

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

HEARTFELT WORSHIP

Psalms 103

By

Steven J. Cole

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Psalms: Lesson 18

Heartfelt Worship Psalm 103

A Christian man heard a message on the end times and decided to make all he could before the economy collapsed. He took his entire savings, went to the race track, and prayed for wisdom on how to bet. He watched the first race without betting. He noticed that a Catholic priest came out, sprinkled some water, waved his arms and made some signs over a horse. The horse won by seven lengths. The same thing happened on the second, third and fourth races. The man waited one more race just to make sure. Same thing--the horse that the priest blessed won. So on the sixth race he waited until the priest did his thing. Then he ran off and placed his entire savings on that horse.

The race began. The horse ran 50 feet and dropped dead. The man was horrified! He ran down to the priest and said, "Priest, I have to talk to you!" "Yes, what is it, my son?" "Priest, I watched you in each race and in every race the horse you blessed won. So I went and bet everything I had on this horse. What happened?"

The priest said, "You must be a Protestant." "Why do you say that?" asked the man. "Because you don't know the difference between a blessing and the last rites."

I wonder, could an outsider coming into a typical Sunday morning worship service tell whether we came here to bless God or to conduct His funeral? Would a person who doesn't know God be able to look at your life and tell whether you have been blessed by God? Or would they conclude that the last rites must already have been pronounced upon you? Are you a person marked by heartfelt worship, whose life overflows with thanksgiving to God for His abundant blessings on your behalf?

God is seeking people who worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). True worship means worshiping God in spirit, that is, in reality. Our inner being (spirit) must be right with God so that the outer motions of worship flow from the inside out. He doesn't want us just to go through the motions, but to have hearts that

overflow with love for Him. That's what it means to worship God in spirit. Worship is similar to love: It is not based on feelings, but if it's genuine, feelings normally will be involved.

But also we are to worship God in truth. Worship must have content. It must be based on the true revelation God has given of Himself in His Word. For that reason, you cannot properly worship until you understand something of who God is and what He has done.

As I have studied worship in Scripture, I have concluded that there are two key elements that normally come together to spark worship in spirit and truth: *An understanding of who God is*; and, *an understanding of who I am*. As you come to realize who God really is, you cannot help but become painfully aware of who you are in His holy presence. So I define worship as "an inner attitude and feeling of awe, reverence, gratitude, and/or love resulting from a realization of who God is and who we are." I also like John MacArthur's definition: Worship is "our innermost being responding with praise for all that God is, through our attitudes, actions, thoughts, and words, based on the truth of God as He has revealed Himself" (*The Ultimate Priority* [Moody Press], p. 127).

The Bible is clear that God is seeking worshipers. We cannot be His children without seeking to grow as true worshipers of God. I believe the reason God called David a man after God's heart is that David worshiped God in spirit and truth. He knew who God is, and he also knew who he was in relation to God. And he expressed this with awe, reverence, gratitude and love for God in many psalms. Psalm 103 is a psalm of pure worship. Unlike most of David's psalms, there are no petitions for help or cries for deliverance. David just focuses on the Lord and His great blessings and overflows in worship. The main idea which I would like to develop is that

God's great goodness and our great need should
cause us to respond in heartfelt worship.

The major theme of the psalm is that ...

1. God's goodness is great.

David is focusing on the abundant goodness of God: “forget none of His benefits” (v. 2). David invites us to join him in recalling God’s many tender mercies. It’s human nature to forget God’s benefits. Focusing on God’s blessings must be a deliberate choice.

When I do premarital counseling, I ask couples to list at least five faults of their prospective mate. I find it humorous that often they cannot fill in all five blanks, and the one or two minor flaws they list are usually brushed aside. All they can think about is, “He is so wonderful, so kind and considerate!” “She is so beautiful! She has such a sweet disposition!” But after a few years of living together, they come into my office saying, “He doesn’t care about anybody but himself!” “She is such a nag! She complains about everything!” Their focus has changed!

It’s easy to fall into the same trap spiritually. In the Garden of Eden, God had blessed Adam and Eve with so many good things. It was a perfect, beautiful environment. But there was one negative: “Don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” What did Satan get Eve to focus on? That one negative! He used it to cast doubt on the goodness of God: “God is trying to keep something good from you. If He really loved you, He’d let you eat from that tree. Go ahead!” She did and the human race fell into sin.

Satan found a strategy that worked and he’s been using it ever since! He uses the trials that come upon us because of our sin and the sin of this fallen creation to get us to doubt the goodness of God. He promotes the idea that God’s commandments are harsh and that God is out to deprive us of pleasure. If we believe that lie, we’re sitting ducks for temptation. We need to resist Satan’s lie and focus on God’s great goodness toward us. David shows that ...

A. God’s goodness stems from His nature.

“Bless His holy name” (v. 1). God’s name refers to the totality of His attributes, to who God is as a person. Since all of God’s actions stem from His attributes, God’s name refers to all that God is and all that He has done for us as His children. Note some of the attributes of God that David emphasizes in this psalm:

(1) God is gracious (vv. 7-17). David accentuates God’s grace by mentioning Moses and the sons of Israel (v. 7). As Derek Kidner puts it, “No story surpasses the Exodus for a record of human

unworthiness: of grace abounding and 'benefits forgot'" (*Psalms* [IVP], p. 365). Verse 8 comes from God's revelation of Himself to Moses (Exod. 34:6) and reveals the fundamental nature of God. As Kidner again puts it (in "Tabletalk," 9/91, p. 29), "There is room for anger in [God's love] (vv. 8b, 9b), yet while human wrath is quick to rise and slow to fade, His is quite the opposite. He has much to rebuke, but not to harp on (v. 9); He sees much to punish, but all the more to forgive (v. 10); and this, not for our deserving."

(2) God is loving ("lovingkindness," vv. 4, 11, 17). This is the familiar Hebrew word, *hesed*, coming from their word "stork," which pictures the loyal love of God as that love which the parent storks show for their young. God crowns you with His loyal love (v. 4)! He is abounding in it (v. 8). And, it is eternal (v. 17)! This last verse is the same phrase Moses used in Psalm 90:2 of God's eternity. Before the foundation of the world God chose you in Christ (Eph. 1:4). And in the future, we will reign with Christ forever and ever (Rev. 22:5)!

(3) God is compassionate (vv. 4, 8, 13 [twice]). The Hebrew word comes from the word "womb," and refers to deep, tender love rooted in some natural bond (R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [Moody Press], 2:841). David uses the analogy of a father's compassion toward his little ones. God understands how we are made (v. 14, "dust," recalls the fall, Gen. 3:19), and relates to us with gentleness, not according to our sins (v. 10). Aren't you glad for that!

(4) God is forgiving (vv. 3, 12). You can know freedom from all your guilt and complete forgiveness for all your sins through the Lord Jesus Christ! The sacrificial system in David's day pointed ahead to the complete and final sacrifice for sins that Jesus secured on the cross. The only way that a holy God (v. 1) can accept sinful people is through the satisfaction of His holy law. Jesus paid the penalty we deserve, so that God's justice was satisfied and His mercy can flow freely to all who flee to the cross.

(5) God is sovereign (v. 19). God's sovereignty should be a source of comfort to us, because it guarantees that nothing or no one can thwart His plans to bless His people. What He has prom-

ised, He will bring to pass. Either God is a liar or else all the good things He has promised to us will be fulfilled.

B. God's goodness means that His people receive abundant benefits from His hand.

(1) Healing (v. 3b). I've just mentioned forgiveness (v. 3a). David goes on to mention the healing of all our diseases. In the context, this points to every aspect of healing--spiritual, emotional, and physical. He is not promising instant, miraculous deliverance from all your problems. Neither David nor anyone else in the Bible experienced that. Nor is David saying that God will heal you of every physical ailment or that it is His will to heal everyone. There is no such promise in the Bible. Indeed, the Bible shows that God often uses physical trials to bring about our spiritual and emotional healing by deepening our dependence on God. And yet, since sin often takes a physical toll on us, when God cleanses our sin, there is often an accompanying physical healing.

Verse 3 affirms that when healing takes place, through whatever means, it comes from God. Thus in everything, we must learn to depend totally upon God. It's right to use medical science, but God should get the praise when we are healed, even if the healing comes through medical science.

(2) Deliverance from death: "Who redeems your life from the pit" (v. 4a). The pit means the grave. Because we have sinned, we are subject to death, "for the wages of sin, is death." To redeem means to pay the price of release. God paid the ransom for our sin through the death of Jesus Christ so that we might be released from sin's power and penalty. The sting of death is taken away by the fact that the moment you trust in Jesus as your sin bearer, God gives you eternal life. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

(3) A good life now: "Who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle" (v. 5). God gives us many material blessings. He also gives inner renewal, even as our outer body grows weaker (2 Cor. 4:16). Eagles are a picture of strength, soaring effortlessly in the sky, even in their old age. Even so, those who wait on the Lord will mount up with wings as eagles, renewed with strength in the Lord (Isa. 40:31).

All of these blessings are ours at no cost to us, although at great cost to God. We deserved His wrath, but He has given us His love. Do you ever take the time to let the immensity of God's goodness as seen in His many blessings overwhelm you like a flood? That's one reason the Lord's Supper is so important--it's a time to contemplate what God did for you at the cross. With David we should often exclaim, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits!"

So David is saying that we need to focus on who God is and how He has blessed us if we want to be people who worship Him from the heart. Focusing on His goodness will cause your heart to well up with thanksgiving and praise. But you can't focus on God without also realizing something about who you are.

2. Our need is great.

Psalm 103's primary focus is on God, not man. But there is the minor theme that we are desperately needy: sinful, sick, and short-lived. If we don't acknowledge our true condition, we won't cry out to God for mercy; thus we won't receive His many blessings.

