

Advent Through Psalms

Peace: Psalm 46

Hope: Psalm 27

Joy: Through Music

Love: Psalm 103



Advent: Love

Psalm 103

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*** This original sermon was not written by A.I.*

We've been following each of the Advent themes with selections from the Psalms, and this week is the theme of love.

The Advent season reflects on the first and second coming of Jesus. John 3:16, such a well-known verse, says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It's the love of God that paved the way for Jesus' first coming, it's the love of God that brought each and every one of you to a life-saving faith in Christ. It's the love of God that opens the doors of eternity to you and me; and it's the love of God that calls upon Jesus to return again and usher in a new era of peace and joy in a new heaven and new earth for the redeemed.

Our Psalm this morning is Psalm 103. This Psalm is perfect for Advent because in it we see the effects of Christ's first coming and the promises of his second coming. The hope in this psalm cannot be fulfilled without both the first and second coming of Christ. And in this psalm, we see how the Lord's love surrounds us.

I invite you to open to Psalm 103. This is a psalm of King David. I'm going to read the whole psalm for context but my message this morning will be mainly from vs. 1 to 12.

Psalm 103

- 1 Praise the LORD, my soul;
 all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
- 2 Praise the LORD, my soul,
 and forget not all his benefits—
- 3 who forgives all your sins
 and heals all your diseases,
- 4 who redeems your life from the pit
 and crowns you with love and compassion,
- 5 who satisfies your desires with good things
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- 6 The LORD works righteousness
 and justice for all the oppressed.
- 7 He made known his ways to Moses,
 his deeds to the people of Israel:
- 8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
 slow to anger, abounding in love.
- 9 He will not always accuse,
 nor will he harbor his anger forever;

10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve
 or repay us according to our iniquities.

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

12 as far as the east is from the west,
 so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

13 As a father has compassion on his children,
 so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

14 for he knows how we are formed,
 he remembers that we are dust.

15 The life of mortals is like grass,
 they flourish like a flower of the field;

16 the wind blows over it and it is gone,
 and its place remembers it no more.

17 But from everlasting to everlasting
 the LORD's love is with those who fear him,
 and his righteousness with their children's children—

18 with those who keep his covenant
 and remember to obey his precepts.

19 The LORD has established his throne in heaven,
 and his kingdom rules over all.

20 Praise the LORD, you his angels,
 you mighty ones who do his bidding,
 who obey his word.

21 Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts,
 you his servants who do his will.

22 Praise the LORD, all his works
 everywhere in his dominion.

Praise the LORD, my soul.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Let's pray.

At the beginning and end of the psalm we come across the imperative phrase, “praise the Lord.” Let's talk about imperatives for a minute. Imperative verbs give a command or instruction telling someone to do something. Imperatives do not come with other options; they are meant to tell you what you must do.

In this psalm, the imperative, “praise the Lord,” functions like a command. It's a command to praise the Lord in response to all that the Lord has done. It is like saying, “you must praise the Lord,” or “hey you, praise the Lord!” It's an instructive command that carries no other options with it. In other words, it is the most appropriate thing to do considering the context that is about to be laid out.

For example, the football coach will tell the wide receiver to catch the ball when the ball comes his way. The instruction to catch is an imperative because it is the single most appropriate thing for the wide receiver to do in the context of the game. There really aren't any other options. Just catch the ball... and run!

In the psalm, David said, "praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul... and forget not all his benefits." David instructs his own soul, his inmost being to praise the Lord. So, this imperative is a command to his own soul. Why? Because *praising the Lord is the appropriate thing to do in response to all that the Lord has done.*

David commanded his own soul to praise the Lord and forget not all his benefits. This is not an encouragement. David is not saying, "hey my soul, knock, knock... you know, I think.. I think you should praise the Lord and you know, you should try not to forget all his benefits." No, he is commanding his own soul to praise the Lord and to not forget the Lord's benefits. He is leaving no other option.

David spoke to his own soul this way because he knew how easy it was to fall into deep sorrow and depression. In psalm 38, David said, "all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed. I groan in anguish of heart." These are the harsh realities of living with a fallen nature.

Living in this reality, as we all do, gives plenty of reason to speak "death" words to your soul over and over again. As circumstances pile up, you find you are dwelling on your sorrow and saying to yourself, "I am sad... I am mad... my back hurts... my heart is broken..." "leave me alone," "I am worthless, I amount to nothing..." "I hate my life, I hate myself, I hate this and that..."

