

PSALMS

Chapter 103

Bless the LORD, O My Soul

Of David.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not 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 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. 6 The LORD works righteousness 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 chide, 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 high as the heavens are 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 does he remove our transgressions from us. 13 As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. 14 For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. 15 As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes 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 word, obeying the voice of his word! 21 Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will! 22 Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Ps 103 A hymn to God's love and compassion toward his people. (See introduction to Ps 101.) Calls to praise frame the body of the hymn (vv. 1–2, 20–22) and set its tone. The recital of praise falls into two unequal parts: (1) a three-verse celebration of personal benefits received (vv. 3–5) and (2) a 14-verse recollection of God's mercies to his people Israel (vv. 6–19). The major division (vv. 6–19) is composed of six couplets framed by vv. 6 and 19, which describe the general character of God's reign. Thematic development divides the six couplets into two equal parts (vv. 7–12, 13–18), of which the first celebrates God's compassion on his people as sinners while the second sings of his compassion on them as frail mortals. The two concluding couplets proclaim the vastness of his love (vv. 11–12) and its unending perseverance (vv. 17–18). As with the hymn found in Ps 33, the length of the psalm has been determined by the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet (see introduction to Ps 33). – Psalms 103 and 104 form a pair. They are united by the theme, "Praise the Lord, O my soul." (CSB)

Ps 103–6 are united by their calls to praise the Lord and are a fitting conclusion to Book Four of the Psalter (see p 844). While Ps 103 is ascribed to King David, we cannot determine its particular time or situation. (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–5, the individual praises the Lord; vv 6–14, whole community called to praise; vv 15–19, human life contrasted with God's eternal nature; vv 20–22, call for all creation to honor the Lord. (TLSB)

103:1 Threefold emphasis. (TLSB)

Hbr *barak*, “To bestow ability for success” (from the greater person to the lesser) or “to praise a person’s ability for success” (from the lesser person to the greater). Refers to bending the knees, perhaps to kneel and receive a pronouncement of inheritance with all its wealth (cf Gn 27). “Bless the Lord” has the sense of “greet” and is common in the Psalms, expressing thanks and praise (34:1; 145:1, 10). In faith, praise is the greatest gift we can offer to our Lord. The blessing that came from the temple at Jerusalem now resonates through the Church, brought by pastors, missionaries, teachers, and other Christians who proclaim the Gospel of Christ’s sacrifice. (TLSB p. 842)

Bless has a distinct meaning of expressing joyful gratitude as an enrichment of God (s.v. Ps. 5:12). The praise given will make more people aware of the person and works of the Lord, and so God’s reputation will be enriched. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

103:1 *soul*. More than just the spiritual center; refers to whole person (“all that is within me”)—body, mind, emotions, will, personality. (TLSB)

103:2 *benefits* – Cf vv 3–14, but also whatever good God has done. (TLSB)

The psalmist’s message here is: Do not forget them (almost, stop forgetting them) – that is, start acting on them. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

103:3–5 Recital of personal blessings received. (CSB)

Psalmist names personal blessings for which he is thankful. Forgiveness tops the list. (TLSB)

103:3 *forgives all your iniquity...heals all your diseases* – In one sense every sickness is a result of sin. If sin had not entered the world, there would be no sickness. Every sickness reminds us that we are sinners living in a sinful world. Sometimes a specific sickness is the result of a specific sin. Sickness transmitted or caused by drug abuse or sexual immorality are examples of such disease. However, we cannot draw the conclusion that every sickness is the result of a specific sin. God may have other reasons for allowing sickness to enter our life. (PBC)

The forgiveness of sins is the first and greatest of God’s benefits, for without this none of the other benefits matter. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

The Lord can and does heal His people, according to His good and gracious will. (TLSB)

Suffering with disease can actually deepen the relationship, which is why God may not heal immediately. The verb “to heal” can be used for physical or spiritual. In fact, the physical healing of diseases or adverse situations is often the outward sign of inward healing (see Ex. 15:22-27; Matt. 9:1-7). (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

103:4 *redeems*. A synonym for “delivers.” (CSB)

