

God Our Soul's Delight

Psalm 103

BPC 5pm – 8/11/2020

“It is so good I could cry.” That was the comment of this woman as she sat in a café with a coffee for the first time in months. “It is so good I could cry” – it’s a very Melbourne statement! Last week our news was flooded by the excitement and joy of people as they returned to café and shops.

But one statement from a reporter stood out: “we will never take a cup of coffee for granted again.” Really? How long will this renewed zeal for the simple things in life like shopping, travel, or eating out really last? Maintaining zeal and appreciation for things that we have access to all the time is actually really hard.

When we get a new phone we are gentle and cautious to make sure it doesn’t get scratched or damaged, but the months go by and it’s thrown onto the couch without a second thought.

And sadly, many of this know this is true for our faith in Jesus. What was once white-hot zeal and joy and thankfulness can so easily turn into a lifeless routine or even burden to endure. What was once worth speaking up for or even being mocked for is no longer exciting enough to even motivate us to turn the TV on for yet another livestream.

So how do we maintain our zeal, our passion, our thankfulness for Jesus through the ebbs and flows of life? How do we make sure our ongoing praise of Jesus does not descend into mere habits but is the genuine, heartfelt, all of life gratitude that is not only what our saviour deserves but good for us?

Psalm 103 is given to us for that exact purpose. It is a Psalm of David and a wonderful song of celebration to be sung every day and in every season. No situation or context is given for the Psalm, there is no reference to hostility or pressure or sin. This is a Psalm that helps us live through the good and the bad, the highs and lows, times of pleasure or even pandemic.

And what may surprise us about the Psalm is it tells us that our praise or worship of God will not happen by accident. Genuine praise is not only to be a response or merely spontaneous but a discipline. In Psalm 42 we see David lecturing his own emotions, *Why my soul are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God! (v.1)*

But Psalm 103 opens and ends with David urging himself to praise or bless God. He is lecturing his will, disciplining himself to get in line with God’s goodness and respond rightly. V.1, *Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.*² *Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits.*

To *praise the Lord or bless the Lord* as the ESV and older translations have it is to speak well of God’s goodness and greatness, to have speech and life that celebrate the God we have come to know. And notice that David is not just promoting some thoughtless lip service to keep up appearances.

He wants his praise of God to be genuine and heartfelt, *all my inmost being, praise his holy name*. In vv.1-5 David is talking to himself, pleading with his own soul to give God the praise he deserves, to shake off anything that might cause him to not praise God.

And so I wonder if you can relate to these opening words of the Psalm. David is so unwilling to let himself drift into apathy that he talks to himself. He is not happy to just go through the motions with routine or ritual or to just give up and say this is a season where his praise will dissipate.

He longs for and pleads with himself to give God the constant and authentic praise he deserves. And so, do you share that longing? Unwilling to let yourself drift into a formality of habits where the stirrings of your soul are left unmoved? Praise of God is a discipline we have to work at, and I think if we are honest we are often content to give God very little, nothing more than a few weekly habits.

And David shows us that central to changing this is our self-talk. As Paul Tripp says, “no one is more influential in your life than you because no one talks to you more than you do.” We need to learn the art of talking to, even arguing with ourselves.

Self-talk is a big focus in psychology at the moment because how we talk to ourselves is so central to our mental health. Lockdown has given us more time at home and alone which often leaves us to our own thoughts which can be profoundly influential and unhelpful...

But we need to spend less time listening to ourselves and more time talking to ourselves. Because David shows us this as he urges himself in v.2 to *forget not all his benefits*. Forgetting in the bible is not about being absent-minded, unable to remember your password or where your keys are.

To forget God is to disregard his lordship, it is idolatry or practical atheism as you live without reference to him and is deeply offensive to God as we see in Deuteronomy 8. And so David urges himself to remember the benefits, the privilege of belonging to God, which will prompt his praise.

This means that any disappointment in God we have is the fruit of amnesia. The true and living God we have come to know in Jesus is never disappointing or inadequate.

And so to ‘remember’ is to have something so central to conscience that it shapes your thinking, behaviour and whole being. And so having urged himself to remember he then lists a selection of benefits in vv.3-5. He takes time to list them and thank God for them.

