

Sermon for Sunday, February 20, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
Our Gratitude in God's Songs
Psalm 103

1 The place of thanksgiving – Giving thanks amidst troubles

Some families have a thanksgiving tradition that goes like this: Everyone takes kernels of dried corn. Then they pass around a small basket and drop kernels in the basket as they thank God for his blessings. Similarly, Psalm 103 names God's blessings: he forgives sins, heals diseases, crowns us with love, and satisfies us. Yet Psalm 103 is more than a list of blessings.

David sings of sins committed and forgiven, of oppression and the pit (103:3-6). David is rousing himself to remember God's benefits. He knows we can forget and wander into complaint, worry, and doubt. So he says, "Remember his benefits." David wrote this to himself. He commands himself to remember. Yet he shares this song and command with the world.

- He tells oppressed people: "The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" (103.6).
- He reminds Israel that the Lord "made known his ways to Moses" (103.7).
- He speaks to the weak (mere "dust"), to sinners, to the dying (103:10, 14, 17).
- He even addresses God's angels and all his creation (103:20-22).
- So David rouses himself, all people, all creation, to praise God.

This psalm has a place, a role, in the book of Psalms. Psalms are the songs God gave his people to sing. But they are also private songs or poems that show us how to talk or converse with God about the issues of life. They invite dialogue. They address Him in praise, thanksgiving, but also in anger and doubt. Because speakers come in faith, they expect a reply. So the Psalms are both our speech to God and his address to us, his people.¹

The most common type of psalm is the lament - the cry of woe, grief, betrayal and suffering. The laments aren't always beloved. The church loves to recite psalms that comfort and affirm the faithful. We love psalms that inspire worship (Ps. 24, 46, 95, 100) or promise us God's care (Ps. 23, 121). We tend to skip the ones where people pity themselves, gnash their teeth, and ask God to wake up and smite someone. But laments are necessary too. God invites us to sing our sorrow to him, and to expect a reply – perhaps comfort, perhaps a rebuke.

The lament is the most common kind of psalm, yet the most common idea in Psalms is praise. Sixty Psalms command Israel to "Praise the Lord." Writers promise, "I will praise you, Lord" over two hundred times. That raises a question: If lament is the most common theme in Psalms, why is praise the most common command? How can lament and praise stand side by side?

The psalms give voice to every season of the soul's life, every aspect of our experience. Seasons of joy, peace, and health evoke gratitude. Believers naturally thank and praise God individually. There is also an impulse to praise together. One stirs another to praise God for his goodness, grace and covenants, his laws and government of the world. When life is orderly, we sing our thanks.

But we are humans; problems nag at us. Some are at the margin of awareness. Like a small splinter in a finger. But some loom large, like a splinter in the foot as we walk, like a splinter in the cheek at a public meeting. Eventually we recognize the disorder, and lament it.

¹ Brueggemann, the Message of the Psalms, 1984, p. 15

But the psalms don't stop with lament or misery. They confess sin, they plead for grace. They ask for help and find it. So the laments move from chaos to order. When we take our anger and tears to God, it changes us. Psalm 69 begins, "The water is up to my neck... my enemies hate me without reason." But then, "You know my folly, O God." Finally, "I will praise God's name in song" (69:1, 4, 5, 30).

There also is movement in psalms like 103. It's not intensely personal. David isn't harassed or tormented, not shouting with relief. He has become *drowsy, complacent, or forgetful* and wants to rouse himself. He stirs himself to praise God. We have to stir ourselves at times. To get out of bed when we hardly slept all night. To go to the gym at the end of a long work-day or bundle up to shovel snow. In Psalm 103, David stirs himself to praise God.

Other psalms "shake off apathy and gloom" too. They summon mind and memory to kindle emotions. Psalm 42:5 "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him" (cf. Ps. 77:6, 11).

