

Psalm 103: “God’s Incredible Love”

29 March 2020 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship:

Well, good morning everybody, and welcome to the third of our broadcasts and the second in our series of looking at psalms for Easter. Today we will be looking at Psalm 103. You will realise, of course, that due to our government’s further restrictions, we are all having to record this remotely. And you will see different people participating and I am thankful for their help and the expertise of those who put this all together. It’s lovely to be able to come to you and talk to you, even in this remote kind of way. I have been encouraged as I have talked to some of you, as I’ve been praying with some of you - encouraged by the strength of community that you have around you, family and friends, and the wider community, and how each of you are being cared for and are caring for others. So, I want to encourage you to keep that up, of course. I will email you again on Tuesday and let you know what our plans are for Easter and what we are thinking of doing going forward. And now, I suppose, I just want us to take this time of worship and reflection as we think about who our God is again. We’re going to look at Psalm 103. You’ll remember last week that we found out that “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble” (Psalm 46:1). And today, we’re going to look at another aspect of God and who He is. So, let’s worship God as we come to Him now. We’re going to sing *The Splendour of the King*.

Praise: How Great is Our God

Prayer:

Let’s come together as a church this morning and pray to our God. Let’s pray.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name.” Father God, this morning we pray to You because You are the God who forgives, and You forgive all of our iniquity, all of our sin against You, which is when we rebel against You and we say that You are not enough, that we want to do things our way. We thank You, because you forgive this rebellion, this betrayal, and this sin. We pray to You as well, Lord, because You are the God who heals, that You have power over all sickness and disease, and even global pandemics like the coronavirus. We pray to You as well because we know that You are the God who heals the greatest sickness we face, which is the disease of sin within our own hearts. We pray, as well, because You are the God who redeems - that You have not left us to suffer and to die, because our sin, but that You have sent Your Son, Jesus Christ, to die and suffer in our place on the cross as a way of redeeming us, to restore that relationship between us and between You, Lord. And because of that, we pray to You and we thank You, because You are our God. And Lord, when we remember these things and we truly think about them deeply, we can’t help but join with David as we say to, “Bless the LORD, O my soul.” However, Lord, we acknowledge often that we do not feel like we bless the Lord. We often live lives that are full of sin, that are not lived as we are supposed to be living. We acknowledge,

Lord, that like the Israelites in Joshua, that we often forget to pray, that we forget to trust You, and we forget to follow Your lead as You guide us. Lord, we confess that we often live lives that are indistinguishable from those who do not know You, and, Lord, we just want to take this time to call that out as being wrong, as being sinful, and to acknowledge that we want to do better. And so, Lord, we pray to You because we know that You are faithful, that You fulfil Your promises that You have told to us. We have seen that so well throughout Joshua. And so Lord, we pray that you will help us to remember who we are, that You will help us to remember that we are men whose life is as fleeting as grass in the field. That we are dust, but that we have an everlasting God who is Almighty, and who cares for us as a father cares for his children. I pray that You will help us to remember that as far as the east is from the west, that our sins have been so far removed from us, and that Your steadfast love and Your steadfast mercy have been poured out onto us every single day. And so Lord we pray that that knowledge and remembrance of who You are and what You have done will spur in us a renewed joy in who You are. That we will turn from our sin to truly love You and to live for You in everything that You do, because we know that You are the God who loves us. And we can truly see that through Your Word and all that You've done for us. And so, Lord, as a way of acknowledging that, of confessing that towards You, we want to finish by praying together as a church the prayer that Your Son Jesus gave to us.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us now into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever, amen.

Reading: Psalm 103

Sermon:

If you do have your Bibles, it would be great to open them at Psalm 103 as we look at this psalm together.

Intro:

I want us to think about the idea of what we praise, and simply state that we praise that which is excellent and delights us. It was heart-warming, wasn't it, to see the response of the nation to our health care workers and that spontaneous applause that happened on Thursday evening. You will know that we love to sing the praise of our athletes and our sportspeople. We admire their skill, and strength, and endurance, and their speed. We praise them for that. And also, we stand in recognition of the brilliance of actors and singers as they delight us and transport us into another world and stir our hearts. So, we praise that which is excellent and delights us.

Psalm 103 is a psalm of praise. David begins it with praise and he ends it with praise. "Praise the Lord, O my soul, all my inmost being praise His holy name." So, obviously David is thrilled and

delighted with God and I want to explore what it is that thrilled him so much. The way that we're going to do that is to examine this as a song or poem of Hebrew scripture.

I. God's love is central

The way that you understand what the main theme is in Hebrew psalms and poetry is by going to the centre, working from the outside in and looking at the centre. So, the centre verse in this psalm is verse 11, which says, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him."