These are all very sad but natural responses to living with a fallen nature in a fallen world. David understood and felt this fallen nature just as clearly as anyone else. Yet, even in his mourning and pain, David commanded his soul to "praise the Lord... and forget not his benefits." He gave himself no other option but to praise the Lord. He was not ignoring his present hardship, but he was reframing his life with an eternal perspective based on the benefits of the Lord that would come to him in time. By praising the Lord, he was declaring eternal truth to temporary circumstances.

No matter what happens in your life, the most appropriate response will always be to praise the Lord and to remember all his benefits to you. There are no other options because your sorrow and pain are not eternal, only temporary. *What is eternal are the benefits of the Lord that are yours right now.* So, if you're heavy burdened, say to your soul, "praise the Lord, forget not his benefits." Speak all the Lord's benefits to your soul as David did in this psalm.

In verses 3-5, David begins to proclaim all the Lord's benefits: total forgiveness, total healing, total redemption, a crown of love and compassion, satisfaction and renewal, righteousness and justice. Now, remember, David was speaking about these benefits before they came to be through Jesus. Up to this point in David's time, Jesus had not yet come, and all these benefits of mercy were merely seeds of hope planted in David's heart by the Holy Spirit. He had the shadow of the Law, which only pointed to Christ but could not provide the forgiveness and healing he

knew was to come. David knew the Lord's love would make these benefits real in the Lord's time, though he only saw the Law operating in life to bring death. And as he waited for grace, he said, "praise the Lord, and forget not," as if the benefits of the Lord were his right now.

That is how we speak to our soul in the period of waiting for the Lord's grace— though my present reality screams pain, sorrow, and hopelessness, praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not his benefits. The body is temporary; the soul has received the touch of eternity from God.

When you feel the heavy weight of your sin, your wrongdoings, say to your soul, "it is he who forgives all your sins." Jesus came and died on the cross to erase all your sins. It is sin that has caused this fallen nature to progress into decay, but the Lord has forgiven all your sins to cleanse your soul. Not a single sin is left unforgiven. The lofty requirements of the law are fulfilled in Christ for your forgiveness. Speak these words to your soul: "the Lord forgives all your sins."

When you are overwhelmed with a disease-wracked body, say to your soul, "it is he who heals all your diseases." Jesus' suffering and sacrifice is your healing. It is not just that your sins are forgiven. It is that your sins are forgiven and all your diseases are healed. "By his wounds we are healed;" The Lord heals all your diseases, not a single disease can make it past his nail-pierced hands. Speak these words to your soul: "the Lord heals all your diseases."

When the darkness of your worst night terrorizes you, say to your soul, "it is he who redeems your life from the pit of darkness." Jesus is your redeemer. He forgives your sins, he heals you up, and he sets you free from your dark nature that terrorizes you. Your body may be consigned to death and disease, but your soul does not share that same death sentence. Say to your soul, "your life is redeemed from the pit."

"He crowns you with love and compassion, O my soul." You may feel your soul is crowned with everything but love and compassion. Maybe your soul is crowned with anger and hatred. Or maybe your soul is crowned with sorrow and self-pity. Maybe your soul has been stamped with that terminal diagnosis and you're losing your identity. Stop the fake swirl of death that threatens your soul and say, "praise the Lord, O my soul, forget not that he has crowned you with love and compassion."

Forget not that it is he who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. We live in a tent that is wasting away day by day, but that is not the eternal state of our soul. 2 Cor. 4:16 tells us the true nature of our soul: "...Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." Say to your soul, "your youth is being renewed by the gift of God."

James 1:17-18 says, "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like the shifting shadows." The good gift the Lord has blessed you with is the Holy Spirit, who renews you day by day. So, say to your soul, "praise the Lord, and forget not his benefits!" Amen!

In vs. 6, David turns his focus from inward to outward, as he does so often in the psalms. The Lord's benefits are not for your benefit alone. He works those benefits into the lives of those

around you. The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love toward you so that you may lead people to his compassion, grace, patience, and love.

My friends, we cannot know the full extent of God's love until we take our eyes off ourselves and let his love work through us to others. For that to happen, God's love and compassion, grace and patience need to break through our critical judgments of others, just as the Lord's love has broken through the hard requirements of the law to us.

In vss. 9-10, David sensed the love of the Lord breaking through the hard requirements of the law. The law does not set free until every penalty is paid. Without fail, the law stands to accuse, hold accountable, and penalize unless the judge rules otherwise. No righteous judge would withhold the penalties of the law from the truly condemned.

Perhaps the law that you live by holds firm within you and causes you to judge and accuse others. You might have a staunch set of rules that, when broken by others, makes your blood boil and you paint a permanent label on the person. All of us have internalized laws that we impose on others. One of my internalized laws is "dogs are not allowed to bark at night when I'm asleep." When a dog's barking wakes me up at night, the accusations fly in my mind toward the dog and owner. We all feel justified in our anger when people break our internal laws that we've imposed on them. Well, God's law is really the only righteous and just law there is, and God is righteous and just to uphold his law.

David, as a just King, understood the necessity of the law's integrity. Yet he proclaimed of the Lord, "he will not always accuse, nor will he harbor anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities." David knew this was not the character of the law; sin required death, always. Yet he foresaw an amazing love coming from heaven—a love that satisfies the requirements of death while keeping us alive. That amazing love came through Christ Jesus. Now, the Father God looks upon us with love and acceptance, in spite of our sin, and in spite of the law that says you must condemn.

If the Father God has ceased to accuse us, how much more must we cease to accuse those who break our own internal laws and rules that we force others to live by? How much more must we praise the Lord and forget not his benefits to our own souls and to those around us? How much more must we share the love of Christ with those who oppose him and are condemned to eternal decay with no way out? The love that the Lord gives is far beyond what we can keep for ourselves.

That leads to vss. 11-12 and the end of this message, "for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." The Lord's love for us is immeasurable. You cannot measure how high the heavens are from the earth, and you cannot measure how far the east is from the west. Neither can you measure the Lord's love for us.

There's a cute little analogy to the question of how much God loves us—in this analogy, the answer is demonstrated as this much (arms held out like a cross.) It's meant to show that God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die on the cross for us. True, but in reality, the arms of the cross extend out for eternity because the Lord's love is immeasurable.

The Apostle Paul prayed this prayer in Eph. 3:16, and I will finish with this, “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!” Amen.

Let's pray.

Study Questions

Read Psalm 103

Observation Questions (*What does the text say?*)

1. List the specific “benefits” named in verses 3–5. Which verbs describe what God does for people in these lines?
2. Where does the psalm move outward (which verse) and what new themes or actors appear once the focus shifts from the individual to others?
3. What images or phrases does the psalm use in verses 11–12 to describe the size of God’s love and the removal of sin?

Interpretation Questions (*What does the text mean?*)

1. What does David’s act of commanding his own soul to praise indicate about the condition of the inner life and the need for intentional leadership of one’s thoughts and feelings?
2. How do the benefits in verses 3–5 function as both present realities and as promises that point forward to Christ? In what sense are they already true and yet awaiting fullness?
3. What is the intended effect on a believer when God’s love is described with immeasurable language (“as high as the heavens,” “as far as the east is from the west”)? How should that reshape a person’s memory of sin and hope for the future?

Application Questions (*How should the truth change us?*)

1. Command your soul: think of a recurring negative sentence you tell yourself (for example, “I’m hopeless,” “I’m worthless,” “This will never change”). Name it aloud. This week, when that thought comes, replace it with a short truth from the psalm (for example, “He forgives all my sins” or “He crowns me with love and compassion”). Which thought will you replace and when will you practice this replacement?
2. Choose one of the benefits in vv.3–5 (forgiveness, healing, redemption, love/compassion, renewal). Write a one- or two-line declaration from those verses and read it to your soul each morning for seven days. Which benefit will you choose and where will you post or keep the line so you remember?
3. Identify one “inner law” you enforce that tends to make you judge others (a rule you expect others to keep that makes you angry when they don’t). Name a specific person who has broken that rule and plan one concrete act of mercy toward them this week (a phone call, a forgiveness note, bringing a meal, listening without defending). What will you do and when?
4. The psalm moves from inward praise to outward justice and compassion (v.6). Who in your life is currently oppressed, overlooked, or criticized by others? Name one practical step you can take this week to bring God’s compassion to that person (advocate, give time, offer resources, speak kindly). Be specific about what you will do and when.
5. Advent asks believers to live from eternity toward today. Choose one simple weekly habit for this season that will help you keep that horizon (a short scripture reading plan, a 5-minute daily “soul-command” prayer, memorizing a promise). Which habit will you try for the next four weeks and how will you stay accountable?