2 The means of thanksgiving – We remember God's benefits

So David is talking to himself, reasoning with himself, pushing himself, as the psalm begins: "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits" (103:2). He says "Don't forget!... Remember!" We don't know why David had to command himself to praise God, but we know why we need to rouse ourselves.

Suppose you wake up in the middle of the night. Tense, heart thumping, all upset about *something* – work, a strained relationship, health. You need to *listen* to your soul "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" Listen to the answer, hear your own heart, write it down. But more - you also need to *talk* to your soul: Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him."

Suppose you wake up on a gray, cold, winter morning, with dirty snow on the ground. You're depressed, six-hour style. Psalm 103 says, "Praise the Lord O my soul and forget not – remember – all his benefits," warm house, food, and friends.

In Scripture, to remember is not mere cognition: "I remember your face but not your name." Remembering is an act of the will. The Hebrew word embraces recall, reflection, reasoning, contemplation.² Ecclesiastes 11-12 says that as people enjoy pleasures, they should remember the Creator, keep thanking him. On other hand, if we remember affliction, we suffer more (Lam. 3:19-20). When we remember God's greatness, it drives out fear. Nehemiah says, "Don't be afraid... Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome" (4:14).

But God's people often forget his benefits. In Exodus 17, shortly after Israel left Egypt and crossed the sea, they camped in a place that had no water. The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink... Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us... die of thirst?" They demanded water, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" Talk about forgetting. After all God did for them, they ask "What have you done for us lately?" So the Lord rebuked Israel and told them to remember (Exod. 17:1-7, Deut. 8:1 ff.).

We forget things because we don't want to think about them. The wicked forget God's justice and righteousness. The godless forget about God, they suppress the truth, because they want to enthrone themselves (Rom 1:18).

What we choose to remember shapes the whole course of life. If you remember every hurt, curse, criticism, and misery, you will be miserable. Every year, someone tells me about a vicious letter or email

² Dotte, 1:1101

that cut them to the core. They add, "And I've saved it so I'll remember what they said." Why? Because you like to suffer? Here's my advice: Put that letter in the shredder and burn the scraps. Don't remember it, forget it." *If you get one, stop reading, and destroy it.*

You say, "I wish I could forget but I'll *never* forget what he said, that look on his face." True, you cannot forget absolutely: "I know he did something terrible to me, but I just don't *remember*..." Yet you can forget in the sense that you don't recall, reflect, and meditate on it. Instead, you can remember what God says to you. You are my beloved child. I will love you with an everlasting love.

In Scripture, to remember means to act on something. Abigail told David, "When you become king, *remember* me." He did remember and married her (1 Sam 25:31). To forget means to fail to act. Joseph helped Pharaoh's butler when they were together in prison and said, "When you are restored, remember me." But he forgot and Joseph languished in prison (Gen. 40:14-23).

In this sense, we do choose to remember. Imagine three scenarios. First, a brutal person says: You are worthless. Good for nothing. A waste of water and oxygen. How did you become my friend? Why did I *hire* you? Why did I marry you?" You think "How could I ever forget those words?"

Second, a mentor says, "I respect you and your work very much, but I need you to do *one thing* very differently next time." Third, you do something notable and dozens of people call and email and stop you in the store to congratulate you, to compliment you. Which of these will you remember? What will you meditate upon them, so that it shapes the way you think and feel about yourself?

We cannot *forget* dark events in the sense that we no longer recall them; we can forget in the sense that they no longer govern us. I know this isn't easy from my history - things I will recall till my last day. But in the Bible's sense, I don't need to remember them so as to be governed by them.

I have to ask: If bad memories are crippling you, *why* do you let them do so? God created you in his image, thought it right to send his only Son to redeem you. Remember that and let it drive out the darkness. Reason with your soul. Rouse your faith. Reason with yourself, correct yourself – with Psalm 103.

