

## The Wonder Of His *Chesed* Love

Valley Center January 26, 2008

Today we take as the basis of our study Psalm 103, one of the most magnificent passages in the entire Bible. Every word of God is pure, but there are sections that seem to be outstanding. Every star in the sky shines, but there are some that gleam more brilliantly than others. Such is this psalm.

It is identified as a Psalm of David. Some assume that all of the psalms were written by him but actually not all of them were. There were some penned by Solomon, some by a group called "the sons of Asaph" and even Moses contributed to this volume which was essentially the "hymnal of the Old Testament."

But this one was written by David, who no doubt composed many while he watched over the family flock as a youth. Some were written before he ascended the throne, during the time he was a fugitive from Saul. Sometimes the sub scripture of a psalm will tell us its background or when it was written, such as the third psalm, which has the explanation "A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son." Scholars believe that the 103<sup>rd</sup> Psalm was a child of his later life, born after the Bathsheba incident, because of its emphasis on God's benevolent and forgiving character. It bears the impress of seasoned maturity and experience both in what he says, and how he says it.

As a poet, David uses many of the literary devices available, including *parallelisms* (the basis of most Hebrew poetry, in which a thought in the first line is repeated or contrasted in the next), *similes* (comparisons using "like," "as" or "than"), *chiasm* (in which the structure is based on an A-B-B1-A1 format), and *envelope* (in which the key thought is used to "wrap" the content at beginning and at the end) to construct his verse in a way that is organized, appealing and carries impact.

We praise the Lord today for preserving this wonderful testament to His character. The truth about the God we serve is the most important teaching in this Book. When Moses asked the Lord to show him His glory (Exodus 33:18, 19), what did He do? He rehearsed "the name of the Lord," and recited His character attributes. He told Moses about Himself. Satan has spread many lies about God. To know Him is eternal life, Jesus said. John 17:3.

You hear a lot today about "text messaging." You know what that is, don't you? If you have a phone with this feature, it allows you to send a note

as a "text message" rather than as an audible call. I'd like to point your mind in another direction the next time you hear the phrase "text message." Can you guess what that might be? If you think about it, "text messaging" is not new to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I'd like to suggest that God knew all about "text messaging" long ago. He placed an important "message" in the "text" of this Book, and the central theme of that message in this text is His character of love. I hope you're reading the "text message" each day! It is your life.

Psalm 103 and 104 might be thought of as "companion psalms." The former brings to view the wonders in God's *compassion*, while the 104<sup>th</sup> highlights the wonders in His *creation*. Both deserve our careful attention.

The 103<sup>rd</sup> Psalm may be divided into four sections.

Verses 1-5 are David's testimony of God's involvement in his personal life.

Verses 6-14 discuss God's caring for His children generally.

Verses 15-18 center on man's dependence on the mercy of God.

Verses 19-22 invite all of creation to worship God.

"Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits; Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, Who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

You will see that this phrase "bless the Lord" is the *envelope* that begins and ends this psalm. He uses a chiasm (this word comes from the Greek letter "X") to emphasize his main point. Notice the "A-B-B1-A1" structure:

Bless the Lord (A)

O my soul (B)

All that is within me (B1)

Bless His holy name. (A1)

What does it mean when he says, "Bless the LORD"? I thought that God was the One Who blesses us. How can we "bless the Lord"? The difference between the two thoughts might be viewed in this way. When the Lord blesses us, He endows us with gifts that are designed for our benefit. When we "bless the Lord," it means that we *recognize and acknowledge* that He has given us these gifts for our benefit.

There are many people who go through life and assume that health, food, shelter, the ability to see, the ability to walk and all the varied benefits that make life enjoyable fall in their lap by chance or merely evolve. To "bless the Lord" means that we acknowledge and give Him credit and glory for these daily outpourings. Every breath of air we take into our lungs is a gift from Him. Did you thank Him today for what you've received?

To "bless the Lord" means that we acknowledge *to Him* that realize that He is the Giver of all, and it means also that we confess *to others* that we believe He is a God Who cares and is involved with even the smallest details of our lives. Our language can be a confession of our belief in Him. Was that just a "good thing" that came to you, or was it a "blessing"? Were you just "fortunate" in that situation, or was it a "blessing." To recognize and acknowledge His involvement in our lives is to "bless the Lord." We should be doing more of it!

