

BLESS THE LORD, O MY SOUL!

SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PSALMS

By Scott Grant

Not ready for fastballs

When you come to worship on Sunday morning, and the music begins, do you always feel like praising the Lord? Or when you pray or read the scriptures, do you always feel connected to him when you start out? Usually, my soul is slow to respond. I'm rather like the baseball pitcher who must warm up for awhile before throwing fastballs. Oftentimes, it seems I never get warmed up.

If you're like me, you're also like David, who recognized the disparity between the greatness of the Lord and his disposition to praise the Lord. In Psalm 103, a psalm of thanksgiving, he faces into the disparity and in doing so, he instructs those of us who are slow to warm up to the Lord.

Psalm 103 opens and closes with exhortations to "bless the Lord." The psalm leads to, and leads out of, the central stanza, verses 9 through 16. Verses 11 through 13, in the center of that stanza, form the thematic climax of the psalm. The key words, which appear between the exhortations to bless the Lord, are "lovingkindness" and "compassion."

Connecting with God's love (103:1-8)

**Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And all that is within me, bless His holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And forget none of His benefits;
Who pardons all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases;
Who redeems your life from the pit,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;
Who satisfies your years with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.
The LORD performs righteous deeds
And judgments for all who are oppressed.
He made known His ways to Moses,
His acts to the sons of Israel.
The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.**

David begins by speaking to himself, to his inner thought and emotional life; a word of exhortation for his soul. He's rather emphatic about it, calling three times for his soul to bless

the Lord—to praise the Lord in a way that gives thanks to him. David’s soul, it seems, needs a little prodding and he is saying, “Come on, soul, get with it!”

The Lord is deserving of praise because of his “benefits,” a word that can be translated either positively, as it is here, or negatively. Are these benefits or just desserts? Clearly, in view of the context, they are benefits, but the interpretive options for this word come into play later in the psalm. David’s soul needs to be roused because it is prone to forgetfulness. Literally, David issues a negative, not a positive command, for his soul to “not forget” the Lord’s benefits, featuring the benefits he has in mind in verses 3 to 18.

In verses 3 through 5, David continues to write with respect to his soul, which is the beneficiary of the Lord (the pronouns “your” and “you” are singular). Nevertheless, as the psalm continues, the blessings of the Lord, rooted in his covenant with Israel, flow out to the many. Moreover, Israel saw itself as being summed up by her king, in this case David. As the king went, so went the nation.

In these verses, David maps out the course of his soul’s redemptive journey. Five clauses, each beginning with the word “who” are stacked on top of each other to create a powerful rhetorical effect. His sins have created a spiritual sickness that the Lord has healed him of. With his sins, he dug for himself a pit, but the Lord has redeemed him, or rescued him, so thoroughly that David is crowned in royalty.

The second line in verse 4 is the thematic climax of verses 1 through 8, with the words “lovingkindness” and “compassion” being echoed at the end of the stanza. These two words, which evoke the Lord’s covenant with Israel, emphasize his love for his people with respect to his loyalty and empathy, respectively. These qualities of the Lord, in particular, are seen in the journey of David’s soul. And, at the end of the journey, David finds that the good things of the Lord that he has encountered in his redemptive journey are satisfying to his soul.

David breaks with his rhetorical pattern in the last line of verse 5 to emphasize the cumulative affect of the Lord’s benefits. He feels young again, not as an eagle is renewed, but as an eagle *is*. In other words, he finds vigor and freedom for his soul, and he has much to look forward to, no matter his age.

David, who has been speaking to his soul, opens up the psalm for others, for he writes of “all who are oppressed.” The example he has in mind is the Exodus. Remember, the Israelites were oppressed in Egypt, but the Lord, through his “righteous deeds” and “judgments,” liberated them. Through the 10 plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, the Lord saved Israel and judged Egypt.

When the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, the Lord gave them the Law, which made known his ways, on which his actions were based. But the people rejected the Lord and instead crafted a golden calf to worship. Moses interceded for them and asked the Lord to reveal to him his glory. After allowing Moses to see his “back,” the Lord passed in “front” of Moses to more fully reveal himself (Exodus 34:6).

David, in verse 8, essentially reproduces the Lord's self-portrait on Mount Sinai. The ways of the Lord, especially in the wake of Israel's idolatry, are "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." The key words "compassionate" and "lovingkindness" envelop the Lord's grace and patience in the face of the wickedness of his people. He wraps his grace and patience in compassion and loyal love.

