

Gamma 12

Study 15

Psalm 103 Praying the gospel

.1. Who is being addressed in this psalm, and what does that teach us about meditation?

This psalm is addressed to “my soul.” Here we see one of the definitions of meditation: taking the self and the heart in hand, to argue with it and talk to it. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said that meditation is talking to your heart rather than listening to your heart. (He made that comment in a sermon on Psalm 42, another self-talking meditation: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God.”) ¹

Meditation is an inward dialogue with oneself. Derek Kidner says that David is “rousing himself to shake off apathy or gloom... using his mind and memory to kindle his emotion.” ² Thus the psalmist gives us an extremely directive and assertive example of meditation. It means taking your heart in hand, reasoning with it and exhorting it until it becomes engaged in “blessing” and rejoicing in God. We are not helpless before our emotions. Meditation is a very assertive way of bringing the truth to our own hearts and emotions, sometimes almost pummeling them into submission. We must be careful here to remember that this does not mean we are to *deny* the emotions of the heart. “Self-talk” cannot mean repressing and hiding our doubts and fears, as we saw in Psalm 77. Rather, once we have truly come to see our hearts for what they are, we “tell ourselves the truth” and “preach to ourselves” very firmly.

2. Define “bless.” How can you bless God? Why does it take your whole being to bless God?

The word “bless” has a fairly vague and sentimental connotation in the English language. As a result, the NIV translation translates “Bless the LORD, O my soul” as “*Praise* the LORD, O my soul.” Though the ideas are similar, they are not identical. To “bless” something in the Bible is the opposite of to “curse.” When we bless people, we affirm or delight in them and therefore seek their delight and fulfillment. We bless when we seek to give them the deepest desires of their hearts.

Therefore, to bless God is somewhat more personal than simply to praise him. Better yet, it is intimate *personal* praise. ³ It means (1) to identify those things that he most desires and those things that would most glorify him, and then (2) to long for his joy and glory, and (3) to give him the things that accord with this joy and glory.

The idea of “blessing God” seems to reverse our normal understanding of the word. We know that God blesses *us* by bringing us joy and deep fulfillment.

Obviously, God's peace and fulfillment are not things we have the power to bestow on him as he can on us. Yet the call to "bless God" points to a

wonderful mystery. He has tied his heart to us voluntarily, so that now our submission to and enjoyment of his glory *does* bless him and bring him joy. In summary: to bless God is to give him joy by enjoying and rejoicing in him. We give joy *to* him by taking joy *in* him. (Actually, that is the heart of any real love relationship that is not manipulative.)

Why does it take "all that is within me" (AV) or "all my inmost being" (NIV) to bless the LORD? Since "to bless" means "giving joy by taking joy" in God, this entails a deep stirring of one's own heart. Mere praise could simply consist of an enumeration of God's attributes. But the personal praise of "blessing God" will only "work" if you are celebrating God's beauty and glory inwardly, delighting in his attributes, not simply naming them.

Eugene Peterson says that Psalm 103 "expresses the *experience* (not the doctrine) of salvation. This is what it *feels* like to be saved." ³

3. What are the benefits we forget? Survey verses 3-5 for the actions of God. Meditate on how each action benefits you practically.

First, he "forgives all your sins" (v. 3a). This has to do with the *guilt* of sin. The legal liability is removed, no matter how extensive our sinfulness has been (notice: "*all* your sins").

Second, he "heals all your diseases" (v. 3b). There are some who interpret this as a promise that God will heal all physical ailments and sicknesses if we ask. But the Hebrew literary style of parallelism means that verse 3b would not be a complete change in subject. When parallel phrases are used, the same truth is being stated in two ways, each with a slightly different perspective that enriches the understanding. This leads most commentators to conclude that God will deal with the *guilt* of our sin (v. 3a) and the *suffering* and damage our sin causes (v. 3b). Sin always has two effects: legal and actual. Legally, we are due punishment from eternal justice. In actual life, sin always damages our characters, souls, and relationships.

