

Psalm 103 - Thanks Be to God!¹

Before the Lesson: There are no handouts or special equipment needed for this lesson.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What is your favorite faith-oriented song (hymn, chorus, etc.)?

Do you ever talk to yourself? Outloud?

Information

Today's psalm is a hymn, a song for communal worship.

In this Lenten season, we have heard primarily songs of lament. God seems hidden or angry. The psalmist feels abandoned, threatened, or fearful. In the hymn of praise, the hope that God will be faithful is fulfilled.

A hymn “characterizes a public (as distinct from personal or intimate) song that is sung with abandonment in praise to God for the character of God’s person or the nature of God’s creating and liberating actions.”²

Psalm 103 is the first of a series of praise hymns, 103-107.

- Have a class member read Psalm 103:1-2.

The psalmist is talking to himself, reminding himself to 1. remember and 2. not forget the Lord’s blessings. We could look for the differences between “remember/don’t forget,” but this is not the psalmist’s goal. Hebrew songs use parallelism, setting one word, or phrase, or image beside another as a poetic technique, much as certain rhythms or rhymes are used in many English songs. So, here we have a positive and a negative way of expressing the same sentiment - God has done a lot for you. That is worth remembering and celebrating.

As in many Bible studies, my small group begins each week with prayer concerns. However, one day two of my class members asked if there could be a way to encourage the sharing of good news as well as the news of illnesses and burdens. We were all depressed by the time we opened our Bibles! Now, we begin our class with a time of checking in (“How was your week?”) and as

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² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994), 158.

the class member checks in they also share “concerns and celebrations.” Now, we not only pray for a sick friend, but celebrate a new job opportunity, a good report card, or an answer to a previous week’s concern.

What is the balance between sharing concerns and celebrations in your classroom (and church)?

Normally, the psalms are vague about specifics. The disadvantage of this is that we love to know “backstories.” (This is probably why so many Psalms were given superscripts, relating the psalm to an event in the life of David, for example. But these superscripts were not part of the original psalm; they were added hundreds of years later.)

The advantage of the vagueness is that the song can be sung by all persons regardless of the circumstance that made them cry out to God in the first place.

What are some circumstances that might cause us to cry out to God? (death, loss, fear, injustice, broken relationships, becoming a target, sin (of ourselves or others), etc.)

As we listen to this next reading, pay attention to the verbs that the psalmist uses to describe God’s activity.

- Have a class member read Psalm 103:3-6.

How has God helped the singer? What verbs are used to describe God’s activity?

[Ask class members to share the different words from different translations as you write these words on the board. This list should include at least six words, such as forgives, heals, redeems, fulfills, crowns, works.]

I am going to invite you, in a period of silence, to think of a difficult experience you have passed through. How did God help you? Which of these words fits your situation? Or, does a different word express your experience better? After a few minutes of silence, I’ll invite you to share that word. After we share the word, I’ll invite you to share a story behind that word, if you would like to do so.

[After reflection and sharing of words/stories...]

In verse 3, we find more parallelism: in the first part of the verse, “God forgives your iniquities” and in the second part of the verse, “God heals your infirmities.” This parallelism is going to be broadened in two longer sections of the psalm. Verses 7-13 will talk about sin; verses 14-18 will talk about sickness. We will hear about the morality and the mortality of human beings.

Before we hear the first section, let’s remember a story about God’s revelation to Moses. You’ll remember that God gave Moses two tablets that were chiseled with God’s commandments.

Moses took these tablets down the mountain. There, he found that the people had gathered gold and created a golden calf to represent the god who had freed them from Egyptian slavery. In his fury, Moses threw and destroyed the tablets. Then, Moses went back up the mountain to get new tablets. It was in this visit with God that God revealed to Moses God's character.

- Have a class member read Exodus 34:4-10.

Verse 8 is “one of the most important theological statements in the Bible. The influence of its language and content is apparent at many points in the law and prophets. . . . Psalm 103 reads like a hymn based on study and reflection on the proclamation in its primary context. The proclamation's theology is what the psalm is all about: the Lord's abounding steadfast love, so much greater and more lasting than his anger at sin, as the ground and hope of forgiveness for sinners.”³

- Have a class member read Psalm 103:7-13.

The word that is threaded throughout this psalm is the word *chesed*. (We have talked about this word before in the lesson on Psalm 32.) Although the word is difficult to translate with a single word or phrase, generally, the word is translated as mercy.

“It is tempting to say *hesed* is the most important word in the Hebrew Scriptures,” Michael Card says. “*Hesed* occurs nearly 250 times in the Hebrew Bible throughout all of the three major divisions.” Although it appears so often, it is a challenge for translators to give it a single word or phrase. Card has an appendix that notes all of the 247 verses that include this word as well as the different ways *hesed* is translated in seven common English translations. Most commonly, the word is translated as mercy, love, loving-kindness, steadfast love, faithful love, or unfailing love.

We see the *hesed* of God incarnated in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Whether Jesus was teaching, healing, casting out demons, or riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, he did all as a demonstration of God's love and mercy. Indeed, as Michael Card put it, *hesed* is “when the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything.”⁴

“If God requited man in accordance with the amount of his sin, one could only despair. But God's logic is not ours; He does not square accounts with us, His grace always overtips the balance.”⁵

³ James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 328.

⁴ Michael Card, *Inexpressible: Hesed and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness*. (Downer's Grove: IVP Books, 2018), 27.

⁵ Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, Translated by J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 241.

As recipients of God's grace, we also grow to become bearers of that grace. Our "fear of the Lord" - that is, our reverence for God motivates us to accept and celebrate God's Lordship.

"Three times the psalm says that the steadfast love and compassion of God are 'for those who fear him' (vv 11, 13, 17). 'Those who fear the Lord' is a designation used in the psalms along with the righteous, the faithful, and the servants of the Lord for those who seek to make the Lord the decisive orienting center of their lives...The fear of the Lord is simply reverence practiced in trust and obedience."⁶

God demonstrates divine lovingkindness in mercy because of our sin and in presence as we face our mortality. This takes us all the way back to the first chapters of the Bible. Adam and Eve sinned. In Genesis 3, we read the consequences of that sin.

- Have a class member read Genesis 3:17-19.

Those haunting words from God to Adam - and to all humanity - are often said as ashes are imposed on our foreheads in the Ash Wednesday service. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Yet, even as we face our finitude, God is faithful to us.

- Have a class member read Psalm 103:14-18.

This is a wonderfully constructed hymn built around the theme of God's character as a God of mercy. It begins with an individual and ends with the universal. Everyone experiences struggles, sin and sin's penalties, and finally, death. The revelation of God's mercy is demonstrated to Adam, to Moses and the nation of Israel, and to all who keep God's covenant.

In our final verses, the psalmist is in awe that God's mercy extends throughout all creation.

- Have a class member read Psalm 103:19-22.

"This psalm opens out into ever-widening circles: the individual, the community of God's people, the world. The development is an attempt at total praise."⁷

"It is no wonder that the concluding summons to praise is expansive. The psalm began by calling the self. But now it is all creation, earth-creatures and heavenly angels, who are needed adequately to assert who this unutterable God is."⁸

Transformational Exercise

⁶ Mays, 329f.

⁷ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 22.

⁸ Brueggemann, 161.

As we conclude, I invite you to relax and listen to my reading of the entire psalm.

Listen to the structure that implies completion. There are 22 verses, just as there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Listen for the emphasis of God's name, Yahweh, used 11 times. Listen for the inclusivity as the word "all" is used 9 times. Note how the psalm begins and ends with the author saying, "Praise the Lord, O my soul!"

Listen to the progression from individual to community to all humanity to heavenly spirits.

Listen to the theological truth that God is greater than us and greater than anything we face. With that in mind, at the end of the Psalm 103 reading, I will read from Romans 8:38-39 (NLT)

[Invite the class members to relax, take a deep breath, and listen to you read the psalm. At the end of the reading, read the passage from Romans (written below), then conclude with "Praise the Lord, O my soul. Amen."]

"And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"Praise the Lord, O my soul."

Amen.