Preaching to our souls

The scriptures, and this psalm in particular, speak to us of God's love for us. However, when we slow down long enough to think about things, we perceive a disparity between God's love for us and our response to it. If it's true that God loves in the manner described by Psalm 96 (see Discovery Paper 4932), we know that all that is within us should be erupting with praise.

Unlike many of our neighbors in the Silicon Valley, those of us who follow Jesus are aware of our sin, our thoughts and actions that express rebellion against God. We're also aware of the forgiveness God grants us in Jesus Christ. When it comes to God's disposition toward us, we should be singing and laughing and dancing. Why is it, then, that we're so glum, walking about under a cloud of guilt and always trying to get out from under it by doing better? It's because there is a disconnection. We are more aware of our shortcomings than God's love. We have not allowed the immensity of his love for us to penetrate our souls so that we experience the hilarious joy of being forgiven.

What should we do? First, it's important to recognize that the awareness of such a disparity in itself constitutes worship. If you recognize that you are not responding to God in accordance with his worth, you are, in fact, acknowledging his worth. If you want from yourself a greater response to God, you are, in fact, worshipping him.

Second, we should do as David did: Preach to ourselves. We speak to our souls, to our own inner thought and emotional life. We get outside ourselves to speak inside ourselves, as if we were an objective observer with wisdom to offer.

What do we preach? "Bless the Lord, O my soul!" Then you give your soul reason for doing so. You remind your soul of its redemptive journey: how the Lord has pardoned you, healed you, lifted you and crowned you. There, in the journey of your soul, you will see the stunning loyal love and compassion of the Lord. And you will emerge with a new appreciation for him. In words that echo the sentiment of Psalm 103, Paul writes:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:4-6)

God has taken you from the pit of sin on a throne of grace, and a heavenly one at that, even now. Reconnect with your own journey, and see that the good things of the Lord, his loyal love and compassion, are satisfying to the soul. Experience the renewal of your youth, whether you're old or young, so that you find new vigor and freedom and optimism. Like David, you

will no doubt find yourself caring about others who are oppressed, and you will want them to experience the Lord's loyal love, compassion, grace and patience.

The nature of God's love (103:9-16)

**He will not always strive with us,
Nor will He keep His anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
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.
Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.
For He Himself knows our frame;
He is mindful that we are but dust.
As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
When the wind has passed over it, it is no more,
And its place acknowledges it no longer.**

The word translated "strive" in verse 9 in this case conveys a sense of contention. Although the Lord has issues with his people, and they provoke him, a time is coming when he will stop contending with them and let go of his anger. For the Lord to stay angry, he must keep his anger, or nurse it for it requires attention and maintenance. But he doesn't want to be angry. Unlike his loyal love, which abounds, his anger has a limit and he will attend to it no longer.

Although he is a God of justice, he apparently deals unjustly with his people: He does not punish them accordingly for their sins. The verb translated "rewarded" is related to the noun translated "benefits" in verse 2. Instead of punishing his people for their iniquities, the Lord blesses them with forgiveness. In other words, his mercy overwhelms his anger. If the Lord's mercy were not greater than his anger, he would have destroyed Israel after it worshiped the golden calf.

David explains the "injustice" of the Lord, which causes him to be lenient with his people, in verses 11 through 13. He offers a series of three comparisons to make his point in the center and climax of the psalm. The key words "lovingkindness" and "compassion" open and close the series. The beneficiaries, both at the beginning and end of the section, are "those who fear him," an appellation for the people of God who, in this case, are responsive to the forgiveness they have received.

David speaks in both vertical and horizontal terms. The distance between heaven and earth is commensurate to the Lord's loyal love. The distance between east and west is the space the Lord has placed between his people and their transgressions.

To speak of the heavens, the earth, east and west is to do so in spatial terms. There is something there to measure, even if one could never stop measuring it. But a father's compassion for his children defies measurement. The entire universe is not big enough to contain or illustrate the vastness of the love of the Lord. It takes an entirely different kind of illustration. So to bring the series to its climax, David employs a relational illustration that blows the entire category of quantification. When we explore the inner dimension of a father's heart, we're not thinking about statistics. Rather, the story of a father's compassion for his children engages our hearts.

In verses 14 through 16, David expounds upon the loyal love and compassion of the Lord. Why is the Lord loyal and compassionate toward those who fear him, and why does his mercy overwhelm his anger? David's answer is this: The Lord knows that his people are weak, fragile and temporal. He would know, of course, that his people are dust, because he formed the first man "of dust from the ground." When the man sinned, the Lord told him that he would return to the ground, "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 2:7, 3:19). The human body becomes dust after life leaves it.

All humans are dust, but David speaks with specific reference to the people of Israel, although his assertions in verse 14 would certainly apply to all people. In verse 15, however, he speaks of "man," turning his attention to humanity as a whole.

A human is like grass or a flower. He flourishes like a flower, enjoying the beauty of life, but only briefly before being uprooted by the winds of life. Not only do the winds take her life away, the place where she lived soon becomes unaware that she was even there.

Notice verse 16, with its use of the word "no" twice, echoes verse 9, which also uses words of negation twice. A human, like a flower, is "no more," and its place acknowledges it "no longer." But in verse 9, the Lord will "not" always contend with us, "nor" will he keep his anger forever. Both verse 9 and verse 16 feature "time." Why will the Lord not always contend with us, and why will he not keep his anger forever? Because he knows that we're temporal. Because the Lord knows that his people, and all humans, are weak, fragile and temporal, he is merciful toward them.

Receiving God's love

Many things must be said about God's anger that we must come to terms with. However we understand it, we must also understand this: God doesn't want to be angry.

There are things you do in life not because you want to but because you know they are necessary. That's the way it is with God and his anger. We nurse our anger because we enjoy it. God nurses his anger because he has to. He doesn't enjoy getting angry. He has to work at it. But a time is coming when he will have to work at it no longer, for it will no longer be necessary after the final judgment. God does not get angry at the drop of a hat, or because of one little misstep.

Mercy is not something God has to work at. He enjoys it. What he enjoys most is when we receive it.

Why is he compassionate and merciful? Because he knows we're weak and fragile. He knows the stuff you're made of. After all, he should know. He made you—and he made you weak. God therefore does not have the impossible expectations of us that we have of ourselves. He just wants us to receive his love, compassion and mercy. Instead, we try to clean ourselves up. We try to prove that we don't need forgiveness instead of accepting forgiveness. We try to make up for our weakness instead of letting God love us in our weakness. God made us weak that we might recognize our need for his love. To receive this kind of love, we must forego our pride. And it is this kind of love that can dismantle our pride. We're worried that our best isn't good enough, but if Psalm 103 is true, our worst *is* good enough.

God is not a statistician. He's not a scorekeeper. He's a compassionate father. He even has compassion for our conflicted state in which we want to praise God but don't. That's how David describes him. It's also how Jesus describes him.

In the famous story that Jesus told, a wayward son finally returned home to his father, but he was far from repentant (Luke 15:11-32). He was hoping that his father could help him, but he still wanted as little to do with him as possible. The son, spatially and emotionally, was "still a long way off" when his father saw him.

Like the Lord, whom David depicts as a father in Psalm 103, this father felt compassion for his son and ran down the road to greet him, though a man with standing in a village never ran anywhere. To do so, hiking up his robes, was to bring shame on himself. He ran in this case because an angry mob would have gathered to taunt and possibly beat a son who had shamed not only his father but the entire village by asking for his inheritance, which was equated to wishing his father dead. He needed to get there before the mob did its work. And, in doing so, the father absorbed the shame that was due his son.

He forgave him and accepted him, even though the son didn't want forgiveness and acceptance, at least at first. But it looks as if the father's compassion may have won him over. Will our Heavenly Father's compassion dismantle our pride and win us over?

Expansiveness of God's love (103:17-22)

**But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting
To everlasting on those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,
To those who keep His covenant
And remember His precepts to do them.
The LORD has established His throne in the heavens,
And His sovereignty rules over all.
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.**

**Bless the LORD, all you works of His,
In all places of His dominion;
Bless the LORD, O my soul!**

In verse 8, David said the Lord was “abounding” in lovingkindness, a word that concerns supply. The Lord has so much loyal love that it overflows. Then, in verse 11, David used spatial terms to describe the Lord’s lovingkindness. Now, he uses temporal terms. The Lord’s loyal love, which overflows to his people, lasts *forever*. Spatially, the Lord removes the transgressions of his people to a place “as far as the east is from the west.” Temporally, the Lord’s loyal love lasts “from everlasting to everlasting.” His loyal love, not his anger, lasts forever.

The Lord’s “righteousness,” which was earlier seen as being involved in the Exodus, extends into the future as well. In Exodus 34:7, which David has awakened in this psalm, the Lord said that he visits “the iniquity of fathers on the children, and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” David, however, now sees that the Lord’s righteousness, which issues forth in works of liberation, extends “to children’s children.”

In Exodus 20:4-5, when the Ten Commandments were first given, the Lord said that he would visit the iniquity of the fathers through the third and fourth generations. He also said, however, that his lovingkindness extended to thousands. Again, David sees the Lord’s loyal love and compassion, and in this case, his righteousness, overwhelming his anger.

The people of God, defined in this psalm as those who fear the Lord, are further defined as those who keep his covenant and do his precepts. This does not mean perfect obedience, for why would the Lord need to forgive those who are perfectly obedient? The covenant that the Lord made with Israel at Mount Sinai included prescriptions for sacrificial offerings. Those who kept the covenant would be those who remained in the covenant community and in relationship with the Lord.

Words such as “lovingkindness” and “righteousness” are associated not only with the covenant of the Lord but the kingdom of the Lord. The Lord, as Israel’s king and as the world’s king, made a covenant with Israel. The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, the higher place, so that his sovereignty rules over all, both the oppressed and the oppressor. Nothing can overpower his loyal love, compassion and righteousness. Therefore, his people can be assured of forgiveness.

David began the psalm by exhorting his soul to bless the Lord, and as he draws to a close, he exhorts the angels to join him. The angels are “hosts,” comprising armies that are “mighty in strength,” fighting the Lord’s battles. David also depicts them as obedient servants of the Lord. The angels, therefore, are in alignment with men and women who keep the Lord’s covenant. Both “do,” or “perform,” the will of the Lord.

Everything between the earthly soul and the heavenly angels is covered by the phrase “all you works of his.” No creation of the Lord escapes David’s exhortation. All things in all places are under the dominion of the Lord; everything in all places must bless the Lord. It’s not enough for

David to bless the Lord; he wants to see all creation blessing the Lord. The Lord's kingdom sets about creating this kind of heavenly and earthly alignment of obedience and praise.

Having addressed everything in heaven and on earth, David finishes where he started. He speaks to his soul. By now, however, his soul has expanded to join a universal chorus comprising both earthly and heavenly praise. And what's all the fuss about? It's about the Lord's loyal love, compassion and righteousness, which find their expression in pardoning men and women for their sins.

In finishing in the same way he started, by commanding his soul to bless the Lord, David leaves us with the impression that he could start all over again and continue in a never-ending psalm of praise.

Expansiveness of worship

Whatever you may experience of God's anger, which is a loving anger, there is a limit to it. His love for you, on the other hand, never ends. Because nothing can outlast or overpower God's loyal love, compassion and righteousness, those of us who belong to Jesus can be assured that we stand forgiven. As Paul says, nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

As our souls connect with God's love for us, we not only respond by blessing the Lord, we want others to get into the act as well. In fact, we want the whole universe to join in. We must turn inward to address our souls, but then our souls propel us outward. Worship is like that. It's expansive. When you discover something of worth, you think others should recognize its worth.

You may enjoy praising the Lord in your room, but if you do, you'll also want to do it with others. If God's love is as immense as David says it is, praise cannot be solely the private privilege of our own soul. You cannot contain God's love, so your soul explodes with praise. This is what we were created for: to praise God, and to enjoy it—and to enjoy it so much that we want every corner of creation to praise God with us. God's love, which expresses itself in pardoning us for our sins, is worth this kind of celebration. When even one person acknowledges the forgiving love of God, the angels rejoice (Luke 15:10).

Now that Psalm 103 has connected your soul to the Lord, don't you think you could command it once again with the same words but with different results? Don't you think your soul could hear the imperative to "bless the Lord" in a new way? Don't you think you could bless the Lord while longing for all things in every corner of the universe to do the same, and don't you think you could do so forever?

What can we do?

If we're slow to warm up to the Lord, what can we do? Preach to our souls about God's love: his loyalty and compassion that grant us an indescribable gift that just might cause us to praise God from the rooftops: forgiveness. Nothing warms up the soul like love. We might start by

preaching to ourselves about a wayward son who saw a lovesick father running down the road for him—and picturing ourselves as the wayward son.

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