PRAISE THE LORD, MY SOUL

Psalm 103:1–22

Key Verse: 103:2

“Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits…”

Happy Thanksgiving! For most people, Thanksgiving is about taking a break from work or school, getting together with family to eat a meal, and maybe watching a parade or football game. But more and more people would rather not spend precious time and money on Thanksgiving, because it means having to deal with dysfunctional family members and getting painful old issues stirred up again. Thanksgiving doesn’t have much of a religious significance anymore.

However, even non-believers see being thankful as a good thing. An article in *Forbes* magazine shows how being thankful produces positive results—it helps us to have better relationships, better physical and mental health; it reduces our aggression and increases our empathy; it improves our self-esteem and increases our mental strength. Still, even though we may know it’s good, it’s hard to be thankful in the midst of messy relationships and many pressing problems. Moreover, we all can be thankful for good things in our lives, but not really be aware of where they came from. The Bible says that every good and perfect gift actually comes from God himself (Jas1:17).

And therein lies the problem: if it’s about God, many people immediately get turned off. So many have a negative impression of God, mostly due to those who’ve claimed to represent him. Charles Shultz, the creator of the Peanuts cartoons, famously had his character Linus once say, “I *love* mankind; it’s *people* I can’t stand!” In the same way, many people say, “I *love* God; it’s *Christians* I can’t stand!” But honestly, many of us don’t know God all that well. We may have some common sense knowledge or impressions of God, but not a very personal understanding. And Christians certainly don’t always represent him well.

Psalm 103 speaks to these issues. It’s probably one of the most loved of all the psalms in the Bible, because it tells us not only what to be thankful for, but also, who God really is. This psalm was written by David. He grew up as a shepherd boy, became famous as a fighter, and later, after much suffering, king of Israel. Through all his life experiences he grew to know God intimately. He knew God so well that he was also famous for writing and singing many songs about God. Have you ever considered writing your own song for God?

In this song David begins and ends with the words, “Praise the Lord, my soul” (1,22). As we read these words it sounds weird, because it seems David is talking to himself; he’s talking to his “soul.” He doesn’t say, “Praise the Lord, my lips,” or “Praise the Lord, my mind,” or even “Praise the Lord, my heart,” but “Praise the Lord, my soul.” He adds in verse 1, “all my inmost being.” It tells us that we all have something inside us, and it’s called a soul; it’s at the core of our being. We all tend to feel our bodies—when they feel good, or when they feel bad. But often, we’re totally unaware that we’re a soul. We can get so busy in life, living as if we don’t have a soul. It happens even to church people who’re working hard but not taking the time to nurture their souls. Then we wonder why we’re having problems. Genesis 2:7 says our souls come from the breath of God. It implies our souls were created for God. As our bodies need things in order to be happy and healthy, so do our souls. As Pastor Judah Smith writes, we need to be asking ourselves and others, “How’s Your Soul?”

We can go through the motions of going to church or Bible study and singing the praise songs. But this psalm tells us we need to learn how to praise God from our soul, with all our inmost being. In Hebrew, the root of this word, “praise,” actually means to get down on our knees. That’s pretty dramatic and powerful. Why does it have to be so intense? It’s because God is real, and that’s the only kind of praise and thanks he deserves. Not fake. Not superficial. Not half-hearted. From the soul. All our inmost being. On our knees. Like David who danced with all his might when he brought the ark of God into Jerusalem (2Sa6:14). The fact that David commands his own soul to do it also has an important message for us. Most often, we’re not “feeling it” at first, but we need to make a choice to praise God; it’s something we need to choose to do. We can choose to focus on the negative. We can choose to be bitter. We can choose to be depressed. Or, we can choose to praise the Lord.

But how can we go from “not feeling it” to praising the Lord with all our inmost being? In verse 1 the psalmist tells himself to “praise his holy name.” Here, “name” represents God’s character. So to “praise his holy name” means to praise God for who he is. Later, David will describe who God is more fully. But suffice it to say here that we can praise God with all our inmost being when we turn our thoughts away from ourselves and our problems, away from people, away from this world, and really start thinking about his holy name, who God is.

Read verse 2. According to this verse, another key to praising God is to “forget not all his benefits.” This is definitely not “friends with benefits.” The word “benefits” literally means good deeds, and sometimes it’s translated “kindness.” It means how God treats us. The operative word here is “all.” It means a lot. We need to remember “all” the ways God has shown his kindness and goodness to us. As the hymn says, “Count your blessings, name them one by one; count your blessings, see what God has done.” So let’s start counting! God has done so much good for us. It started with our parents, teachers, coaches or anybody who went out of their way for us. Whoever they were, people nurtured and protected us when we were helpless babies; they trained us as children, they guided us as teenagers and mentored us as young adults. None of us would be where we are today without those people. But often we’re unaware that these good people in our lives actually came from God himself. As we enjoy all the kindness God has shown us, directly or indirectly, we’re kind of like people eating a gourmet meal, unaware of how much it cost somebody or how much work went into making it.

