

Ash Wednesday

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[0:00] Good evening, folks. Let's pray before we start. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening.

! In Christ's name, Amen.! But I suspect that when we think about Lent, we just remember the turning away part of the equation.

Which means some folks just spend Lent kind of just beating themselves up. And there are a number of problems with this, of course. One of the main issues is that you can make yourself the focus of the season.

But I want us to do Lent well, obviously. We want to do Lent well. We want to do it in a way which is spiritually very healthy. And to help, we're going to be looking at Psalm 103, which was the psalm sung to us.

I'm going to be quoting from the ESV, which is the Pew Bible there. In the Pew Bible, page 502. And it's one of the readings for Ash Wednesday.

[1:20] And what I love about this psalm is it's realistic about the state of humanity, about our frailty. But the focus is actually on the goodness of God. I mean, it still talks about sin. But David says, let me tell you about the God that we bring our sin to.

So let's get stuck into it. Here we go. Psalm 103. It says there, bless the Lord. That's how it starts. And if you look at the bottom, it says, bless the Lord.

So at the start, it's more personal. Bless the Lord, oh my soul. And at the end, it's David inviting heavenly realms to join with him. Bless the Lord, you angels, all you hosts of heaven.

So bless the Lord sort of bookends the passage. What does that mean, bless the Lord? Well, we heard from how it was sung with us tonight. It basically just means praise the Lord. So the question is, why do we praise the Lord though?

Why should we do that? And that's what the middle of the psalm is about. It's praise the Lord, praise the Lord. And in the middle, it says, let me tell you why you should praise the Lord.

[2:29] So let's get to that middle part. And remember, we're reminding ourselves of who we are turning to in Lent. In verse 2, David says, bless the Lord, forget not his benefits.

And what's the very first benefit we are to remember? What's the first thing David is grateful for? Let me read it to you.

Bless the Lord, oh my soul, forget not his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity. You remember, David was a superstar at this point.

He had had some kind of life. I mean, he had a lot to thank God for. But the first thing he thanks God for is forgiveness.

That's where he starts. And he's the king. And that's the first thing that comes to his mind. Now, what is forgiveness? It's a good question, right?

[3:28] But what actually is forgiveness? Well, verse 10 tells us. It tells us that forgiveness is not pretending that something didn't happen.

So what is it? If you look at verse 10, you'll see there. It explains it to us. Verse 10. He does not, he, that's the Lord. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

That's forgiveness. Forgiveness means God does not deal with us according to our sins. He does not repay us according to our iniquities. When you come to God with your sin, he doesn't hold it over you.

He doesn't say, look, you've messed up, and now I'm going to treat you differently. The gospel means you don't get what you deserve. But I think that's hard for us, isn't it, to understand that. It's hard for us to wrap our heads around that. Because I think secretly, I think secretly we prefer karma. I think secretly we do.

[4:32] Karma says you get what you deserve. You do good, you get good. You do bad, you get bad. And it seems fair. It's kind of orderly. I think a lot of us like it.

You know, you pay people back for their performance. It's how the world works. It gives us a sense of control. I understand why people like this. But karma is the opposite of the gospel. Karma says, and most religions actually say you get what you earn. But the gospel of Christ says in Christ you get what you don't earn. You receive grace and mercy when you deserve the opposite. And all of this is because of the cross. Jesus got what you deserved. And you get what he deserved.

Okay, back to the passage. So the first thing that David thanks God for is forgiveness. And he defines forgiveness for us. He says, he does not deal with us according to our sins. He does not repay us according to our iniquities.

[5:37] Isn't this great news? This is great news. God doesn't operate on some kind of strict repayment system. And this is wonderful. This is the God that you're coming to with your sins.

Now we need to qualify this a little bit. All the stuff I just said. It doesn't mean that God is happy with sin. It doesn't mean that God is laissez-faire about it. That it doesn't matter. If we look at verses 8 and 9, it says that God doesn't like sin.

He's not laissez-faire about it. It makes him angry because it hurts people. But he limits. He limits it. He limits his anger. Unlike us sometimes.

I don't know about you. You kind of... What's the phrase? You like nurse your grievances. I think that's a phrase, right? You nurse your grievances. Like you feed your grievances.

You hold on to them. When people wrong us, we kind of file it away. Replay it in our heads. We might fantasize about getting back at people. That's terrible, you know.

[6:48] When we're weird, people are weird. We're weird like that, aren't we? If you do this, you replay arguments in your head in the shower. Kind of winning your arguments in your head against the bad people in your life who have wronged you.

I mean, we're just weird. God is not like that. He doesn't hold a grudge. He doesn't fly off the handle. He doesn't replay these things in his head. He won't be like that with you when you come to him in repentance.

Now, here's a good question. Why is God like this? Why is he slow to anger? Rich in love? Why is he merciful?

Especially considering some of the messes we get into. Answers in verse 13, I think. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

For he knows our frames. He remembers we are dust. The Lord loves you despite your weaknesses because he's a father. Father. He's a father. He's not like a boss.

[7:52] You know, a boss loves you. I don't really love you, to be honest, do they? They like you because you perform. You know, you meet your quarterly objectives.

And if you don't, I mean, it's all over because that's a relationship based on performance, isn't it? See, your relationship with God is not like that. But we think it is sometimes.

We mess up and we think, oh, no, God, we can't come to God. He's going to be sick of me. He's going to pull back. God is not like a boss. He's a father. He has eternally been a father.

He's your father. Let's think about this a little bit more. You know, when you're a father, if you've had that experience, you know, when your kids get in trouble, they do something stupid.

You don't forget about them. You don't pull back from them. You actually get more engaged when they do stupid things. Let's say your kid lies to you. What do you do? You don't pull back.

[8:49] You get more engaged because you don't want them to be liars. You're angry about it. But it doesn't last. You keep loving them. You don't cast them out. You don't ignore them.

You actually dig in. You dive more into that relationship. Now, how is it we can have a relationship like that with God? How is it that God can be our father?

Again, it's the cross. You notice, when we get to Easter and we read the story of the crucifixion, the passion of Christ, you'll notice Jesus doesn't get to call God father at the end there, does he?

And that's because he lost his relationship with his father so that we could have one. That means, you know, when we get to the litany part of his service and the confession part, and, you know, I know we read these things and it stings a lot.

A little bit. And because you can relate to a lot of the stuff in there. You know, we'd be tempted to think, you know, God must be so sick of me. But remember, you're coming. I'll just say it again because it's so important.

[9:57] You're coming to your heavenly father. When my daughter calls me, and she's not here tonight, she's annoying. You know, like, when she does stupid things, when she calls me up, how do I answer the phone?

Every time. Hello, gorgeous. How are you? What's going on? You know, that's the kind of reception you get from a father and even a broken father like me.

Do you think you're going to get a less response, a worse response from God when you come to him? God will always be there. Always ready to forgive.

Always ready to hear. Always loving because he's your father. And it's hard to fathom, I know, because you know your sin. And for some of you, I'm guessing there is stuff that sits quite acutely and quite profoundly on your conscience.

And it's hard for you to get out from underneath it. If this is you, can I just direct you towards verses 11 and 12? What David does is he gives us these two pictures to help us see how good God is and how complete that forgiveness is.

[11:09] Even for that thing that's just sitting there in your brain, kind of mocking you. Verses 11 and 12. For as high as the heavens above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him.

As far as east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. So what are these? These are pictures of vast distances.

Impossibly large distances. God takes away our sin and guilt as far as east is from west. That's an immeasurable distance.

And again, you might have some things that are sitting on your conscience that just seem too big for God's grace. I just wonder for a moment if you could imagine something for me. I want you to imagine that thing just on a boat in a harbour.

Just sitting on a boat in a harbour. Now imagine that boat just starting to drift. And it gets further and further and further away.

[12:13] That thing that's hanging over you. That the evil one is always niggling you about. The thing that you think God could never forgive.

And that thing is sitting on that boat. And that boat is drifting further and further away. And it gets to the horizon. And it dips over the horizon. And it disappears over that horizon.

And it's completely gone. That's where God puts your sin. As far away as you can possibly imagine. As far as the east is from the west. Because he's your father. And the father loves his children. Now does this mean that God is all goo-eyed.

A goo-eyed dad. That has these unrealistic expectations of us. Unrealistic opinions of us. No. Look at verses 14 to 17. He knows our frames.

[13:11] He remembers we're dust. Our days are like grass. He flourishes like a flower of the field. For the wind passes over it and it's gone. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.

We're like dust. We're like grass. God knows it and he doesn't despise us. Even though he knows how frail we are. His love for us is everlasting to everlasting. That's one more sort of impossible measurement.

He knows you. He knows all of you. And he loves you. I'm going to finish up here. At the start of a sermon I said, don't spend Lent. Just beat yourself up.

There's a turning away. There's a turning to. Be realistic about your state. And be in awe of who God is. I heard a brilliant summary of this yesterday.

Yesterday I watched that sort of documentary movie, *Amazing Grace*, at Senior's Lunch. It was produced by Charles Morris and Bruce Heinemarscher. Bruce Heinemarscher. Both St. John is here. The movie is incredible.

[14:14] It's the story of John Newton, who was a former slave trader, who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*. And early in the movie, the elderly John Newton is grappling with his involvement in the slave trade.

And as you know, he was the captain of a slave ship. He delivered hundreds of slaves. Hundreds and hundreds of slaves. And he was responsible for many deaths as well. And as this older man is reckoning with his conscience.

And he says, towards the end of his life, I've come to a conclusion that I'm a great sinner. And Christ is a great saviour.

So this Lent, let's make sure we remember both of those things. Amen.