lord is our Forgiver, our Healer, our Redeemer, our Crowner, our Satisfier and our Renewer. His healing is for our bodies and for our souls. He redeems us from the pit and crowns us with love and compassion. This reminds us of the Prodigal Son. He went far away from his father in rebellion until he ruined his life, hitting rock bottom. Still, the father longed for his foolish son's return. When the father saw his son coming home, dirty and smelly, he ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The father crowned him with a robe, a ring and a feast. The father was full of love and compassion for his lost son who returned home.

There is a very important Hebrew word in verse 4 that occurs again in verses 8, 11 and 17. It's the Hebrew word for "love" or "covenant loyalty." Some translate it as "steadfast love." The Hebrew word is 'chesed' (strong "h"). I have more to say about 'chesed' in the next part. The Lord satisfies our souls with living water. The Lord restores our youth and strength so we feel like we are soaring like an eagle in the sky.

Have you found enough reasons to praise the Lord yet? What were the two secrets we learned in this part to praise the Lord in every situation? First, we have to tell our souls to praise Him--remind yourself, catch yourself, turn your attention to the Lord your God. Secondly, we must forget not all his benefits.

Praise the Lord, community (6-19)

After calling himself to praise the Lord, the psalmist's praise radiates out toward the community. He becomes a worship leader, calling his people to praise the Lord. When we first praise the Lord ourselves, we can help and influence others to praise the Lord as well. When we remove complaints out of our own hearts, then we can help and influence others to get out of their complaints as well.

Verses 6 and 19 are two verses of prose which serve like bookends, encompassing the community of God's people. Verse 6 tells us more about what the LORD does: "The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed." This verse also tells us the character of the LORD--the Lord is right and just. The LORD will always do what is right and just. He is mindful of the oppressed. He was mindful of his people in slavery. He is mindful of those suffering in their sins.

Verse 7 is a very important past tense verse in the psalm. It tells us what God has clearly done. "He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel." How do we know the Lord? We know the LORD because it pleased God to make himself known. The LORD made himself known to Moses and to the people of Israel. We have this revelation of Himself in the book we call the Bible. The Bible is the revelation of the LORD to us through those who were chosen to write it down. How can we know the LORD? We can know him through the revelation of himself--through his word, through the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ.

Verse 8 is descriptive. It tells us directly the character of the LORD: "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." It is a famous Bible verse, often quoted in the Bible. Jonah quoted it. Remember? He said to God: "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Jonah 4:2). Do you know where this passage comes from? It comes from Exodus 34. The Israelites failed big time (Ex 32). They made a golden calf and worshiped it, while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. The LORD's anger burned against Israel for their idolatry and he was ready to destroy them all. But Moses interceded on their behalf in prayer. The LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. Moses continued to plead for the LORD's Presence to go with them into the Promised Land and Moses requested, "Now show me your glory." Then the LORD revealed himself to Moses in one of the Bible's most awesome theophanies, or revelations of God. The LORD put Moses in a cleft in a rock, covered him with his hand and passed by. Then the LORD proclaimed of himself, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)

The psalmist understood God's grace of forgiveness of sin. He knew that sin, iniquity and transgression all deserve God's punishment. But God did not treat them as their sins deserved. The Lord has not treated us as our sins deserve, neither as individuals nor as a community. We should have perished long ago for our rebellion and wickedness. The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. His love (chesed) is great; like the heavens which tower over the earth. How great and gigantic is the love of God!

To whom is this love directed? It is directed to his covenant people--those who fear him. The phrase "those who fear him" is repeated three times in verses 11, 13, and 17: "so great is his love for those who fear him" (11), "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him" (13), "from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children" (17). According to verse 18, those who fear him, are identified as those who keep his covenant and obey his precepts. They are his covenant people. Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, are God's people of the new covenant in Jesus' blood.

Verses 14-17 contrast man's short life with God's eternal love. Regarding our physical mortality he says (14-16): "for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more." In contrast to our short lives, he says, "But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love (chesed) is with those who fear him..." Our lives are too short. But God's love is with those who fear him from everlasting to everlasting. The psalmist concludes this section on the community of God's people: "The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all." This is also leading us into the final call to worship to all creation, the next radiation of praise: from self to community, and from community to all creation.

Praise the Lord, all creation (20-22)

It sounds like the psalmist is bursting with praise now. If David indeed wrote this psalm, he was probably dancing before the LORD with all his might. He calls even the angels of heaven to join him in praising the LORD. There are four bursts of praise, including a final praise that ends where the psalm began:

20 Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.

21 Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.

22 Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion.

Praise the Lord, my soul.

I'm not sure if he is commanding angels or inviting them to come join the praise and worship. One thing is clear: he knows confidently that the LORD is worthy of praise from everything in creation. As the very last verse in all the psalms says, "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD." (Ps 150:6)

1 Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

2 Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits--

We know the incredible story of Job, who praised the LORD even after great tragedy struck his family. After losing his possessions and his children in disasters, he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." (Job 1:21) Praising the LORD gives healing and strength and joy to our souls. In contrast, when we forget to praise Him, we fall into criticism, complaining, grumbling, slander, accusations, cursing and gossip. When we have in our minds who the LORD is, what he has done, what he will do, and especially what he does and is doing now, then our mouths can praise Him from our souls. As Christians, we are God's covenant people by his grace and mercy. He forgives all our sins through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. He has adopted us into his family. His steadfast love--his chesed--endures forever.

Through this passage, I accepted the importance of telling myself to praise the Lord. So often I have grievances or criticisms or problem-people or situations in my mind and heart and soul, and I then lose strength, and wisdom and joy. But as I tell my soul "Praise the Lord", the darkness and the clouds disappear, and joy, power, glory and love come in. Some of you came to worship today, but you are not here in spirit. Maybe you are distracted, or you are worried, or you are critical. Maybe you don't like the music or the singspiration team or the messenger. That's your problem. The solution is simple: tell yourself to praise the Lord. We all wrestle with distractions, worries, anger and criticism. Let's decide to tell ourselves to praise the Lord.

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