

The Gospel According to Psalm 103

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[0:00] Father, we ask that you would incline our hearts to hear your voice. And as we listen to your word, we ask that you would apply it to our minds, that we not grow shallow, that you would apply it to our hearts, that we not grow cold, and that you would apply it to our feet, that we not just be hearers of your word, but doers also.

We ask all these things in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord, and in his mercy. Amen. You can be seated. Well, good evening. Nothing.

Wow, nothing. Morning people are much nicer, much nicer. I was looking forward to, you know, 6.30 is my service. I was looking forward to the 6.30 and nothing. Good evening.

There we go. All right, you know you're in trouble when a sermon starts with a disclaimer. This morning I was preaching all the services, and I was preaching Mark 10.45, and I'm preaching Psalm 103 tonight.

So if all of a sudden you find that I'm going down this kind of Mark 10.45 trail, just go with it. It'll all come together in the end. Let's jump straight into the text. I want a quick reminder.

[1:08] Psalm 103 comes on the tail end of Psalm 102. I'll come back to that point, but we've got to remember that this psalm is written on the tail end of a psalm about deep despair, disorientation, wondering where God is.

So Psalm 103 spells out five things God has done for us. We must remember how God's forgiven us, how he's healed us, how he's redeemed us, how he crowns us, and how he satisfies us.

And in all these actions that God takes towards us, we learn a few things. We learn about ourselves. But then we also learn about the character of God, who he is, and what he has done. And as we see who God is, then we also learn how we ought to respond to all the things that God has done for us, especially in light of our character, and especially in light of who God is.

So we'll use these first five verses of the psalm to read the entire psalm. So it'd be helpful if you keep your Bibles open. So it starts with the, Bless the Lord, O my soul.

[2:06] We need to begin with that. Bless the Lord. What is this bless the Lord business? You know, I think this can become a Christian-y phrase that we say. We don't always stop and think, what does it mean?

Yet this is the single refrain and focus of the psalm. It starts this way. It ends this way. And the psalm, it's positive. David is sure that if we see God, no matter the circumstances, this will be our response.

It's synonymous with saying, praise the Lord. And it's not a polite suggestion either. It's a command. And it's an odd command at that. When we say, God bless you, it's normally in response to when someone sneezes.

It's normally in some sense of hope that God will bestow goodness or provision upon that person. But bless the Lord. How do we bless the blesser?

How do we bless the one who has given us everything? But blessing the Lord is something we can do. And the fact that it is a command, it shows that it's something God desires us to do.

[3:13] God wants us to bless him. And blessing the Lord is this act of speaking well of the goodness of God. God wants us to do. God wants us to do. And offering our entire lives in response to his character.

Just how when you take the risk and say, I love you, to someone for the first time. You hope to hear, I love you too, and not, ditto. Or what Julia said to me in response to the first time I said, I love you.

I think I love you. I'm still getting over it. This is how it is with God and remembering him. If we see, if we see how God relentlessly pursues us.

How he has sought us. What he has done for us. This should be our response. This should be our response. We should respond by blessing him with our entire lives.

And let's not overlook something that's odd about this verse. In verse 1. Bless the Lord, O my soul, all that is within me. David is talking to himself.

[4 : 17] He's pleading with his soul to worship God. And I think we get this. I really do. Think about that time. You have that noble thought or aspiration. Like, I should spend the next 5 to 10 minutes praying.

Then you spend the next 5 to 10 minutes finishing off that bag of Doritos. You know, you have the intention. But you find that your body does not follow through. Your heart does not follow through. Our minds are willing. But sometimes the flesh is weak. And we can't seem to get our souls calibrated. And David, he knows this. He knows that he needs to get his soul recalibrated.

He knows that the way we do it isn't just through our efforts. But through a decided effort to remember what God has done. He knows how prone we are to forget.

We're forgetful creatures. We forget stories. We forget keys. We forget deadlines. We forget to pay bills. We forget anniversaries. At times we forget children.

[5 : 14] And so it makes sense. It makes sense that David says, Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. But the forgetfulness here is more than mere absent-mindedness.

The proper response to God is to bless him. But the problem is that there is something fundamentally awry within our souls. That not only do we forget what God has done.

But we forget how we ought to respond to what God has done. We can get tunnel vision. And we can't seem to see past ourselves. So there's two things we learn in these first two verses.

