

Bless the Lord, Oh My Soul

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of January 2004. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Bless the Lord, O my soul, and is based on Psalm 103. You may like to have open the Bibles at page 482 to Psalm 103, the first of our two Bible readings today.

This is part of a sermon series through January on some of the Psalms. So let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that you speak to us so clearly in the words of Scripture.

We pray that as we come to these words, this Psalm this morning, that you'll speak not only to our minds but to our hearts as well, that they may be filled with gratitude and praise of you for all the benefits that you bestow on us.

And we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen. What have the Romans ever given us? The aqueduct? Oh yes. Well, apart from the aqueduct, what have the Romans ever given us?

[1 : 1 1] There's the sanitation. All right. Apart from the aqueduct and the sanitation, what have the Romans given us? Well, there's the roads. You can't deny that the roads are pretty good.

And there's the irrigation system. That's very good. Medicine? Yes, yes. Education. They brought us good wine. The public baths? They're pretty good too. And you can't deny that it's safe to walk on the streets at night.

All right. All right. Apart from the aqueduct, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths and the safety on the roads, what have the Romans ever given us?

Peace? Well, John Cleese's commandos in the comedy movie Life of Brian, they were plotting to overthrow the Romans. They thought that the Romans had brought them nothing but evil, bad things.

And so in that comic scene, they begin to realise and list all sorts of things, all sorts of benefits that they'd received at the hands of the Romans.

[2 : 1 7] Before that, I guess, their ingratitude had blinded them to the reality. Now, of course, that's just comedy, a fairly silly film, really, and fiction. But how true it is that ingratitude blinds us to reality.

Ingratitude means that we fail to see and appreciate the benefits and good things that we've actually received. Blow, blow, thou winter wind.

Thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude. As King Lear said, ingratitude is a marble-hearted fiend. Well, this psalm of David, Psalm 103, addresses ingratitude.

Rather than the cold winter wind that is less unkind than ingratitude. This is a psalm of warm, gentle breeze of faith, full of thankfulness.

David begins talking to himself. Notice how he says, Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. David's talking to himself about blessing the Lord.

[3 : 33] There's a sense in which he's a little bit like, say, Leighton Hewitt on the tennis court who shouts to himself, I suppose, trying to urge himself on to play better shots and to concentrate, especially when he's losing.

Or maybe it's a bit better like somebody who's trying to remember something so they keep on saying it in their mind. The number of times I've walked from church over to home or vice versa saying, I've got to ring Fred, I've got to ring Fred, and I get home and I think, why am I here?

What have I got to be doing? I've forgotten already. There's a sense in which David, talking to himself at the beginning of this psalm, is trying to remind himself, cajole himself even, to bless the Lord and to praise his name for all the benefits that he's received.

He's urging himself to remember the benefits from God. See what verse 2 says, Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits.

Keep on reminding yourself, he's saying to himself, of all the benefits that God has given you. You see, the key to this psalm is not forgetting. Forgetfulness of God's benefits is an expression of ingratitude, something worse even than that bitter wind of King Lear.

[4 : 49] Rather, David is trying to urge himself and therefore ask the readers not to forget, but rather to remember and therefore be thankful and grateful for all the benefits that God gives us.

And look at the list that follows from verse 3. God forgives all your iniquity. He heals all your diseases. He redeems your life from the pit. He crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.

He satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagles. That's an astonishing list of benefits that David has received from the hand of the Lord.

It's quite a sweeping list. God forgives all your iniquity. God forgives all your iniquity. Not just some sins, but all of them, without exception, great or small.

He heals all your diseases. An astonishing claim of a benefit from God. He redeems your life from the pit, from death, from the grave, if you like.

[5 : 49] Not just sparing your life, but I think in here even an implication of life beyond the grave, redeemed by God, at a cost that David could not envisage, but we see so clearly in the New Testament, in the death of Jesus.

He crowns you with steadfast love and mercy. Here's a king speaking. He's crowned not with gold, but crowned with steadfast love and mercy. And he satisfies you with good as long as you live.

Astonishing claims of the benefits of God. David's speaking from experience, of course. His praise is not a formal ritual. He didn't just open a prayer book and recite in an empty fashion these words.

But this is personal experience and heartfelt gratitude being expressed. And he's urging himself to keep on remembering the benefits that are his from God. Urging himself to be thankful.

I wonder how we feel about this list of benefits. Could we express our gratitude to God for the same list? It's quite a significant and strong and sweeping list.

[7 : 04] I'm not sure whether you watched any of the Sydney test match at the beginning of the week or last weekend. But maybe sadly for Australia, Sachin Tendulkar hit form. Up till that point, his whole year and the test season had been fairly disappointing for one of the world's best batsmen.

But if you like watching good cricketers bat, it was wonderful to see him return to form with a huge amount of runs, over 300 without being dismissed. And what was good to watch is the sweet timing of the ball as his bat just times itself and the ball races off towards the fence.

You see, you need to get your timing right if you're going to be a good cricketer. But you need to get your timing right as well if we give thanks to God for all the benefits we receive. You see, as we look down this list, we look firstly at God forgiving us all our iniquity.

It's something that God does whenever we repent of our sins and he does so immediately because without forgiveness, then there is no ongoing relationship of God. This is a fundamental blessing, the baseline, the bottom line.

But if we keep reading and see David saying, he heals all your diseases, we think, well, David must have struck it lucky because here am I suffering this illness or this disease or this frailty or whatever.

[8 : 23] But not so, in fact. David, after committing sin of adultery with a woman called Bathsheba in the Old Testament, turned to God in prayer. He was immediately forgiven his iniquity, a great iniquity, the king committing adultery and actually leading on to murder.

But he was denied healing, though he asked for it. But here is David giving thanks for the Lord's benefits that includes healing all your diseases. Because David has the big picture and the big timing in mind.

He knows that not always and not immediately does God always bring healing, though occasionally he does. But that the ultimate end is of a place where healing is the reality for each and every one of God's people.

Always, for eternity. Where forgiveness is a reality. Where being crowned with steadfast love and mercy. Where the life has been redeemed from the pit and they are satisfied with everything good.

That is in the big picture and the ultimate timing of God. These are benefits that David could give thanks for and which we also ought to give thanks for. It's David's personal experience, but as we'll see, it's not limited to his personal experience either.

[9 : 39] These are blessings for each one of God's people. Healing may not be immediate. We may not actually feel satisfied immediately and every day. But the ultimate good of God and benefit of God is that healing, satisfaction, along with redemption of our life and forgiveness are the benefits that are ours for eternity from God's mercy.

They're great benefits. David got his timing right because we know from the stories of the Old Testament he was denied healing and yet here he can give thanks to it because he knows that in the end all of these benefits are his because of the mercy of God.

As we've already sung today, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. That's what these benefits are. Who like me, his praise should sing. In fact, we've done what David did.

We've urged ourselves to praise God and remember these benefits. Praise my soul, the King of Heaven we sung. To his feet thy tribute bring. But David's psalm is not just listing his personal experience.

David knows that what he has received, the benefits that he has had from the Lord, are the benefits that God gives to each of his people because the mercy and love and blessings that David had received is characteristic of what God is like for all God's people.

[11 : 02] As he was for David, so is God for each one of his people. So David moves from verse 6 into what he personally gives thanks for and he anchors it in what is commonly and characteristically the action and behaviour of God in general.

In verse 6, the Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed, not just for David, but for all. And probably alluding here, in particular, to when the people of God were oppressed by the Egyptians, enslaved in Egypt, in the early part of the Bible, in the book of Exodus.

Because verse 7 then makes that explicit. God made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. Moses was the leader of the people of Israel in the book of Exodus, in the early part of the Old Testament.

So David is remembering back to how God had acted in the past and seeing a consistency with how he's acted to David in the present. David says, my situation's not unique.

This is how God always acts. And so he goes back to a significant time in the Israel's past, in the book of Exodus, slaved in Egypt, and how God there revealed himself firstly to Moses at Mount Sinai, and then a bit later to all of the people of God, Israel, at Mount Sinai, and revealed his ways, his promises, his laws and commands to all the people of God.

[12 : 23] And then he says in verse 8, the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. But that's a quote. It occurs several times in the scriptures, but the first time, the place from which it originates, is the book of Exodus, when Israel had come out of Egypt and were at Mount Sinai.

But at Mount Sinai, they had committed gross idolatry, if you like, the worst sin you could imagine. They built a golden calf and bowed down and worshipped it and turned their back, most rudely, on the God who'd brought them from Egypt.

There they committed the sin of idolatry. Moses had prayed for them, interceded, asked God to forgive them, which he'd done, astonishingly, an act of extraordinary mercy, though Israel really deserved to be obliterated then and there.