As Tim Keller says, we must pray the truth into our hearts until it catches fire in the presence of God. Because the privileges and benefits David lists are also true for us in Jesus. *Who, v.3, forgives all your sins*. Through his death on the cross Jesus has taken all of our sin and the death it deserved on himself.

That every barrier to approaching the holy God has been removed by the God we offend. And this of course is not earned but graciously given. And David begins with forgiveness first because all the other benefits listed are the outworking of this restored relationship with God.

Who, v.3, heals all your diseases. As God deals with our sin he is also at work to restore us from the ongoing corruption and consequences of sin. And this healing is sometimes in this life but

perfectly in heaven. As Paul says we are waiting for the redemption of our bodies when Christ returns (Rom 8:23)

And isn't that just such a wonderful benefit and comfort? Whether the grief of cancer or the just the debilitating pain of aging, Jesus will make all things new when he returns.

He continues, v.4, *who redeems your life from the pit*. The pit is a picture of death, which David was rescued from many times. But in Jesus we see this redemption from the pit, from death itself, is secured through the resurrection and the gift eternal life. The sting of death is gone for believers.

We are plucked from death itself and made royalty, still v.4, *who crowns you with love and compassion*. The word for 'love' here is God's special covenant love, his *hesed*. It is his steadfast love, his ongoing promise and goodness to us in the face of our unfaithfulness. We are crowned in this love; it is a beautiful picture of being covered with the ongoing experience of God's love because we are assured of his character and promise.

⁵ *who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's*. This is not a promise we get whatever we want but that God withholds nothing good from us. As we are faithful to God we are assured of his goodness because he is enough, in Christ we are brought to fullness.

And not only does God give us all we need, he actually sustains us to enjoy and serve him with an inward vigour. The language is similar to that of Isaiah 40, *those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint*.

But you might be thinking that you're not sure you can say with David vv.3-5. So often in the ups and downs of life we might not feel or be assured of any of these. We might struggle to see God's protection and provision, his goodness and sustaining strength.

But I think that's exactly the point. So often we don't see it, to remember it, and don't enjoy it. And the same was exactly true for David. It's why we have Psalm 103. Because after pleading with himself to praise God in vv.1-5, in v.6 onwards he grounds his praise and confidence in the benefits of God not in his present circumstances or feelings but in salvation history.

⁷ *He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel*. David goes back to God's chief revelation of himself in the Exodus, when Israel was saved from slavery in Egypt, because that's where God's character, his love and compassion were displayed for all to see and know.

⁶ *The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed*. As God saved his people he showed them his character. He works righteousness and justice. He delivers from evil while judging the evil. No enemy is too great or situation too difficult when the LORD acts on his people's behalf.

But God not only changes the people's situation, but the people themselves. What is glorious and comforting about the Exodus is not simply how God removed Israel from Egypt, but how he endured them afterwards! It is not God's power or control David highlights but his love.

⁸ *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.* This is a quote from Exodus 34 when God passed by Moses on the mountain to reveal his glory. And what was the context for this event? As God saved his people and brought them to himself, as he made a covenant with them and promised to be their God, what did Israel do?

Built a calf out of their jewellery and worshipped it. And the LORD stuck with these people. He *is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.* David points himself and us back to Moses because, as OT scholar Derek Kidner says, “No story surpasses the Exodus for a record of human unworthiness, of grace abounding, and benefits forgot.”

Because God’s love is so beautiful, so glorious, and so compelling because it embraces us as we truly are. ⁹ *He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;* ¹⁰ *he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.*

This reality protects us from two errors: firstly from thinking that we are not offensive at all and somehow God should love us. But secondly, from being so caught up in our sin and failure that we think God will not love us. Knowing God’s love is so liberating as we don’t have to pretend or hide.

Tim Keller says, “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is to be loved by God and what we need more than anything else.”

And David highlights God’s all embracing and immeasurable love through the metaphors of vv.11-12. ¹¹ *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;* ¹² *as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

You can see David is at pains to find ways to express the enormity of God’s love. As high as the heavens are above the earth, which for us with all our technology and space exploration has just confirmed how large and incomprehensible it is.

And the greatness of God’s love is again seen in how he responds to our sin – he doesn’t pretend it isn’t there or just ignore it, he actually deals with it! As he says in v.12, he has removed our transgressions from us, as far as the east is from the west.

It’s a beautiful image isn’t it – our sin is gone, east from the west, never to be brought up again. And as we look at Jesus we know this isn’t merely poetic language or wishful thinking, our sin really has been removed because Jesus takes it on himself to the cross as he dies in our place.

Romans 5: ⁶ *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.* ⁷ *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.* ⁸ *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

In Jesus we see not only the enormity and beauty of God’s love but the cost – the eternal perfect Son of God given for us. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (2Cor 5:21)

So as David looks back to God's rescue in the Exodus to remember and be assured of God's love in the face of our insult and sin, so too we must look to the cross and delight in the costly love of Christ.

Every relationship needs the constant reminder and assurance of love. I cannot say to my wife Holly, "remember when we got married and I declared my love to you, that should see you through for the next 5-10 years right?" It's true in marriage and it is certainly true for our faith in Jesus.

And the problem for us I think is that we can be so familiar with these passages or the Gospel itself that we think there is nothing further to gain by turning back to them again. But the Gospel is God's constant declaration of his great and costly love to which we must run to constantly.

So as David recalls God's immeasurable love in vv.6-12, he moves to remember and celebrates his fatherly compassion in v.13 *As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.* ¹⁴ *for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.* ¹⁵ *The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field;* ¹⁶ *the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.*

I have a 2-year-old son Thomas and I think one of the biggest challenges I've had since becoming a father is being the source of guidance and boundaries as well as discipline and comfort.

At least once a day there will be a regular exchange of: Thomas don't do that, you'll hurt yourself. Thomas then does it, hurts himself, and then runs to me for hugs and consoling. I find it really difficult because every time he runs to me for comfort, I really want to stop him to have the conversation...

What did dad say... What did Thomas do... I want to defend my honour: "I warned you!" But rationalising with emotional toddlers never goes well. So rather than sit him down and go through it all, as much as I'd like to, I embrace him with a hug and seek to reassure him all is well.

And so how much greater is God's compassion in the face of our much greater offense. The longer I am Christian the more I think I am overwhelmed at the patience of God. Because it is confronting to realise how emotional, temperamental and inconsistent I really am. Like grass blown by the wind!

All it takes is a night of bad sleep, being stuck in traffic, running out of coffee, technology failure or even just being hungry to shape my behaviour and justify any number of sins.

We never really like to admit our frailty and weakness, but God knows us better than we know ourselves and when confronted with our fragility he is constantly compassionate.

¹⁷ *But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—* ¹⁸ *with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.*

David is contrasting our frailty and mortality with God's eternity - but the point is not to show how different God is from us, but that his grace and care is unending and inexhaustible. God's love

never runs dry, never gives us, is never depleted or removed; it remains *from everlasting to everlasting*.

And so as David remembers God's immeasurable love and fatherly compassion in the face of his frailty, he is assured afresh of his many benefits prompted to praise.

And the tragedy of this is how often do we let the guilt of our sin or awareness of our weakness cause us to run from God rather than to him? How often do we turn to our performance or efforts to restore our joy or cover over our shame?

So often we know and can even say we are saved by grace but really just live by works. And so we must let our sense of failure or knowledge of our frailty but put to rest by a love more vast than cosmos, a forgiveness greater than our imagination, and compassion we desperately need.

It's why we find time and time again in the New Testament that the call to praise God takes us to the cross and God's love displayed in Jesus. Ephesians 1:3, ³*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.* ⁷*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace* ⁸*that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.*

Or 1Peter 1: ³*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,* ⁴*and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.*

Because as we have what God has done for us in Christ dwell in us richly, yes we will be prompted to praise, yes we will have our hearts comforted and assured, but we will also be moved to invite others to join us: for who God is and what he has done in Jesus is good news for all to hear.

¹⁹*The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.* ²⁰*Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.* ²¹*Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.* ²²*Praise the LORD, all his works everywhere in his dominion.*

David has moved from pleading with himself to praise as the Psalm opened, to urging all people, in fact all of creation to join in as the Psalm closes. And all people must join in praise because the question of who is God, who does rule and will rule has been absolutely settled.