Our good friend John has been working as a plumber at the San Onofre nuclear power plant as a part of a crew numbering several hundred doing short term maintenance work during one of their shutdowns. The job was scheduled to last only a few months. He realized, though that there was a very small crew of about 16 that was part of a more permanent project, called "water service," and asked his boss if he could be a part of that team when the shutdown work finished. He was told that the prospects of that happening were somewhere between none and zero, and that the crew, already intact, was in fact going to be trimmed from 16 to 10. Nevertheless, John and his wife prayed that God would open the door. He also reminded his boss frequently of his desire to be able to continue his work. On the last day of John's shutdown employment, as he was going out the gate and leaving the job, his boss said, "Wait a minute John. Would you like to be a part of 'water service' crew?" It seems that they had already trimmed the team, but one of the ten had suddenly taken another job, leaving an opening. Others might think that this was "good luck," or "good timing," but John is convinced it is a blessing and an answer to prayer, and was happy to share that view with his boss!

Although David's expression certainly includes verbal acknowledgements of God's goodness, he actually goes beyond that. He doesn't just say, "Bless the Lord, O my tongue;" he says, "Bless the Lord *O my soul*, and *all that is within me*, bless His holy name." With every fiber of his being, with every ounce of his energy, David longed to express his gratitude to God. He wants everyone to know, not just by his voice, but by his demeanor, the expression on his face, the joy in his step, that he is thankful. He has cultivated an "attitude of gratitude," and wants that translated to every facet of his personality and character.

He implores us to “forget not all His benefits.” Dwight L. Moody was fond of saying, “You can’t remember them all, but don’t forget them all either.” Oh, how short our memory can be with respect to His goodness! It was when the Israelites “forgot” all his wonders in the Exodus from Egypt that they fell into murmuring. They failed to recount His wonderful miracles of deliverance and slipped into idolatry.

In 1897, on the diamond jubilee celebration of Queen Victoria, Rudyard Kipling composed a poem called “Recessional” to commemorate the event. The poem strikes a sad note, reflecting on the possibility that the British Empire would follow along the crowded path of other once glorious empires, noting that success and wealth can breed pride and forgetfulness in His giving of these blessings. In this poem, which has survived the decades, he included at the end of each verse the warning, “Lest we forget.”

“God of our fathers, known of old--  
Lord of our far-flung battle line  
Beneath whose awful (awesome) hand we hold  
Dominion over palm and pine--  
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,  
Lest we forget - lest we forget!”

In the 103<sup>rd</sup> psalm there follows a six-fold accounting of some of the many benefits bestowed by the gracious Lord. He “forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies and renews.” In this list David touches on the things that matter to God’s creatures: our physical health, our emotional well-being and our spiritual prosperity. God provides for them all.

He provides an antidote for the poison of guilt, that most destructive effect of sin. The Gospel declares that we have been set free from the pain of guilt by His redemptive act on the cross. We have been declared “not guilty” by His sacrifice. God has now reconciled us to Him through His Son, and we can have peace through His forgiveness. David knew the joy of great forgiveness because he knew he was a great sinner. It is impossible to know the joy of healing forgiveness if one has never come to the realization that he or she is a sinner. As long as a person maintains the frame of mind that, “I’m as good as the next person,” the true joy of forgiveness will never come. Simon the Pharisee couldn’t understand why a woman would waste a year’s salary in pouring out her soul in gratitude over the feet of Jesus, because he had not as yet seen himself as a sinner. He thought he was pretty good, just as Saul who became Paul did, before he met Jesus. When David heard Nathan’s words, “You are the man,” he gained a new

revelation of himself. He saw how sinful his thinking and his actions were. Once he acknowledged his sin, he was prepared to receive the forgiveness of God and receive its joy.

His healing grace sustains us in a sin-sick world. Sometimes, according to His will, miraculous healings come from God that restore the sick to health. However, He doesn't intervene in this life every time, though He would like to. Many in Bible times were healed, but not all. Paul went through his life with poor eyesight, but was uplifted by the grace of God to perform his duties. Many receive the blessing of such sustenance through illness, according to His will. It is also true that if we practice the health habits He has given to us, the statistics tell us that we will benefit from longevity and a better quality of life.