And this touches on what’s probably our greatest human problem. We all take things for granted. We’re like Adam and Eve who started taking the beautiful garden and all their privileges in it for granted. What’s more, in our sinful nature we tend to magnify our problems, but minimize the good. Sometimes we even create drama and manufacture fake problems. Of course some people have really serious problems, great pain and suffering, no end in sight, nobody to turn to, no true friends. At different times we all experience various levels of hardship. But whatever we’re going through, the bottom line is that we get to be alive, and we get to be alive in God’s good world. As the famous movie showed us, life is beautiful. Life’s a privilege. We all have an absolute reason to praise God—we’re alive. So Psalm 150:6 says, “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.”

Yet, we so easily forget all God’s benefits. Sometimes we even convince ourselves that we created these benefits. We like to think we’re independent and not indebted to anybody. But the truth is, without God we wouldn’t even be alive, not to mention able to enjoy anything good. The Bible says that when we forget all God has done for us, we become proud (Dt8: 12–14; 2Ch26:16; 32:25). We become spoiled, and frankly, ugly. It’s ugly to receive so much only to turn out ungrateful. On the other hand, it’s so beautiful to give thanks where thanks is due. To “forget not all his benefits,” we need an exercise in being reminded. And that’s what this psalm is all about.

So what are all God’s benefits for us? Many people at Thanksgiving say, “I’m thankful for my family and friends, I’m thankful for my job, etc.” But surprisingly, David doesn’t start out describing any financial or human benefits. What does he begin with? Read verses 3–5. Notice he doesn’t mention the generally “good things” until verse 5. What he’s thankful for first is God’s forgiveness. He’s not speaking generally, about God forgiving all those wicked people out there; he says, “who forgives all *your* sins.” There he goes again, talking to himself! David uses the word “your” here five times, each time speaking to himself. It tells us that to really thank and praise God, it’s good to remind ourselves of our own sins. David says, “all your sins.” Sounds like a lot. In the Bible David seems like such a nice man; but he knew himself, that he had so many sins, sins against God, and sins against people. We shouldn’t live in denial about all our sins. Nor should we just dig up our ugly sins and be left in shame. We should remind ourselves of all our sins, in order to appreciate how great God’s forgiveness is. “God forgives…all our sins”?! Wow! We’ve heard it probably many times, but do we really appreciate it? David’s going to come back to describing God’s forgiveness a bit later. But the point here is to take a moment to remind ourselves of all the sins in our lives that God has so graciously forgiven. Appreciating God’s forgiveness personally is the starting point of being thankful, the starting point of praising him with all our inmost being.

He adds in verse 3b, “…and heals all your diseases.” Here David makes healing parallel to forgiveness. It’s deep. As we experience God’s forgiveness, we also experience his healing, both physically and spiritually. David seems to be suggesting that we human beings have all kinds of spiritual diseases. What are all these spiritual diseases? Well, it’s not pretty. Pride. Vanity. Lust. Selfishness. Fear. Guilt. Self-hatred. Hatred of others. Greed. Unbelief. Bitterness. And that’s just to name a few. We develop these spiritual diseases as we gradually commit sins, and, as people sin against us and against each other. Once we contract these spiritual diseases, they’re so hard to get rid of; they become our “baggage.”

The man who wrote Matthew’s Gospel used to be a tax collector before Jesus called him. His life choices he made in order to pursue money at all costs left him spiritually very sick. But Jesus invited this spiritually very sick man to follow him, and Jesus was always with him until he was healed. Through Jesus’ spiritual healing Matthew was changed from a greedy, guilt-ridden, chronically selfish man, into a man who saw sick people with God’s love and compassion. So in retelling the details of Jesus’ ministry, Matthew emphasized how Jesus healed people. He said Jesus’ healing was in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Mt8:17; cf. Isa53:4). What heals our spiritual diseases? It’s definitely not our efforts to improve ourselves. The only thing that can truly heal all our spiritual diseases is God’s forgiving grace to us in Jesus. The Bible says that by the wounds of Jesus on the cross we have been healed (1Pe2:24b; cf. Isa53:5). Here, David uses the present tense of the verb, “heals,” to say that it’s an ongoing process even now. What a great thing to be thankful for, that God is healing all my spiritual diseases in the grace of Jesus!

Let’s read verse 4. Here, “the pit” can refer to the pit of death; it can also refer to the pit of sin that’s impossible to get out of on our own. When we give in to sin in our lives and contract spiritual diseases, our lives feel like we’ve plunged down into the pits. In a pit we feel hopeless. But God in his grace redeems our lives from the pit. How does God redeem my life from the pit? It’s through Jesus, who died on a cross in order to redeem us. Through his shed blood Jesus paid the price to get us out of our pit of sin. In fact, Jesus is the only one who can get us out of the pits. And what happens to us when we get out of there? It says that “he crowns us with love and compassion.” What a change! It’s like the prodigal son coming home filthy and in rags, but having the best robe, ring and sandals put on him. Though we’re nothing but ugly, dirty sinners, God treats us in Jesus like royal princes and princesses. What does it mean to be crowned with love and compassion? Partly, it means to experience God’s love and compassion personally. Partly, it means to become loving and compassionate like God himself. What a blessing, to be crowned not with material treasures, but with love and compassion! We can’t take credit for it; it’s an inner transformation, done only by the grace of Jesus. When we actually see God’s own love and compassion growing in us, it moves us to praise him with all our inmost being.

Read verse 5. Here, “desires” means simply, what you want. And in Hebrew the word for “good things” was especially used for things that smell amazing. I’m thinking of a bakery, or a house when somebody’s been cooking an incredible meal. God our Creator knows what we want and how to satisfy us, and he generously provides us with plenty of food and fills our hearts with joy (Ac14:17b). But in this verse David is probably talking about not only physical but also spiritual satisfaction. Being in a relationship with God satisfies our souls like nothing else. We experience firsthand how good he is to us. When God satisfies us, it says our youth is renewed like the eagle’s. It means we have new strength and new spirit to soar. We get so tired and worn out living in this world. We can even get burned out and feel dead inside. We need to spend time coming back to God, until we experience him so deeply that our souls are renewed and truly satisfied. It’s the best refreshment ever. And we need to praise and thank God for always renewing us whenever we come to him.

In verse 6 David helps us to see that what God does is not just for us personally, but for all people, especially those who’re oppressed. God doesn’t ignore them, but works righteousness and justice for them. In this next section of the psalm David wants us to appreciate more of God’s character. God revealed what he’s like in the ways he dealt with his people Israel (7). Look at verses 8–12. This is a loose quotation from Exodus 34:6,7. Many people think the God of the Old Testament is a God of anger and wrath. But that’s not true. God revealed himself to Israel as one who’s compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. God doesn’t hold grudges. God also doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve. We should say that again: God doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve. That’s precisely what it means to be gracious. Our sins make us deserving of punishment, severe punishment. But God loves us so much that he wants nothing more than to forgive us. David describes God’s forgiveness. Read verses 11,12. David uses great distances here as a metaphor. Our sins may seem so great to us, but God’s grace is far greater. When he forgives, it’s like he totally wipes our record clean. It’s like he puts our sins at the opposite end of the galaxy, in a black hole, obliterated. That’s how much he loves us.

David wants to think more about God’s compassion. Read verses 13,14. God really is our Father. His compassion for us isn’t a concept; it’s real, and very personal. In God’s eyes, we’re his own lovely children; we belong to him. David also emphasizes how God in his compassion knows and understands us. He knows all our weaknesses. He knows how truly weak we are. But he doesn’t despise us for it; even in our fragility he sees us with compassion. When we dwell on the greatness of God’s forgiveness and compassion, we want to praise him with all our inmost being.

David also meditates on God’s faithfulness. To do that, he thinks about how different God is from human beings. Read verses 15–18. Human beings are here today, gone tomorrow. But God is from everlasting to everlasting. The Everlasting God never forgets the people who keep his covenant and remember to obey his word. We also see in these verses the one thing this amazing God wants from us. He knows how weak we are. He knows how sinful we are. All he asks of us is that we fear him. It’s repeated here in verses 11,13 and 17. What does it mean to fear him? He’s so forgiving, so compassionate, so faithful. To fear him doesn’t mean to live in dread of him, but with awesome respect. It means not to abuse his grace or take him for granted. Ultimately, as David says in verse 18, to fear him means to remember to obey his word. If we don’t keep his word, we’re not really fearing him.

David finishes with a glorious vision of God in verse 19: “The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.” At the end of his song, David again calls for praise to God. Read verses 20–22.

Let’s read verse 2 again. This Thanksgiving, let’s try to remember all God’s benefits. His forgiveness. His healing. His love and compassion. All the goodness he shows us, that satisfies our souls. May he help us even to kneel down and praise him with all our souls.