

Psalm 103
A psalm of praise alone

Introduction

This psalm has greatly influenced people in Christian history. It is closely linked with the history of the Christian church in Scotland, and it is often sung at celebrations of the Lord's Supper. It was through an exposition of this psalm that John Knox was converted. This psalm was sung by James Renwick just before he was beheaded – the last of the covenanters to be executed during the persecution of the covenanters in Scotland between 1660 –1688. This psalm inspired Henry F.Lyte to write the great hymn “Praise my soul, the king of heaven”.

This psalm is suited for all ages; it suits all persons and is applicable to all conditions. There are seventeen matters of praise, and not one of petition. It is a psalm which calls for more devotion than exposition. We will be the more enriched by it if we have a warm heart and ordinary good sense, than if we have cold heart which critically examines every word in the original.

We are going to consider this psalm by a look at the past – a reminder of God's benefits; the present – with its assurance of His mercies; and the future – as the psalmist stresses God's sovereignty.

Reminder of God's benefits – the past

The writer calls on his soul – his immortal nature and all his senses and faculties, his intellect, his will, heart and tongue – to bless or praise or worship the Lord. This is not a cold, formal “thank you”, but he wants his whole being to be engaged. Then he goes on to list all these benefits.

Dr Alexander Whyte loved this psalm and used to say these verses take us to the law court, the hospital, the slave market, the throne room, and the banqueting hall.

In the law court He forgives all our sins (Psalm 103:3). This is people's greatest need – not Jesus as a helper or friend, or peace or joy – but Jesus as a Saviour, forgiving their sins.

In the hospital He heals our diseases. The diseases of the soul need a cure, and God not only pardons us but also gives us new life. Sinful passions, like pride, avarice and lust, are the diseases of the soul. This phrase may also include bodily ailments, though he does not heal them immediately, and not always, else we should never die. But it is the case that at the Second Coming we shall have perfect bodies.

In the slave market He redeems our lives from the pit (Psalm 103:4). “Redeem” means set free or delivered at a cost or by payment. We are set free from the punishment of sins in eternity.

In the throne room, **He crowns you with love and compassion.** The whole sentiment of these last two statements suggests resurrection to new life.

And in the banqueting hall, **He satisfies your desires with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's** (Psalm 103:5). He gives us all we need – not all we want – for our nourishment and comfort, so that we are renewed. **As we wait on the Lord we renew our strength** (Isaiah 40:31). **Outwardly we are wasting away, but inwardly we are renewed day by day** (2 Corinthians 4:16). **They will still bear fruit in old age** (Psalm 92:14).

Now thank Him for all these things and do not forget them. “Our memories are too often like leaky vessels in retaining things that are good.” “Our lips are closed because our hearts are dead” [unclear where these quotations are taken from]. Ingratitude is the outstanding sin of believers as well as unbelievers. The Old Testament contains constant reminders of the dangers of forgetfulness. On entry into the Promised Land, Moses warned, **when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your flocks and herds grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt** (Deuteronomy 8:12-14). Even good men in the Old Testament could forget. Hezekiah loved and served God, and restored true worship. But later, **Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him** (2 Chronicles 32:25).

*“Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”*

Assurance of His mercies – the present

Know the Lord about whom we speak. **He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel. The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love... He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities** (Psalm 103:7-10). Then the psalmist gives us some dimensions. Height – **As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him** (Psalm 103:11). Breadth – **As far as the East is from the West, so far has he removed our transgressions from us** (Psalm 103:12). He has put an immeasurable distance between Himself and our sins (through Christ).

Next, the psalmist uses a picture often used by Bible writers to refer to God's relationship to His people – as a father. He has compassion like a father (Psalm 103:13). **He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust** (Psalm 103:14). He knows our temperament, limited understanding, fears, how things affect our nerves, strength of temptations, discouragement tendencies. All that calls for His tender compassion and pity. This does not, however, excuse our sins, or our unwillingness to do anything about them.

God's graciousness, mercy and compassion are very endearing qualities of God. Someone who was converted by John Knox's preaching, Elizabeth Adamson, said she liked his preaching because “he more fully opened the fountain of God's mercies than any other”. As John Knox expounded this psalm, she was led to Christ, after much

agony of soul. Shortly before her death she asked for this to be read because “It was in receiving it that my troubled soul first tasted God’s mercy which is to me sweeter than if all the kingdoms of the earth were given to me to possess.”

This is a wonderful psalm to turn to, especially in the dark times in the Christian life when we feel far from God. Conscious of deep failure and shame, even when we have lost the will to go back to God. His infinite readiness to pardon and receive us again is underlined here.

*“O Jesus, full of truth and grace,
More full of grace than I of sin,
Yet once again I seek Thy face.
Open Thine arms and take me in.
And freely my backslidings heal
And love the faithless sinner still.”*

Finally in this section, a reminder how brief and frail our life is – our days are as grass (Psalm 103:15,16). We flourish like flowers of the field, but then the wind blows and they are gone, and the place where they once were does not remember them. This happens so often in the hot East, where the east wind in summer blows and soon any regeneration is withered up.

But from everlasting to everlasting, the Lord’s love is with those who fear Him... with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts (Psalm 103:17,18). The psalmist did not have all the light we have about life after death, but clearly these words speak of God’s plans made in eternity past, which will endure beyond the grave. **Nothing... life nor death... can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 8:38,39).

Hope arising from God’s sovereignty – the future

The psalm ends with a strong confident note. Lifts eyes off selves and off the earth to the heavens above and all the universe around. **His throne is in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all** (Psalm 103:19). He rules everything – time, places and creatures, great and small, willing and unwilling, faithful and faithless. We cannot see this. All seems anarchy from where we are. We forget He does not keep our clocks and times and calendars. But if we could see what He sees – past, present and future – we would see how perfectly His sceptre is over the universe. The book of Daniel has its problems in interpretation, but one message is loud and clear – God’s rule is over all. **He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and sets up kings** (Daniel 2:21). **No one can hold back his hand or say to him, What have you done?** (Daniel 4:35).

He has controlled history in preparing for Christ’s first coming, and is bringing history to a great conclusion in Christ’s second coming. The Christian can affirm that Christ rules over all. Remember the need for patience. We cannot see the whole picture, only the tip of the iceberg. We are in a hurry, but God is not. Leave worrying about the world to God – though we should still act obediently and responsibly and prayerfully. There is no point in us trying to govern the world. We can leave all that to

Him, and also our lives, careers, families, with all the ups and downs. Our peace would increase if we would rest more in the one whose kingdom rules over all.

Conclusion

Reminder of God's blessings in the past. Assurance of His mercies in the present. Hope about the future by stress on His sovereignty and kingship. No wonder the psalmist bring the psalm to a great crescendo in v.20-22. He calls on the angels who do His bidding, all the heavenly hosts, all His servants and all His works, to praise Him. So he concludes with the same words that he started with – **Praise the Lord, O my soul.**