

Bless the Lord

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[0 : 00] Greetings, good morning. My name's Kevin. I'm one of the pastors here at Church of the Advent. And as you can see, I'm recording from Studio Hinson. I'm in Pastor Tommy's office this morning.

And I'm really excited to preach Psalm 103, in large part because this psalm has been such a blessing to me this week. I really needed this psalm, and I'm excited to encourage you with it. This is very much a feel-good psalm. It's beloved by God's people. And it's an important psalm because I think it gets at the ultimate purpose for everything that God created.

And so it serves as a true north for us in these confusing and challenging times. And the purpose for everything that God created is simply this. Everything exists. Everything that exists that was created by God exists to be blessed by the Lord and to bless the Lord in return.

And this psalm inspires us to fulfill this purpose. And so as we consider this psalm this morning, we're going to look at three things together. First, we're going to look at why we need this psalm right now. Why do we need it?

[1 : 06] Second, we're going to look at how the psalm works its magic in our hearts and in our minds and in our souls. And lastly, we're going to look at one of the ways, what it means to bless the Lord in this season.

Let's pray together. Father, we come before you needing you, needing encouragement, needing you to lift our hearts up. We listen to your word, Lord.

We attend to your word. I pray that you would speak to us and that you would encourage us, that you would help us to be people who love you and love our neighbors as ourselves. We praise these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. So first, we're going to look at why we need this psalm right now. Simply put, I think we are a people in need of encouragement. We need courage poured into our hearts and into our minds and into our bodies right now.

We need to be uplifted. And I probably don't need to tell you why we need encouragement. Right? 2020 has been quite the year. You know, this past week, I was reading the news, talking to friends and family, people from within the church.

[2 : 15] And as I was praying about and preparing for this sermon, this image came to my mind. And it was the image of me standing in the confluence of three rivers. And each of the rivers signifies a different level of crisis in our world.

So one of the rivers is the global crises of the pandemic and the looming economic meltdown that may or may not come, which is really intense.

And the second river is the national crises. There's so much going on in our nation right now that is stressful and anxiety-inducing. We have all that's going on with the racial unrest.

And we're in the midst of a really intense election season. And now we have wildfires on the West Coast that are just raging. And the third river is the personal crises that each one of us is facing. How the global and the national crises sort of lands in each of our own lives. That could be physical sickness or feelings of loneliness or stress and anxiety, trying to manage all of the demands of work while trying to teach our kids the things that they need to learn to stay on track.

[3 : 22] I don't know about you, but I feel like I'm chest deep in the confluence of those rivers. I'm hanging on there. I'm treading water. I don't know how you feel. Maybe you feel like you're neck deep. Maybe you feel like your head is bobbing below water sometimes.

I think wherever we are, we need the Lord to break through in our lives to encourage us and to buoy us up. And I think this psalm does just that for us. This is a brutal time.

It's taking its toll on us physically. It's impacting our emotional and our mental health. And it's having a negative impact on us spiritually. It's a brutal time. And it's no wonder that a spiritual malaise has set into the church, at least in America.

Andy Crouch, one of my favorite thinkers these days, has described the pandemic as a period of winter. It's not a blizzard that goes away in a couple weeks, but it's a winter or maybe even a little ice age is how he describes it.

And this is what he says as an ice age. He says, this season is a once in a lifetime change that is likely to affect our lives and our organizations for years.

[4 : 30] And the craziest thing is we don't really know the impact that this is going to have. But we do know a few things that are alarming right now. One of them is from a Barna study that was released in early May of this year.

This study showed that over a third of practicing Christians in America have just checked out from church during the pandemic. And if you break it down by generations, it's even more alarming. So one in four boomers is checked out, one in three people from the Gen X cohort, and half of millennials have stopped engaging with church during the pandemic.

And this was back in May, so it's probably worse right now. So what I think we're seeing is the church is falling asleep. And it's unclear if people are entering hibernation mode only to awake when spring comes, or if people are hypothermic and they're falling asleep never to wake again. I think we're in a time of real spiritual danger. And the Christian life is all about trajectories. You never really arrive this side of the age to come. You're either always heading towards God or away from God.