Turn to Psalm 103, and the benefits God has granted you. This is precisely what David does in Psalm 103. He hears his soul's lethargy and he commands it to rise. "Praise the LORD, O my soul... Praise the LORD... and forget not all his benefits." David tells his soul what to remember, so he can see the world aright.

3 The content of thanksgiving – (a) God's benefits

Psalm 103 is calm, not passionate. David has not just emerged from crisis. Rather he surveys past troubles, convinced that "the Lord is trustworthy in the face of every threat." So David stirs himself to praise God, who forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, and satisfies us. Consider some with me.

In Psalm 103:3a "He forgives all your sins." He forgives sins, past, present and future, sins of thought, word, and deed, including David's sins with Bathsheba. He presents this in a fascinating way in 103:8: "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." This is a direct quote from Exodus 34, God reveals himself to Israel through Moses. "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love..." He concludes, "He will by no means clear the guilty" (Exod. 34:5-7).

But Psalm 103:14 concludes, "He is compassionate... for he knows how we are formed, he remembers [so as to act] that we are dust." Is this a contradiction? Not at all! Israel, so full of rebels had to hear, "He does not clear the guilty." But for the man who comes to praise God's holy name, with all his being, for the woman who knows God's covenant love, then hear this, "He is gracious," with no mention of justice for the guilty, for we are his and he has forgiven us. This is his first and greatest benefit. God can clear us of sin, because he laid our iniquity on Jesus.

Psalm 103:3b says, He "heals all your diseases." Healing means diseases of the body first, but it includes the heart, mind and emotions. But where forgiveness is always immediate, healing is not. David, Paul, and others asked God for healing *in this age* and he did not grant it. Why not?

Because sin always destroys our relationship with God, it must be treated at once, but sickness can deepen our faith. He heals all our diseases, but he doesn't heal them all in this age. So we long for the redemption of our bodies, on the day Jesus comes again and restores all things!

We read in Psalm 103:4 He "redeems your life from the pit." There are physical pits. We stumble into pits; we dig pits for ourselves. God delivers us from these pits – but perhaps not at once. Jeremiah was put into a muddy pit when Israel became weary of his prophecy. Here the pit means death: premature death, and eternal death and separation from God. The Lord brought us from the pit when he forgave our sins and granted us life.

Psalm 103:5 says He satisfies us, fills us, with good things. Psalm 2:121 says the Lord satisfies our good desires. For children, for friends, for a spouse we can love more and more every year. For the joy of immersing ourselves in work we love, so we forget ourselves as happy hours pass. For the sounds of Mozart and blue-grass, the riots of blooming flowers. All of these? No, but the Lord "takes our desires seriously" and satisfies us with good things. Even when we are old, he renews us, so we experience his blessing again. Praise the Lord, O my soul! Remember his benefits.

Content of thanksgiving (b) God's grace and compassion, forgetting sin

Now the psalm shifts direction. The praise for God's actions – forgiving, healing, satisfying – leads us to his character. He acts for us, because he is good, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

Psalm 103:6-7 says He works righteousness and justice for the oppressed. The great example of this is the exodus. God led Israel out of slavery, into a new land. He also forgave Israel: "The Lord is... gracious, slow to anger."

We tend to approach people legally – we accuse and condemn – when people wrong us. But "He will not always accuse" (103:9). "Nor will he harbor his anger" (103:9b). Again, we tend to "remember" the wrong things. When we are wounded, it's almost as if we want the wound to fester and ooze instead of healing.

But God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (103:10). He is infinitely wronged, yet he tempers his anger and his justice. And the cost! He left our prior sins unpunished because he knew Jesus would bear the punishment for sin. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Now the distance between east and west is infinite. However far you go to the east, the east is still as far as you can go, that way. East and west can never meet. So far he has removed our sin.

Psalm 103 describes God's love in terms of great distances: "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him" (103:12). And in terms of family bonds: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him" (103:13).