It has the basic sense of “protect” and is often used for practical care and defense of the family rights (as in the book of Ruth). But with God as the subject the ideas of rescue or redeem are more pronounced. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

Could simply refer to God's delivering the psalmist from a premature death. When reading this verse from the perspective of Christ's empty tomb, the redemption encompasses deliverance from the grave through the final resurrection. (TLSB)

pit. A metaphor for the grave. (CSB)

Death or Sheol. (TLSB)

This word, "Sheol" occurring 65 times in the Hebrew OT, is still obscure. Since the derivation of the word is uncertain, the context must determine the meaning in each case.

1. *Sheol* can mean the resting place of mankind's mortal remains (Jb 17:16; Is 38:10).

2. *Sheol* can also mean "realm of the dead," into which all enter who depart this life, righteous as well as wicked (e.g., Gn 37:35; Jb 7:9; Ps 16:10; 31:17; 89:48). In this sense, it is a general term used very much like the English phrase "the hereafter" or "the beyond." The phrase "to go down into Sheol" means "to die, to depart from the land of the living." But it should be noted that when the righteous are said to descend into Sheol, their fate beyond is rarely taken into account. The hope of the pious in the OT is expressed differently (e.g., Ps 73:24).

3. *Sheol* can mean the place where God's judgment overtakes evildoers. In this sense, Sheol receives those who are taken away in God's anger. Korah's rebel band went down to Sheol because they had provoked the Lord (Nu 16:30, 33). Harlots go to Sheol (Pr 5:5). The anger of the Lord burns to the depths of Sheol (Dt 32:22). According to Ps 49, all people die physically, the righteous as well as the ungodly (v 10), but there is a difference in their existence in the hereafter. The confidence of the psalmist is expressed in the words "They [i.e., the wicked] are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd.... But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me" (vv 14–15). Clearly, there is a sharp contrast between the doom of the ungodly and the glorious hope of the believer, who hopes to rest securely in the hands of God (Ps 73). (TLSB p. 792)

who crowns you – By using "who crowns you," the psalmist is signifying how God honors his people – he makes them feel like kings. By so crowning them he fits them to reign; and do that, he weaves the crown out of his attributes. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

103:5 *like the eagle's.* The vigor of youth is restored to match the proverbial unflinching strength of the eagle (see Isa 40:31). (CSB)

Describes a strength that is renewed and even soaring. (TLSB)

103:6–19 God's love and compassion toward his people. (CSB)

In many respects the history of Israel was like David's personal history. Like David, Israel had received undeserved mercy and forgiveness. They had often gone astray during the wilderness years, but God forgive them and maintained his covenant with them. The Lord has not dealt with us as our sins deserve. He has forgiven our sins for Christ's sake. Since he has given his own Son to die for us, we can feel absolutely sure of his love. (PBC)

103:6 Together with v. 19 (the other side of the literary frame) it characterizes the reign of God under which Israel has been so graciously blessed. (CSB)

103:7–12 God's compassion on his people as sinners. (CSB)

103:7 *his ways*. The Lord's benevolent dealings (see 103:7; 138:5) with those who are true to his ways. (CSB)

103:8 God used these adjectives in Ex 34:6–7 to describe Himself to Moses; here they are the basis of praise. (TLSB)

In Exodus this revelation was given to the nation after the sin of the golden calf – when they needed it the most. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

103:9 God should punish for sin, but instead He shows limitless compassion to forgive and remove iniquity. (TLSB)

always chide – Offer a rebuke or accusation. (TLSB)

anger. God's anger is always an expression of his righteousness. (CSB)

103:11–12 The vastness of God's love is supremely shown in his forgiving Israel's sins. (CSB)

Too vast to measure. Cf Is 55:8–9. God's removal of transgressions knows no bounds. (TLSB)

God's mercy and forgiveness are immeasurable. Who can measure the distance of east from west? Who can measure the height of the sky? God's love will never come to an end. (PBC)

Isaiah 55:8-9 ⁸ “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. ⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

103:11 *so great is*. So prevails. (CSB)