He redeems from destruction. Only in the Kingdom will we see how close we stepped to the chasm of death and escaped. In 1921 Lyndon Tarr was a student at the mission school in Natal, South Africa. His parents served as missionaries at the Emmanuel Mission about 150 miles away by train. When it was announced that there was going to be an extra long weekend, Lyndon decided immediately that he would make use of the time to go and spend with his parents. Never mind that it would involve walking 18 miles to the train station, boarding a train for which he had no reservation, and then walking another 12 miles after he stepped off the train. He was going to see his mom and dad! Things were going well, and he got off the train and began the last leg of his journey. But a storm had come up with a fierce rain, it was night, and he had no lantern. So he removed his shoes so that he could feel when the bare dirt of the path transitioned to grass, indicating he needed to get back on the dirt road. At last he heard the sound of the Caledon River. Suddenly there was a brilliant flash of lightning that lit the whole sky and landscape. Then, just as quickly, it was dark again. But that flash of lightning revealed to Lyndon that he was standing on the very edge of a cliff of some twenty or thirty feet, created by the erosion of the heavy story. Beneath him boiled and churned the angry waters. If he had taken one more step, serious injury or death could have resulted. (V. E. Robinson, "Junior Guide," Sept. 19, 1956). Someday we'll have greater appreciation for His mighty act in saving us from death.

God "crowns" us with "lovingkindness". The Old Testament word used here is *chesed*, and appears 245 times. Among the words used to translate it are "favor" (3x), "goodness" (12x), "kindness" (38x), "lovingkindness" (30x), and "mercy" (151x). While the word "love" appears only rarely in the Old Testament (10x when used of God),

*chesed* is found generously. A strong case can be made that **this is the Old Testament equivalent of agape**. Rather than the broad stroke of "love" or "charity" (KJV) which is the way *apage* is rendered, *chesed* is translated by a particular attribute of love. It is "kindness," "mercy," "favor" or "goodness." His love is the crown we wear today by faith and in the hereafter in fact. It is this Godly kindness and mercy toward us through Jesus that gives us hope in a troubled world. Praise God for His *chesed* love!

The "satisfaction" that God provides is through His "good" gifts which elevate and purify rather than debase. While the world seeks satisfaction by many short-lived schemes, God is the One Who provides lasting satisfaction and fulfillment.

Because of God's tender mercies and loving forgiveness, David felt rejuvenated and renewed. His spirit could soar like an eagle. He had a spiritual make-over.

"The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. 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 punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame, He remembers that we are dust."

What beautiful verses! The Lord's "ways" are beyond our comprehension, unless He reveals them to us. We could no more know about the character and mind of God than I could guess what is in your mind at this moment. But graciously, He has "made known" His ways and His acts, through His prophets, such as Moses. You will find in the Bible that the phrase "ways and doings" is often repeated. Usually in this context, "ways" refers to the invisible, inside person; his or her thoughts, feelings and character, while "doings" or "acts" refers to the visible, outward behavior. Through the study of His Book we can become acquainted with His ways and doings.

There follows a wonderful description of what the "ways" of the Lord are. His character is highlighted by mercy and grace, pity and understanding. We're told, "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities." Thank God for that! This section

begins by noting the Lord's justice and righteousness. Those are wonderful attributes of God, but ***we need more than justice.***

What is "justice"? Justice can be defined as the **administration of a deserved reward**. If you received what you deserved, you were treated justly. What David deserved for his sin with Bathsheba was death. What Adam and Eve deserved for their sin was death. What we deserve for our sins is death. But God's legal system goes beyond justice and operates within mercy. God has not dealt with us according to our sins, but according to His grace.

