



## Psalm 103 - Thanksgiving for God's Goodness

Of David.

### Introduction

This is a hymn of praise, celebrating the abundant goodness and love of the Lord for his people. It is the first of four psalms reflecting on God's dealings with his people from creation to exile. Psalm 103, the last of only three Davidic psalms in Book IV, introduces the sequence by recalling that Israel's survival in the time of Moses was due to God's steadfast love.

It begins with each individual singer exhorting his or her own soul to bless the Lord and then goes on to list the benefits that the soul should be careful not to forget. The crowning benefit is God's enduring love to the descendants of the faithful, which leads the worshippers to exhort all the angelic hosts and all the material creation to join in blessing the Lord. These benefits come to the individual but are not individualistic: he or she is a member of the community, and he or she contributes to the progress of that community.

As the commentary will show, the psalm takes the Pentateuch story for granted, with evocations of Genesis 2:7 and 17:7, as well as Exodus Chapters 32-34. Christians enter into the joy of this psalm as they celebrate how the biblical story that has developed since that time has displayed even more of God's goodness and kindness. Psalm 104, although not by David, is probably placed next to this one because it too begins and ends with <<***Bless the Lord, O my soul***>>. Psalm 145 is the other example of a Davidic psalm that is a sustained celebration of God's goodness and benevolence.

The circumstances in which it was written are unknown, but since David was a man who knew the grace and deliverance of God many times, it could have been at many different times of his life. Charles Spurgeon suggested, "We should attribute it to his later years when he had a higher sense of the preciousness of pardon, because a keener sense of sin, than in his younger

days. His clear sense of the frailty of life indicates his weaker years, as also does the very fullness of his praiseful gratitude.”

### Psalm 103:1-2 - Bless the Lord, O My Soul, and Do Not Forget His Benefits.

Each member of the worshipping congregation urges himself to bless the Lord, i.e. to speak well of him for his abundant generosity. Thus to not forget all his benefits is a crucial step in blessing the Lord, and the body of the psalm lists these benefits in order to bring each singer to an admiring gratitude.

- 1 Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name.
- 2 Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits —

### Psalm 103:1-2

**Bless the Lord.** David did not mean this in the sense that a greater bestows a blessing on a lesser. God is infinitely greater than man and in this sense man could never give a blessing to God. David meant this in the sense that it blessed and honoured God when his creatures praised him and thanked him appropriately.

**Bless the Lord, O my soul.** David called upon his soul to bless Yahweh. It was as if David looked at his soul and understood that it was not praising God enough. He called upon his soul to do more.

David understood that true worship was something deeply inward, of the soul. It is not just about outward forms or expressions, but also about something real from the soul. Spurgeon commented “Soul music is the very soul of music,” and again, “Let others murmur, but do you bless. Let others bless themselves and their idols, but do you bless the Lord. Let others use only their tongues, but as for me I will cry, ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul.’”

**And all that is within me, bless his holy name.** David also understood that worship had to be more than inward; it had to be offered as completely as possible. He wanted everything within to praise God. People often praise and thank God with half a heart and half the effort or even less! David called for everything within him to give honour and praise to God.

**Bless his holy name.** To bless the name of God is to bless each and every characteristic of each member of the Trinity for they share the name of God and the associated characteristics. In what is known as the Great Commission, Jesus said: *<<Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the*

*name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*>> (Matthew 28:19). 'The name,' Greek *onoma*, 'of the Father,' 'Son,' and 'Holy Spirit,' is singular, not plural and is therefore an early indication of the Trinitarian Godhead; an overt proclamation of Jesus' deity. Even though different words are used elsewhere: <<*Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'*>> (Acts 2:38), the meaning is the same because, in biblical usage, a person's name represents the person's character; that is, everything that is true about the person. The name, i.e. the character and attributes of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, is the same as the name, that is, the character and attributes of Jesus Christ. The fact that *onoma* is singular indicates that Father, Son and Holy Spirit share one name, i.e. one character and set of attributes. Spurgeon observed, "Only a holy man can delight in holy things. Holiness is the terror of unholy men; they love sin and count it liberty, but holiness is to them a slavery. If we be saints we shall bless God for his holiness."

**Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits.** In the pattern of Hebrew poetry, David used repetition for emphasis. He then added an important idea – that this praise and honour to God should be given unto him for rational reasons, not on the basis of mere emotion or excitement. There are true benefits given by God unto his people, and they must not forget them. Instead, they should use the remembrance of those things as reasons to praise. The Chronicler described a man who did forget God's benefits, at least for a time: <<*But Hezekiah did not respond according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and upon Judah and Jerusalem*>> (2 Chronicles 32:25).

#### Psalm 103:3-19 - The Benefits.

The benefits all express God's steadfast love and mercy, as God explains his own name: <<*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation'*>> (Exodus 34:6-7). These include the personal and communal experience of God's forgiveness and constant care.

- <sup>3</sup> who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,
- <sup>4</sup> who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

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

### Psalm 103:3-5

Who forgives all your iniquity. One of the great benefits mentioned in the previous verse is the forgiveness of sins. When the magnitude of sin and the righteousness of God is understood, this forgiveness is a staggering reason for praise and honour to God. Significantly, this is the benefit listed first. In David's mind, the most important thing was to have sins forgiven, even more important than physical healing.

Who heals all your diseases. Another great benefit is God's care for the body. He brings healing to people in this life through natural, scientific, and miraculous ways. He promises ultimate healing for all his people in the age to come. Many if not most commentators understand these diseases as spiritual in nature. Dr George Horne described this thinking: "What is pride, but lunacy? What is lust, but a leprosy? What is sloth, but a dead palsy? Perhaps there are spiritual maladies similar to all corporeal ones." While it is true that sin and its effects must be healed in those who repent, it is more probable to see these diseases as first of the body, and of the soul by spiritual analogy.

Heals often refers to curing someone from a physical sickness, but it can also be used as a metaphor for restoring the moral and spiritual life, for example: <<*Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed*>> (Isaiah 6:10), <<*But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed*>> (Isaiah 53:5), <<*Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness. 'Here we come to you; for you are the Lord our God*>> (Jeremiah 3:22), and: <<*I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them*>> (Hosea 14:4). Since it is in parallel with forgives, the metaphorical use may be intended here. Thus iniquity is like diseases, which weaken and corrupt; it is God's mercy that takes them away. These sentiments reflect David's own experience of God's forgiveness; refer to 2 Samuel Chapter 12 and Psalm 51.

**Verses 4-5 speak of God's constant care and provision.**

Who redeems your life from the Pit. Many know the powerful sense of God's rescue from sure destruction. There are many calamities that are spared the child of God, whether they be known or not to the one rescued. Adam Clarke commented, "Preservation from destruction, *lawgh haggioel*, properly, redemption of life by the kinsman; possibly looking forward, in the spirit of prophecy, to him who became partaker of our flesh and blood, that he might have the right to

redeem our souls from death by dying in our stead.” Refer to the comment made on Psalm 25:22.

Who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy? God’s greatness extends beyond sparing his people from sin, disease, or trouble. It also gives unto them in a positive sense; they are crowned with his great love and mercy.

Who satisfies you with good as long as you live. The result of God’s work, both in what he saves his people from and what he saves them unto, is to bring true satisfaction to their lives. This is different from mere pleasure or entertainment; God wants to bring true satisfaction to their lives from good things. This satisfaction becomes a source of strength and energy to his people, i.e. so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. Spurgeon observed, “No man is ever filled to satisfaction but a believer, and only God himself can satisfy even him. Many a worldling is satiated, but not one is satisfied.”

So that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. The eagle is an emblem of strength, vitality, and youthful endurance: <<*but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint*>> (Isaiah 40:31).

#### Introduction to Psalm 103:6-14

The list of benefits shifts to a survey of how God has dealt with his people as a whole, in spite of their many provocations. The key is v.8. The terms ‘us,’ ‘our,’ and ‘we’ refer to the people; the verses focus especially on those who fear the Lord, i.e. on those who take the covenant to heart.

- 6 The Lord works vindication  
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- 7 He made known his ways to Moses,  
his acts to the people of Israel.

#### Psalm 103:6-7

The Lord works vindication and justice. In the previous section David described the greatness of God in his work to the individual. Yet God also shows his greatness in bringing vindication and justice to societies. Vindication, also translated as righteousness, and justice are the blessings of protection from those who might exploit or harm: <<*You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people*>> (Deuteronomy 16:18), <<*He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord*>> (Psalm 33:5), <<*Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness*

*and justice are the foundation of his throne>> (Psalm 97:2), and: <<For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!>> (Isaiah 5:7). The Lord extends these blessings to all who are oppressed, but especially to his own people: <<who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry>> (Psalm 146:7a).*

He made known his ways to Moses, that is, God's character as it governs his deeds: <<Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people>> (Exodus 33:13). Another aspect of God's greatness is his self-revelation. God could be content to hide himself, but instead wanted to make known his ways and his deeds.

His acts to the people of Israel. These reveal his enduring commitment to his people, i.e. they express God's ways. Acts can also be rendered deeds; refer to Psalm 9:11, Psalm 66:5, Psalm 77:12, and Isaiah 12:4.

- <sup>8</sup> The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- <sup>9</sup> He will not always accuse,  
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
- <sup>10</sup> He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- <sup>11</sup> For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
- <sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
- <sup>13</sup> As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

### Psalm 103:8-13

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Verse 8 is based on Exodus 34:6, where God proclaims his own name, the OT's fundamental confession of God's character; vv.9-13 expounds this further. The terms sins, iniquities, and transgressions are names for what God forgives in Exodus 34:7a. Likewise steadfast love and has compassion, the word is related to merciful in v.8, reveal that this is an application of Exodus 34:6-7. Spurgeon again

commented, “All the world tastes of his sparing mercy, those who hear the gospel partake of his inviting mercy, the saints live by his saving mercy, are preserved by his upholding mercy, are cheered by his consoling mercy, and will enter heaven through his infinite and everlasting mercy.”

Nor will he keep his anger for ever. This is confirmed elsewhere by: <<*For his anger is but for a moment; his favour is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning*>> (Psalm 30:5), and: <<*Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger for ever, because he delights in showing clemency*>> (Micah 7:18).

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. David knew the slow anger and abounding mercy of God personally. He knew that his sins and the sins of his people deserved much greater judgement or discipline than received.

For as the heavens are high above the earth; as far as the east is from the west; as a father has compassion for his children. These are three comparisons for the kindness of God toward his people, to show its abundance: <<*Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds*>> (Psalm 36:5), decisiveness (v.12), and enduring quality (v.13).

For as the heavens are high above the earth. This is a description of the abounding mercy of God mentioned in v.8. The distance from the earth to the heavens measures the greatness of his steadfast love towards those who fear him. By instinct, people often think of God’s mercy as less than it really is. There were three concepts of heaven in ancient Biblical world. The first heaven is the blue sky, the atmosphere with its sun. The second heaven is the night sky, the stars and constellations. The third heaven is the place where God dwells and is enthroned. It is interesting to wonder which of the three concepts of heaven David had in mind with this wonderful statement.

As far as the east is from the west. This is a description of the great forgiveness of God mentioned in v.10. It is not known whether David knew the shape of the earth but the Holy Spirit who inspired him to write this did, and the nature of the earth and the human way of describing direction makes this statement more wonderful. This is much greater than saying “as far as the north is from the south,” as far has he removed our transgressions from us.” If a person travels north on a globe, as soon as they go over the North Pole they begin to travel south. However, if they travel east they will continue east forever. Given the true shape of the earth, east and west never meet, and this is how far God has removed sins from the sinner! Spurgeon concluded, “At this day God loves us, and he will love us for ever. He loves us infinitely, and he could not love us more than that if we had never fallen.” Adam Clarke noted, “As the east and the west can never meet in

one point, but be for ever at the same distance from each other, so our sins and their decreed punishment are removed to an eternal distance by his mercy.”

God is a father to his people as a whole: <<*Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, ‘Let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son”*>> (Exodus 4:22-23), and to the particular faithful members: <<*for the Lord reproveth the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights*>> (Proverbs 3:12). Of course many human fathers fail to embody this idea; this image assumes that biblically informed people have an intuition of what fathers ideally should be like. However, it also serves as a goal for faithful fathers: they will seek more and more to be the kind of father who has compassion for his children: <<*And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*>> (Ephesians 6:4), and: <<*Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart*>> (Colossians 3:21).

The Lord has compassion for those who fear him. David continues to describe the abounding mercy and goodness of God. The way that a good father cares for and even pities his children in their frailty and weakness, so the Lord pities those who fear him. The reader may think of a loving father dealing with his tired children. He does not demand more of them than they can perform but with care takes into account their weakness. He comforts them and measures his expectations according to his wisdom and compassion.

Spurgeon considered the many ways God may pity his children:

- He pities our childish ignorance.
- He pities our childlike weakness.
- He pities our childish foolishness.
- He pities our childish naughtiness.
- He pities our childlike stumbles and falls.
- He pities the pain of his children.
- He pities the child when they have been wronged by another.
- He pities the fears of his children.

He then comments, “For it is in the present tense, and carries the idea of continuity: at this very moment he is now pitying them that fear him. Though he knows your trials will work for your good, yet he pities you. Though he knows that there is sin in you, which, perhaps, may require this rough discipline ere you be sanctified, yet he pities you. Though he can hear the music of heaven, the songs and glees that will ultimately come of your present sighs and griefs, yet still he pities those groans and wails of yours.” The wise reaction to this is, fear the Lord! How much better to be on the side of his pity and compassion than on the side of his anger or righteous judgement?

14 For he knows how we were made;  
he remembers that we are dust.

#### Psalm 103:14

He knows how we were made. This could also be ‘he knows how we are formed,’ which, together with ‘we are dust’ looks back to: <<*then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being*>> (Genesis 2:7). The Lord remembers the finiteness of the human perspective (‘dust’ is not eternal or omniscient), and he is patient with his people. The pity and compassion of God towards those who fear him is rooted in his knowledge and understanding of inherent human weakness and impermanence, their transience.

This pity and remembrance is only greater in light of the incarnation. God himself added humanity to his deity and experienced human and dust-like weakness: <<*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin*>> (Hebrews 4:15). What he knew before by observation he submitted to know by experience.

#### Introduction to Psalm 103:15-18

The song reaches its crescendo here: amid the shortness of human life (vv.15-16), God’s steadfast love for his faithful is everlasting (v.17a), bestowing on them the privilege of nurturing those who will be his people in coming generations (vv.17b-18).

15 As for mortals, their days are like grass;  
they flourish 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.

## Psalm 103:15-18

As for mortals, their days are like grass. David expanded on the thought of man's weak frame and dust-like nature. Humanity is so transient that his days are like grass and like a flower of the field that blooms one day and withers the next. When the flower is gone, virtually nothing remains – its place knows it no more. For the image of grass and flower for the transience of life, refer to Psalm 90:5 and Isaiah 40:7; for other reflections on the shortness of life, refer to Psalm 102:3, and Psalm 102:11.

The wind passes over it, and it is gone. The wind dries out the plants in a dry climate and the remnant is blown away.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. This is true of God's mercy and of God himself, the source of mercy. His *hesed* – covenant love or loyal kindness – endures from all ages to all ages. Those who fear him receive the benefit of this everlasting mercy, as do their children's children. This further confirmed by: <<*Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old*>> (Psalm 25:6), and: <<*For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations*>> (Psalm 100:5).