A. We are sinful (103:3, 4, 8-10, 12).

We can't come to God until we admit our sin to Him. And then, even though He removes our sin and guilt and imputes to us the righteousness of Christ, we still are sinners saved by grace, daily in need of that grace to overcome the sin that still indwells us. There is a popular teaching going around that says that Christians are not to see themselves as sinners, but only as saints. That is unbiblical and damaging. The closer we draw to God who is light, the more we see the sinfulness of our hearts, which makes us cling all the more to His grace and love Him more who forgave us so much.

B. We are sick (103:3b).

We're subject to disease. We're vulnerable and frail, in spite of the advances of modern medicine. A strong, robust man in the prime of life can be cut down by an invisible virus. A healthy person can be struck down by cancer without warning. Our physical frailty should show us that we're needy!

C. We are short-lived (103:15-16).

As Moses did in Psalm 90, David here compares man to the grass or to the flowers of the field--here today, gone tomorrow. No one is guaranteed a long life. Even a long life is short compared to eternity. Our fleeting lives show us our need for God.

The problem is, we often don't see ourselves as needy, so we don't cast ourselves completely on the grace of God. Remember, grace is not for worthy people; it's for the unworthy. This is one reason why it is against Scripture to work at building our self-esteem and self-confidence. If we think we're worthy, we won't come to God for His grace. If we think we're competent, we won't rely on the Lord.

We need the attitude of Paul who said, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant ..." (2 Cor. 3:5-6). God humbled Paul with a thorn in the flesh so that he would learn that he was weak and needy. But then he trusted fully in God and His grace, so that he could say, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

When we see God's goodness and our own need,

3. Our response should be heartfelt worship.

David ends the psalm like a conductor ends a great symphony, calling in all of the instruments for a great climax of praise. After affirming the absolute sovereignty of God (v. 19), he calls in the angels to bless the Lord (v. 20). Next, he calls in all the hosts (probably referring to the angels as God's army) to praise God. Note that they all do God's bidding and obey Him. Then he extends the call to all of God's works (v. 22). But then, lest the individual get lost in the grandeur of it all, he crisply closes by bringing it back down to where he started, to that little speck on planet earth: "Bless the Lord, O my soul."

There are three elements of worship in this psalm:

A. Worship is a response of praise (vv. 1, 2, 20-22).

That's what it means to bless God: to respond to God's blessings in your life with heartfelt praise. When my kids were small and used to buy me a Christmas present, where did they get the

money? From me! But when they gave back to me what I gave them, they were blessing me. We are to give back to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name (Heb. 13:15), which flows from His abundant goodness to us.

Like David, our hearts may grow cold and we may have to rouse ourselves to praise God. He is talking to himself in the psalm (“O my soul”), stirring himself to worship. He is deliberately remembering God’s blessings. The opposite of praise is forgetfulness (v. 2). Stop and count your blessings. Remember God’s goodness to you in spite of your self-centeredness and sin. And stir yourself to praise Him.

B. Worship is a response of fear (vv. 11, 13, 17).

To fear God means to live with the awareness that all you think, say, and do is open to His scrutiny (Heb. 4:13) and that one day you will give an account to Him. The fear of God takes away silliness and trifling with the things of God. We shouldn’t goof around when we worship the Lord. We can have fun, but it must be tempered with reverence.

C. Worship is a response of obedience (v. 18).

“The fear of the Lord is to hate evil” (Prov. 8:13). God isn’t impressed with our worship if we are not obedient to His Word. If you sing God’s praises on Sunday but are living in known disobedience to Him throughout the week, you are like King Saul, whom God rejected (1 Sam. 15:22).

Conclusion

Worship is an intelligent response to God: a response of praise, reverence, and obedience which stems from an understanding of who God is and who we are. God’s great goodness and our great need should cause us to respond to Him in heartfelt worship.

Some years ago, before computers, the Reuben Donnelly Company, handled magazine subscriptions for a number of publications. They had a machine that sent out the notices to people whose subscriptions had expired. One day the machine broke and a rancher in Powder Bluff, Colorado, received 9,734 notices that his subscription to *National Geographic* had expired. He drove the ten

miles to the post office, sent his money and wrote, "Send me the magazine! I give up!"

God has flooded your life with far more than 9,734 notices of His love and blessing. He wants you to respond by giving up your self-seeking, stubborn ways and by giving in to His great goodness toward you in Christ. He wants you to be filled with heartfelt worship every day as you think about God's great goodness and your great need.

Discussion Questions

1. How can a person who has been through terrible tragedy believe in the goodness of God?
2. How does the teaching that "we need to see ourselves as worthy people" undercut basic biblical truth?
3. How can a person who doesn't feel like praising God do it from the heart?
4. How would you answer a Christian who claims that Psalm 103:3 promises physical healing to every Christian?

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