So, how much does God love us? This much? No, God loves us even greater than the distance from the sun to the earth. I looked that up and that is 145.2 million kms. I used to know it as 93 million miles, but kilometers sounds greater, doesn't it? And that's what he's saying - God loves us an incredible amount. He wants us to think about that and to let that idea marinate in our minds. God loves us an awful lot.

II. God's forgiveness is complete

So what is his story? What has moved him to this point? What is he thinking about when he writes? Well, he remembers that he was an ordinary man from a shepherding family, who was chosen by God, plucked from obscurity, for leadership and greatness. He became King of his nation, he was an accomplished military leader. He was a national hero, he was a poet and a musician, and he was a man with a deep affection for God. And yet, he wrecked his marriage, wrecked his family and wrecked his nation in a moment of calculated lust, adultery and murder. God had gifted David, given him wonderful privileges, and yet he betrayed that love with wilful and deliberate sins. So, he had known great blessing from God, and he had also known that he had broken that relationship with God, and that great tragedy and difficulty had come into his life. But when you hear him in this psalm, he is still able to express a deep love for God, and able to praise God. And why is that?

Well, if you examine the psalm, you'll see that either side of verse 11 (in verses 10 and 12, of course) that he speaks about this central idea of forgiveness. And as I've mentioned, some of the sins that David had committed, both in his heart and externally, were awful. He realizes that his forgiveness is undeserved, and he describes it as being "complete". He's completely forgiven for adultery, completely forgiven for murder, completely forgiven for his arrogance and pride and the almighty mess that he had created in his life and the life of the nation. That is why he is so thrilled with God, because he sees His love in that deep forgiveness.

III. God's character never changes

And then if you go outside of that central verse again and those two verses, you see that he talks about God's character in verses 10 and 12. He sees God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He has pictured God as a compassionate father in verses 13 and 14. And he sees himself like a flower, that grows up quickly and then fades away. And he sees in God this wonderful character of gentleness and compassion and it never changes. He's able to look outside

of that again and he sees that it was the same for Moses, not just for himself. And he goes outside of that again on the other side and he sees that this is an everlasting promise that God has given to His people, a covenant that was formed with Abraham and went even further, right to the days of Noah in verses 17 and 18 - an everlasting covenant. So he sees God as a forgiving God, and knows God as a forgiving God, and he sees God as a compassionate and tenderhearted God. He has experienced that compassion and tenderheartedness, and as he explores further, he realizes that this has gone on forever and ever.

IV. God's benefits are praiseworthy

At the very beginning of the psalm, in verses 1-5, that is why he is so full of praise. He lists all these benefits, all these things that he has experienced. And in verses 20-22, he calls the entire world, the entire created world, to sing and praise this God.

So, what has David experienced? Just this: he had found himself having sinned, messed up, and being without hope. He had disobeyed God's commandments. He had succumbed to temptation, he disgraced God, hurt many people, been deliberately responsible for the death of a loyal citizen of Israel - a husband, a colleague. He had acted unjustly, selfishly and with arrogant pride. He was undeserving of anything but God's justice which would have resulted in his removal from office and his death, but God had forgiven him and he is overwhelmed by the greatness of such love. "Praise the Lord, O my soul and forget not *all* His benefits. Who forgives all your sins" we read in verse 2.

Now, the idea of benefits has been in the news recently, sadly because in this crisis many have lost their jobs (we hope temporarily) and what they need is the benefit that comes from the state and the state's financial package for them. Some of us, of course, have fallen sick and are unwell because of the virus. What we need is the benefit of the skill, and the knowledge, and the medicines that are given to us by our healthcare professionals. And it's the same for David.

He recognizes that in his heart he has a problem that cannot be cured by anybody other than God. And so that's why he says in his central statement in verse 11, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love," that's God's love, "for those who *fear* Him." You see, we receive God's love as we admit our sin, as we ask for His forgiveness, as we realize that only God in His grace can forgive us. That is what *fear of the Lord* means. We need God. We need His help. We need to receive the benefit of what He has done for us.

What has God done for us? Well, God had forgiven David. But *how* had He forgiven David? He had demonstrated how He had punished someone else. David's punishment that he deserved fell on someone else, as whenever *we* sin, the punishment that we have deserved falls on somebody else. So in the Bible read of the story of Jesus coming and living a life of perfection, and yet going to the cross and dying for our sins. And Peter, one of His apostles writes, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18). So, like David, let us take time to remember God's goodness to us in our salvation, and use this time of crisis to remember the benefits of His love and forgiveness.

V. Take Time To . . .

So, what can we do in response to that? Well, I think, just practically, we need to take time to **remember God's love**. Maybe we need to take time just to recall our stories to date and the things

that God has blessed us with - material things, spiritual things, and just the experiences of God we have known to date.

And perhaps we can **praise God**. I personally have been working through Spotify. I've been listening to songs of praise, and I want to encourage you to do something similar on Spotify or YouTube or music that you have in other sources. And in a moment we're going to sing a hymn of praise which is entirely based on Psalm 103 - *Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven*. So take time to praise God.

