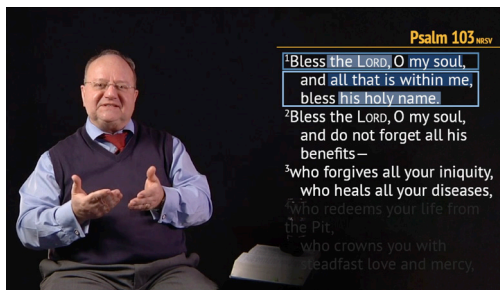


Psalm 103



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Welcome to part 3 of our series on the Psalms. This time we are going to look at one of my all-time favorites, Psalm 103. The psalm is, by the way, a longish psalm. It has 22 verses. And so we are not going to look at every verse in the psalm, but what I want to do with you is share some of my excitement about the beauty of that psalm—both in its form and how it has been composed and structured and also in its spiritual energy and the theological beauty of what is being said. And I hope as we go through the psalm you catch some of the excitement of how form and content interact to create something truly sensational and spectacular.

Let's begin with the opening line of the psalm: "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name." I want you to pick up two things straight away. The first one is that the psalm is the poet. The poet theologian here is actually talking to himself. And what he's doing is envisaging. He's personifying his soul, his emotions, his faith, and his relationship with God as a conversation partner, who is perhaps lagging a little bit in his faith and excitement for God. And the psalmist himself is now addressing himself as if he was a preacher preaching or a friend talking to a friend and encouraging himself, his conversation partner, to get excited again about this amazing God in whom they both believe.

As the psalmist does that, he is using a very interesting form that is very typical and characteristic of Hebrew poetry. We call it parallelism. Why parallelism? The reason is because much of the poetry of the Bible is composed of two or three different partial lines that repeat in a very interestingly variational way. The same idea but in such a way that the repetition enhances what is being said, makes it more beautiful and more meaningful and more impactful.

Let me show you what I mean. The first half of this verse says, "Bless the LORD, O my soul." The second half of it appears to be

simply parallel and saying more or less the same thing in more or less the same words: “and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” But have you noticed, as you pay attention to the detail, that the second repetition of this same idea is actually so much more powerful? Whereas in the first half, God is simply referred to by His name, the LORD, by His title. In the second half, the psalmist is now encouraging his soul to bless God’s holy name, small words, and more meaning.

The same thing concerns who is supposed to bless the Lord. In the first half, it is some vague, abstract idea: the soul. In the second half, it is “all that is within me.” Everything that he is supposed to bless the Lord. What is that everything? What are all these things within me? It’s not just an abstract “my soul.” It is my emotions, my values, my preferences, perhaps even my fears and anxieties, the things that propel me and the things that hold me back. The things within me that already trust God, the things within me that make me wonder and worry. I may be in a situation of anxiety, of fear even. I may be subject to external pressures. There might be circumstances that might distract me from my relationship with God. The psalmist is reminding himself to let everything that is within him, no matter what it is, to let it all out in admiration for this wonderful and amazing God.

In the remainder of the psalm, we learn why the psalmist wants his soul, everything within him, to bless the Lord. Because God is doing wonderful, amazing things no matter what the circumstances are. In verse 2, we read “Bless the LORD, O my soul.” Third repetition, by the way, not just saying the same thing. This is about emphasis, about intensity, about excitement, about beauty. “Do not forget all his benefits,” everything that God has been doing for you and is continuing to do for you and will continue to do for you. Verse 3, “who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.” Who forgives your sins and who heals your illness? What an amazing framework for the providence of God in our lives. And what happens in the rest of the psalm actually is that the psalmist develops in great detail how forgiving, gracious, and merciful, how patient God is with us, the believers who are like this psalmist today: you and I. God loves us.

And we don’t want to go through every single verse of the psalm, but I encourage you—perhaps after you have finished watching this clip—to really go through the psalm and make it your own. Encourage yourself, your soul, everything within you to see just how wonderful and amazing God is. I want to pick up on one or

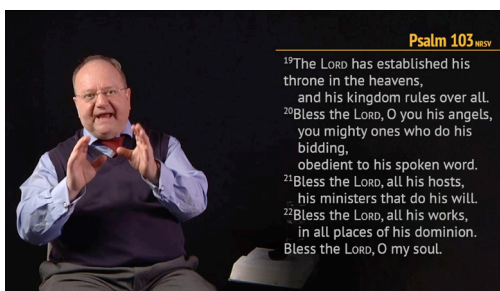
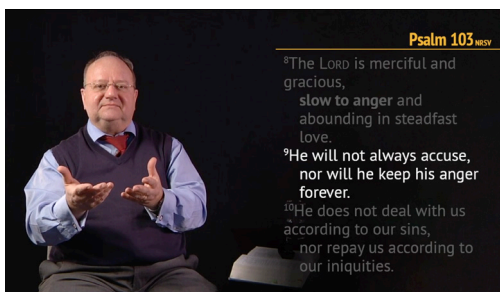


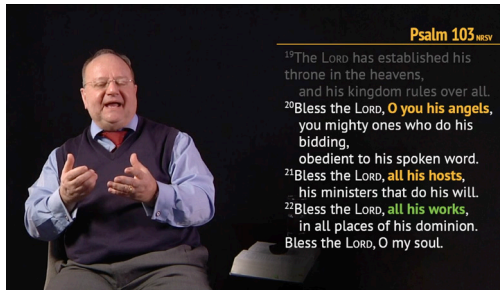
two other things in the middle of the psalm (in particular verse 8): “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” There’s so much we could say about this verse. This by the way is a quotation from Exodus 34:6. Worth reading but we don’t have time to look at that now.

But I want to share with you a fun thing. Did you know that the way in which Hebrew language expresses the idea of patience is related to the nose? Somebody who is short-tempered—notice the modern image or metaphor of short-temperedness, as opposed to a long-suffering or a long temper—the Hebrew says it with regard to the nose. So when it says, God is slow to anger, literally (I think this is funny), the Hebrew says God has a long nose.

So we tend to think that the God of the Old Testament is this angry choleric who goes nuts at the slightest provocation. But what the psalmist reminds himself, and us, of here is that God is actually truly patient with us, slow to anger; and not only this, but in verse 9 we read that even though God eventually may get angry, He will not remain angry forever. So it takes Him a long time to get angry in the first place. Once He is angry—and that’s part of the makeup of the loving, gracious, merciful, generous, and wonderful God we believe in and whom we are called to bless here in this amazing psalm—this God does not remain long in His anger. What a wonderful, beautiful God we believe in! So much more could be said, but we don’t have time. So what we’ll do now is we’ll jump to the end of the psalm.

We’re going to look at the final verses, namely verses 20–22. Those final verses respond to the state of the universe (v. 19): “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.” This means that God is absolutely in control. He’s got unlimited power and control over the entire universe and your entire life. But the psalmist, now in his excitement and in his renewed awareness of how wonderful and marvelous and beautiful God is, now turns into a universal cosmological evangelist. In fact, what happens is that the psalmist, who until now has been talking to his own soul in an internal dialogue, is now directing his attention to others around him. Nonetheless, would you believe he addresses the angels—supernatural beings with incredible power who also have caused no off and believe in God—and is so bold as to encourage the angels, the mighty ones of God, to bless God and to remain obedient to God.





What an amazing bold move this is! The repetition in verse 21 expands this and makes it more intense, envisaging angels like us human beings as free agents who have a choice in whether or not they want to trust God and be obedient to God. And then in verse 22, the psalm comes full circle by expanding this invitation to bless God to the whole created universe. All of God's work, everyone, with nobody excluded, is invited into a living relationship with this God characterized by admiration, by gratefulness, by excitement, by faith, hope, and love. And when everybody, everything, the whole universe is included in this wonderful praise of God in this worship of God, the psalmist remembers, "Bless the LORD, O my soul." That is the experience you and I can have as we continue to explore and discover the beautiful poetry of the Old Testament and in particular the Psalms.