He has employed divine "accounting," in which Jesus was "numbered" among the lost (Isaiah 53:12), while we have been "accounted" righteous through faith in Him (Romans 4:3). The word in Isaiah 53 is a word you may have seen before. It's the same word that appears in Daniel 5, the story of Belshazzar's last supper. Amidst the revelry and defiant blasphemy a hand was seen inscribing flaming letters of judgment; meni, meni, tekeli, upharsin. Daniel explained that "meni," the same word as is found in Isaiah 53:12 meant that Belshazzar's kingdom was "numbered" and finished. A divine audit had been conducted, and the accounting was completed. The empire had been weighed in the divine scales and found wanting. That was justice. That was a deserved sentence. But Isaiah is telling us that Jesus was "numbered" or "accounted" among transgressors. That's grace! That's mercy!

David turns to nature to search for comparisons to somehow describe God's mercy. He's frustrated because His mercy is immeasurable; it is higher than the heavens, it is as far as east is from west, if that could ever be tabulated. He turns to human relationships to find something to compare with God's mercy. Even if we can't understand fully the science of salvation, we can understand the love and pity a father has for his child.

This attitude of mercy is based on God's infallible knowledge. "He knows our frame." What a comfort to understand the truth that "He knows." In the ancient world the pagans worshiped deities who had little interest in the care and welfare of humans. But our God knows and cares. He "knows" as our Creator. As the divine Architect, Engineer and Manufacturer, He knows mankind through and through. Beyond that, He "knows" because He was here and dwelt among us. He wore our skin. He felt the same hunger, fatigue, sorrow and pain that you and I do. There may be something that you're going through right now that no one else even knows about, much less could understand. But God knows. He knows that we are but dust.

When the enemy called sin made its rude entrance, it brought a trainload of unwanted baggage. Because we live in a sinful world, we feel sorrow. God knows. Because things aren't perfect here, we feel sad. God knows. Through the entire gamut of human emotion runs the thread "He knows." He understands, like no one else ever could. Your children might not know; your spouse might not understand; your siblings might not comprehend, but He knows. He knows our human predicament fully. Look to Him as your Friend and Counselor.

"As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them."

We all know the sad reality of verse 15. The tenure of humanity on this planet is a short one. A few short years and we pass away. In contrast, the mercy and righteousness of the Lord are everlasting.

What does it mean to "fear the Lord"? To "fear" the Lord does not mean to look upon Him in abject terror. It means to love and respect Him as Creator God. It means to have a repulsion of doing that which offends and disappoints Him. Notice that the author clarifies that the ones ("on those who fear Him") who receive the **full measure** of His mercy and righteousness are those who acknowledge Him as their God, obey His commandments and keep His covenant. In the clearest terms we're informed that keeping His covenant is equated with doing His commandments. Many today teach that God's grace and mercy make obedience unnecessary, but the terms of His covenant haven't changed. The difference between what the Bible calls the New Covenant and the Old Covenant is that in the New Covenant God promises to forgive our sins and write His laws in our hearts. (Hebrews 8:8-12) In the New Covenant He doesn't say, "You are free to disobey My commandments;" He says, "I will help you become obedient."

There are uncounted blessings that fall from His throne benefiting all of humanity, even those who refuse to honor Him. The same sun rises on the just as the unjust. The rays of His kindness reach every corner of the globe, warming even those who curse His name. He grants to everyone the blessings of life and the opportunity to become acquainted with Him, and pursue a course in accordance with His plan. But it is with those who recognize and appreciate Him as God and perform the highest act of worship, that of obedience, that His unmeasured bounties rest. He "is the Savior of all men, *especially* those that believe." I Timothy 4:10.

In this psalm, "remember" is a key term.

In verse 2 we are told to "remember His blessings."

In verse 14 we are told that "He remembers that we are dust."

In verse 16 we are told that if we pass away, it may be that we will not be remembered by some.

In verse 18 we are encouraged to "remember His commandments to do them."

"The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all. Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word. Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, you ministers of His, who do His pleasure. Bless the LORD, all His works, in all places of His dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!"

The psalmist closes with a reminder that the Lord is King. No matter how chaotic the world may appear, no matter how unsettled our life might be, there is a God in heaven. His throne is established forever. With Him there is security and constancy. He is our Rock. His rulership is unhindered.

Having gathered evidence from every quarter, David now pulls back and works from the large to the small as he ties his poem together. Bless the Lord, you angels, you hosts, you ministers and all His works. His final benediction is a reaffirmation of his own personal commitment. "Bless the LORD O my soul!"