

Notes On Psalm 103

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Verse 1

“Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name” – Worship is incredibly internal. It must come from deep within if it is going to mean anything. This runs counter to formulaic religion, or religion from mere duty or tradition.

God is personal. Throughout the psalm it is clear that He has a name (v. 1), is deeply emotional (vv. 7, 9, 13, 17), acts/has a will (“who pardons, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies, performs, His was/acts to the sons of Israel [v. 7], established, all you works of His [v. 22]).

Verses 2-5

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits...” – It is man’s tendency to forget. In good times, we forget how we were helped by God previously (we also forget about friends and family, favors given, charity, all the patience our parents and mentored showed in teaching us). In bad times, we forget that God has done many good things. Too many to count, in fact. Remember, life and breath are not rights. Every sip of water, ever twitch of a muscle, sunlight, a cool breeze – these are gifts. God is not compelled to grant us anything because, based on our lack of merit, we deserve nothing (v. 10).

“Who pardons all your iniquities” – This is a “must” in order to understand God. Before we can get anywhere we must accept that we have iniquities to be pardoned. Sin causes a separation between us and God (His holiness demands it). Because we are the transgressors, we cannot pardon ourselves. We must look to the one with authority for pardon. He pardons on His terms, and our obedience is a pre-requisite (see vv. 17-18) even for the angels (v. 20). He has the sovereign right to dictate the terms of our pardon, but we bless Him because the terms are more reasonable than we deserve (v. 10). This is why we approach God with a blessing rather than grudgingly or with contempt. He could have made us “dance”. He could have embarrassed us, demeaned us, and really rubbed it in. Ironically, this is exactly what happened to Jesus in the very act of securing forgiveness for mankind! See 1 Peter 2:21-24.

“Who heals all your diseases” – Difficult to square with the reality of death and disease, but is the writer literally saying that God *will* heal all your diseases? Or is He simply giving God credit for the ability to heal all diseases? That there is no disease He *cannot* heal? Jesus illustrated this truth throughout His ministry as He healed those with incurable diseases (leprosy in Luke 17:11ff) and disfigurements beyond repair (withered hand in Mark 3:1ff). Another element of this is that when a disease is healed, it is only because of God’s provision. We do not know exactly how the body heals itself in some cases, especially on the cellular level. There is incredible mystery in some processes of healing and it is all a part of God’s handiwork. Additionally, when we develop medicine and medical technology it is with the materials God has always made available to us. Even something as simple as Aspirin would be impossible if God had not created the world with the chemical building blocks to invent it. So while God clearly does not miraculously intervene and cure every case of illness, it can be rightly said that when illnesses are cured it is always a

credit to God. It should be noted that the Bible clearly states that God will not cure all diseases miraculously or remove the possibility of disease and certainty of death until the end of the world. Disease, pain, injury, etc. are part of the curse of Adam (Gen. 3), so as long as sin exists in the world (that is, always) sin's consequences will be felt. The last enemy is death (1 Cor. 15) and we are still subject to it, no matter how hard we try to avoid it by prolonging life through medicine.

“Who redeems your life from the pit” – “Redemption” means to set free by payment. Possibly a reference back to Joseph who was lowered into a pit by his brothers before being sold into slavery. Isn't this the mess we all make, though? While there is a lot to disagree with in the broader religious world, one thing that I notice is that people who pursue God, who want Him in their lives, who make an effort to know Him (even if it's based on misunderstanding) find their way out of life's “pits” easier than unbelievers. Seeking God, by the very nature of the endeavor, raises us up and gives us a boost. The unbeliever struggles to find life's meaning or purpose. There is no answer for guilt and sin. It gnaws away at them, while “stuff” and activities and foolish pursuits distract them just long enough to keep them from changing anything. Some worldviews or philosophies dismiss sin (it's an illusion, subjective) or paint over it. Christ DEALS WITH IT. He reaches into the pit and pulls us out, proclaiming that our spiritual debt has been paid in full. Analogy: dealing with debt can seem like a pit. Some offer false solutions, such as shuffling the debt around. Others simply ignore the debt while others carry it for their entire lives by thinking they can pay it off with the minimum payments. But how would it feel to simply have the debt paid in full? Vanished. Gone.

“Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion” – These things identify us. We wear them obviously, so that they're the first things people see. God's people show love and compassion to others because they have been shown them in abundance. We forgive others, as we have been forgiven and love our enemies.

“Who satisfies your years with good things...” – Not that every moment of life is going to be happy. Death is assured, and so is suffering at times. Sometimes the “good things” the writer has in mind are in greater or lesser abundance. Sometimes we just cherish the memories of the good things and hope for more later. But life is not really as bad as we often think. If you objectively looked at any given year, the bad events typically stand out the most but are not indicative of the way life actually was on a daily basis. One year, a parent died. Another year, you were unemployed for a long stretch of time. But those years were also filled with sunny days, friends (or, at least, the opportunity to make and maintain friendships if you just looked away from your self-pity), daily food, daily breath, daily water, an open door to worship every single week, etc. Maybe one reason we fail to appreciate our blessings is because we have so many that they've become rather mundane. What an embarrassment of riches we have! And remember, this verse promises “satisfaction” not necessarily being filled, rich, healthy, or superficially happy. Even suffering can be satisfying if we take the right approach to it (Rom. 5:3-5) and grief can be the pathway to a deeply moving sense of sobriety (Ecc. 7:1-14).

“So that your youth is renewed like the eagle” – Without God, all of life is simply headed toward its demise. We are expending ourselves in the struggle to survive, accumulate wealth, find a mate and reproduce, and fight the aging process. But our decay is inevitable, and we will never be as

young as we are at this very moment. But God's way provides renewal. Notice the similarity to Isaiah 40:31. It is interesting that David and Isaiah are writing from an Old Testament perspective. Even under that law, which we know to be imperfect and temporary (Heb. 8), with its emphasis on physical things and places, they knew God's way was the way of life. How much more is this true under the New Covenant! Jesus promised Nicodemus that he could be born again (indeed, he must be born again to enter the kingdom of God) in John 3:1-6. Also see the way new creature is described in various New Testament passages, such as 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 4:22ff, Romans 6:1-11, and Colossians 3:8-10. The renewing of our mind occurs when we follow God's path (Romans 12:2).

Verses 6-7

"The Lord performs righteous deeds, and judgments for all who are oppressed" – God is an advocate for the downtrodden. Throughout the scriptures He calls for justice and fairness, as well as abundant charity, for the widow and orphan (Exodus 22:22, Deuteronomy 14:28-29, Acts 20:35, Jeremiah 7:6, Psalm 146:9, 68:5, James 1:27). This also means that even the most unimportant people (by the world's standards) are important to God. Nobody is forgotten, nobody is neglected. Countless innocents have been harmed by the wicked and God sees it all. In eternity, not one act of cruelty will be forgotten or overlooked (save for the repentant who shall receive mercy for their sins).

"He made known His ways..." – God discloses Himself, so that we can know everything about Him that He wants us to know. While it is true that there is much about God shrouded in mystery, we know enough to acknowledge Him, obey Him, please Him, and share a relationship with Him.

Verses 8-14

"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness" – Compassion is at the center of this psalm. As John put it in 1 John 4:7-10, God is love. It motivates His every interaction with mankind (even the parts we don't like, such as discipline [Heb. 12:6]). He is compassionate because it is part of His character. Even the act of creation itself was an expression of His love since our existence wasn't required. He is also slow to anger, which means He doesn't *want* to be angry. He doesn't have a quick trigger. He's not looking for excuses to be mad at us. Lovingkindness is one of my favorite compound words because it is so self-explanatory. It's two wonderful words just squished together. There is a sense of abundance to it.

