

“Oh, The Lord is Good to Me” – Psalm 103

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In my early childhood, I lived in Celo, North Carolina. Some of you have been there. It is in the mountains not far from here. There is a summer camp there and when I was about six years old I attended it.

There was a prayer I learned there that was sung before the evening meals. It is the Johnny Appleseed song. It goes like this: “Oh the Lord is good to me and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the things I need, the sun and the rain and the apple seed. Oh, the Lord is good to me.”

Another simple prayer that many children know is “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food.”

These simple prayers teach us to give thanks to God for his kind provisions such as food. The Psalms also contain prayers of thanksgiving like these children’s prayers. But most of the Psalms go deeper in describing who God is and why we should praise him.

They remind us of the greatness of God in all his attributes, and of our duty and privilege to praise him. And when it comes to focusing on God’s love expressed by his goodness, Psalm 103 will help us see that God’s good provision far exceeds food, sunshine, rain, and apple seeds.

In Psalm 103, we are lifted up high to see the overwhelming goodness of God to his people. The psalm also calls us to respond to that extravagant goodness with heartfelt and active praise.

So, let’s read God’s word now in Psalm 103, and listen for answers to these three questions:

1. How great is God’s goodness to those he loves?
2. Who receives this love and goodness?
3. How should they who receive it respond?

READ PSALM 103

For many years my family and I have cherished this psalm. I’m sure many of you have too. Let’s consider the three questions I posed before reading it. The questions were:

1. How great is God’s goodness to those he loves?
2. Who receives this love and goodness?
3. How should they who receive it respond?

Here are some brief answers, and then we will look into each one further:

1. How great is God's goodness to those he loves? In a nutshell, I would say, "Immense, like an ocean."
2. Who receives this love and goodness? The psalm uses several phrases, but in a nutshell, it is "Those who fear him."
3. How should they who receive this immense love and goodness respond? They should bless the Lord. They should praise and thank him.

1. How great is God's goodness to those he loves?

We see in verses 1 to 5 David recounting many of the blessings he has personally received. We don't know at what time in David's life he wrote this psalm. It would seem to be later in his life, since he is reminding himself of the many things God has done for him.

Pastor Mike has just finished preaching on Psalms 1 through 7, and in Psalms 3 through 7 we read of David calling out to God for help during times of distress. Now, in Psalm 103, David is looking back and meditating on how God has answered those prayers.

What about you and me? Do we take time to count our blessings? To pay attention and remember how God has blessed us? I am challenged by this psalm to count my blessings more often.

Anne Hope is helping me do that: she set a jar in the dining room with strips of paper and said to write down blessings throughout the year. The plan is to read them on Thanksgiving Day and give thanks to God for each blessing. I know many people do that and I think this is a great idea.

It follows David's example of doing something to remind ourselves of God's goodness. Notice in verses 1 and 2 that David is speaking to himself. He addresses himself as "my soul." In verse 2 he says, "forget not his benefits."

So, we see that David, like us, is apt to forget one of the most basic duties of human beings: to thank God for all the good things he gives us. As it says in Romans 1:21 "for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him."

All mankind has failed to give God the thanks that he is due. David feels compelled to bless the Lord because he realizes it is the right thing to do. That's why he preaches to himself to do it.

In my own life, it might be a sense of duty that gets me started praying to God and thanking him. Then once I get started, feelings of gratitude start to follow...not every time, but that is often the pattern.

When we take time to thank God in prayer, we are not simply "looking on the bright side." Instead, we are looking up to the Divine Person who really loves us and the Person we were created to enjoy.

Recognizing the ways that God has blessed us, physically and spiritually, is a way to grasp his love for us and rest in it. In verses 3 through 19, David helps us do just that.

In verses 3 through 5, David says that God has forgiven his sins, has healed him from every disease, and has redeemed his life from the pit. God has rescued him from certain death, whether due to enemies or due to sickness.

David proclaims that God not only rescues and heals him, but also lavishes on him so much good that his strength is renewed like the eagle's. As he says in Psalm 23 "my cup overflows." How great is God's goodness to those who belong to him? It is immense!

In verses 6 through 7, David recalls Israel's history. The Israelites were enslaved by Pharaoh and God delivered them with a mighty hand. He freed them from slavery and carried them to the Promised Land. He executed justice on Pharaoh and his army by drowning them in the Red Sea.

In verses 8 through 10, David says that God is also good to his people by withholding the wrath and punishment that their sins deserve. Instead of wrath, God chides, and only for a time, not at all to destroy or make miserable, but rather for good.

As a good father only disciplines his child for the child's good, so God lovingly disciplines his own. This is according to God's revelation to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7 that he is a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The psalm reaches a crescendo in verse 11 with this declaration: "for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him." How high is that. We might be able to send a rocket through the atmosphere and into space but let's understand this verse as it is obviously meant to be taken.

