

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
September 19 & 20, 2015
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Psalm 103**

We're all learners at this. We have to figure out how prayer becomes more than something that the preacher talks about on Sunday or something that we do right before we go to asleep or we have a meal. I'm going to suggest that one of the ways we learn is that we do something new so I'm going to ask you to do something a little different today. At the end of each of the pews, there is a basket we would ask you to pass down the aisle. As the basket gets passed, everybody take a pen and take a card. The pens are primarily for you to take some notes if you'd like in your bulletin but each person should take a pen and take a card. Once you've done that, reach into the pew in front of you and take out a Bible. This is a countercultural thing for Presbyterians but we're going to open our Bibles up and mark in them today. Find Psalm 103. It's found on page 899. It's in about the middle of the book.

You know, for most of the life of the church, for the last couple thousand years, we would not have had to give much of an introduction to the Psalms being the prayer book of God. The monks used to go through the entire Psalter, the 150 Psalms, every week, morning, noon, and night. The Book of Common Prayer that the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, and a lot of the other mainline churches use, gives a way to pray through all the Psalms in a month: morning and evening common prayers. When the Reformation came along, they tried to revive the use of the Psalms by setting them to verse and singing songs in congregational worship so that every week, people would see that this was part of the dialogue between God and God's community. This is the prayer book of the Bible.

But today it's not used that way. Everybody looks for the Psalm that says, "Now I lay me down to sleep." It's not in there. Everybody would remember "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." But the Psalms, other than that, are not familiar territory, probably for lots of reasons but first, because if you read these as prayers, there are really difficult things that are said in here. There are times where the Psalmist seems to scream at God. The Psalmist is very angry at God, feeling betrayed or deserted. There are other times where the lament turns into anger at others, but that anger seems inappropriate when it seeks retribution on all of our enemies.

We are going to talk about that in a couple of weeks, prayers of lament and prayers of imprecation. That's when you want God to blast somebody. Part of the problem is that we don't know the theology, the way that the Psalmist looked at God in a way that is helpful to us. Most of the reason that we don't read the Psalms as prayers is because they are poetry. They were set in poetic form and poetry is always harder for us. We are not a poetic people. We are a PowerPoint people. We want to go through things quickly and poetry says, "This needs to sink in. Listen to this again." Poetry is about images rather than facts.

The Psalms are there to take us deep into our hearts. Psalms are not for the head. Psalms take us deep into the heart a thousand times faster than we ever get deep into our hearts by

ourselves. The Psalms are like a personal trainer or a coach. You know they'll help you do good things, but it's very painful so you don't do it all by yourself. The Psalms actually force us to deal with the deep suffering and pain of life even before anything has gone wrong. While we are doing well, it is hard to read about deep pain and suffering. In the same way, the Psalms force us to pray in ways that praise God and give thanks when we don't feel that way at all. They are like exercise. It's against the grain. The Psalms push us and pull us emotionally in ways that, when we are ignoring the beautiful language, we find that we think, "Oh, really? That's not the way I feel."

The most important reason you should read the Psalms is that it is God's way of teaching you to pray. The Psalms teach you the language of God's prayer. The most important reason to read them is that they force us to deal with the real God the way the real God is. Eugene Peterson is the guy who translated the Bible into that version we call The Message. Peterson says that in our culture, prayers are about us. He says, "Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing or to the part of God that we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the [real] God who speaks to us." Only the real God can speak back. The Psalms train our ears for that conversation. They wrestle us into obedience. On our own, we indulge our appetites for religious fulfillment. With the help of the Psalms, we practice real faith. Religious fulfillment is a lot more fun but real faith is a lot more important.

What is essential in prayer is not that you learn to express yourself. What's essential in prayer is that you learn to answer the God who is already talking to you. That's what we want to do these next four weeks. We want to learn what God is saying and make our prayers an answer in that dialogue.

Lord God of heaven and earth, in some ways it's easier to talk to these people than it is to talk to You as if You are right here listening to me. Some people just wonder if I'm talking to myself but I believe, we believe, that You are here. Speak to us, we pray. In Your Name. Amen.

Sometimes we learn best by listening to the way other people have learned to pray.

[Video begins. To view, see link below]

- Growing up, I didn't really have the faith base that I developed in my faith as an adult. It's been kind of a struggle to learn to pray where my kids have always had it around them. They don't struggle and they understand to pray for anything. Ben is my five-year-old and he'll overhear a conversation sometimes and he'll ask about it, and whenever it's kind of a serious conversation, we kind of pray about it. I don't ever really correct him in his prayers. I don't know if that sounds strange but it's just a genuine, natural prayer the way that they pray about things.