"He will not always strive with us; Nor will He keep His anger forever" – The writer does not see any difficulty accepting these two sides of God: His abundant love alongside His entirely justifiable anger. Often, the world presents these things as mutually exclusive. That's why we have so many false views of God – some see Him as only love and joy without the capacity for punishment, while others deride Him for being capricious, vengeful, and jealous. But David understands that God is more complicated, that He is the model upon which our entire range of emotions is based. God possesses the qualities of mercy and justice, love and hatred, compassion and wrath, without the bias and weakness of humanity. Thus, *perfect* love and hate are complementary, not competing, interests.

More important, David knows that *because of* God's compassion, His anger has a limit (Psalm 30:5). This is comforting because it means that God does not discipline because He's sadistic or emotionally out of control. As long as we are alive, there will always be opportunity to turn things around and return to His favor. He disciplines, for sure, but only so that we will have the chance to be restored. This also means that if my relationship with God is severed, the only obstacle is my own stubbornness or reservation. He doesn't hold a grudge or prolong His anger out of some pathetic self-righteousness.

"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" – Spiritual maturity leads one to accept this truth. Only when we let go of the last shred of self-reliance, of boastfulness, of independent self-righteousness, can we understand just how little we deserve mercy and how great God's love is for us. Keep in mind that David had experienced some severe punishments for his sins – the death of a child because of his adultery and murder in the affair with Bathsheba and the devastation (70,000 died) after his census. In all likelihood, he also connected the trauma associated with the rebellion of Absalom with his own sins. So he writes from personal experience on the subject of sin and its consequences. Isn't it interesting, then, that death, destruction, rebellion, and fleeing for his life still didn't seem like what he deserved? David knew that it was only because of God's mercy that his discipline was not more harsh.

This helps us understand why there is sometimes such a disconnect between people's current physical conditions and their engagement in sinful activities. There is a greater punishment awaiting those who refuse to repent – greater than physical calamity, sickness, or poverty. God has not dealt with any of us the way we deserve, since what the sinner deserves is eternal condemnation. God promised Adam and Eve that they would face spiritual and physical death if they ate from the tree in Eden. It was an act of mercy not to bestow such a punishment the very moment they transgressed! Instead of striking them down, God guided them through the difficulties of life, provided tools for survival, and the means and methods to offer acceptable sacrifice to Him.

The other lesson is that there is no punishment that can be physically inflicted that will somehow "earn us" forgiveness. If eternal hell is what we deserve, then there is no amount of flogging, pitiable living, or other self-inflicted punishment that can make up for our sins. Cain deserved more than being marked and exiled. Samson deserved more than having his eyes gouged out. Nebuchadnezzar deserved more than thinking he was a cow. Israel and Judah deserved more than defeat, subjugation, and captivity. Jerusalem deserved more than destruction in 70 AD.

"For as 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" – The only way for us to have any sense of the vastness of God's love is to make comparisons that we can understand. From our limited human sight, these distances spell infinity. East to west, the heavens and the earth – these are incalculable distances. God's lovingkindness is so big that it would take the entirety of an infinite space to hold it! And our sins have been removed to the point that they are effectively removed forever. This is comforting because it means that God does not keep our sins close by in order to guilt us or manipulate us. He doesn't keep a little log

book in his pocket, always ready to remind us of our most heinous crimes. Instead, He casts our sins away, so far that we cannot even comprehend it. So far, in fact, that our sins can best be described as forgotten by God (Jeremiah 31:34, Isaiah 43:25).

“Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him” – This picture is the most powerful because it brings a very personal touch to the ideas being conveyed by the psalmist. The force of this comparison gains a special emphasis in the Hebrew in that a tense form is used that stresses the fact that the Lord “has *always* had compassion.” A father knows that his children are not mature. He expects them to fail at times, and is prepared to lovingly discipline, lead, and instruct them. He can be compassionate because he knows the failure is due to weakness and immaturity, rather than evil motives. This is also why the caveat is so important – “on those who fear Him.” God shows no compassion for the openly rebellious, for the stubborn and self-willed, for the arrogant, for the foolish. In order to be treated with understanding by God, we must show our willingness to submit to Him and seek His will.

“For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” – God created us, so He knows better than anybody else how weak we are. He made us with physical desires that are designed for good (eating, sleeping, procreating, etc.). But these desires can also be turned toward evil. And it doesn’t take much! We are weak enough that we can use the same mouth to kiss our loved ones and pray to God in the morning, but turn around and curse our neighbor or blaspheme by lunch time. We are weak enough to procreate with a spouse, to express our love in a physical way, but then turn against the same spouse mere days later after a bad argument.

God knows we are weak, so it doesn’t come as a surprise to Him when we fail. To be sure, He disapproves and is disappointed in our many failures, but it’s not a shock to Him.

Perhaps this became even more tangible to God after His Son came and lived a physical life and experienced our weaknesses and temptations. Being omniscient, He has always known all things, but there might have been some aspect of it, some experiential knowledge, that could only be gained through personally inhabiting a human body. Hebrews 2:10-18 suggests this very idea, making it clear that Jesus Christ’s compassion for mankind is rooted in His experience living as one of us

Verses 15-18

“As for man...” What a contrast! God knows all things and is the reason for our very existence. But we are limited, stuck in the very hedge that we have created for ourselves. “His days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes.” The writer admits that mankind has a certain, limited kind of glory. For a time, we can accomplish some amazing things. We build. We craft. We write. But the glory is only temporary, and it fizzles faster than we can erect monuments to our own ingenuity and power. Simply recall the tower of Babel, or the jubilation at the conquest and habitation of Israel in Canaan. Man has built temples and cities and palaces and not a single one remains unchanged forever.

But these are all very sweeping, grand concepts! It is our duty to focus on our own lives and the little monuments we build. Our jobs and homes. A legacy or reputation. Some little

accomplishment or award. Even the wealthiest person cannot live forever, and at his death he must relinquish control of everything he has built for himself (Ecclesiastes 2). Your glory days are short, and so is the window of opportunity you have to make a difference in people's lives and obey God.

"When the wind has passed over it, it is no more; and its place acknowledges it no longer" – All of man's efforts have only produced ruins, one way or another. These things cannot satisfy us for eternity, since there is an eternal spiritual component to all of us. If we only live for the flesh, the flesh will falter. Remember, David was a king – the greatest king in Israel's history – and it only took one generation after him to divide his kingdom in half and ruin all that he built.

"But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children" – It's nice to know that the contrast is not between what man and God can each build. We would fail that contest miserably! Our greatest works of engineering can only span the canyons and waterways crafted by the hand of God! No, the psalmist instead contrasts man's works with God's characteristics and qualities – His lovingkindness and righteousness.

"To those who keep His covenant, and who remember His precepts to do them" – As previously mentioned, God's mercies are only extended to those who humbly submit to His will. God does not only care about what we feel or think, but also what we do. Our obedience means something to God. Also see John 15:10ff, 1 John 2:3-6, Romans 1:5, 2 Corinthians 5:9-10.

Verses 19-22

"The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all" – It is His sovereignty that gives Him the authority over all, as well as to execute justice and practice mercy. Do not be dismayed when the world asks, "What gives God the right?!" Simply respond by pointing out that His very being gives Him the right to dictate the terms of salvation and obedience. If we wish to receive mercy, we must do so on His grounds. All of creation speaks to the glory of God. It is His footstool, so who are we to speak against that!

"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" – The psalm ends with a call to blessing, just as it began. Given all the facts presented, who can resist the call? God satisfies us and makes provision for our physical existence. He has disclosed Himself to mankind in such a way that we can know Him in a personal way. He has shown mercy to us in abundance, far beyond what we deserve. And His nature, His power, and His glory will outlast all the works of mankind. So bless Him! What else can we do?

"Bless the Lord, all you works of His, in all places of His dominion; Bless the Lord, O my soul!"