

You are probably aware of the statistics that show that fewer young people are attending church than did in previous generations. Many young people are simply skeptical about any kind of organized religion. However, these same surveys show that there is a lot of spiritual interest among both younger and older people. Since you are here in church this morning I am going to make the assumption that at some level you have a desire for a spiritual connection with God.

For centuries Christians have found that reading the Psalms is a great way to begin and deepen that connection. So we're beginning a series in the Psalms this morning. In your bulletin we've provided you with a list of the Psalms we are planning on using in worship over the next few weeks. The readings we've selected cover all the major themes found in the Psalms. We hope that when we're done, you'll be equipped to read and understand most of the 150 Psalms on your own. I encourage you to read the Psalms we're using in worship during the week, either before or after you hear the sermons on them.

The Psalms were written by various Hebrew poets, with many of them attributed to David, who lived about 3000 years ago. They served as the hymnal for ancient Israel and the foundation of Christian praise and worship for much of the life of the church. In fact, there was a time when

Presbyterians would not sing anything but the Psalms in worship! Other songs, like our hymns, were not considered appropriate for Sunday worship. This led to some major debates until hymns were finally deemed acceptable! In fact, when the Lower Marsh Creek Presbyterian Church split off from our church around 1750, this was one of the major issues!

This morning we begin with a quick look at the well-known Psalm 103. It is the basis for many hymns, including our opening hymn this morning. We also used a few verses from this Psalm as our Assurance of Pardon. Clearly this Psalm has a variety of uses in worship, but what does it have to say to us as individuals? Let's read it together. You'll find it in your bulletin. You may notice that the Psalm is in three parts. It begins with an invitation to praise God, followed by a list of God's many benefits, concluding with another invitation to praise God. Let's read it responsively.

<sup>1</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

<sup>2</sup>**Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—**

<sup>3</sup>who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

<sup>4</sup>**who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,**

<sup>5</sup>who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

<sup>6</sup>**The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.**

<sup>7</sup>He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

<sup>8</sup>**The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

<sup>9</sup>He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

<sup>10</sup>**He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.**

<sup>11</sup>For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

<sup>12</sup>**as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.**

<sup>13</sup>As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

<sup>14</sup>**For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.**

<sup>15</sup>As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field;

<sup>16</sup>**for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.**

<sup>17</sup>But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,

<sup>18</sup>**to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.**

<sup>19</sup>The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

<sup>20</sup>**Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word.**

<sup>21</sup>Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will.

<sup>22</sup>**Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul.**

At the beginning of the Psalm, the writer seems to be talking to himself! “*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.*” (Psalm 103:1) The Psalmist is rousing himself and reminding himself of the importance of blessing or praising God. He continues, “*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits-*” (Ps. 103:2) One reason we bless God is because of the many benefits which God gives to us. The Psalmist quickly lists six of these benefits. Look at verses 3-5.

1. *Who forgives all your iniquity.* God forgives our sin. No one else can do that, and being delivered from our guilt is a wonderful gift that God gives us. In fact, this one is so important, that the Psalmist will devote more time to it later in the Psalm.

2. *Who heals all your diseases.* According to the Psalm, it is God’s will that we be made whole again, not just spiritually, but physically as well.

God is concerned with the whole person- body and soul- and it is God's will that we be whole in both body and soul. Sometimes in worship we have a time of prayer for healing and wholeness. There is a strong biblical basis for doing so, and this verse is part of that.

3. *Who redeems your life from the Pit.* When we looked at this Psalm during staff devotions this week, a couple staff members talked about feeling like their lives were in the pit sometimes! But in the Old Testament the "pit" usually refers to the threat of death. God is able to overcome death itself and deliver us from it, or walk us through it. Some of you know what it is to face death, you have done so in the past, or you are doing so now. And it can be terrifying for us. The Psalm reminds us that God is a God of life. That has been important to Bonnie and me right now as we grieve the recent deaths of my parents.

God forgives, heals, and redeems. And there is more.

4. Next we read that God treats us like royalty, crowning us with steadfast love and mercy (or compassion.) The Hebrew word, "hesed," translated "steadfast love" is one of the most important words in the Bible. It is used scores of times to describe God's love for his people. It emphasizes that God's love for us will never change, no matter what we do. That God's love for us is a result of his decision to love us, not because we've earned it somehow. And that makes God's love much more

secure than if it were dependent on our doing what God wants us to do!

God's love is faithful and steadfast. The Psalm continues.

5. *Who satisfies you with good as long as you live.* Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones were right when they sang, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." People everywhere long for a satisfying life, but it is simply not out there. The Stones looked for it in sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but it wasn't there. Others seek it in achievement, material things, in friends and family relationships. It isn't there, either. As good as some of these things are, the imperfections in them make it impossible for them to perfectly satisfy us. But the Psalmist reminds us that the God who designed us, who knows exactly what we need, is able to satisfy us with good for our whole lives. Part of that satisfaction comes as we read his Word to us, as we find it, for example, in the Psalms.

God forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies,

6. *so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.* God desires that we be renewed. That we be strengthened. Many of you know that I turned 60 last year. So I'm feeling the need to be renewed from time to time, especially physically! But I think God has more than that in mind. He wants to renew our inner being. Perhaps you have known people like I have whose bodies are terribly afflicted or wasting away, but who are as strong as ever in spirit. I am always amazed by such people. They have

received a renewed spirit as a gift from God, one of the benefits for those who follow him.

The Psalm then shifts gears, moving from personal benefits to benefits for the whole community. Verses 6 & 7 look back to the time of Moses when God brought justice and vindication to his people who had been enslaved in Egypt. And it was shortly after that time, when the people were wandering in the wilderness on their way to the promised land of Canaan that God revealed something of himself to Moses.

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, he discovered that the people had made a golden idol and were worshiping it and engaging in all kinds of debauchery. You might recall seeing Charlton Heston acting out that scene in the film “The Ten Commandments.” Moses was enraged and threw the tablets down, breaking them. Later, God called him back up to the mountain to receive the commandments a second time, telling him, *“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”* (Ex. 34:6; Psalm 103:8) Does that sound familiar? It is quoted exactly in our Psalm. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love to all his people. The rest of the Psalm just amplifies this theme.

It reminds us that God does not always accuse us of sin or stay angry with us. That his steadfast love for us is as high as the heavens. That God

has removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. That God's compassion for us is like that of a good father toward his children. Someone summed these verses up by saying that God has a long fuse, a short memory, a thick skin, and a big heart.

Finally, God is mindful of our frailty. Verse 14- *For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him...* (Psalm 103:14-17)

In the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona Spain, Derek Redman was about to run the 400 meter race. Like all Olympians, Derek had trained for years for this moment and now was about to live out his dream. He was running well, but when he hit the backstretch, his hamstring muscle tore and he went down in agony- physical agony from the injury and emotional agony from not even being able to finish the race for which he had sacrificed and trained so long. As he lay on the track his father came down from the stands. He told his dad that he didn't want to be carried off, but wanted help to finish the race. So his father put his arm around him and supported him across the finish line.



That is a lot like what God does for us. God knows our limits, our frailty, our failures. And rather than holding that against us, God's steadfast love for us supports us and helps us throughout our lives- to the very finish.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.*