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Psalm 103
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Perspective

One of the questions, that I have learned to ask people is... “How is your soul today?” It’s a question that honestly catches people off guard because it is hard to answer. The soul in fact, is like a wild animal that only comes out occasionally. To be in touch with one’s soul, they must be very still, quiet, and observant. As people begin to ponder their response, they often look down or away as if to peer inwardly, deep within themselves. They take inventory of their relationships with God, with others, with themselves, and all of creation.

As the person begins to speak, the soul peaks its timid head out from the darkness and begins to spill forth from them.

Psalm 103, our psalm for the day, which was written by David, book ends how it was with his soul at the moment. David, as we see through out his poems was very in touch with his soul. He was a renaissance man, a man of great emotion.

So what is the soul?

One commentator wrote, “O my soul,” was a very conventional Hebrew way of addressing oneself. It’s not a spiritual aspect distinct from the physical but an individual’s very self as a living, conscious, personal being. When the psalmist used soul with bones, he was not referencing two distinct entities but was referring to himself as a whole.

The Hebrew word for soul is “nephesh” which can also be translated as face or image. When scripture says that humans were created in the image of God, the nephesh of God, it is actually referring to our soul or that part of us that is unique. It is the seat of our intellect, our emotions, and our will. That is what is made in God’s image.

The Book of Psalms or Psalter is like opening up David’s intimate soul journal. Here, David is brutally honest with God in his high, his lows, his questions, his certainties, his doubts, his joys, his sorrows, his bravery, and his fears. David is not afraid of telling it how it is. The Psalms doesn’t sugar coat what he was feeling at the time. The beauty is that this is give us license to also be brutally honest before God with how we are feeling.

Join me as we read Psalm 103 and hear more about the soul.

Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
2 Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—

3 who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,
4 who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and
compassion,
5 who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed
like the eagle's.
6 The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.
7 He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel:
8 The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.
9 He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;
10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our
iniquities.
11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those
who fear him;
12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions
from us.
13 As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on
those who fear him;
14 for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.
15 The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field;
16 the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.
17 But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear
him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—
18 with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.
19 The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over
all.
20 Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding who
obey his word.
21 Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.
22 Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion. Praise the Lord,
my soul.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Mt Angel Benedictine Abbey just east of Salem, Oregon is a place where I like to go to get in touch with my soul. I usually head out there several times a year for personal retreats or study leave. Once per month, pastors from the around the Portland Vancouver areas gather there for a spiritual retreat day away, fellowship and connection with each other. Those moments feed my soul.

A spiritual practice that I developed years ago when I first started frequenting the Abbey was to take a walk through the cemetery where the monks who served at the Abbey over the years have been laid to rest. As I walk, reflect, and pray, I listen for whatever messages the dead monks have to tell me...which is always the same. They say, "Remember you are dust." Remember that this is from which you've come and to which someday you will return. As David reminds us, "For our days are like grass or a flower of the field. The wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more."

Pretty sobering, huh?

But somehow those sobering words comfort me and help me to develop proper a perspective about whatever on my heart at the moment.

Psalm 103, is a psalm of perspective. David helps us to develop a proper perspective of who God is, who we are, and what God does for us.

So first, we learn more about who God is.

God is Creator of all things. God is sustainer of all things. Things on earth, beneath the earth, above the earth, beyond the earth. God keeps the earth in its orbit around the sun and moon around the earth. And all the stars, planets, and galaxies, seen or unseen in motion.

God is a Father who has compassion for his children who fear him.

Now this was a confusing concept for the boys on my recent hiking trip to British Columbia. Why would God want us to be afraid of him?

This is what I said. It doesn't mean that God wants us to be afraid of him. But God does want us to revere him, to have a healthy respect for him. We treat him with awe, but we also are careful around him. It's like playing with fire. Fire can be extremely useful when handled with caution and respect. But when we are careless with fire, it can burn us and cause incredible damage. Every time I drive through the Columbia River Gorge, I am reminded of the forest fires that devastated hundreds of thousand of acres of pristine forest land all because one young person didn't fear fire and was careless with it while hiking on the Eagle Creek Trail. Yes fireworks are fun, they are beautiful, they are powerful. But they can also be very deadly.

We need to have a healthy fear of fireworks. Not be afraid of them. But to have a proper perspective of them.

The same is true with God. David tells us to treat God with love and respect and proper care. Fear.

God is also compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. God's love is from everlasting to everlasting. It's eternal. God's love covers the past, the present, and the future.

That's some of what Psalm 103 tells us about God.

Second, Psalm 103 tells us more about who we are.

We are worshipping creatures.

Notice how the Psalm opens and closes with Praise the Lord or also translated Bless the Lord, O my soul. As I mentioned earlier, David was a deep feeling person. We hear that throughout his psalms. He is calling his soul, his intellect, emotions, and will to worship God fully. The truth is that sometimes we don't feel like worshipping God. Do we? But David reminds us to do it anyway and sometimes we even need to command our souls to worship God. So David is stirring himself up to praise and to stir up others to praise God as well. By doing so, we put ourselves in proper context with God at the center of all things, above all things, and with all things as the Creator of all things.

Notice also that we are called to praise God with our in most being. Everything that we are. Not just what we present to others. Our most hidden depths. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees and teachers of the law he accused them of being white washed tombs...who worshiped God with their mouths, but not with their dead hearts. A white washed tomb looks good on the outside, but smells like death on the inside. David challenges us to worship with authenticity, so that what comes from our mouths matches what is springing forth from our hearts.

