Bless the Lord, O My Soul

Psalm 103

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One Soul, Zero Forgetfulness, Three Remembrances

We have been studying the book of Psalms, and our text today is Psalm 103 — one of Scripture's great psalms of praise. We are given little context for it, except that it is "of David." And even though it is a psalm of praise, something is wrong, because David is commanding his soul to bless the Lord. That detail should stop us. Why would a man after God's own heart have to give his own soul orders?

The pattern of this command will guide us through the whole psalm: one soul, zero forgetfulness, three remembrances. We remember what God has given, what God has done, and who God is. And in that remembering — in that zero forgetfulness — our souls drink deeply of His goodness, and gratitude rises into praise.

But before we get there, we need to wrestle with a prior question. What does it even mean to bless the Lord?

What Does It Mean to Bless the Lord?

Psalm 103 begins with the command:

> *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*

This is the question I have wrestled with this week. The obvious answer is that "bless the Lord" means to praise Him and give Him thanks. But I am not fully satisfied with that answer. I think there is something more. Blessing the Lord and praising the Lord, though overlapping, are not exactly the same thing.

One reason this is difficult is how we use the word *bless* in English. We use it to mean doing something good for another person — "Let me buy you lunch, bless you." We use it to approve an arrangement — "I give my blessing upon this marriage." We use it to wish good upon someone — "May the Lord bless you." And we use it as a way of giving thanks — "Let's bless

this meal." Outside of that last sense of gratitude, none of these usages fit the command to bless the Lord. We cannot add anything to God. We do not approve what He does — we may agree, but God acts without needing our blessing. Do you see why this command is worth wrestling with?

Yes, to bless the Lord involves praise. Yes, it means to honor Him. And yes, gratitude is a very large part of what it means to bless the Lord. But there is still something more.

The Thirst of the Soul

Look again at verse one, and notice carefully who David is directing his command toward:

> *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*

David is commanding his own soul to bless the Lord. The answer to why a man after God's own heart would need to give his soul orders is this: the soul thirsts, and it must be reminded where its life, joy, and satisfaction are truly found.

The Hebrew word for "soul" here is *nefesh* (). It is a rich and common word — it occurs 754 times in the Old Testament — and it is translated as "soul" only about 32 percent of the time in the ESV, which is already higher than many other translations. The NIV, for instance, renders it as "soul" only 14 percent of the time. The reason for the variation is that *nefesh* describes the whole person, the entire inner self.

But the original weight-bearing meaning of this word — and I doubt you were expecting this — is *throat*. Consider Psalm 69:1: *"The waters have come up to my neck"* — my *nefesh*. So how does one travel from "throat" to "soul"? It is not as strange a journey as it sounds.

Your throat is where you feel thirst. We all know what thirst feels like, though it is hard to describe. The mouth goes dry, swallowing becomes difficult, and there is a focused, consuming need to drink. Now carry that image into the spiritual realm.

Have you ever felt spiritually thirsty? It is different from depression or simple discouragement. Spiritual thirst is a desire, a longing for something more, but nothing seems to satisfy. There is a dryness within, an ache. You pray, but the words feel empty. You sing, but your heart does not match the words. You read Scripture, but it feels like a chore. You still believe, but your affections for God are in the doldrums. You may even wonder, "Is something wrong with me?"

I think this spiritual thirst of the soul is precisely what leads David to command his soul to bless the Lord. He is experiencing what he describes in Psalm 42:

> *As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

His soul is thirsty. That is why he commands it to bless the Lord.

Is your soul thirsty? I hope so. Your soul is made to thirst for the Lord. Spiritual thirst is not a problem — it is a signpost. Just as physical thirst reminds us of our need for water, spiritual thirst reminds us of our need for God. We are made to be satisfied by Him. The problem is not the thirst; the problem is where a person goes to satisfy it. The Lord makes this plain through the Prophet Jeremiah:

> *My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:13)*

Jeremiah is describing people attempting to satisfy their spiritual thirst in things that cannot satisfy. When David commands his soul to bless the Lord, then, he is directing his soul to the living waters of God. It is a command to find what the soul longs for in the Lord — to come and drink from the fountain of living waters, and at the same time, to stop drinking from the broken cisterns of the world.

To bless the Lord is to turn the whole self toward God in grateful adoration. And David shows us how that happens.

To illustrate what I mean by gratitude rising into praise, imagine a time when you had a deep need — a worry that consumed you, a situation you fixated on but had no power to change. Maybe it was medical test results, news about a job, a financial burden. And then the phone rings. You answer, and the voice on the other end tells you: the job is yours, the results are clear, that need is taken care of. What do you feel in that moment? A tremendous weight lifts from your shoulders. There is a deep exhale, a wave of relief, and out of you comes a spontaneous, heartfelt gratitude — maybe even the words, "Oh, bless you."

That is the kind of gratitude I am describing. And this soul-refreshing gratitude can be experienced even when all is not well in this world or in one's life. I believe that is why David commands his soul to bless the Lord — things are not going well, and so he must go and drink from the fountain of living water. *Bless the LORD, O my soul*.

And how does one drink from that fountain? How does the soul find this deep gratitude? The answer is in verse two:

> *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.*

Zero forgetfulness. When your soul is spiritually dry — and please note, spiritual drought can come in seasons when everything in life is going well just as easily as it comes when

everything is falling apart; our souls thirst regardless of whether we are on the mountaintop or in the valley — the way to drink from the living waters of God is through the gratitude that comes from remembering. Remembering what the Lord has given. Remembering what He has done. Remembering who He is. These are the three remembrances David now walks us through.

The First Remembrance: The Gifts of God (vv. 3–5)

> *…who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

I do not know exactly what David is suffering, but what he chooses to remind himself of gives us some clues. Maybe he is overwhelmed with guilt. Maybe he is battling sickness. Maybe it is shame, or simply the weight of growing old. There are so many things in life that can send a heart into the depths — discouragement, heartache, the feeling that you have made a complete fool of yourself.

But what does David command his soul not to forget?

Don't you dare forget that you are forgiven. Don't forget that your life will be redeemed from the pit — we call that the resurrection — and because of that, no disease or illness will have the final word. Whatever sickness you are walking through, it is not the end. Don't forget that in your moments of shame and feeling utterly worthless, He crowns you with steadfast love and mercy. And don't forget that the good He has for you lies ahead of you, not behind you.

When the soul remembers these things, something happens. It remembers that it is well. It drinks from the fountain of living water. And out of it comes gratitude. *Bless the Lord. Thank you.*

The Second Remembrance: The Works of God (vv. 6–14)

> *The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*

Clearly the works of God overlap the gifts of God — He works forgiveness, and we are forgiven. But the overlap is precisely the point.

Some of the broken cisterns people try to drink from are positive self-help philosophies. The pattern is familiar: a person wants something to be true, so they tell themselves it is true, in the hope that it will become true. And for some people, this is what religion looks like to them from the outside. *Forgiveness, resurrection, eternal life* — it sounds like elaborate self-help.

What makes the gifts of God true rather than self-help is that they are anchored in what God has actually done in history. The Lord made His ways known to Moses — He did that. He worked righteousness and justice for the oppressed. His mercy and grace and love and compassion have been revealed in real historical events.

Look at the description of that love and forgiveness in verses 11 and 12. Draw a vertical line: *as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love.* Now draw a horizontal line: *as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions.* The shape those two lines make is not an accident. God's love and forgiveness were historically worked out on the cross of Christ.

This connects directly to Paul's encouragement to Timothy in our Wednesday night study. Paul does not urge Timothy to endure on the basis of a self-help philosophy. He grounds endurance in what God has done in history:

> *Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! (2 Timothy 2:8–9)*

The gifts of God are real because the works of God are real. To drink deeply, we must remember both.

The Third Remembrance: The Nature and Character of God (vv. 15–19)

> *As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love 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 to do his commandments. The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.*

The most refreshing drinks from the fountain of living water come from delighting in God Himself. Notice the progression David has taken us through. First, he remembered the gifts of God — forgiveness, redemption, love, and mercy. Then he remembered the works of God — what God has actually done in history to make those gifts real and possible. Now David goes even deeper. He remembers who God is.

This matters because the greatest gift God gives us is not forgiveness, or healing, or even eternal life. The greatest gift God gives us is Himself. All His other gifts are wonderful precisely because they bring us into relationship with Him.

Notice how David describes Him. God is not like us. We are like grass that withers, like a flower the wind sweeps away and is gone. But He endures — everlasting to everlasting. He is forever faithful to His covenant. He reigns; His throne is established in the heavens, and His kingdom rules over all.

Remembering God's nature and character goes hand in hand with trusting Him. I trust the Lord because of who He is. This is why the soul can be refreshed and satisfied even in times when this world is not well. I know Him, and this is what He is like — sovereign, everlasting, faithful in love — and because of what He is like, it is well with my soul. That remembering satisfies the soul, and out of the soul flows gratitude. *Bless the Lord.*

One Soul Becomes a Chorus

In the last three verses of the psalm, David moves from commanding his own soul to calling on all of creation to do the same:

> *Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will! Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!*

When the soul finds refreshment from the living water of God, it cannot keep that to itself. It wants others to drink there too.

Come and Drink

Today, does your soul thirst? I hope so. I also hope that you will satisfy that thirst at the source: Jesus Christ. He said in John 7:37, *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."* He is the fountain of living water. And drinking from that fountain requires faith — believing and trusting in the One who died and rose again.

We drink, one soul, zero forgetfulness, three remembrances.

We remember who He is: sovereign, everlasting, faithful in love. And because of who He is, we remember what He has done — *as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions.* And because of what He has done, we remember what He has given: redeemed, forgiven, crowned with love and mercy, satisfied with good.

From the refreshment of the soul flows gratitude. This is what it means to bless the Lord.

A Practice for This Week

Before we close, I want to give you some homework. Take a piece of paper — perhaps the back of your bulletin — and create three spaces. In the first, write down what God has given you. In the second, what God has done — His works in your life and in history. In the third, who God is — His nature and character. During your times of prayer this week, spend time writing in each of those areas. And after you do, give Him thanks. Do the 103 — remind yourself of what has been done for you by the One who loves you.