Can you jump above the atmosphere? Of course not! Earth's atmosphere is 6,214 miles high. By comparison, the peak of Mount Everest is 5.5 miles high. It would be easier for you to jump above the atmosphere than to exhaust God's covenant love for you!

Also, notice the word "great" in verse 11: "great is his steadfast love." The Hebrew word for "great" is translated "prevail" in Genesis 7, where it says about the Flood of Noah's day that "the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth." David is telling us that God's love is immense, like an ocean. You cannot exhaust it and it will cover everything.

In verse 12, we read about another of God's measureless measurements. How is his ocean-like, steadfast love applied to our ugly, rebellious sinfulness? God removes it from our account as far as the east is from the west. Again, we have a word picture that helps us understand that the Lord does not partially or temporarily remove our guilty sentence.

He completely removes it, forever, leaving us standing before him clean and beautiful in his sight!

In verses 13 through 16, David uses another word picture of God's love and goodness toward his people: he treats them like a kind father who accommodates his children in their natural weaknesses.

God treats us like dust and grass and weed flowers. Not by walking over us or past us but by showing us compassion. This reminds us of Isaiah 42:3 where it says of the Lord's servant: "a bruised reed he will not break and a faintly burning wick he will not quench."

But even if God is gentle with us bruised reeds, what good is it if we are quickly gone just like the flower of the field? What good is it if I am loved and forgiven and fed by God for only a few moments? The Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt but then they died in the wilderness.

Moses was privileged to see God's glory such that his face was radiant, yet he soon died on the top of Pisgah. Although David is singing in this psalm about being healed of his diseases and being redeemed from the pit, later he dies.

Look at verse 17. Notice that it starts with the word "but." "**But** the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting."

The second part of the verse states that God's love and righteousness are given "to children's children", which means to every generation.

But when it says that "the love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting," I believe David is proclaiming that God's love rests on individual souls, including David himself, forever. How can a soul receive God's love eternally unless that soul endures eternally?

This is one of those "but God" verses. Jonah ran from the Lord, "but God" sent a great storm and a great fish to turn him around. We are like grass that is here today and gone tomorrow. But God loves us from everlasting to everlasting.

That is what Hebrews 11 and 12 explains. The saints of old did not receive every promised benefit during their earthly journeys. But they looked forward to the heavenly Jerusalem where they would receive every benefit.

Verse 19 says that the Lord's kingdom rules over all. This tells us that there is no power above him. As it says in Romans 8:31, "if God is for us, who can stand against us?!" No one!

His steadfast love for those who fear him is higher than the heavens and he is able to act according to his loving intentions. Nothing can stop him! Not even death.

In all these verses, David is counting his blessings, both the ones he has received and the ones he will receive. All of them together confirm that his God loves him with a prevailing love, immense like an ocean.

2. Who receives this love and goodness?

Before we look at the last three verses of the psalm, let's go back and answer the question, "who is it that receives this immense, eternal love from God?" We read in the psalm that it is David and the Israelites.

I have also been saying that it is "us," because I am speaking to the church and the New Testament teaches that those who believe in Jesus Christ have been grafted into Israel, God's covenant people.

But Psalm 103 gives another characteristic of the people who receive God's blessings. In verses 11,13, and 17 these people are described as "those who fear him." And in verse 18 they are called "those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments."

So, are these great blessings of God that we have been hearing about only for those who are perfectly obedient to God's commands? Thankfully, no. First of all, we know that perfect obedience is not in view

here, because David has already extolled the mercies of God in forgiving him and his fellow Israelites, removing their sins as far as the east is from the west.

Secondly, verse 18, about keeping God's covenant and commandments, is a way of saying that God's people are holy, set apart. There is a way of life in them that can be observed. It includes their morals and expressions of faith, based on what God has ordered. For the Old Testament saints, this would have included offering right sacrifices and worshiping at the temple, not unlike our participating in the Lord's Supper today.

But why does David use the term "fear" so often? He is not talking about the kind of fear one feels when trapped in a room with a murderer or with a lion. In those cases, there is a fear of being harmed and a distrust in the person or animal in the room. Nor is David talking about the type of fear that the demons feel.

In James 2:19 we read that "the demons believe—and shudder!" The demons fear eternal punishment from a holy and powerful God. This is a valid fear. It is not the fear of the Lord that Psalm 103 is speaking of, but there is a connection.

John Newton wrote the hymn Amazing Grace in which he says, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." He is saying that his eyes were graciously opened so that he could see that his soul, like the demons, was in jeopardy of the coming judgment and eternal punishment.

And he is saying that this new fear of punishment was relieved, when God graciously forgave him of his sins and freed him from eternal death.

In this sense, a sinner's fear of the Lord ceases once he is forgiven, because there is no more fear of condemnation. But there is another sense in which "the fear of the Lord" is an attitude that begins at conversion and continues on.

