

Praise Psalms

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and gives us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

Psalm 103 begins with one of the most famous lines in all the Psalms:

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

Many scholars deem Psalm 103 to be the richest of all the Psalms. The word “bless” is repeated six times in the Psalm. Bless means to praise, to worship, to revere. Psalm 103 is also unique in how it starts.

Nearly every week, we have a Call to Worship. Have you noticed what book of the Bible we almost always draw from for the Call to Worship? ...The Psalms.

There is a general pattern, too. A dialogue between the individual and the community; a conversation between the One and the All. But here, it starts off with the One... and the One. It's not addressed to the congregation but to the self. The self summons the self to worship. David is having a conversation with David. King David is singing a solo here, coaxing and cheering himself on to praise. Stirring his soul to gratitude.

This is the beauty of praise: Praise gets you out of yourself, while simultaneously getting you in touch with yourself. To paraphrase John Calvin: Praise empowers every person to descend within themselves and turn their sluggishness and sloth into singing and celebration. Praise turns our needy and emotional selves God-ward. And there, we're no longer self-absorbed, but become God-absorbed instead.

Psalm 103 doesn't stop with the self. It works into a crescendo of concentric circles rippling outward along the lake of life:

From the individual solo,
to the choir of the community,
to the entire ensemble of the universe,
singing God's praises, together.

Psalm 103 is an invitation to not miss out.
Your voice and your part are needed to complete it.

Then at the end, it circles back to the individual.

*Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the Lord, O my soul.*

Let's hear now God's word from Psalm 103 ...

Scripture: Psalm 103:1-22 (NRSV)

- 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—
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 as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- 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.
- ⁸ The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- ⁹ He will not always accuse,
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 the heavens are high 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 he removes our transgressions from us.
- ¹³ As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
- ¹⁴ For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.
- 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.
- ¹⁹ The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.
- ²⁰ Bless the Lord, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.
- ²¹ Bless the Lord, all his hosts,
his ministers that do his will.
- ²² Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the Lord, O my soul.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Praise Psalms

Well, you know that sabbatical grant I shared with you about in the spring? The \$50,000 one that every pastor dreams about? The one where you're supposed to make your heart sing and make the case for your dream spiritual renewal? It's the Make a Wish Foundation for Pastors. We had a bunch of people working on this. The Church and Presbytery were involved—And a whole team of volunteers working on it, writing multiple drafts. Researching plane ticket costs, AirBnBs, and buses. We had people who previously won the grant and others who were readers for these grants give feedback.

Well, I found out Monday the news by email:

Unfortunately, your proposal was not among those selected for funding this year....

We didn't get it. I didn't get it. A second time. I'm batting a thousand—2 for 2. Not seven years ago, not this year. I thought maybe the pity factor would come into play: This is this guy's second time applying. He's got four kids. Been serving his church for a lucky thirteen years. It's in the middle of a pandemic. *This is where you cue the violins.*

Then I had an important heart to heart talk *...with myself*. Okay, Tittle. It's time to bless the Lord. You got the blues out of your system in Psalm 102. That's important, but let's not linger in 102 longer than needed. Let's get to Love Potion #103, Psalm 103. Just what I needed to preach to myself this week. 103 gave me just what I needed: *a kick in the pants with praise*. Okay, I will bless the Lord. I will give thanks to God. I'm alive. I have breath. A pulse. I'm blessed to be at a church that gives sabbaticals to pastors every seven years. I'm blessed to be a pastor at Immanuel—two sabbaticals! My last sabbatical, I didn't get this grant either and I still had an amazing experience. This second one is going to be great.

Blessing God reminded me of something important: Nothing was owed to me—it was never "mine." There were no guarantees of getting it, even if a bunch of us worked our tails off. Faith inspires you to bless God, not curse God, in all circumstances—good or bad, because you know you're blessed—no matter what.

I gave that sabbatical grant my heart and soul, and they said no. *But give the Creator of the Universe, your heart and soul?* He blesses it and showers you with loving-kindness, every time. He won't reject me and he won't reject you. There are no rejection letters from God, no Dear John letters. I started feeling better this week, re-reading and re-praying Psalm 103, because I began remembering how blessed I am: JOHN, FORGET NOT ALL HIS BENEFITS.

God FORGIVES my iniquity and heals my ILLS. REDEEMS your life from the Pit and destruction. He CROWNS your head, not with gold and jewels, but crowns us with something much better: God's LOVING-KINDNESS and TENDER MERCIES.

In the Hebrew it's **chesed**. Loving-kindness. We're crowned with **chesed**. God "**cheseds us**" by: forgiving, healing, delivering, vindicating, and choosing us. The Lord accomplishes vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. That's "**doing chesed**" too. To do **chesed** is to do *the best in* and *make the best of* a relationship. God **cheseds** us, God **cheseds** the world. We can **chesed** one another. And there's more that I had forgotten: YOUR YOUTH IS RENEWED like the eagle's.