The psalmist praises the greatness of God's loyal love to those who fear him – it is unlimited, higher than the heavens above. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

103:12 *east...west* – God's mercy and forgiveness are immeasurable. Who can measure the distance of east from west? Who can measure the height of the sky? God's love will never come to an end. God's supply of forgiveness will never run out. When God removes sin, he removes it completely. When God forgives sin, he does not bring it up again (PBC)

103:13–18 God's compassion on his people as frail mortals; perhaps echoed in Lk 1:50. (CSB)

Human life is very fleeting. In comparison to God's eternity or the age of the earth, it is as short as the life of a flower. (PBC)

103:13 *as a father* – This compares God's manner of dealing with us to that of a loving father. Good parents love the children and hope for the best from them, but they do not expect or demand more than their children are capable of performing at a given age and level of ability. God knows the limitations imposed on us by our present physical and spiritual weaknesses. He does not demand from us more than we can perform. What we are incapable of doing Christ has done for us. (PBC)

Family imagery adds warmth to this picture of God's forgiveness. (TLSB)

103:14 *we are dust.* Cf Gn 2:7. God knows who we are because He formed us out of the dust. (TLSB)

The use of the words “frame” and “dust” recalls the account of creation in Gen. 2:7 and 3:19. God “formed the man from the “dust” of the ground; and God declared, “Dust you are and to dust you shall return. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

103:15-16 *grass flourishes...wind passes* – The grass and flowers flourish in all heir glory, but they fade and the wind blows it all away and it is gone and forgotten. So too are humans. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

103:17 *steadfast...everlasting* – The infinite span of God’s love over-arches man’s little time (see v. 11). (CSB)

In contrast with the brief and frail nature of human life. (TLSB)

children’s children. The close identity of a man with his children and of children with their parents, resulting from the tightly bonded unity of the three- or four-generation households of that ancient society, is alien to the modern reader, whose sense of self is highly individualistic. (CSB)

103:18 *keep his covenant* – Show faith in God’s redeeming forgiveness and love. (TLSB)

do his commandments – Obedience that flows from faith follows, worked by God’s grace (cf Rm 1:1–5, esp v 5). (TLSB)

103:19 The emphasis of the psalm changes here; now the psalmist extols the greatness and majesty of the one who has taken pity on sinful, mortal creatures. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

throne in the heavens – Cf 93:2; 102:12. God’s power and authority over all creation. (TLSB)

throne is a symbol of his reign; and its location in the heavens places his reign far above and over all the earth and all mortal beings. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

103:20–22 Concluding call to praise, directed to all creatures (cf. vv. 1–2). A call to praise is often the climax of praise in the Psalter (as also of the whole collection; see Ps 148–150). (CSB)

This final call urges all creation, including the heavenly creatures, to give glory to God. (TLSB)

103:20 *his angels* – Possibly a military image: God’s mighty warriors or His angelic army. (TLSB)

103:21 *all his hosts.* Uniquely here and in 148:2 the Hebrew for “hosts” is masculine, and in both places the “hosts” are associated with “angels.” (CSB)

ministers. Translates the participle of the Hebrew verb for “minister” in 101:6 (see note there; see also note on 104:4). (CSB)

Those who carry out God's will from heaven (cf Heb 1:14), much as officials in a royal court carry out the commands of a human king. (TLSB)

103:22 *all his works*. Because God's kingdom is one, all his creatures will rejoice when God's rule over mankind brings righteousness to full expression in his cosmic kingdom. For the present state of the creation as it awaits the fullness of redemption. (CSB)

Hbr "created ones," usually describing human beings. People and angels will praise God in all times and places. (TLSB)

Ps 103 How many times do we need God's forgiveness? It's impossible to count. Day after day, our transgressions should bring His anger. But over and over again, He removes our iniquities. Where are they sent? To the cross, where Jesus takes the anger and gives us compassion instead. • "Bless the LORD, O my soul!" (v 1). I thank You for redeeming me from death so that I may join the angelic hosts in praising Your holy name from everlasting to everlasting. Amen. (TLSB)