

Experiencing God when Life is Hard

Remember

Psalm 103

I had a neighbor years ago who was a professor in the Agronomy Department at K-State. There was a little patch in his lawn beside his driveway that he could never get to grow. And it bothered him. One day I saw him out watering that little patch of grass looking downcast. When I walked over to talk with him, he said something to the effect of, "I do research on how to genetically engineer grass so that it doesn't lose as much moisture to evaporation, but I can't figure out how to grow grass."

We're all intelligent in different ways, and that's okay. That's why we have different careers and different interests. But there's a type of intelligence that everybody needs: relational intelligence, meaning you are wise when it comes to developing healthy relationships. Since we all need healthy relationships, we all need relational intelligence.

The Bible doesn't use that term, but it has much to say about developing healthy relationships. One thing that the Scriptures emphasize is that to develop healthy relationships you need to pay attention to the other person's life. For example, if you're wise, you are quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. You consider others' interests, not merely your own; and that requires you to pay attention to the other person. In marriage, husbands "live with their wives according to understanding"; you seek to understand your wife and live accordingly. Relational intelligence involves paying attention to the other person.

Nowhere is that more important than in our relationship with God. We need to become skillful in developing a healthy relationship with him. One aspect of relational intelligence involves understanding who God is and then relating to him accordingly. If we're smart, we won't relate to God based on stereotypes and cliches. We will go to Scripture and understand who he is and the commitments he has made to his people. And we will respond accordingly.

As I studied Psalm 103 this past week it struck me that David is modeling great wisdom in relating to God. He repeatedly tells himself how to relate to God. As we listen in on David's internal conversation, we will get smarter about how we should relate to God.

This message marks the beginning of week 3 of our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting. We're looking at four psalms which teach us how to ***experience God when life is hard***. Each of these psalms draws from the experience of the children of Israel on their journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. We saw from Psalm 90 that since life is short and hard, ***seek wisdom***. We saw from Psalm 95 that when life is hard ***worship God***. Today we're going to see from Psalm 103 that when life is hard ***remember***. Remember ***the benefits*** of knowing God and respond accordingly.

Two comments before we dig into Psalm 103. ***First***, because of the length of Psalm 103 I'll be selective in which verses I discuss. I apologize ahead of time if I don't comment

on your favorite verse or on the verse that you're especially eager to hear my "take" about.

Second, the structure of Psalm 103 is very obvious. In the first and last verses David says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." These bookends tell us that this whole psalm is about blessing/praising/worshiping the Lord. At the end of the psalm David is calling all of creation to bless the Lord along with him.

In the context of worship, David models something for us to imitate when our lives are hard:

Remember the benefits of knowing God. (*Psalm 103:1-2, 20-22*) You can probably think of something in your life that is hard right now: some loss, some disappointment, something that fills you with anxiety or anger. Keep that in mind as we work our way through this psalm. Notice how David talks to himself in verse 1:

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

David tells his soul (the deepest part of his being) to "Bless the Lord." David wants his praise to bring blessing and satisfaction and joy to the heart of God. It's a staggering idea, really, that that's even possible. David knows that for God to be blessed by his praise, it cannot be half-hearted or lukewarm; he tells everything within himself to bless God's holy name.

In verse 2 we learn the content of his praise to God:

2 Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

Isn't it interesting that David says, "and **forget not** all his benefits"? He could have stated it the way I did, "Remember his benefits." By stating it the way he did, he's highlighting the tendency of humans to forget everything God has done for us. This is especially true when our lives are hard. The tendency for all of us is to take our eyes off of God and fix our eyes on our own hardships. Last week we saw from Psalm 95 that even though God had done miraculous things for them, they basically concluded, "There's no benefit in knowing God. . . he's not a good Shepherd who provides and protects." And the same thing sometimes happens to us.

And when it does, like David here in Psalm 103, we need to confront ourselves and tell ourselves, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." We see the same thing happening in Psalms 42 and 43. [The same identical verse is found three times in those two psalms.] In Psalm 42:11 we read:

11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

Do you see how the psalmist confronts himself and tells himself to hope in God? Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the British preacher from the middle/end of the 20th century, wrote about this in his book *Spiritual Depression*. He says this:

“The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. . . . And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. . . .” (p. 21)

That is what we see David doing in Psalm 103. And that’s what we need to imitate. You may not be used to being that aggressive with yourself, but if we want to “forget not all his benefits,” we need to take ourselves in hand and tell ourselves what to do: worship God, remember God, and respond accordingly. If we’re passive with ourselves, we’ll likely forget God’s benefits and end up grumbling and faithless.