This continuing fear of the Lord might be described as the desire to please the Lord and taking him seriously. This is a major aspect of the believer's relationship with God. We see this expressed in Isaiah 66:2 where God says, "this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word."

If you are like me, you have hours or even days when you don't consciously fear the Lord. We get caught up in the tyranny of the urgent and make decisions or say things based on what feels right, seems practical or convenient, or avoids pain. Even when I am consciously trying to please the Lord, I know that my motives are mixed.

Every Christian falls short of fully fearing the Lord. But when we feel the weight of our falling short, we can remember that he is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will forgive us and keep us on this path of pleasing him and resting in him.

Recapping this idea of fearing the Lord, you must have a proper fear of God before you can trust God. You must realize that he is the only one in control of all things and that he is your only Judge. Then if God pronounces you "not guilty", you are truly exonerated. It doesn't matter what anyone else says.

If God, through his Son Jesus, sets you free, then you are free indeed. But if you never fear the Lord, you will never even seek his forgiveness and mercy. If you think he owes you good, then you are deceiving yourself.

But if you and I see ourselves as we really are, people who are naturally selfish and naturally uninterested in God, and if we see God as he really is, both holy and the justifier of guilty persons, then we will flee to God through Christ.

And then, glory of glories, God promises that whoever believes in him in this way will never perish but have everlasting life. Then the floodgates of blessings open, and they continue through eternity! Listen to how the apostle Paul describes it in Romans 8:31-34:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

So, we see the connection between “those who fear him,” and the blessings that flow to them from God. “Those who fear him” is shorthand for those who have put their faith in God and God’s Son, Jesus. They have a covenant relationship with God, not unlike a good marriage or a close friendship.

When someone is your closest friend, you care about what they care about. You want to please them. And God, who loves his adopted children, is pleased to give them everything good, even his steadfast love and presence forever.

3. How should they who receive this immense love and goodness respond?

In verses 1 through 19 David has been remembering God’s goodness. Now he wants to bless the Lord with all that is within him. In verses 20 to 22 he wants all angels and all creation – all plants, animals, and humans to praise the Lord. It is a call to praise God from whom all blessings flow. It is a doxology.

The final statement is the same as the first: “Bless the Lord, O my soul!” Like David, we should remind ourselves every day to praise our God.

How should we praise or bless the Lord? We immediately think of activities such as in our worship services, like singing and praying. And that is a major part of praising God. He did give us voices and minds for this purpose.

But another way we bless the Lord in response to his abundant goodness is in our interactions with other people, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul makes this clear in Romans 12 and following.

After writing 11 chapters on the immensity of our needs as sinful humans and the far greater power and goodness of the gospel of God, he states: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

When Pastor Mike preached through Romans, he explained that the Greek translated “spiritual worship” means a logical response to the extravagant grace of God. Paul goes on in the rest of Romans to describe what the Christian life, as a living sacrifice, looks like. For example, in Romans 12:9-13 he says:

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

So, a large part of our blessing the Lord, as David reminds himself to do, is in being a living sacrifice, being a person who knows how much grace he has received through Christ and therefore obeys Christ’s commandment to love one another.

Three things in conclusion:

1. Do you fear the Lord? Are you in a covenant relationship with him, where he calls you “my child” and you call him “my Father”? If not, begin that relationship now. Give up all other ways of obtaining blessings for yourself.

Forsake them. Actually, hate them since they are false and empty ways. Reject all notions that your past sins can’t be forgiven. God will remove them from you as far as the east is from the west. Reject all past disappointments in the church or in people. They were never the true source of the good that you need anyway. And then embrace God through Jesus Christ. Ask him!

2. Did you put your trust in God through Christ years ago but don’t feel like you are receiving the blessings that David proclaims in this psalm? Recount what God has done for you.

Believe that God is for you and not against you. God has declared it to be true. Who are we to contradict his statement of the facts? And his “being for us” is not only about removing our guilt. It’s also about him going to bat for us in every way.

He will remove every obstacle that tries to stand against us receiving all good things. Your blessings in this life are just the warmup exercise. The fulness is yet to come.

3. Bless the Lord with all your soul. Worship him with words and actions. Be a living sacrifice.

Johnny Appleseed sang “Oh the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord.” We who fear and know the Lord can sing that too but with many more reasons than Johnny Appleseed mentions in his song. We can sing loud and call on angels and all creation to sing about his steadfast love! Amen.

Psalm 103 (ESV)

Of David.

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

² Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,

⁴ who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

⁵ who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

⁶ The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.

⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.

⁸ The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

¹⁴ For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

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

¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.

¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,

¹⁸ to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

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

²⁰Bless the Lord, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!

²¹Bless the Lord, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!

²²Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.

Bless the Lord, O my soul!