In the language of traditional theology, verse 3a is basically about "justification" (an immediate, legal act that puts us right with God, pardoned and free from condemnation). Verse 3b is basically about "sanctification" (a gradual process by which God's Spirit heals the fears, anger, and weakness of character that are the results of our sin. Derek Kidner notes, "For all the similarity of these two phrases, there is a difference between God's handling of *iniquity* [sin] and of *diseases*, which was made plain in David's own case when he repented of his sin with Bathsheba. Forgiveness was immediate; but [immediate] healing [of the baby born to them] was denied, in spite of several days of prayer and fasting... If relationship with God is paramount, this makes

good sense, for sin [and guilt] destroys it, while suffering *may* deepen it (Heb. 5:8; 12:11).”⁵

Third, he “redeems your life from the pit” (v. 4a). “The pit” simply means the grave. This may be a prayer for God to rescue him from a premature death but, considering the magnitude of the other “benefits” in this list, that is not likely. It is also not possible that the word “redeem” here refers to pardon from sins. David has already thanked God for that, and besides, he is not asking to be redeemed from sin, but from the grave. What we have here is a confidence that he will be ushered into eternal life and, probably, a declaration that he will experience the resurrection from the dead.⁶

Fourth, he “crowns you with love and compassion” (v. 4b). This may simply mean that God loves us, but the word “crown” seems to refer to something more. God imparts an experience of his love to us in a way that makes us feel honored and built up. The NIV translation “love” does not give an adequate signal that this is the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which is commonly translated “steadfast love” or “unfailing love.” *Chesedh* means binding, guaranteed, covenant love — bomb-proof love! It could just as well be called “gospel love.” It is a love that is not subject to change; it does not come or go on the basis of our merits or performance. (The word is also used in verse 17, when it says that God’s gospel love is from “everlasting to everlasting.”) It is *this* kind of love that is a “crown” — a name, an honor, a status. We get our status and honor from God’s gospel love, not from human kingdoms and honors. Following Eugene Peterson here (in his view that Psalm 103 is about our *experience* of salvation), I think David is talking about the enormous new identity that is ours when we experience his love through the Holy Spirit. We know we are in his royal family.

Fifth, he “satisfies your desires” in such a way that “your youth is renewed like an eagle’s” (v. 5). Here we have God’s gift of hope. There is no more wonderful picture of boundless strength than young eagles soaring on the wind. Derek Kidner quotes Weiser, who says, “The poet realizes that the opportunities which life offers lie before him just as they did in the sunny days of his youth.”⁷ In light of our new identity, our assurance of the resurrection, and our confidence that God is going to heal us into holiness, we have a tremendously full and hopeful future. If we grasp the first four actions of God — justification, sanctification, resurrection, and adoption — we will naturally find a continual renewal of our strength.

When you meditate on the practical benefits of each blessing, consider the following:

- Justification gives us a freedom from the past.
- Sanctification gives us an assurance that God is working in the present.
- Resurrection gives us a certainty about our future.
- He honors us, so that no one’s lack of approval should overthrow us.
- He wants to satisfy us with good things, so if we are suffering or going without, he must have an awfully good reason for letting that go on.

- **4. What remarkable claims are made about the believer's status before God in verses 8-19? Which of these claims do you most need to grasp personally right now? How does the work of Christ shed light on these claims?**
- What is a believer's status?
First, verses 8-9 tell us that believers do not have to fear God's wrath. His wrath is not as fundamental as his love. Luther says that God's wrath is his "strange work." God's anger is what happens when his goodness comes into contact with our rebellion and sin. That means God's anger is a relatively temporary phenomenon. After he deals with our sin through his redemption, his anger will cease. He will not keep it forever, but his love is permanent (1 Cor. 13:8-13).
- Second, verse 10 tells why God's wrath should not be feared; namely, because he will not make us pay our own debt! Verse 10a says that he will not treat us as if we have sinned; he will treat us as if we lived far better lives than we really have. Verse 10b goes even further and says that the debt we owe will not be required of us. This has to be one of the most astounding verses in the Old Testament. Verse 8 is almost a word-for-word restatement of what God said to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34:6. Then in Exodus 34:7, God says that he "will by no means clear the guilty" (KJV). The psalmist here, at first glance, seems to be directly contradicting that statement. He says, "He will *not* make you pay, even though you are guilty." As we will see below, this statement makes no sense without an understanding of the cross of Christ. Unless we see that Jesus made full payment of sin on our behalf, we will have to choose *either* what Moses said ("he will not clear the guilty") or what David said ("he will clear the guilty").
- Third, in verses 11-14, the psalmist uses three incredibly rich images to teach us about our status before God.
- His love toward us is "as high as the heavens are above the earth," which of course is an infinite distance. Today we know even more than David did how infinite and immeasurable is the span of the heavens — the universe. The psalmist is saying that God's love for us is infinite.
- His mercy and forgiveness toward us are "as far as is the east from the west," which again, of course, is an infinite distance. This brilliant metaphor tells us that, *by definition*, our sins cannot bring us into condemnation. Just as the "west" — no matter how you define it — can never be in the same place as the "east," so our salvation removes the liability of our sins from us in God's sight. God does not look at us in connection with our sin.
- His knowledge of and care for us is "as a father has compassion on his children," which is unconditional and unlimited. Notice the two parts to this family love: On the one hand, a father knows his children and all their weaknesses (v. 14, "he remembers that we are dust"). An adult can see right