Psalm 103 reminds us that we are God's children, adopted into his family by faith in Jesus Christ. And that being part of the family comes with certain benefits and responsibilities. David says, don't forget that.

Dr. Patrick Miller at Princeton Theological Seminary was an expert in the Psalms. And he would tell us the story of what his father would tell him as a youth before he'd go out on the town with friends. He'd say, "Now Patrick. Remember that you are a Miller. And Miller's have a certain reputation in this town. It comes with some benefits, but also a great deal of responsibility. Do not forget that, Son."

The same is true for us a God's children. There are great benefits but also some responsibility of acting as God children.

The Hebrew word for benefit is "gemul." It means service, recompense, or reward. David reminds us because he knows just how easy it is to forget God's benefits or that we are God's children. We forget or choose not to acknowledge him. When we do what is wrong, and we know clearly what is right. Do you think David chose to forget God and his benefits and responsibilities when he looked at Bathsheba and wanted her for himself. You bet he did. Did he pay the consequence for his sin? You bet he did that too.

David calls us not to forget God because God's ways are always best for us.

My friends, is there something we know that we are doing and are putting blinders on hoping that God doesn't see? Maybe God is calling us this morning to make it right and change our ways so that we don't forget God and God's ways.

Psalm 103 tells us that we are dust. Every time I conduct a memorial service, I am reminded of this truth. Particularly when the person who has passed away is cremated. Our material bodies are reduce to ashes that can fit into a small shoe box.

When I was in the Navy, one of the courtesy services that we would periodically do out on deployment was conduct burials at sea for former deceased servicemen. Although there were times when I wished I could perform it for some live servicemen as well. (Haha).

This one time, as the lay chaplain for our ship I was asked to participate in such a service. We would read a few scriptures, say a prayer, and then release the ashes into the sea. That was when I learned how important it was to know the direction of the winds while you are doing that. This time the winds were blowing back on deck. So not paying attention, we released the ashes and but apparently the person didn't want go into the sea. But instead blow all over the deck. We had quite a laugh as we did our best to sweep him up and put him back in the sea.

Tell me God doesn't have a sense of humor!

Psalm 103 also goes on to tell us what God does for us.

God forgives all our sins. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. You might recall me saying that sometimes in the prayer following our time of confession each week. Psalm 103 is where those words come from.

God heals all our diseases. Now I understand that there are four kinds of healing. Our bodies have been created to heal themselves. That's pretty amazing in and of itself. There are also healings from medial advancements. There are supernatural or miraculous healings where there are no scientific or medical explanations for it happening. Then there are healings that occur that we don't fully know or understand. Healing can be physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual.

God redeems our life from the pit. Psalm 40 is a great psalm of David that speaks to that.

"I waited patiently for the Lord, he turned and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet upon a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord."¹

The pit can be translated as destruction, death, or the grave.

God crowns us with love and compassion. The Hebrew word for crown is *atar*. It means to encompass. To surround or encircle us as if to protect us from attack. When David talks about crowning us with love and compassion, what he is

¹ Psalm 40:1-3

referring to is as if God has put a special knowledge in our heads as children, heirs, that we are loved and shown compassion.

One of the things we saw on our recent trip to London were the British Crown Jewels in the Tower of London. It was amazing to see these crowns that are only pulled out for special occasions. The crown that Queen Elizabeth wore for her coronation in 1953 weighed in at 2.5 lbs and is laden with 2,868 diamonds, 17 sapphires, 11 emeralds and hundreds of pearls. It's extremely heavy, serving as a reminder of the tremendous weight and responsibility that she carries before God and the British people to rule with love and compassion.

When David says that God crowns us with love and compassion, those jewels are much more precious than what Queen Elizabeth wears. The Hebrew word for love is *hesed* which can also mean loving kindness, favor, mercy.

Psalm 103 tells us that God satisfies our desires with good things. The Hebrew word *desires* is literally *mouths*. So God puts good things in our mouths. Now God's idea of good things might be different than what we might think of. As a kid I may only want to eat junk food and candy, but our loving parent knows that we need to eat health, good things for us to grow properly. The Hebrew word for good is *tov*. It means bountiful, beautiful, better, best, cheerful things.

We hear that God restores our youth like the eagles. When we hear this we should also hear echoes of this Psalm in the words of the Prophet Isaiah who said, "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak, even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will walk and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."²

Psalm 103 reminds us that God works righteousness and justice for the oppressed. We heard all about that last week with Psalm 82. If you didn't hear that sermon, it would be worth giving it a listen.

And finally we hear that God establishes his throne in heaven and his kingdom rules over all which leads us to the end of the psalm.

Once again, David calls us to call to worship and praise God. But who?

The angels who do his bidding. The Hebrew word for angels *malak* can also be translated as kings, prophets, priests, or messengers of God. Or those who God has created and put in place to steward his creation and rule over the nations.

The heavenly hosts. The Hebrew word for hosts is *tsaba* which can also be translated as an army which stands ready to be sent into battle. Think of the heavenly hosts that show up to praise God at Jesus' birth.

² Isaiah 40:28b-31

The servants who do his will. Like you and me.

All of his works.

Our souls. From the beginning of life, to our final breath. That's what Psalm 103 is getting at. May everything we do, and say, and think, and believe, praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord.