

“THE GRACE OF GOD”

Psalm 103

This is an amazing piece of writing and a wonderful piece of poetry. I’m always surprised that in anthologies of great poems, there are very few examples from the Bible, particularly from the Psalms, because they really are gems, even when translated out of Hebrew in to English. And this *Psalm 103* is especially good. Artur Weiser, a German scholar, calls it “*one of the finest blooms on the tree of biblical faith*” and Charles Spurgeon, in his usual hyperbolic way, writes, “*There is too much in this Psalm for a thousand pens to write, it is one of those all-comprehending Scriptures which is a Bible in itself, and it might almost suffice for the hymnbook of the church.*” (He wrote that in his *Treasury of David*, a great commentary on the Psalms which is always worth dipping into, despite the rather overblown Victorian language.) Elsewhere, many decades before Motown took over the phrase, he calls it “*soul music*”, because it comes from the very depths of the heart which is the foundation of all great music.

It begins with the Psalmist – David – exhorting himself to praise God. He addresses it to “*my soul, all my inmost being*” – there is a kind of intimacy in the expression of it. This is a sinner saved by grace, touched by God, revelling in the personal nature of God’s dealings with him. He wants to thank God for what he has done in his own life. But by the end of the Psalm, he is inviting the entire universe to join him – “*his angels, you mighty ones ... all his heavenly hosts ... you his servants ...all his works*”. The praise of one person is nowhere near sufficient to worship God as he deserves. It just spills over, like the joy we experience at certain times in our lives that just has to be shared with others. Now and again we might find ourselves moved to worship God like this – a spontaneous outburst of praise that just wells up from within and draws others into it – but more often than not, our praise and worship can become pretty monotonous and staid, little more than a daily private duty or a weekly corporate ritual.

The reason for that is that we do what the Psalmist counsels against in v2 – we so easily “*forget all his benefits*”. The longer we have been Christians, the easier it is to take God’s love and God’s grace for granted. We get on with our lives day by day, aware deep down that we are safe in his hands, that our eternal future is secure, but less and less eager to express our deep, soul-felt gratitude for that. The familiarity of our songs and prayers can contribute to that – we can be mouthing the words while our thoughts and emotions are elsewhere; we say our “Amens” without really knowing what’s been said; we live our lives as if nothing particular has happened, as if the amazing work of Jesus Christ has not really changed us in any way.

So this poem is a great corrective to that in that it reminds us yet again of how great God is, how great is his love in our lives, how great is the grace he has shown us, how much we really do have to thank him for. It’s the kind of poem it would be worth learning by heart and using regularly as a hymn of praise, meditating each time you use it on a different aspect of God’s character and activity as David describes it. You can see four things particularly that we are not to forget (although I’m sure others would divide it up differently).

1. GOD’S GRACE (vv2-5)

God’s grace really permeates the whole Psalm, but in the first part of it, the poet singles out four particular aspects of it to kick off. Remember, in all this God is lavishing his grace on those who really do not deserve it – which is what grace really is anyway. God **forgives** our sins – no, he forgives **all** our sins. There is nothing that is beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness, no sin that is too great for him to deal with, no deed, word or attitude that has not been dealt with by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (or, in David’s day, by the sacrifices of the regular cycle of worship). Those who claim that they have done something so bad that God can never forgive them are actually guilty of a monumental arrogance, that somehow they are just too bad for God – but no-one is too bad for him, no-one is outside the orbit of God’s love.

Closely linked to that in the mind of the Hebrews was the concept of God’s **healing**. Indeed, Jesus himself makes the link on occasions. There are all kinds of complicated issues for us in that, made even more complex by the progress of medical and psychiatric science, but what it boils down to in the end is that God made us. He knows how we are put together and how we work best and, whether healing comes through

the God-given wisdom and skill of doctors and others or through the dramatic intervention of his Holy Spirit, it is indeed God who heals.

And in that – both in forgiveness and in healing – God demonstrates his **redemption**. The poet says that he “*redeems your life from the pit*”, the “*pit*” being a metaphor for the grave. In Hebrew thought this was the place of despair, darkness and destruction, away from the warmth of God’s smile, away from the place of his favour. But, by the grace of God, we can know release from that. David was no stranger to despair and to what we might even call depression – just read through some of the other psalms, which are really cries from the depths of his heart for release from his anxieties and his many troubles – but here he recognises that the follower of God can know freedom from such anxiety and a glorious hope for the future.

In a sense, those three things are the bare minimum – God in his grace forgives, heals and redeems. But there is so much more besides which we can enjoy as his people. He **satisfies our desires** as well. The first line of v5 is a very problematic one because no-one is really sure what the Hebrew words mean. If you translate them as it seems they should be translated, they make no sense, so various versions have different English words here. But they all come down to the same thing in the end – God continues to lavish good gifts on us and, in that, he grants us the deepest desire of our hearts (perhaps, for many, a subconscious desire), that we should have eternal life – life renewed like a young eagle’s energy appears to be.

2. **GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS** (v6)

There is a reminder here, too, of God’s love for the underdog. He is a God who wants justice for everyone, especially those who seem to be denied it by their fellow human beings and by their circumstances. The RSV uses the word “*vindicates*” here. God vindicates the trust of those who rely on him, although outwardly their earthly circumstances do not seem to demonstrate that. They may be poor, put upon, persecuted – and others may well point the finger and ask why they bother to keep faith with God. But in the end, God will demonstrate his justice. Those who truly trust in him, whatever their situation, will receive the reward of righteousness.

3. **GOD’S PAST MERCIES** (v7)

Here’s where we so often fall down in our recollection of and gratitude for God’s grace – what he has already done for us. As the Jewish people so often did – and still do – David reminds himself of the way in which God worked in the past, particularly at the time of the Exodus, of the liberation of his people from slavery and oppression in Egypt. It is so easy to forget what God has already done, especially when times are tough.

Of course, we are told time and time again not to dwell on the past, not to live only on past mercies, but there is nevertheless real value in recalling what God has done for us in the past. And that is most necessary when we are struggling with the things of the present. When nothing seems to be going right, when the odds seem stacked against us, when we are grappling with the problems that seem to be piling up, we can become so absorbed in the difficulties, so desperate to find our own way out, so anxious about our situation, that we completely forget the God who has helped us out so many times before. We start to think that God has forgotten us, that he does not want to help us – even that he is punishing us. But just cast your mind back to the last time you were struggling, to situations of crisis in the past. God has seen you through those – often in dramatic, miraculous ways. As we shall see in a moment, he is the same God, with the same love for you, the same inexhaustible reserves of grace to pour out on you. He can do it again. Those who think he cannot have forgotten the past.

4. **GOD’S “OTHERNESS”** (vv8ff)

In a way, all that we have said so far is about what God has **done** for us. Of course, we should never forget what he has done. But neither must we forget who he **is**. In the rest of the psalm, David reminds himself of the characteristics of this great God of grace. In vv8-10, he contrasts God’s character and attitude with that of human beings. Here we have a God who is “*compassionate and gracious*”, who doesn’t bear grudges, jump to conclusions, seethe with resentment and try to get his own back on people. He is patient,

and full – even overflowing – with love. David knew how his fellow human beings could behave. If you read some of the other psalms you will see how he describes those who seem to be out to get him. Even among the people of God, within the Church, there are people who nurse grievances, who hang on to past hurts, who imagine sleights where there are none, who spend their lives looking for revenge. God – fortunately – is quite different from that.

And that is because of the **awesome immensity of his love**. God's love is beyond imagination – “*as high as the heavens*” – and the forgiveness that springs forth from that love means that our sins are removed so far that they can never be counted against us again – “*as far as the east is from the west*”. When you stop and consider the limits we so often put on **our** love, the conditions we apply, the ways in which we make our love dependent on response and so on, then the love of God seems so much greater. In fact, it really is difficult to grasp how great that love really is.

That means it is a perfect love. It is demonstrated in **perfect compassion**. God looks on us with the compassion of a perfect parent. There's an echo of this in Jesus' words in *Luke 11:11-13*, where he takes the greatest love he can think of and says that God's love is even greater:

Jesus said, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

He wants the very best for us, as a proud father wants for his children. He wants to protect, to guide, to advise. When things go wrong, it upsets him. When we ignore him he tries to coax us back. When we are struggling he wants to help.

Now that's not just something he does on a whim. By contrast with the fickleness of human nature and the temporary nature of our earthly lives, God is **constant and eternal**. God never, ever forgets his people. His love is “*from everlasting to everlasting*”. In terms of time, it has no beginning and no end. God's love for you was in place before time began and he will love you when time ceases to be. Faithfully, constantly, without any diminution, without any conditions, God loves his people. That should give us amazing confidence and security. The God who helped Moses, the God who inspired David, the God who energised the first Christians, the God who has protected his church, the God who helped you through that crisis twenty years ago, the God who was with you in the hospital last week, the God who makes his presence felt among us this morning, will go on doing great things, will go on protecting, providing, keeping his promises.

His love is without limit in terms of time and in terms of space too. His throne is in heaven, but his kingdom is over all. His **rule is boundless**. As we've already said, there is nowhere, no-one, nothing that is beyond the orbit of his love. You can never get away from his love. You will never find yourself abandoned by him. There is no place where his writ does not run. Wherever you are, he will not forget you.

That is the God we worship. That is the God who loves us. That is the God who lavishes his love on you. That is the God of grace who is always, everywhere demonstrating his compassion. What a great God! And what great love! Never forget him – and what he has done for you.