The famous 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote that praise is choosing **the way of the eagle** over **the way of the owl**. The last Psalm we looked at, Psalm 102, talked about the way of the owl. *"I am like an owl in the ruins."* This Psalm, Psalm 103, talks about the way of the eagle: *"My youth is renewed like the eagle's."* We're given a choice on which bird we choose—the owl or the eagle.

Which one will be your spirit bird?

The owl seeks the night and avoids the sun; the eagle seeks to soar in the sun. Immanuel, our newsletter might be called the Dove, but we are a church of the eagle. Praise helps us shake off our miseries and take on God's mercies. Praise takes you on a journey from misery to mercy. Praise transforms our sadness into gladness, our mourning into dancing.

Just like the eagle who molts its feathers each year, we can shake off and shed apathy and gloom. We experience it, and then we let it go—we don't cling to it.

We hang on to God's benefits and gifts.

Tie a string around your finger.

Tie a string around your brain and your heart.

NEVER, EVER FORGET ALL OF GOD'S BENEFITS!

God makes it possible for us eagles to soar above our setbacks. Praise gets us outside of and beyond ourselves. Praise reconnects us to God's activity in and around us—rejuvenating us. God has made us like eagles, but he also remembers that we are but dust. In the midst of all my foibles and peccadillos, God isn't a fault-finding, grudge-nursing, or hen-pecking God. God is a loving father, a nurturing mother, a truly patient and engaged parent.

Made in God's image—the *imago dei*—I can begin to reflect God's fatherly love for my children. Praise helps us live into the reality more and more that we are made in a loving God's image. Praise helps us to love others—friends, siblings, spouses, fellow Christians, people of the other political party, a little more like God does, a little more like God **cheseds** us. We're a forgiven and forgiving people! This **God of Chesed** is on the throne, ruling the universe with a golden rule of loving-kindness. And the New Testament teaches us that God's goodness, his loving-kindness, his **chesed**, is manifest in Christ Jesus.

I've got a question for you: how many weeks do you think the average human lifespan is? Anybody want to venture a guess? 4,000 weeks or so if you're so blessed. If you're blessed into your nineties like Bob Seel and a few others in our congregation, you'll be pushing 5,000 weeks. Either way: 4,000 or 5,000 weeks isn't that long. To me that feels much shorter than 80 or so years. Praise reminds us life is too short to wallow in self-pity for long. Praise also taps you into the wonder and joy of this precious, short life of ours. So when you're praising and blessing God, you're doing what's most important and lasting, partaking of the eternal in the midst of the fragility and brevity of this life. So hold nothing back. Go all out. Let there be no moderation.

Luther described what our praise should be like:

"body and soul; eyes, ears, and all limbs and sense; reason and all faculties."

Your total being—your deepest recesses. Not just your brain or your mouth. Don't be half-hearted about it. Be all in. Let it rip. Praise taps us into our life purpose—to glorify God and enjoy him forever. I love how CS Lewis puts it in his *Reflections on the Psalms*:

... not to praise *"is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end, to have lost it all."*

Praise is vital to our vitality because it's the way we come to know and experience God. I think that's why you're here right now, to encounter the living God with the people of God.

Praise is the way that we sense and feel God's presence in our lives. If we don't praise, we totally miss out on that. And when you really think about it, praise is going on all around us:

- Love songs praising the lover,
- Sports enthusiasts praising their team,
- People praising the refreshing rains,
- Mountain views of the Rincons,
- Delicious home-made pad thai,
- Binge-worthy Netflix shows,
- Or a new outfit you got on the clearance rack at TJ Max.

We praise what we love and really care about.

C.S. Lewis points out that the cranks, curmudgeons, and coots out there have something in common:
... they are the ones who *"have praised the least."*

Praise trains us to look for the good. The best critics are those who can find something to praise, even in imperfect works. Lewis puts it this way,

"... praise seems to be inner health made audible."

A week or so ago I finished one of my favorite novels I've ever read:

Charles Dickens' *"David Copperfield."*

I was emotional—and that doesn't happen tons with this Scottish Scandinavian. When I finished the last page, I was moved, inspired, touched. I felt so appreciative of life. I was treasuring my marriage, my kids, my friendships, everything, just a little bit more than before I started that book. I felt I knew the characters David, his aunt, Emily, Agnes, the two Pegottys, and yes even Uriah Heep and Mr. McCawber with his pecuniary difficulties. I wasn't sure if I should climb my roof and shout it out or just post something on social media: read this book! I'll just share it here.

C.S. Lewis is totally tapped into this when he says that praise is so important because it not only expresses our joy, but it completes our joy. Praise is like a good joke. You have to share it with others. Withholding our praise keeps us from doing what gives us the most joy! The worthier the object of praise, the more intense the delight is. And you just can't go any higher than the Higher Power. We're never more human, never more satisfied, than when we're praising God. To fully enjoy, is to glorify, says Lewis. When God summons us to praise, it's an invitation to joy and delight.

So we tune our instruments and keep trying to hit those high notes. We continue praising in our imperfect ways. It's what we've been designed to do. Praise is our feeble and best attempt to say,

"Wow, thank you God!!!"

Amen.

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