What are the benefits of knowing God? (*Psalm 103:3-19*) David will spend the next 17 verses rehearsing those benefits. Let’s begin down in verse 7 where David makes reference to God revealing his ways/acts to Moses and the people of Israel.

7 He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.

Think about the miracles in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the giving of the Law, the provision of water and food in the desert. God acted in power on behalf of his people.

Verse 8 is a very clear reference to Exodus 34:6 where the Lord passed before Moses and revealed his “name” to him. This descriptive name of the Lord is repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments.

8 The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

God’s “steadfast love” [“lovingkindness” (NASB), “love” (NIV)] is often called God’s covenant love; it is the fierce loyalty God has toward those who are bound to him by covenant. In the Bible, a covenant defines a relationship between two parties. When God enters into a covenant with you, his love for you is fiercely loyal.

When the Lord gave the Law (the old covenant) to Moses, he wanted them to know that he was *merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*. As he gave hundreds of commands to the people of Israel, he wanted them to know that he wasn’t hotheaded or grumpy or stingy. He wasn’t sitting in heaven hoping that they’d break a commandment so that he could punish them. Just the opposite was true; he

was more generous than they could imagine. David told his soul to remember the benefit of being in relationship with a God like that.

If those living under the old covenant were urged to remember the steadfast love of the Lord, how much more should we?!? They had animal sacrifices to atone for their sins temporarily; we have the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God, to pay for our sins permanently. They experienced the steadfast love of the Lord in many ways, but Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this. . . laying down one's life for a friend." We've experienced the greatest possible expression of God's steadfast love.

I'm sure that some of you here are considering whether or not you want to become a follower of Jesus. The good news of the gospel is that if you enter into relationship with God through faith in Christ, you are entering into relationship with a God who by nature is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. This is his default way of treating us and relating to us. The following verses explain this further:

9 He will not always chide, [i.e., bring valid accusations against us]
nor will he keep his anger forever.
10 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

I'm going to read verse 10 again. As I do, consider whether or not you relate to God as if this verse is true, or if you are convinced that takes great delight in catching you in sin so that he can punish you.

10 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

Imagine what your life would be like if God had a chart on a wall in heaven with your name at the top. This chart has two columns: "_____'s Sins" and "The Punishment." Every sin you commit is listed in column 1; the appropriate punishment for that sin is listed in column 2. Can you imagine what our lives would be like if God repaid us for every sin we commit? The fact that he doesn't makes you want to tell yourself, "Bless the Lord, oh my soul, never forget that he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness."

You might be thinking, "But you don't know what I've done. . . or how often I've done it. . ." Well, God knows it all. . . and his grace is greater than your sin.

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

In other words, you cannot overstate the magnitude of God's covenant love. Notice that this love is "toward those who fear him" (also in verses 13 and 17). If you fear the Lord, you care more about what God thinks about you than anything else, and you enter into covenant with him wholeheartedly. As we discussed when we studied Psalm 90, fearing the Lord doesn't mean being terrified of God's punishment; the punishment we

deserved fell upon Christ. Our fear of the Lord is more relational; we fear grieving the One whose love for us is fierce and extravagant. Given who God is and what he's done for us in Christ, fearing the Lord is simply relationally intelligent.

12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Back in verse 3 David mentioned that "he forgives ***all your iniquities.***" If you have entered into the new covenant in Christ's blood through faith, you cannot overstate how completely you've been separated from your transgressions. Your transgressions aren't even in the same hemisphere as you.

Verse 13 uses a common image found in both testaments:

13 As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

If you've had a difficult relationship with your earthly father, this might not sound very reassuring. But David is appealing to the common experience of fathers being willing to do anything for their children. We all (I hope) know good fathers like that; God is like those fathers x 1,000.

We'll finish with verse 14.

14 For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

When God relates to us, he never forgets that we were made from the dust (Genesis 2:7), that we will one day turn back into dust (Genesis 3:19), and that we are dust. As a compassionate father, he takes into account our frailties; he doesn't expect us to be superhuman. Several passages in the New Testament stress that because Jesus became one of us, God's knowledge of our weakness is now ***experiential.*** Hebrews 4:15, for example, assures us that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, having been tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin.

This week you will experience some hardship or difficulty. You might experience a wave or grief of anxiety seemingly out of the blue. When you do, how will you respond? Will you forget the benefit of knowing God and do the best you can independent of God? Or will you imitate what we've seen David model in this psalm?

Take yourself in hand, speak to yourself, tell yourself to remember the benefits of knowing God, and respond accordingly: bless the Lord with everything you've got and live in the fear the Lord. If we do this as a way of life, eventually our minds will be renewed and our relationship with God will grow more satisfying.