If you want to bless the Lord with all your soul. First, it will take remembering who you are. And second, it will take a decided effort of remembering who God is and what he has done.

And this is precisely what the rest of the psalm does. David begins to remember God and what God has done and how God has acted. He writes in verses 3 and 4, God who forgives all your iniquity.

[6 : 16] Who heals all your diseases. Who redeems your life from the pit. Note the verbs. Forgives. Heals. Redeems. This is a vocabulary of salvation.

Let's also note the subject of these actions is God. God is the one who takes the initiative to set us back to rights with him. Salvation begins with God before it ever has anything to do with us.

And these verses tell us that the actions of God, but they also reveal something about our nature. We need forgiveness. We need healing.

We need redemption. And right now, I want you to resist the urge of saying to yourself, I've heard this all before. You know, give me the real meat. You know, I know the basics of the gospel.

David knows this stuff. David has seen God show up in his life in incredible ways. But he also knows if he's going to wake up his tired heart, it will take more and more effort to remember what God has done.

[7 : 22] So when we treat the gospel like it's the basics, like we've got it down, we've completely missed the point. You see, one side of the coin of salvation is how God saves us.

This is true. But the way we grow in the Christian faith isn't simply putting effort after effort after effort after that point forward. It takes remembering how God has shown up.

And as we remember how God has had mercy on us, we find that our hearts are strangely warmed. And we find that our feet begin moving in the way of Jesus. Because God is the one doing the work in and through us.

Yes, it requires effort, but it also requires remembering the great mercy of God. And that is the other side of the coin of salvation. The gospel is how we're transformed. And so I want you to check in right now.

Remember the gospel with me. Listen to this with me. First, the psalm tells us we're an iniquitous people. Iniquity, it's not a word we really use anymore.

[8 : 20] It's synonymous with sin. It tells us that we all sin. And that every sin, every offense is ultimately against God. And the holy and just outcome of sin is death.

And the psalm tells us we are sinners in need of forgiveness. But then it tells us that we're a diseased people. I think at this point we get, I mean, we get colds.

Our bodies break down. Depression and anxiety, you know, is a struggle of many of us. We see cancer in some of our family. We see other scary diseases. We look at the world and, yeah, we see that our bodies are diseased.

They break down. And then the psalm says, our lives are in the pit. That's the Hebraic way of saying that our lives are headed towards death. And death is anti-creational.

This was never God's plan. His desire was never that we would die. But when we sinned, we rebelled against the only source of life. We chose death. And ever since, sin, sickness, and death are a reality in this fallen world.

[9 : 24] And so we walk in the shadow of death. Because this world has been separated from God because of sin. And so the psalm says, we're an iniquitous, diseased people who live in the pit.

An iniquitous, diseased people who live in the pit. Not exactly what we would put on our resumes.

But I don't think it takes much imagination to see where these verses intersect with our lives.

They ring true, even if we don't want them to. And the point is not to beat you over the head with some verses. I think David, he remembers this. He remembers his frame to bring him to a place of humility.

A place of honesty. A place where we can take off our masks and admit that we're not really as cleaned up as we present. And that we're covering our brokenness with cheap veneers.

And the psalm invites you, whether you've ever placed your faith in God. Or whether you've considered yourself a Christian for a long time. To take off your mask and be honest about your brokenness.

[10 : 24] Because for us to revel in what God has done. We first have to recognize the need for him to have done it. And yet the good news is that precisely in this place. Trapped in the disease of sin.

Taunted by the shadow of death. That God took the initiative to save us. And as David remembers that he himself is a person who struggles with sin. He also remembers God.

Read with me in verse 8. He writes in verses 9 and 10.

God will not always chide. Nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins. Nor repay us according to our iniquities.

You may remember your life and you think, If there's a God, yeah. Yeah. He should be angry at me. Yeah. He could rightly judge me.

[11 : 25] Maybe you're feeling the weight of guilt over a secret sin that you've been committing and keeping. Or maybe you're feeling the weight of guilt over sins that you haven't been keeping in secret. But if we remember God rightly.

We remember that God is the merciful, compassionate lover of our souls. And while we may deserve his wrath and anger, he does not treat us the way we deserve. He does not repay us according to our sins.

He treats us with grace. Remembering who he is then gives us permission to come clean. I want you to hear this. You can come clean and admit all your brokenness because God forgives all sin. Not just some sins. Not just the easy sins. All sin. And certainly not because we deserve it. He forgives sins because that's his desire.

That is the best expression of who he is. And he does it because he desires you. This is grace. Unmerited, free forgiveness that we could never earn.

[12 : 28] And David elaborates on this in verses 11 through 13. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love from those who fear him.

As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As the Father shows compassion on his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

God's love, it's steady. It's strong. It's immeasurable. It's as high as the heavens are from the earth. And this isn't just about the 10 miles or so until the atmosphere begins.

The point is that God's love is massive. It's all-encompassing. There's not a nook and cranny of all of the universe that God's love is not present. That God's love does not fill.

And yet God's love is not generic. He doesn't paint the universe with broad strokes of love. It's specific. It's targeted. It's directed. God loves you.

[13 : 26] This massive, unfathomable love is directed towards you and your soul. And it's unswerving. And there's nothing you can do to increase God's love.

There's nothing you can do to decrease God's love. God loves you in complete totality, without limit. I don't know about you, but I can get this intellectually.

It's so hard to get it into my heart. Tim Keller says there's two ways to fail to let Jesus be your loving Savior. The first is to have a superiority complex.

You hear that you're broken. You're an iniquitous, diseased person. And you say, no, I'm doing pretty good. On the other hand, you have this inferiority complex where you say, I am so terrible. I am so broken. How could God ever possibly love me? But either way, you're letting yourself get in the way of receiving God's forgiveness.

[14 : 23] Rather than opening your hands and receiving what he so freely offers. And so no matter what you've done, God's forgiveness is all-encompassing.

It obliterates each of our sins. He puts our sins as far as the east is from the west. In other words, the biggest metaphor of distance that you can fathom, times it by two, times it by infinity if you so desire.

That is how far God puts sins away from us. We can't comprehend it. We can't come up with a metaphor to explain how far he puts it away from us.

But how? How can he put our sins this far away from us? I think the fulfillment of these verses, you have to look to the cross. On the cross, the Son of God was nailed naked to a tree on two crooked beams.

And all the sin in the world, all of the sin in this room was placed on him. And he was substituted in your place and judged for your sins. And he was tormented and he was mocked.

[15 : 23] Yet he didn't judge us. He didn't condemn us. He actually uttered words of forgiveness before taking his last breath so that our sins could be forgiven. On the cross, we see the extent of God's love for us.

God is beyond space. He's beyond time. He is great. He is holy. He's good. And yet he descends down from his greatness and his power and his glory into the form of a human.

And yet his association with us doesn't stop just in becoming human. He continues to descend down even to our worst parts. Even to our darkest places.

Even to a place of a cross. To identify with our sin when he was sinless. Just so that we could know that his love knows no bounds. And that there is no place that he wouldn't go to pursue you.

On the cross, we see that Jesus is our redemption. That God descended not just to forgive us, but to bring us back up with him.

[16 : 24] That our lives would no longer be enslaved by sin. And that we might begin to live by the power of his spirit. And walk in his grace and newness of life. When I was trying to think of how to illustrate this point, I remembered an experience I had with my own father when I was 16.

We were arguing. And I was being lippy like all 16-year-old boys are. You know, just kind of getting in his face. I can't remember what I was angry about. He was probably asking me to turn down my Marilyn Manson CD, which I listened to on repeat.

But, you know, I can't remember. And it just makes this story worse. We were arguing. We were getting more and more upset. And so I just stepped back. And I punched my dad square in the face. And for a moment, for a moment, it was like I forgot who I was. You know, I'm like bouncing around like Muhammad Ali or something. But in reality, I was just this emo kid with dark black hair.

And, you know, flailing my fist at him. Like, you know, like this moment, I just forgot who I was. And as I remember this, I realized this past Christmas, I never apologized to my dad for this.

[17 : 30] So 15 years later for Christmas, this was his present. And in the evening, I said, hey, there's something I want to talk to you about. And he said, sure. And I said, do you remember that time I punched you in the face?

And he said to me, what? You punched me in the face? I said, yeah, I must have hit you that hard. And he said, or it was just that memorable, son.

Now for my dad, for my dad, it was literally forgetfulness. He just didn't remember. But for God and his posture towards our sins, he says, what sin?

It's because Christ has obliterated our sins so that God remembers them no more, fulfilling the promises of Jeremiah. You can read more about that in the book of Hebrews, chapter 8 through 10. I think that all of this, the cross especially, it speaks into this deep desire for acceptance. In our sin, we know there are parts of our souls that we can't accept about ourselves.

[18 : 34] And if we can't accept them, we know that the people around us couldn't accept them. And if we know that we can't accept them, and the people around us can't accept them, how could God accept us? The scriptures say, even when we were worse, even when we were sinners, even when we were enemies, God loved us.

And he offers forgiveness. And the cross exposes whatever lies you've been telling to yourself. The truth is, you can throw your punches at God. You can give him your worst, and he will forgive you. He will not hold your sins against you if you place your faith and your trust in Jesus and continually come to him for the forgiveness of your sins. And so far, we have remembered how God, he forgives, he heals, he redeems us.

And this is what we say the gospel is. This is one coin, one side of the coin of salvation. But the other side is how the gospel transforms us. Verse 4, God crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.

This is such an interesting verse to me. David's the king of Israel. He literally wears a crown. He's clothed in power. He has dominion over people.

[19 : 50] And yet, he knows his true crown is not the crown on his head. He knows that his true crown is God. Why don't you think about the crowns we give out in society for a second? Think about Miss America.

She's crowned for a year, and then she's gone. Nobody remembers who People Magazine's sexiest man alive was in 2003. It was Aaron Roberts. Just kidding.

It was me. But even our best crowns, like Her Majesty the Queen of England. Not everybody recognizes her crown.

Some nations like to throw Her Majesty's tea into the ocean. Our crowns, they're fleeting in society. Their worth is arbitrary.

Not everybody recognizes them. And worse, not everybody gets a crown. But we all long to receive the significance that it conveys. So we attempt to crown ourselves in many ways.

[20 : 50] We try to find our acceptance and our worth in different things. It might be your love life. It might be how you look. Or how many days you checked in at the gym. Or your children's grades.

Or a new home. Or whatever achievement you just made. But the moment that source of worth slips, you feel terrible about yourself.

I didn't go to the gym for two weeks, so I must be a slob. Johnny got an F. I must be a terrible mother. And our hearts get so caught up in these things. And God, he knows this.

He knows we struggle to find security and identity. And so he offers us an identity we could never achieve on our own. He shows us that our identities aren't ultimately in our stuff, or in ourselves, or in relationships, but in him.

In his mercy and steadfast love. David said he crowns you with mercy and steadfast love. This is the exact description of God's character in the psalm. You're crowned with God.

[21 : 54] When I hear this, it's like God looks you square on in the eyes, and he says, you matter. You matter to me. And then most of all, the crown God gives us is everlasting.

Verse 17. The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him. The other stuff will pass. It will fade away. It will fail you. But our acceptance and worth in God cannot be lost, because his embrace will not let us go.

So God forgives. He heals. He redeems. He crowns. But then David tops it off. He says, God satisfies. Verse 5. He satisfies you with good. And I think this is a good thing, because we are a people that are thirsty for satisfaction.

You know, maybe you had the laptop, and you were feeling pretty good about your MacBook, and then the iPad came out, and you just had to have the iPad, and then the iPad mini came out, and you couldn't possibly preach a sermon until you got the iPad mini.

You know what I mean. It's always the next thing. The car. The job. The next degree. The things of this world, even if they're good, will not give us enduring satisfaction.

[23 : 13] It's intriguing that when David says, God crowns you with good, that he doesn't list a bunch of things like playing croquet or bobsledding. He doesn't list stuff. He just says, God satisfies you with good.

And I think that means we will only be satisfied ultimately with God himself. Jesus even says, only the Father. Only the Father is good. God satisfies us with his steadfast love and his mercy as our crown.

He satisfies us as we find our acceptance and our worth fully in him. How many of you know John Piper? John Piper. Anyone? All right. This will be funny to some of you.

John Piper has famously yelled, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. He'll yell this until he's red in the face.

God is most glorified in us until we are most satisfied in him. What he means is that God is most on display, will be seen most beautifully in us.

[24 : 16] When we see that all of life, all of meaning is ultimately found in him. And that our souls will only ever be fully alive when we run towards him and bless him with our lips and our lives.

It's only in God. This is the only place that I know where you can be satisfied right now. And not some future version of yourself when you hit all your milestones.

Because God offers you a crown in satisfaction here and now, even with everything that seems like it's chaos and all these strings that don't seem to connect, God meets you right there.

And the question that came up to me as I studied this psalm, why? Why would God treat us like this? When we are an iniquitous, diseased people who forget him.

Verses 13 and 14 are the answer, I think, the key to the psalm. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

[25 : 22] For he knows our frame. He remembers that we are but dust. God's our father. And I think we hear this so often that it loses its profundity.

God's not our enemy. God's not aloof. God's not distant. God's a tender father who shows compassion towards us.

The word compassion here in the Hebrew conveys a deep emotional connection. God's heart is knit to yours as one of his own children. And despite whatever misconceptions you may have because of your father, know that your heavenly father is perfect in love and kindness and mercy.

Because he remembers our frame. He knows that we're but dust. He knows that sin has saturated our bodies and our minds and our actions, that we need help.

We need saving. When I think back to that punch I threw at my dad 15 years ago, I can't believe that I treated him with such disrespect.

[26 : 29] For the most part, by any measure, by any measure, my dad was a good dad. But in that moment, I didn't treat him like a good father. I treated him like an adversary. There's something about the way my dad responded that has stuck with me.

First, he grabbed me by the shoulders and he said, Do you want me to punch you back? And I was terrified. Because I knew whatever pain I could inflict on him, he could inflict double.

Then he let go and he left the house for a few hours. Then he came back a bit later, came into my room, and gave me a chocolate bar. Male emotions at their best. At the time, I thought the chocolate bar was a little victory.

I stood up. I proved myself as a man. But I totally misunderstood. I totally misunderstood what my dad was doing. See, he remembered my frame.

He knew the stuff that was tearing up my soul. He knew what was driving me. So he didn't return punch for punch. He took the insult. He took the pain and had compassion on me.

[27 : 38] The best way he knew how, he gave me a chocolate bar. God doesn't treat us the way we deserve. He doesn't treat us the way we deserve. He takes the insult.

He takes the punch. He takes the pain. But he gives us so much more than chocolate bars. He gives us himself. He gives us true satisfaction. True worth.

True acceptance. He gives us himself as our loving father. I want to say this. It would be a mistake at this point if I didn't emphasize something that the psalm makes very clear.

This grace. This compassion. This love. This love. Is not de facto yours. The psalm says three times that it is for those who fear him.

Which means you are not automatically a child of God. Outside of the salvation Jesus offers, the scriptures say you are a child of wrath. A child of the pit.

[28 : 40] A child of the shadow of death. Heading towards eternal death. So then what does it mean to fear God? I think that's what we want to ask.

I don't think it's merely reverence. I think it would be a lot easier if it was just reverence. I think it's downright literally fear. Because if we see who God is, we in turn see ourselves for who we truly are.

And we know that our sin leads towards death. And that before a holy and righteous creator, we have no legs to stand on. But to those who see God rightly and to those who respond with fear, God paradoxically says, Do not fear.

So the command to fear the Lord is a command, I think, to see him rightly. To have God in your mind and heart as so powerful and so holy and so awesome that you wouldn't dare run away from

him, but only run towards him.

And it starts by putting your faith and trust in Jesus and what he did for you on the cross. So bring it all back together. In light of this, God forgiving, healing, redeeming, crowning, satisfying.

[29 : 52] There's only one way to respond. Bless the Lord. And I know this isn't easy. But the psalm is so clear.

If we saw God, if we could just see the beauty of Jesus, you wouldn't have to try to fabricate this response. This will be your response. And you need to remember, David writes this on the tail end of Psalm 102.

A psalm of deep despair and struggle. I think that shows that no matter what's going on in your life, today, the past week, the past month, the past year, we're called to remember God regardless of how we feel.

Even when our souls don't feel like it, we have to stir them up by remembering God. And I think blessing the Lord means blessing him not only with our lips, but with our lives.

And how this looks practically is different for every single one of you. But it begins in the same place. It begins by asking God, how can I bless you today? And letting your answer be yes, before you know what he asks.

[31 : 03] Listen to the end of the psalm. This is how the psalm begins. This is how it ends. Bless the Lord. 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. Bless the Lord, all his works in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord.

Amen?