Compassion (103:8, 13) is the feeling of love. We are empathetic when life goes against our children and parental compassion makes us feel their sorrow. So the Lord mourns when we mourn and rejoices when we rejoice. We are not alone in the world.

God is also gracious (103:8). Grace is God's delight in bestowing favors. Gracious parents tell their children that we delight in them purely, without conditions. Whether the team wins or loses, whether grades are high or low. Gracious parents take children for ice cream even if they're naughty. Praise the Lord, O my soul, for he is gracious to his children, who never seem to grow up.

Content of thanksgiving (c) Eternal love for short-lived creatures 103:15-18

God knows us better than we know ourselves. We think we're pretty substantial; he says, You are dust. You are a mist. You're like wild flowers that bloom and fade. Like dead flowers, soon forgotten: "The wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more."

Have you ever been forgotten? It hurts. You meet someone six times, and each time "Oh, how nice to meet you, my name is Jasper." Am I invisible? Sometimes we are invisible, forgotten. Did you ever go away for six weeks, return and announce "I'm back." Oh, were you gone?

In 100 years, almost all of us will be forgotten. That is natural, in human affairs. But God never forgets us. "From everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him." He loves us and our children's children (103.17).

Therefore all creation praises God 103:19-22

God's kingdom rules over all ["the all"] every last thing. Therefore all should praise the Lord –the angels who obey his word, every servant that does his will, even creation itself. And yet, David cannot stop with creation. His "final line is as personal as the first": "Praise the Lord, O my soul" (103:22).³

Praise the Lord and remember his benefits. As Israel entered Canaan, God told Israel: When you eat your fill, build houses, and your flocks multiply, beware, lest your heart become proud "and you forget the Lord your God" (Deut. 8:12-14). When we become proud, we forget God (Hezekiah in 2 Chr. 32:25). Success either tempts us to pride or moves us to praise.

As I've studied Psalms, I've given thought to God's benefits. The Psalms themselves, the many fine Christians books on the Psalms, by learned and pious people who studied and shared their discoveries in writing.

I have two books on Psalms by Professor Mark Futato. In God's providence, I met Mark on a basketball court when we were teenagers. We went to college and seminary together and became close friends. We encouraged each other to persevere in our Ph.D. programs and have seen each other often over the years. Now I read his excellent books on Psalms and share them with you. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not that he placed Mark Futato in my life.

The singer invites God's people to join by listening: "I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders" (Ps. 9:1). They invite the world to sing along: "Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth, sing praise to the Lord" (68:32). They declare that it is right to praise God: "Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise" (48.1).

When you awaken on a bitter morning – praise him for a warm house. When a friend calls, praise him for bringing you together. When you feel yourself aging, praise God for his eternal power, his promise of resurrection. When you sin, praise him that he is more forgiving than you are.

Brian Mahan loved his grade school, a convent school in Boston. He loved the beautiful building, the shiny floors, the quiet library, full of books about God. He loved talking to older women who "dressed in a way that showed that they belonged to God." He loved hymns and catechisms.

Brian sat directly opposite a cute girl in one class. One day he discovered that if he slid down in his chair he could see her legs, even catch a glimpse of her underwear. He did this several times, then he felt queasy, guilty, and tainted. He tried to talk to a nun about it later that day. "Sister, do you think that God would let a kid sneak into heaven, even if that kid was bad sometimes?" No Brian, the sister said, it's not

³ Kidner 367

enough to be good *sometimes*. Brian wondered: Did she really mean it, or had she seen what he did? He thought, "Wouldn't God let a kid sneak in the back door? A kid would do anything for a God like that."⁴

Good question, Brian. But the sister was half-right – God would never let a kid like that sneak in heaven's back door. He would insist that he come in the front gate and seat you at the head of table groaning with your favorites – turkey, mashed potatoes, and cranberries. Yes Brian, a kid would do anything for a God like that. Adults would too. Praise the Lord, O my soul. Remember his benefits.

⁴ Brian Mahan, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, 52-55.