Like this summer, we had a friend whose brother was going to have a CAT scan and he's claustrophobic and so Ben wanted to understand what a CAT scan was. What do they do? And explaining that to him, first thing, it was like, "Okay." He had done VBS [Vacation Bible School] here so he just kind of did a prayer. He said, "I just want to pray that when you see those lights in the tube, you know that's Jesus." That was so genuine for him because that's what he related that to. I think he found his way of praying all the time instead of asking, "Shall we pray for this? Shall we not pray for

that?" I want him to pray for anything. I think any prayer is important. It can't be too big or too small.

- My experience of prayer is talking with God in any fashion. I was raised in more traditional interactive prayer where I did all the talking. But when I was in college, I met a guy who introduced me to this new style where it was a lot more listening and a lot more fluid in its engagement with God. The first time that he brought me to this type of prayer, I was just shocked at what he was doing. He was walking around the room with his eyes open. He was not sitting calmly, bowing his head. This was such a strange type of prayer but I eventually realized that it allowed me to engage with God more directly. The way that this guy prayed, he was actively talking and listening to God simultaneously and I have enjoyed that so much. It has brought me so much closer to God in this heart connection that I have sought out other guys to partake in this practice of prayer.

[Video ends.]

Somebody who grew up without talking to God is still learning and her kid is teaching her and somebody who has done this all his life as far as he can remember is still learning how to listen for God's voice. That's where the Psalms come in. They teach us how to pray. Our call to worship was Psalm 103. We'd like to do it again as a prayer. We talked last week about the idea that sometimes different postures, kneeling or putting our faces to the ground or sitting alone or even standing, help us focus, so I'd like you to pray with me by standing. You've got your Bibles there. You don't need the Bibles for right now but leave them open to Psalm 103. Let's see if we can together pray this Psalm over our pastors. It begins this way.

[John:] ¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!

[All:] ² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

[John:] ³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,

[All:] ⁴ who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

[John:] ⁵ who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

[All:] ⁶ The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.

[John:] ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,

Let me stop there for a second. Do you hear what that says? Remember last week? Moses said, "Teach me Your ways." This is somebody who is hundreds of years after Moses and he

says, "God *did* teach Moses His ways."

⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.

[All:] ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[John:] ⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

[All:] ¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

That isn't something we teach our kids but it's something our hearts need to know.

[John:] ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
¹⁴ For he knows our frame;

He knows how we are formed.

he remembers that we are dust.
¹⁵ As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.

[All:] ¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting
to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
¹⁸ to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

[John:] ¹⁹ The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.
²⁰ Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!

[All:] ²¹ Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!

[John:] ²² Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Amen. Be seated. We said it once in the call to worship. We tried to pray it now but it's a poem and it bounces off unless you spend time with it. Let's keep the book open to Psalm 103 and see if God can teach you how to speak to Him. This psalm is an example of what is called meditative prayer. It is a meditation. That's part of what Skip Powell was talking about. He was learning that Psalm 103 is addressed to his soul.

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul,

Prayer that is meditation is talking to your soul rather than just listening to your heart. Our culture says, "Listen to your heart." Forget that. Your heart is crazy. You need to *talk* to your heart. Meditative prayer means taking your heart in hand and reasoning with it and showing your heart the truth of God until your heart can bless and rejoice in God. We are not helpless before our emotions. Our emotions are often not reality. This doesn't mean that when we talk to God we deny our emotions. The Psalms are filled with more anguish, more excitement, more dreams, and more despair than most of us are comfortable saying out loud. We face it all, but a prayer that is meditation where we pull out our souls and look at them is a dialogue with our hearts in the sight of God. It's a way of looking back at what's happened in our lives and trying to make sense to give it meaning and reassurance. How do we do that? Together let's look at the Psalm.

The first words of this meditative prayer are actually a command. "Bless the LORD." We want to be blessed. I just read a post this week that talked about the dangers of saying "I'm so blessed" because what "I'm so blessed" really means in our culture is "I've got a lot of money. I'm feeling really good. I'm better than you. I am blessed." That is not, apparently, what the Psalmist means by blessing. The Psalmist is not talking about being healthy or having enough money or even being happy. The Psalmist does not seem to be concerned about whether you are fulfilled in your life. Instead, the Psalm says what is important is that the people who have a relationship with God are filled with gratitude. They have a sense of freedom.

To bless something in the Bible is the opposite of cursing something. Some things we curse, whether it's traffic or a parking ticket. Some things we bless. When we bless people, we affirm them. We delight in them. We seek their fulfillment. When we bless, we want them to have the deepest desires of their hearts. Blessing people is to be grateful for them, so to bless God, it says, "Bless the Lord," to bless God is more than to praise God. Find a good thing about God and say, "This is neat that You're like this." Eugene Peterson says, "Psalm 103 expresses the *experience* (not the doctrine) of salvation. This is what it *feels* like to be saved." This isn't what it's intellectually like to be saved. This is what it *feels* like to be saved. It's a response, a meditation on that.

When we receive the benefits of life with God, we become grateful people. But in order to be grateful, you have to take time to receive and recognize your gifts and believe that you are blessed. Take time out to take your heart out, learn to look back, and see the gifts that God has given you. Your soul will learn to respond with gratitude so that you're not anxious. You will learn to expect that God will bless you.

The Psalm says,

- ² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

Do you know what that means? It means we forget our benefits. The Psalmist is saying you need to remember your benefits. What benefits do we forget? The heart of this, and if you want to underline this in your pew Bible, that's great, the heart of this prayer's benefits is about seeing God as angry. Many of you feel like God is that angry judge or that parent who can't wait for you to come home to give you another tongue-lashing or even whipping. Who wants that kind of conversation? In verses 8 through 10 it says,

- ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. He won't always accuse. He won't be angry forever. He doesn't treat us the way our sins deserve. God does not want to be angry. Remember Martin Luther from the Reformation days? Martin Luther was so afraid that God was angry with him that he went to confession every day. His confessor went, "Martin, you haven't had enough time to do that." But Luther was afraid that God was angry with him. He once said that God's wrath is God's strange work. God's anger is what happens when the goodness of God comes into contact with rebellion or sin. That means that God's anger is temporary. It is not His default face. God's default face is not grrrrrrrr. God's default face is yes! As soon as it's not in contact with rebellion or sin, the joy of God comes. After God deals with sin through redemption, anger will cease. God will not keep angry forever and His love is permanent.

In verse 2 the Psalmist says *forget not all His benefits*. The first benefit we need to be reminded of is that **the Lord forgives all your sins**.

- ³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,

That's what Van [Chounlamountry] was trying to talk about with the kids. People accuse you of doing this. God says, "I'm not accusing anybody of anything." He is forgiving the guilt of your sins. You don't have to hide it or pretend or blame somebody else. No matter how extensive our sins have been, it says He forgives all your sins.

And second, it says **He heals all your diseases**. I've got to tell you, when I first started to read this, I thought that this probably meant that God would promise to heal His people. But I think since it's connected to *forgive all our sins*, it's another part of the idea of God forgiving us. There's the idea that when you break God's law, even if just in your mind, you're guilty. There's a sense of guilt. And then when you break God's law, there are consequences. David commits adultery with Bathsheba. He's guilty of that. But even if that's forgiven, there are consequences. He has a child. The child dies. This is addressing the idea that God will heal us from the

consequences that our sin brings us. I think that we need to be reminded that God is not angry. Some of you have sins that you won't let yourself be forgiven for. Some of you have sins in your lives that you won't forgive the other person for. That is what this prayer is about. Teach me to be forgiven. Teach me to forgive other people.

The third benefit we need to be reminded of, one that I forget, is in verse 4. **He redeems your life from the pit.**

⁴ who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

The pit is obviously the grave. Maybe the prayer is asking God to rescue us from premature death, but that is probably unlikely. More likely, this is confidence that people who learn to pray this Psalm will be ushered into eternal life when they die. It's a declaration that they will experience the resurrection from the dead. He redeems your life from the pit. Death is not the end. Remember that.

The fourth benefit we need to be reminded of is that **God crowns you with love and compassion.** That simply may mean that God loves you. But the words *crowns you* give the idea that there is something more going on here. God gives His love to us in a way that makes you feel special, honored, built up. The Hebrew word for His love is *chesedh*. It's the same word that is used in verse 17 where it says God's love is from everlasting to everlasting.

¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting
to everlasting

What it means here is steadfast love or unending love, binding love, guaranteed love, bomb-proof love. You can't do anything to get rid of this love. It could be called Gospel love, love that will never change, that doesn't come or go depending on how you do. No matter how badly you do, God says His love is from everlasting to everlasting.

The fifth benefit is that the **Lord will satisfy your desires** in a way that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. This is God's gift of hope.

⁵ who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

It's not going to say you get everything you want though. Yesterday as I was coming here to work on this sermon, I drove on 66th Street between those two little lakes, and an eagle flew by. I thought how great this is, to live in a place where an eagle flies by. The story of that eagle reminded me of a heart that yearns to be free. That is what God wants. These are the benefits that God gives us when we pull out our hearts to look at them. He says that He forgives our sins and heals our disease. He redeems our life from the pit. You don't have to worry about death anymore. He satisfies your soul and gives you strength when you need it.

Seeing the benefits of God in our past brings gratitude instead of grumpiness. Grateful people have to have somebody they are grateful *to*. They have to have somebody they are grateful *for* but they have to have somebody. What we call someone who gives us benefits is a benefactor, a person who gives us benefits. That's from the Latin words *bene*, which means good, and

factor, which is related to the word factory, the producer. A benefactor is a person who produces good things, a little engine that keeps on giving blessings to us.

John Ortberg says, “To be truly grateful you must not only recognize the benefits or gifts that come your way, but that they are not just random acts. They are not accidents. They are coming from someone who has good intentions for you. It is not a result of just you being good.” We’re American. We’re self-reliant. This is saying you’re not lucky, you are blessed by a God who loves you. The apostle James said,

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows [James 1:17].

The prayer that the Psalmist is trying to teach his own heart, that we should be teaching our hearts, finishes with these three powerful images of God’s love. God’s love toward us is **as high as the heavens are above the earth**.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

The kids have no idea how far that is. They just know it’s a long way away. Did you guys see that image from the satellite that took a picture of the sunset on Pluto as the satellite sped out into space? That’s a tiny fraction of how high God’s love is.

It says His mercy and forgiveness toward us is **as far as the east is from the west** which, of course, is an infinite distance.

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Our salvation comes from a God who says, “Oh, you did that? I forgot. How come *you* remember? I have forgiven it as far as the east is from the west.” Our salvation removes our sins from us in God’s sight. This isn’t in the sermon, but the reason we did that little children’s sermon is that 25 years, we’ve been here 26 years, 25 years ago an associate pastor, Virgil Lee did that children’s sermon. It was great. Our little four-year-old Katy was sitting there and the very next week in worship, we were doing a bidden silent prayer and confession and she’s sitting next to her mommy and Laura hears Katy say, “Dear God, please take all my bad sins and throw them as far as the east is from the west.” That’s the Gospel. We are not just forgiven. It’s forgotten.

It says that God’s knowledge and care for us is like **a father who has compassion on his children**, unconditional, unlimited.

¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.

Tim Keller talks about the idea that a father’s love has two parts. On the one hand, nobody knows a kid better than the parents. The parent knows all their weaknesses.

¹⁴ For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

An adult parent can see right into the heart of a kid because kids do not have the sense to hide their selfishness. They haven't learned how to conceal their impatience with their lack of understanding. God knows how shallow and weak and impotent we can be. But on the other hand, a father has deep compassion on his kids. The weaknesses of our children may break our hearts, but it doesn't stop our love. That's the way God responds. Rather, the more silly, weak, and needy a child is, the more a parent's heart is bound up with the child. God loves us completely, not only in spite of His knowledge of our sin but because of it, and God will do anything to get us back. God is not a king who wants to rule you. God is a parent who wants to shower you with love.

² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

The Lord is kind to you. Let that go from your head to your heart and it will fill you with gratitude.

I said that we wanted to do more than listen to this and underline in our Bibles. I'd like us to try something, so I'm going to ask Heather Hood to come up and play a little. I'd ask you to take out the cards and pens that you have. On the one side, the card says *I give thanks for*. That means *forget not His benefits*. You should write down one of the benefits God has given you.

Or, use the other side of the card that says *The gift of forgiveness for*. The gift of forgiveness is a blessing. I thank God for forgetting *that*, I thank God for forgiving *that*, or I ask God to help *that* stay in the past. He knows, but He wants you to be reminded. We'd like to give you a minute here whether you want to bless or ask forgiveness. Don't sign the cards, but let's show God that we remember. Then, as we sing our closing song, I'd ask any of you, not all of you but any of you who want, to come up to the front, take a little stick pin and just place it on this corkboard. If you're up in the balcony, please come down. Stay down if you want to, that's great, or wait until after the benediction and come down then. It's up to you. Don't feel like you have to do this, but it could make your heart grateful and be what God would want to say to you today.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for all the benefits that You have offered us. I pray that You will remind us of them so that they fill our hearts with gratitude and our lives with love. In Your Name. Amen.

Link to video shown during this service: <https://vimeo.com/140342605>

With thanks to John Ortberg for his book *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* and to Tim Keller for his fine study guide on the Psalms, both of which heavily influenced my understanding. Soli Deo gloria.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.