into the heart of a child, who does not have the sense or wherewithal to hide his or her selfishness, impatience, lack of understanding, etc. Just so, God knows how shallow, weak, and impotent we are. Yet, on the other hand, a father has deep compassion on his children (v. 13). Their weakness does not alienate his heart. Rather, the more silly, weak, and needy a child is, the more a

parent's heart is bound up with the child. Just so, God loves us completely — not only in spite of his knowledge of our sin, but because of it. (Thus the implied relationship of verses 13 and 14: "He has compassion on us, for he knows how weak we are.") This is because God's love for us is not simply the love of a king for his subjects, but the love of a father for his children.

Which of these claims do you most need to grasp personally?

The three claims of a believer's status before God are these: In general, God's love for us is immeasurable.

In particular, we enjoy (1) *The status of justification*. God's forgiveness of our sin is limitless and unconditional. He never views us in terms of our sin. (2) *The reality of "adoption."* God has adopted us into his family. We do not simply have a legal status of "no condemnation," we have his heart. We have his tender care, not in spite of our weakness but because of it. God knows us completely, yet cares for us perfectly.

How does the work of Christ shed light on these claims?

This question is, if anything, too weak. Christ's work does not simply "shed light" on these claims. Without Jesus, these claims are almost nonsense! How can a holy God who says, "I will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex. 34:7), go on to do that very thing? How can he say, "I won't make you pay your debt"? Then who *will* pay the debt? Let's look at the claims of Psalm 103 through Christ.

1. (1) The claim of *justification* is made three times in Psalm 103 (v. 3, "forgives"; v. 10, "does not repay us according to our iniquities"; v. 12, "removes our transgressions"). In Christ: "God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished... so as to be both just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25-26).
2. (2) The claim of *sanctification* is made in verse 3b ("heals all your diseases"). In Christ: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son... in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who... live... according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4).

(3) The assurance of *resurrection* is offered in verse 4a ("redeems your life from the pit") and the hope of a glorious future in verse 5. In Christ: "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who lives in you" (Rom. 8:11).

4. 4) The status of *adoption* is referenced in verse 14. In Christ: "For you did not receive a spirit... of fear... but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:15).
5. 5) The honor of being "*crowned*" with *gospel love* is given in verse 4b. In Christ: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). Not only do we have the personal

relationship with God as his little children, but we have the honor and status of being his “heirs,” as adult children.

5. What do all the individuals in verses 20-22 have in common?

They are all beings who are created by God and they are all perfectly obedient to God. The psalmist is saying that when I learn to rejoice inwardly in who I am in Christ and begin to live in accordance with that, I join the enormous dance and symphony of praise and blessing already going on in the universe. The psalmist begins the psalm with the call and the effort to “bless” the LORD with his individual soul (vv. 1-2). Now at the end, he shows us that this is never a solo! ⁸When we bless the Lord, we suddenly find the rest of the universe singing to us and with us! “How doth all the world... sing to a sanctified soul,” wrote Jonathan Edwards. ⁹

Psalm 103 shows us that, ironically, meditation on the grace of the gospel can bring us to the same place that Eastern meditation wants to take us — namely, to oneness with nature. In 103:19-22, David tells us that it is only when praising God that he truly experiences oneness with all creation — for it is then that he realizes what all nature is *doing* — rejoicing in God! Eastern meditation seeks to get us to this oneness by suppressing the analytical side of the mind. Christian meditation, however, gets us to oneness in nature by stimulating our analysis and reflection — and having it center on the glory and grace of God.

6. Meditating on Christ has been called “preaching the gospel to yourself.” Summarize all the things you learn about preaching the gospel to your own heart from this psalm.

The best way to meditate on how to preach the gospel to yourself is to ask this question: *What happens to me when I forget this particular benefit of the gospel?* The number of answers to this question is infinite. Here is a very brief set of examples to get you started.

- When I forget justification, I am flooded with guilt and regret about the past. I live in bondage to idols that make me feel better about myself.
- When I forget sanctification, I give up on myself and stop trying to change.
- When I forget resurrection and hope, I lose my excitement. I become afraid of aging and death.
- When I forget my adoption, I become full of fears. I don’t pray with candor. I try to hide my faults from God and myself.
- When I forget my honor, I become shy. I lose my confidence. I become self-conscious about my appearance.