And as a result of that, God was praised with these words from verse 8 here. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

That was David's experience, but he's saying it's not just mine, it's the experience of all of God's people. And it's the experience way back in the book of Exodus, when Israel committed the severest of sins and deserved the strongest of punishments.

[13 : 47] Rather, it received the abounding mercy and steadfast love of the Lord. As he goes on to say in verses 9 and 10, God will not always accuse the languages of the legal court or judgment day when God could well accuse us of the sins that we've committed.

He won't always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

That is, we deserve judgment and punishment. But that's not how God always treats us. He doesn't give us our just desserts. He gives us mercy and steadfast love.

That's why David can praise him. That's why we've praised him. Praise him for his grace and favour to our fathers, ancient Israel, in distress. Praise him still the same as ever, slow to chide and swift to bless.

Because David's experience like ancient Israel's experience like ours is the same. For at the heart of the character of God is that he is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[14 : 58] Israel had deserved to be obliterated, but weren't. Because God demonstrated then and there that he was merciful and slow to anger. And that character of God is consistent.

It wasn't just God on a good day at Mount Sinai. Because David experienced the same thing. God's slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And it's because God is slow to anger and it's because he's abounding in steadfast love that the climax of that demonstration comes in the New Testament when Jesus dies on the cross to take the anger of God against sin so that we may be recipients of mercy and steadfast love.

There's a story that Napoleon once was, had sentenced some young man to death for some crime. And the mother of the young man came to him and pleaded for mercy and Napoleon said he doesn't deserve mercy.

And she said if he deserved mercy it wouldn't be mercy. Mercy's never deserved. It's always undeserved. Otherwise it's not mercy. Often, too often, we probably live as though we deserve God's mercy.

We take our forgiveness for granted. And when we do that we're forgetting the benefits. We're thinking that somehow God owes us. But if ever we think that mercy is deserved that the benefit of forgiveness we take for granted then we'd only ever say this psalm with a cold formality or a marble heart of ingratitude.

[16 : 34] What child has ever asked their parent or what parent ever been asked by their child how much do you love me? Do you love me this much? Or this much? Or this much?

Or this much? How much do you love me? Well, lots of kids ask that. I remember when we were children asking that sort of silly question to my parents. But David uses that sort of spatial imagery to demonstrate just how vast and great the mercy and steadfast love of the Lord really are.

He says in verse 11 as the heavens are high above the earth so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him. So God doesn't love us this much or this much or this much he loves us as high as the heavens are and we know in our modern times better than David just how far you can travel through the heavens without reaching their end beyond Mars or beyond all the planets.

That's how great boundless is in effect what's being said here the steadfast love and mercy of the Lord are. And then the next verse, verse 12 uses the spatial imagery horizontally if you like as far as the east is from the west so far he removes our transgressions from us.

I've often thought that it's quite clever that it's east and west maybe well deliberate by David here and elsewhere in the scriptures because if you travel north eventually north meets south when you reach the North Pole but if you travel east or west you can travel east or west forever and never end and never meet the opposite direction in effect.

[18 : 09] You can just keep travelling west and west and west and west or east and east and east and never stop but north stops and south stops. See what's being said here again is that this is boundless love and mercy for us.

The illustration is that God's removed our transgressions from us but it's saying the same thing that this is the dimension of God's love. Our sins have been taken so far and eternity away from us in space.

That's how widely God loves us beyond any children's demonstration of this much this much or this much. The steadfast love the mercy of the Lord is boundless in height and breadth.

He uses then a parental image in verse 13 as a father has compassion for his children so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

The language here is warmly emotional. You see God's love and steadfast love and mercy for us is not some sort of cold substance that is just there on tap for us.

[19 : 17] God loves us personally that's the added dimension in verse 13 here. It's not just a sort of unfeeling steadfast love and mercy that just sort of comes out like water from a fountain.

There is a sense in which God personally loves us boundlessly with his love and mercy as a father has compassion a warmly emotional word that's used here for us.

Indeed God knows us and yet loves us. He knows us more than we even know ourselves. He made us is what verse 14 says and he remembers that we're but dust and yet despite all that this rich personal love and mercy boundless in heart and boundless in breadth father like he tends and spares us well our feeble frame he knows.

Well David continues to ponder the dimensions of the steadfast love and mercy of the Lord the benefits that he's received and now he does so by way of contrast human life is just fleeting a little blip on the time scale he says in verse 15 as for mortals their days are like grass they flourish like a flower of the field for the wind passes over it and it is gone and its place knows it no more and the older we get the more we realise the truth of these words human life is fleeting we're here on earth for such a short time by comparison with eternity and in contrast verse 17 the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him and his righteousness to children's children not only is God's love and mercy for us boundless in space breadth and height it's boundless in time is what this is saying it's from everlasting to everlasting the implication again here just a seed of thought if you like is that death does not even stop the steadfast love and mercy of

God to us that it lasts beyond the grave not only to the next generation and the next generation but the language also implies to each person forever from everlasting to everlasting no wonder this psalm is used in the burial service because real comfort for God's people is being offered here that even in the face of death God's love and steadfast mercy do not stop frail as summer's flower we flourish blows the wind and it is gone but while mortals rise and perish God endures unchanging on indeed we might even better say something like God keeps loving unchanging on well this psalm is a corrective to those who tend to forget the benefits of God to us but forgetfulness you see in the scriptures is not just amnesia it is not as though one day we're going to wake up and think oh I can't remember what God's given us no that's not the forgetfulness of the scriptures you see forgetfulness is a spiritual problem not a mental problem forgetfulness comes because of human sin it comes because of our pride that thinks that we deserve mercy or we have no need of mercy or that all these benefits and blessings of God are mine by right that's pride that's sin and that's forgetfulness and whenever we're like that we're turning our backs on God and failing to realise that all that we've received from his hand we do not deserve and yet he's poured out his abundant love to us you see we're all vulnerable to forgetfulness not because of amnesia but because of sin pride turning after other gods being self sufficient or worshipping indeed ourselves you see it's human pride and sin that causes forgetfulness of God's benefits and David knows that all too well that's why he's reminding himself with this psalm you see he's urging himself to remember not because he's forgetful so much as because he's sinner and he needs to keep reminding himself and notice how in this psalm he's done it he's done it not just by composing nice words he's done it by looking back to the scriptures because at the heart of this psalm is what

[23 : 48] God has done in the past and God's character means that he still does it to David and to us you see David has used the scriptures the story of God bringing Israel out from Egypt and Israel's sin but God's mercy at Israel's sin in the book of Exodus to remind himself and to correct his sin of pride to remind himself that he is and remains always a sinner in need of mercy and therefore stirring up gratitude in his heart for the blessings and benefits from God that are his sin it's the same for us we have the same vulnerability to sin and therefore to forgetfulness for the benefits of God and like David we ought to be using the scriptures to provoke us to remind us to urge us to remember that we ought to be grateful every moment of every day for the benefits from God which are ours you see this psalm can't be said or sung sincerely if we're proud of ourselves but David's full of humility he knows that he's frail as dust he knows that he's fragile like a flower of the field he knows that he's a sinner undeserving of mercy he knows that it's his pride that makes him vulnerable to forget but David also knows that the benefits received from God leave us not unchanged because David knows and expresses through this psalm that rather than sinful pride there is humble trust and fear of God see what he said at the end of verse 11 great is God's steadfast love towards those who fear him end of verse 13 the Lord has compassion for those who fear him verse 17 the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him as we saw last week fear here doesn't mean terror and running away from God fear is the proper trust faith and obedient response to God as

God revering and honouring him as God see David knows that the right response to protect gratitude in our hearts is to fear God submit to him humbly obeying his commandments and trusting his word well so great is the steadfast love of the Lord that David urges the whole of creation to join in praise of God God is sovereign over all verse 19 tells us the Lord has established his throne in the heavens and his kingdom rules over all so he invites the angels to join him in praise bless the Lord you his angels you mighty ones who do his bidding obedient to his spoken word he blesses perhaps the sun and the moon and other things in the sky bless the Lord all his hosts his ministers that do his will and then he says to everything and anything the whole of the universe bless the Lord all his works in all places of his dominion God's love is not some fleeting romantic emotion

God's love is a steadfast love as it's translated here a covenant love as it's translated in other translations a love that is firm reliable unchanging God who loves us despite ourselves our failures and our sins a love that endures and endures despite us and regardless a steadfast love that the whole of the universe can embrace with gratitude joy and praise I wonder whether you can join in this psalm with sincerity I wonder whether your soul your inner being needs some provocation to bless the Lord or is perhaps your heart already ablaze with praise angels angels help us to adore him ye behold him face to face sun and moon bow down before him dwellers all in time and space and David ends as he began urging his soul not to forget but to praise the Lord bless the Lord oh my soul praise him praise him praise with us the God of grace bless the Lord oh my soul and all that is within me bless his holy name bless the Lord oh my soul and forget not all his benefits