Those who fear him are the same as those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments; they are the faithful, who believe the promises and obey the commands: <<*Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples*>> (Exodus 19:5a), <<*Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations*>> (Deuteronomy 7:9), <<*If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever*>> (John 14:15-16), <<*They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them*>> (John 14:21), <<*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love*>> (John 15:10), <<*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near*>> (Revelation 1:3), and: <<*I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name*>> (Revelation 3:8). The covenant of circumcision, which Abraham's descendants were to keep, included the promise that the Lord would be God to both the offspring and their parents. This psalm goes beyond that, however: the faithful expect that God sets his saving love on their children's children. This is the crowning privilege that God gives to his faithful: although

their lives are short and appear almost insignificant, they may still contribute to the future wellbeing of the people of God by their godly and prayerful parenting and grand-parenting. In Exodus 34:7a God keeps steadfast love for thousands of generations of the faithful: <<***but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments***>> (Exodus 20:6).

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

### Psalm 103:19

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens. David celebrated God's secure reign from heaven. God is enthroned in heaven, beyond the troubles and corruptions of earth. It is established, and will never be moved.

And his kingdom rules over all. There is an eternal contrast between the ruler and the ruled. There is no aspect of the universe that is not under his reign.

His throne, and his kingdom refer to God's universal rule over all creation; refer to the comment made on Psalm 93. The marvel of being God's people is that the one whose kingdom rules over all offers the privilege of gratefully embracing his rule.

### Psalm 103:20-22 - Let All Creation Join in Blessing the Lord.

After listing all these benefits, the psalm returns to urging various creatures to bless the Lord, echoing vv.1-2. The addressees go beyond the individual 'soul' to include the angels and mighty ones (vv.20-21), and even the material creation (v.19). The overflow of goodness and steadfast love that God's works reveal compels his people to call on the angels and all of nature to join in their celebration: <<***The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork***>> (Psalm 19:1). The song closes with the singer returning to urge his own soul to bless the Lord, with a deeper appreciation of how much praise and admiration he owes.

<sup>20</sup> Bless the Lord, O you his angels,  
you mighty ones who do his bidding,  
obedient to his spoken word.

<sup>21</sup> Bless the Lord, all his hosts,  
his ministers that do his will.

<sup>22</sup> Bless the Lord, all his works,  
in all places of his dominion.

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

### Psalm 103:20-22

Bless the Lord, O you his angels. David began the psalm by telling his own soul to bless the Lord, but he knew the praise and honour to God should go beyond what he could give. It should extend all the way to the angels, and David boldly told them to also bless the Lord.

Bless the Lord, all his hosts. The angels also make up God's hosts, his heavenly army and under his command and those who do his bidding. As God's soldiers, they should give him the honour and praise due to him.

You mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word. The angels are strong and obedient, but even they should bless the Lord, giving him praise and honour.

His ministers that do his will. Jesus echoes this in Matthew 6:10, teaching his followers to pray that God's 'will be done' with the same ready obedience shown by the angels in heaven. Even knowing that the Cross was his destination, Jesus was still determined to do the will of the Father: <<*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done*>> (Luke 22:42).

Bless the Lord, all his works. David extended the call to honour and praise God further than the angels to all of God's works, in all places of his dominion.

Spurgeon's final observation from this psalm was, "Man is but little, yet, placing his hands upon the keys of the great organ of the universe, he wakes it to thunders of adoration! Redeemed man is the voice of nature, the priest in the temple of creation, the presenter in the worship of the universe."

Bless the Lord, O my soul. David ended the psalm the same way he began it, with a call to his own soul to bless God, giving him the honour and praise due to him. After the many reasons given in Psalm 103, David had more reasons to bless the Lord at the end of the psalm.