[5 : 36] And if we find ourselves heading away from God, I think this psalm is a psalm that can help us get back on track. So second, I want to look at how the psalm works its magic.

That's why we need the psalm. But how does the psalm rekindle a desire, jumpstart our hearts so that they beat to bless the Lord? And the answer to that question is not very complicated.

One of the keys to living a life that blesses the Lord is simply having a clear memory. And we see that in verse two of our psalm. It says, Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. Memory is key here. Memory is the secret sauce. The psalmist is reminding us of how much God loves us. How much he has done for us. How his orientation is always and only grace and mercy towards us.

So I want to walk through this psalm so that we can get a feel for how David is trying to spark our memory. First, I want to do a quick flyover of the terrain of the psalm. And then I want to circle back and focus on the heart of the psalm.

[6 : 39] The very middle in greater detail. So Psalm 103 has three broad movements. It goes from personal exhortation to praise. And then it fans out looking at the community, exhorting the community to praise.

And then it expands ever outward with this cosmic exhortation to bless the Lord. It's sort of a crescendo of praise. That's the shape of Psalm 103. So first, the first section, verses 1 through 5, is the focus on the individual, the personal exhortation to praise.

One commentator says this. He says, The psalm begins with an individual self-exhortation to praise. That's just a fancy way of saying the psalmist is talking to himself.

The psalmist is recalling five different ways that God has been good to him. He says to himself, He remembers all of these ways that God has been good to him.

And then he preaches to himself and he says, Bless the Lord, O my soul. Now, I think this first section is very instructive for us. If you find yourself, like me, wrestling through this spiritual malaise that I was talking about, I encourage you this week to take time to remember.

[8 : 08] Reflect on the ways that God has been good to you. Reflect on the ways this past week that God has blessed you and has showed his grace and his mercy and his favor towards you.

And write those things down. Be specific. And then preach to yourself. Tell yourself to bless the Lord. So that's the first section focusing on the individual. We'll look at this very quickly.

He then turns to the community in verses 6 through 19. There's this communal focus. And the psalmist rehearses the history of God's dealings with his people. We'll come back to this in just a moment.

And then the call to bless the Lord expands ever outwards. In verses 20 through 22, we see this cosmic exhortation for everything that's been created to bless the Lord.

The psalmist writes, Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word. Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers who do his will.

[9 : 03] Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul. What we're seeing here is that everything, everything that has been created, visible and invisible, is called to bless the Lord.

Psalms 103 is a crescendo of blessing, a crescendo of praise. So I want to circle back and focus on the middle section, verses 6 through 19, and just make a few comments about it here.

What we see in this section is this rich tapestry of allusions and echoes. Basically, the psalmist is rehearsing the entire story. It's calling to mind the entire story of the Old Testament and God's dealing with his people.

He's reminding us who God is and how he relates to his people. We see that as he talks about two of the most important parts of the story in the Old Testament.

The creation account and the great story of redemption told in the Exodus. So we see creation very clearly in verses 13 and 14. The psalmist says, God knows our frame.

[10 : 11] He remembers that we are dust. He's talking about creation there. God knows our weaknesses and our limitations because he's made us. And he doesn't resent our weaknesses. But like a compassionate father is to his children, God is gracious and merciful towards us.

So we see creation very clearly. And we see the motifs of the Exodus even more clearly. Starting in verse 6, it says, The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. This is a very clear reference to the great event of redemption where God redeems his people from oppression under Pharaoh.

Now, the very heart of this section is verse 8. And I think this is interesting. It's kind of sneaky how amazing this little passage is.

Verse 8 says, The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

This is my favorite part of this psalm because this is God's name.

[11 : 20] This is when God reveals to Moses in Exodus 34, 6. Moses says, Lord, show me who you are. Tell me what your name is. I want to know what you're like. And this is God's name that he reveals to Moses.

And my favorite part of this is this happens right after the golden calf incident. It's not when Israel is being an exemplar of faithfulness. It's actually when they first screw up and screw up royally that God reveals himself in his true character as one who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and steadfast love.

And I just love that, that God, it's a very subtle thing here that the timing in the Old Testament. I want to zoom in on one other image in this middle section.

I think this is one of the most profound metaphors of forgiveness that we see in the entire Bible. And it's a spatial metaphor in verses 10 through 12. The psalmist writes this, And what I want to do here is sort of play this metaphor out so that we can grasp just how profound this image is of God's love and his mercy.

And I want to do that by looking at an image of the observable universe that I've taken from NASA's website. We'll take a look at this image here. Since we're recording these sermons on videos, take advantage of the medium and look at a picture together.

[12 : 59] This is an illustration of the universe that places the Earth and the Sun and our galaxy in the center of the visible and of the observable universe.

And of course, it's not drawn to scale. But I want to look at this and consider this a bit together and show how this illuminates verses 10 through 12 of our psalm. Now, as far as physicists can tell, the distance from the Earth to the edge, if we can call it that, the edge of the universe is 46 and a half billion light years.

Now, that means edge to edge, the universe is approximately 93 billion light years in diameter.

Now, notions of East and West don't quite work in outer space.

But I think we could consider East and West sort of as the furthest points in opposite directions relative to Earth. So how far are these two points?

In other words, how far is our sin removed from us? Well, approximately 93 billion light years. Now, to put it in perspective, the nearest star is 4.24 light years away.

[14 : 06] And right now, with our Festus technology, it would take between 70 and 80,000 years to get to the nearest star. Now, compare that to how long it would take to get from one edge of the universe to the other, which is almost 25 billion light years further.

It's basically unimaginable how long it would take to get from one edge to the other. The distance, in other words, between East and West is an unfathomable expanse.

This is how far God has taken our sins, how far he's removed our sins from us. He's taken them completely and utterly away. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

Now, of course, David, as he was penning this psalm, would have no idea just how large the universe was. I think we in the 21st century actually have greater insight into what this psalm means than David himself.

Part of that is because of our knowledge of space and how large it is. But the most important thing is we know what this means because of our knowledge of Jesus Christ. The New Testament tells us that the Son of God, for eternity past, enjoyed infinite and intimate communion with the Father.

[15:22] And Jesus, the Son of God, suffered separation from the Father on the cross so that sinners, people like you and me, who were once separated from God, might be brought near, might be brought together with the Father by having our sins far removed from us.

Paul describes what's going on here in Ephesians very beautifully. In verse 12 and 13 of chapter 2, Paul writes, Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Jesus. It's this radical and gracious and forgiving love that is the greatest blessing.

It's the greatest blessing that we hear about in Psalm 103. This, precisely this is what the psalmist wants us to remember. And this is what sparks our response of blessing in return.

This spark ignites this response of blessing in return. So now I want to bring all of this together. And I want to ask, what does it mean for us to bless the Lord in this season?

[16:42] And perhaps I should have done this at the beginning as we've been talking about the psalm. But I think in order to answer that question, we have to answer a more fundamental question. What does it even mean to bless the Lord?

It's kind of a strange thing to think about. Normally, when we think about blessing, it's from somebody who's superior blessing somebody that's inferior, like a father blessing a child or God blessing us.

So I need to clarify what it means to bless the Lord. Well, it's not the same as when God blesses us. When God blesses us, one scholar has said, we are helped and strengthened and made better off. When God blesses us, we're endowed with something special, like a new power or with favor or with a new calling or with a new identity.

When we bless the Lord, we're not helping God. We're not strengthening God. God is not made better off by our blessing him because God cannot be made better off.

[17:41] When a human blesses God, what that means is they're praising God. They're expressing gratitude and praise and honor towards God. So what does it mean to bless the Lord in this season?

Well, given all that we've talked about, I think probably the most obvious answer would be something like engaging more deeply with worship. But that's not where I want us to land today. Obviously, you're listening to this or watching this sermon. That means you haven't disengaged from church like a third of the Christians in America.

So you probably don't need to be encouraged to engage more deeply in worship. I think that we probably need to be encouraged in a different way. Blessing the Lord certainly includes worship in a formal sense, but I think it's far more expansive than just worshipping God, singing songs of praise to him and that sort of thing.

I think the image of a father and a child is really instructive here for us. What does it mean for a child to bless her dad? Well, I think about my own kids.

[18:46] Billy the other day came up to me and he said, Daddy, you're the best daddy and the biggest daddy that I've ever had. And I would say that's a blessing depending on what he means by biggest daddy.

And I would say I was blessed by the words. It was encouraging to me to hear Billy say that I was his best daddy. Billy certainly is true since I'm his only daddy. But I'm far more blessed, not by Billy's words, but when he lives freely in the world the way that I've trained him to, the way that I desire him to.

So it's really nice when Billy blesses me with his words and says, nice and encouraging things to me. But I'm far more blessed when he forgives his brother when I'm not paying attention. Or when I see him include the shy child on the playground, who's sort of on the fringes playing by himself. I'm blessed when Billy says that thoughtful thing to our neighbor, Miss Kimberly. The type of thing that I'm just so happy when he's acting that way in the world, doing that of his own accord. I think the same is true for us. I think that God is blessed when we praise him and when we worship him, but he may be even far more blessed when we're living as God intends us for him to live in the world as his children.

[19 : 55] You see, one of the central truths for the people of God is that we're blessed to be a blessing. The purpose of God blessing us is so that we might bless others in return.

Bless God and bless our neighbors. And we see this perhaps most clearly in Genesis 12 when God calls Abraham. He says, Abraham, I'm going to bless you so that you might be a blessing. I'm not blessing you instead of all these other people. I'm blessing you so that all of the families of the world might be blessed. So I think this means a lot of things for us. This can take shape in a number of different forms.

And so I don't want to limit our imagination for what it means to bless the Lord in this season. But I do want to suggest something for us. I want to suggest one thing. Now, one of the most profound ways, I think, to bless the world and to bless the Lord is how we relate to our enemies, be they real or perceived.

I think we find ourselves quickly approaching a very nasty political season in our country. There are a lot of enemies. There's a lot of cursing. There's not a whole lot of blessing going around.

[21 : 01] There's not a lot of blessing going on. Now, if you're a Christian, I want to tell you that you cannot bless the Lord and curse people. You cannot bless the Lord and curse people.

You'll be tempted to do so. We're tempted all the time. And in fact, I think we're trained to do this very thing. We're trained to curse people and our enemies all the time by our political and our cultural leaders.

But it's impossible for Christians. We cannot bless the Lord and curse people. James, in his letter, talks about just how unbecoming this is for someone who has been blessed by God.

James says this. He's talking about how we use our words, how we use our tongue. In chapter 3, verses 6 through 10 of his epistle. James writes, What he's saying is, You cannot bless God and curse your enemies.

Curse people. In fact, the opposite is true. And so I want to be very clear about what I'm saying right now. I think we bless God. One of the ways we bless God in this season is by blessing our enemies.

[22 : 30] People made in the image and likeness of God. This is one of the things that sets those who have been blessed by God apart from the world. How does the world deal with its enemies?

It crushes them. It cancels them. It curses them. But when the world curses its enemies, Christians are called to bless them.

To extend grace. To extend forgiveness and patience and love and kindness and mercy to the ones who are not deserving of it. To our enemies. Jesus said this in Luke chapter 6.

Woe to you when all people speak well of you. For so their fathers did to the false prophets. But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. This very well may be the most challenging call to discipleship that Jesus offers.

[23 : 35] It's the most challenging call for disciples, but it also corresponds to our greatest blessing. Love your enemy. Pray for those who curse you.

Bless those who curse you. And it's only possible. This impossible thing is only possible. When we remember, this is exactly what Christ has done for us.

Let's pray. Father, we come before you needing to be refreshed. I pray that we would drink deeply from this psalm and that it would be water for our parched souls.

I pray that we would see through this psalm just how blessed we are in Christ. That you love us and that you extend grace and mercy towards us.

And that we would realize that we're blessed in order to be a blessing. That you would equip us by your spirit to bless our enemies. To bless the world and in so doing, bless you in return. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

[24 : 39] Amen.