And I think lastly, as God has loved us, so we need to **love others**. As I said, I've been so encouraged as I have rang people, and spoken to them, and prayed with them. I want to encourage each of us to do the same, and I know that you have been doing that, but perhaps just to share a little bit more about ourselves and what God has been saying to us and doing, so that we too might sing praise of God to one another.

So, can I encourage us to remember how much we are loved, "as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him" (Psalm 103:11). And in the midst of this presence difficulty, as we look towards God, we see not only that He is "our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble" (Psalm 46:1), but we see that He is a God of tremendous love, forgiving, and the most beautiful character. And I pray that we will know that and share that with others.

Praise: IPH 227 Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven

Prayers for Others:

Let us pray. Dear Lord, who through the blood of Christ has delivered us from the jaws of death and who, through this unconditional love, does not give us trials that we cannot overcome. Through the use of modern technology, we thank you for giving us the opportunity to gather as a congregation, in Your name, and meditate on Your Word, sing joyful and emotive songs of worship, learn about Scripture through Sam's sermon, and open our hearts and minds by reflecting on this difficult past week and plan for the coming week. Due to the inconvenience of lacking free mobility, we immediately see how much we have taken for granted our lifestyle of plenty, through the ever-increasing number of confirmed cases, and more importantly and worryingly, through the number of very ill patients with respiratory emergencies, and most importantly, through the numbers of loved ones and friends who have sadly passed away. We immediately sense how feeble mankind is to unforgiving and unrelenting nature. Forgive us, Lord, for taking lightly of the virulent threat and for not preparing soon enough. Forgive us, Lord, for not being our brother's and our sister's keeper. Forgive us, Lord, for being too enthused with using and possessing modern social media, while failing to interact more with our grandmothers and grandfathers, our mothers and fathers, our aunts and uncles, our siblings and relations and friends and colleagues. It is an irony that we have come to the point that the only way to see them and speak with them is through these very modern tools of communication. And this has occurred only because we realise how much we miss our loved ones and how much we need them so dearly. We join the chorus of voices and thank the health care professionals, the citizens who are tending the shops that stock the essentials, those who are manufacturing ventilators and personal protection equipment, the people involved in the logistics of supply, the army personnel, the leaders who step up every day to brief us and encourage us, and the many unknown and unnamed volunteers, all who are making their lives and working unimaginable hours to serve us and save us.

We also pray for the families who are with children at home. May the children and students continue to receive the lessons and develop their skills, despite the changed surroundings. And look after the parents, who are serving triple roles as school teacher, protector from a dangerous disease, and a loving and caring father and mother. For those who have been afflicted, we ask of You to quickly reduce the symptoms, alleviate their pain, and accelerate their healing, so they may regain health and possess the immunity to help others who still need to be isolated. For those who are struggling economically, we pray that along with the government's measures of assistance, You open new ways where we can all share the burden together. For those who are confused or are in spiritual distress, we ask of You to hold them in Your warm and calm hands, for we recall Your teachings, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," and "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." But during these times of uncertainty, we also wish to thank You for what You have declined to grant us. Through these times, you challenge us to share our resources with those who are less fortunate. You make us pray more often and earnestly for our fellow congregation members, our families and our neighbours, and You make us realise that, somewhere out there, someone is praying for us as well.

You make us realise that You are here with us and You are not silent. It is with this comfort and unquenchable faith that we bring our Lent prayers to the health and freedom of missionary Jong Uk Kim, who is currently thought to be under life imprisonment in a labor camp in North Korea. As a country completely voice of communication with the outside world, we hear of hundreds of deaths in North Korea, despite its complete closing of borders in January. The recent news that North Korea is asking for medical aid, despite publicly denying any cases [of coronavirus], is also very worrisome. Dear Lord, we first ask You to protect Missionary Kim in the labor camp, and comfort and bless his family. We pray for all North Korean Christians in prison for their faith and ask You to bring hope, encouragement, and spiritual strength. For those who are suffering under the pandemic, we ask of You to provide the country with the medical aid that the government is seeking, and have the witness of the Christians there be a blessing to the citizens there as a whole and an awakening of the country itself.

Finally, especially during these trying times, we carry within ourselves little, humble fragments of genuine need and hope - sometimes worldly, sometimes about our health and well-being, sometimes profound and spiritual. Despite these worries and challenges, we are comforted through Paul's message that the Spirit, the *parakletos*, helps in our weaknesses and even though we may not know how we should pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings that we cannot utter ourselves. Come to think of it, although we may be in a lockdown-like situation, through You Lord, we are the ones who are truly free. We are the ones who are bountifully blessed. Our cup overflows, and for this we thank You Lord. We pray in the name of our dearest Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Closing Praise: IPH 509 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Benediction:

Thank you for listening and God bless. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen.