

Psalm 103 - God of Compassion

Over the course of the next ten weeks
In the morning services, we will be studying 10 Psalms from the book of Psalms
There will be no particular order in preaching these Psalms
But many of them will be well known to you if you've been a believer for a while
Both Clinton and I will be preaching most of this series while Neil is on long service leave
But Chris Craig one of our elders as well as Travis Moroney
Will each be preaching one Psalm each.

The Psalms are the songs of God's people
Songs of lament, of praise, of thanksgiving
And the unique thing about the Psalms is that yes they are words from God to us
Words for suffering, struggling and sinful people
But they are also God's words for us
Words that we can use when we cry out to Him in grief
Words that we can use when we call out for forgiveness and mercy
Our hope with this series on the Psalms
Is that these songs would nourish your soul
That they would draw you to God in praise, in dependence and thankfulness

Let me pray

Michael Phelps is the greatest Olympic swimmer in history
With 28 Olympic medals to his name
And a key part of his pre-race ritual
Was listening to music just before he competed
And Phelps explained why
"I like to get in my own world. When I'm getting ready for a meet, I always have headphones on,
listening to rap music to get myself fired up"

Songs are important to our souls, aren't they?
They shape us
They lift us
They inspire us
They comfort us
They give voice to our experiences

I wonder what the songs are that are feeding your soul?

As I was deciding what to wear
I was thinking "I'm too sexy for this shirt" by Right Said Fred
And then I realised "I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo" by Radiohead
I think I'm showing my age with those songs
But think of Adele
A whole generation of women are growing up with her songs
Each of her albums represent her age
As she sings the songs of each season of her life
Her songs of love and loss are feedings souls

Will you let God's songs feed your soul?
The Psalms get you out of your own world
And they place you in God's world
In reality
These songs speak of love and loss

These songs speak of true hope beyond this life
These songs will inspire you and lift you up
And they will help you weep

Can I encourage you to let these Psalms shape your soul?
Because you will be better for it.

Let's look at Psalm 103
Three things I will look at today

Remember God's Blessings (vv.1-5)

Know God as Righteous King & Compassionate Father (vv.6-19)

Declare God's Praise (vv.20-22)

Remember God's Blessings (vv.1-5)

Verse 1

¹ My soul, bless the Lord,
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Psalm 103 is a Psalm of praise
But notice for the Psalmist
Praise starts with his or her own soul
Telling herself to praise God
With all of her being

To bless someone is to say or do something good for them
And so the Psalmist is saying something good about God
That's what praise is – to declare the goodness of God's name

The holy name of God reminds us of Exodus 3 where God revealed his name to Moses
Yahweh – the great I am who would rescue Israel from slavery
The Psalmist blesses God as a response to the numerous blessings
That she's received from God
And we see those blessings from verse 3 onwards

³ He forgives all your iniquity;
he heals all your diseases.
⁴ He redeems your life from the Pit;
he crowns you with faithful love and compassion.
⁵ He satisfies you with good things;
your youth is renewed like the eagle.

God is an active God who forgives, heals, redeems, crowns and satisfies
Every good thing that you enjoy in life
Comes not from my own hand, but from the hand of God

We on the other hand are helpless and hopeless
People who break God's covenant because of our iniquity, our sin
The Pit represents a place of despair and imminent death
in the book of Genesis
Think of Joseph being thrown into a pit by his brothers
The Pit can also represent the place we get into because of our sin
We deserve judgement for our sin
And yet it is God who redeems us from the depths of our sin
And blesses us with his goodness and strength as though soaring on the wings of a majestic eagle
Why does He do this?

Because of His steadfast, faithful love and compassion in verse 4

Verse 2

² My soul, bless the Lord,
and do not forget all his benefits.

Why does the Psalmist need to remind her own soul of God's actions and his character?
Because it's very easy to forget

This past Monday we commemorated another Anzac Day
Every town and suburb you go to in Australia
You will find a plaque or a memorial and the names of young men who died
Lest we forget
That's what that means
Let's not repeat the same mistakes
Let's not forget their sacrifice
Let's not forget how they blessed us
That's why we remember

So why start with our own soul when it comes to praising God?
Lest we forget
It's easy to forget God's goodness
Why were the Israelites to celebrate the Passover every year?
So they would not forget God's rescue
Why do we celebrate the Lord's supper today
So as to remember and not forget God's rescue of us in Christ
And you resist forgetfulness by praising God in your own soul

How many of us forgot God's goodness during lockdown?
Regardless of what you lost in the last two years
You can still always say:
My soul, bless the Lord
I tell myself, do not forget all His benefits
It is a choice to bless God
It is a habit that we can form to be thankful
To bless God in plenty or in want

In the next section of the Psalm
We are presented with two very different pictures of God
One is that of a **Righteous King**
And the other is that of a **Compassionate Father**
Both are essential if we are to know God rightly

Firstly Know God as... Righteous King (vv.6-19)

Verse 6

⁶ The Lord executes acts of righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.

⁷ He revealed his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel.

Jump down to verse 19

¹⁹ The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.

Not only did God reveal his name to Moses
But at Mount Sinai, God enters into a covenant with His people
He gives them His law
and they are to obey that law if they are to enjoy the blessings of the covenant

And remember in the book of Exodus,
It was only Moses who could approach God at the top of Mount Sinai
Otherwise anyone else would die if they were even to touch the mountain
For God is an awesome and holy God
You do not approach him any way that you choose
For he is the Sovereign and Righteous King
Justice and righteousness matter to the Righteous King
The Putins of the world will not escape his judgement
And this King will not overlook the abuse and the murder of the vulnerable

And verse 17 tells us how we should respond to God as King

¹⁷ But from eternity to eternity
the Lord's faithful love is toward those who fear him,
and his righteousness toward the grandchildren
¹⁸ of those who keep his covenant,
who remember to observe his precepts.
¹⁹ The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules overall.

To fear God is not to recoil in terror
But to bow our knee in humble adoration and obedience before our King
For we are not His equal
He does not obey us
We need to obey Him
We are his loyal subjects
He rules on His throne
He is the King and we are not
So we ought to come before Him on bended knee

Martin Scorsese

Hollywood Director - said of the most recent film he made "The Irishman"

"I would suggest if you ever want to see one of my pictures, or most films - please, please don't look at it on a phone, please. An iPad, a big iPad, maybe."

This was the first movie he had ever released on Netflix
All the movies he had made prior to this were released on the big screen of the movie theatre
His movie is big and long,
It's a complex story
And Scorsese wanted people to be impacted by his story
And watching it on a phone could not convey what he intended

I know because I watched his movie on my phone
And I'm pretty sure like most of what I watch on Netflix
It left little impact on me
And my short attention span.
I think we often do the same thing to God
We like him in small, iPhone sized chunks
Like all our other consumer content
We want to digest God when it suits us
And then when we lose interest
We like to put Him back in our pockets for later

The companion Psalm to Psalm 103 is Psalm 104

It also begins with the Psalmist saying "My Soul bless the Lord"
But it's all about praising God as creator
God who makes the clouds his chariot

God who causes the water to gush down mountains and through valleys
God who produces the crops to feed people and gladden their hearts
God who satisfies the thirst of humans and animals
God who causes the sun to rise
God who gives the breath of life and takes it away
I would encourage you to read Psalm 104 after the service
Because it is God on the big screen
God who is awesome and takes your breath away
This is the majesty of the eternal King
And the on the other hand there's us

Verse 14

¹⁴For he knows what we are made of,
remembering that we are dust.

¹⁵As for man, his days are like grass—
he blooms like a flower of the field;

¹⁶when the wind passes over it, it vanishes,
and its place is no longer known.

After you mow the lawn
You're left with grass clippings that lie on your lawn
Grass clippings that turn yellow and then wither away
Eventually to be blown away by the wind
And the Psalmist is saying that's you and that's me.
We are those frail and fragile grass clippings
When I die, I want that put on my memorial stone
Here lies, Andy May
His life was like grass clippings
Here today, gone tomorrow

In my line of work,
I conduct funerals
I see people breathe their last in hospitals and nursing homes
I've seen life support systems being turned off
Both children and adults dying
And one day that too will be me
Yes people will grieve my passing for a while
And then one day
No one will remember me
As if I never existed
It's sobering isn't it?
We spend so much time, not wanting to think about our own mortality
But when it comes down to it
We are but dust
Grass clippings on the lawn

We get so caught up with our own lives don't we
Checking our social media accounts
Comparing our lives to that of others
And we know that we don't feel great when we do that
We feel envious of the lives of other people
Living their best life
We feel terrible about our own body image
We get agitated and angry by their opinions
Let me put a spin on it from Psalm 103
When you do that?

You are grass clippings comparing yourself to other grass clippings
And in the end
No one will remember either you or them

And when everyone else forgets you
There will be only one who remembers – God

Verse 14
For he knows what we are made of,
remembering that we are dust.

The eternal king remembers us
He knows our fragile and fallen nature and can do something about it

Why? Because he is also the Compassionate Father

Know God as...Compassionate Father (vv.6-19)

Verse 13
¹³As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.

If there is a word that strikes you repeatedly in this passage
It is the word compassion
You can see it in verse 4, verse 8 and 13
It has the sense of tender care
Along with compassion is God's faithful love
This is God's covenant love for His people in verses 4, 8 and 11
And together we have this picture of God as a father
A father who gently tends to the needs of his children
But God's compassion is more than that
But there is an added dimension
Psalm 103 also reminds us we are sinners
You're we're not only fragile grass clippings
We are sinful grass clippings

Verse 3
³He forgives all your iniquity;
That's another word for sin
And God needs to redeem us
To free us from sin and death

Verse 8
⁸The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in faithful love.
⁹He will not always accuse us
or be angry forever.
Why would God be angry with us?
Because of our sin against Him and others

Verse 10
¹⁰He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve
or repaid us according to our iniquities.
¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his faithful love
toward those who fear him.

God's compassion towards us includes His mercy towards our sinfulness
We deserve judgement
But God's mercy means that he doesn't give us what we deserve for our sin
In fact His grace gives us what we don't deserve
And that is to be treated as His dearly loved children

In verse 8 when the first hearers of Psalm 103 heard that description
"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love"
I'm sure they would immediately have thought of the golden calf incident back in Exodus
Moses was getting the ten commandments from God at the top of Mt Sinai
The people had made a covenant with God
Agreeing to obey His commands
And because Moses was on the mountain for such a long time
The people decided to make a golden calf
And worship that instead of God

In their rebellion they sinned against God
And God ought to have destroyed them then and there
But He relented and revealed even more of Himself to Moses
In Exodus 34 verse 6 he said:
The Lord—the Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful
love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and
sin.
The righteous king who cannot tolerate sin
is also the compassionate father who is willing to forgive sin

In the New Testament
Think of the parable of the lost son as told by Jesus in Luke 15
Here depicted so beautifully by Rembrandt
Think of this reckless and selfish son
Who has squandered a significant part of His father's estate
And then comes home with his tail between his legs
And then listen to the Father's response to this sinful rebel
Verse 20
"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he
ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.
The compassionate father of that parable is of course God
And we are the selfish, sinful son.
Whom God welcomes back with open arms

So let me ask you
Do you know this God?
God who is both Righteous King
And Compassionate Father
And it is important that God is *both and*
And not *either or*

The Righteous King is strong in justice
But if that is all He is then as sinners we should just tremble with fear
For He will punish us as we deserve – condemnation and hell

The Compassionate Father is gentle and merciful in his dealings
But if that is all He is,
then we might wonder if He really cares about sin and evil and injustice in the world

But God is both strong and gentle
He is both just and merciful
He is righteous and compassionate

How many people in your life are like that?

Strong and gentle
I bet most of the people in your life
Are one or the other
Strong but scary
Gentle but weak
I wonder how many of you have had parents who are one or the other
Or maybe even neither
And that affects how you view God to this day

If that is you I want you to try another way
I want to encourage you to look at your parents
Through what you see about God today in the Scriptures
He is the King you've always needed
He is the Father that you've always wanted
Strong and gentle
Do you know this God?
He is worth knowing?

But there might be some of you who are wondering
"How do I reconcile these two very different pictures of God"
If he is a Righteous King then he must punish sin
And if he is a Compassionate Father then he must forgive sin
How can he possibly do both?

Verse 12 gives us a clue
¹²As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed
our transgressions from us.

In order for God to forgive our sin
He must remove it from us by punishing it

And in the New Testament
We get an even fuller picture than what this Psalmist knew

2 Corinthians 5 verse 20

Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross
Is how God removes sin from us
As far as the east is from the west
Our sin that deserves God's punishment
Is put upon Jesus who became sin for us
Who is therefore punished for our sin
Such that we might be forgiven and be declared righteous

It is at the cross we can reconcile God as Righteous King and Compassionate Father
They do not cancel each other out
God is both at the same time
And it is only at the cross we can be reconciled to God as King and Father

Transcendent and Personal
Holy and approachable
If you want to know God
You must keep coming back to the cross of Christ

Our final point is
Declare God's Praise (vv.20-22)

²⁰ Bless the Lord,
all his angels of great strength,
who do his word,
obedient to his command.

²¹ Bless the Lord, all his armies,
his servants who do his will.

²² Bless the Lord, all his works
in all the places where he rules.
My soul, bless the Lord!

What started as the Psalmist singing to her own soul
Is now the Psalmist telling every creature in heaven and earth
And every part of God's creation
To Praise the God that she knows
In all the places where God rules which is everywhere
The whole of God's creation ought to sing his praise
And the Psalmist comes full circle by finishing where she started
My soul, bless the Lord.

And that is always the right conclusion
When you truly know God
God is worthy of all your worship
And if you know Him like that
You cannot contain your praise
You want everyone to know this God and to give Him the praise that is His due

In the New Testament,
The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 1
Has a very similar explosion of praise as Psalm 103

Ephesians 1 verse 3
Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual
blessing in the heavens in Christ...
Verse 6
to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.

Life is all about the praise of God and His glorious grace
John Piper once said
Missions exist because worship doesn't
When you know God as he truly is
Righteous and compassionate
The one who remembers the frail and the fallen
And is willing to forgive sinful grass clippings like us and give us eternal life
You want everyone to know Him and worship him
Let this be your motivation to share the gospel with anyone who will listen
God deserves our praise, our worship

What song will you sing to your soul on your deathbed?

"I did it my way" by Frank Sinatra?
"Good ole Collingwood forever"?

You can do better

One of my heroes died a month ago
Ray Davidson from our church
I had the privilege of spending some time with her in the last weeks of her life
She had stopped eating about 5 weeks before she died
And about two weeks before Ray died
On one of my visits
I sang the hymn "It is well with my soul" with Ray and her husband of 66 years, Harold
Ray told me that this was sung at her own father's funeral
And with what little breath she had left as she lay on her bed
Ray sang to the God who she would soon meet

*My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, o my soul!
It is well, It is will with my soul*

You see the thing about people like Ray
Is that they are at their most peaceful,
their most joyful
When God is big, and they are small
When they declare God's praise to the world, to their soul, with their dying breath

Will you sing like Ray?
In life and in death
My soul, praise the Lord