And Jesus himself made this absolutely clear by his resurrection. Having risen he appeared to his disciples and declared, *all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...* (Matt 28:18-19).

As the risen King sits on his throne all the angels and heavenly hosts are summoned to worship in vv.20-21. And Revelation 5 tells us that this is what is happening now as John says, ¹³*And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"*

All of heaven is in praise of Jesus and all people everywhere, v.22, are called to join in. And so notice that the total universal worship of King Jesus is achieved by calling on individuals to praise him. Just as with an orchestra, each individual voice is as necessary as the total sound.

But that must begin with and include us. Notice that the evangelistic or missional thrust of vv.19-22 is the outworking of David's own commitment to praise God and remember all his benefits. It is as we commit ourselves to the heartfelt worship of God that we are moved to call others to praise the Lord.

Because although David does call on all people everywhere to praise the Lord, the Psalm finishes as it began as David speaks to himself v.22, *Praise the Lord my soul.*

And so do you share David's longing that you, in any and every season, will praise the Lord? Do you or will you, preach the Gospel to yourself, constantly urging yourself to praise Jesus?

And I wonder what comes to mind for you with the call to praise the Lord. Sometimes I think we go immediately to hands in the air and tears in the eyes as we sing our hearts out. And while praising the Lord certainly includes our singing, notice that the praise David longs for isn't merely lip service.

Nor is it some emotional high that runs around saying God is good that pretends the sorrows and hardship of the world don't exist. No, David actually tells us throughout the Psalm what kind of praise God calls for.

v.11, so great is his love for those who fear him. V.13, the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. V.17, the LORD's love is on those who fear him.

To fear God is to see him rightly, the holy, perfect, eternal creator God, and in seeing him rightly, to give God have total claim upon your life. He rules. Put simply, it's to give God an all of life response.

As v.18 said, *those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.* So while praising the Lord will certainly includes our words, these words are to be the overflow of hearts that delight in God and whole lives given to him faithful service.

So how is your zeal to give God that kind of praise? Have you let yourself become content to give God something substantially less than the all of life worship he both calls for and deserves? Have you let yourself drift in believing or living in a way that suggests anything other God is your soul's delight?

I imagine for many of us this idea of arguing with ourselves is completely foreign. And sadly, I think taking time purely to thank God for our many benefits in Christ is too. Have you forgotten what an absolute privilege and treasure it is to be a Christian: To know Christ and his immeasurable love?

In his commentary on this Psalm, French theologian John Calvin says, *"Man, without the knowledge of God, being the most miserable object that can be imagined, the discovery which God has been pleased to make to us in his Word, of his fatherly love, is an incomparable treasure of perfect happiness."*

If this pandemic has shown us anything about our world that does not know Jesus it is exactly that. And so we must let God's Word tonight shake us out our apathy, confront our contentment to give God anything other than our total affection, and challenge our complacency to ignore a world without hope.

For some time I've been quite committed to not dancing at weddings. I didn't dance at my own wedding, I've fought off many a friend or family member who have sought to drag me on to the dance floor, even happily resisted the attempts of newlyweds to drag me out there.

I'm happy to sit back, arms folded, and watch. I'm too comfortable to risk the embarrassment, too proud to participate simply for the joy of others, and too cynical to think I'd enjoy it. And yet I hope that can never be said of my Christianity.

Too comfortable to change my ways and give God my all, too proud to acknowledge my weakness, too cynical to call others to join. Because the beauty of Psalm 103 is that while God calls for holistic and genuine praise, we are assured that he understands and provides for our frailty.

We are to be people who praise the Lord with our inmost being, who fear and obey him, and the Psalm shows this happens as we see Jesus as he truly is: our loving and compassionate saviour who knows our weakness, and has made provision for us to enjoy him forever at great cost to himself.

And let's be constant in praying the words of Ephesians 3, *that being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.*

And let's maintain our zeal and appreciation by talking to ourselves, forgetting not all his benefits, by coming back to the cross and praising our Lord of love and compassion. Praise the Lord O my soul.

Let's pray.