

# Psalm 103

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Date: 03 September 2006

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'd like to look with you this evening at this psalm which we are singing through tonight, the 103rd psalm, and I'd like you to look in your Bibles to page 605, where we have the words of that psalm in the so-called prose version.

And in particular, I would like to draw your attention to the phrase at the beginning and at the end, praise the Lord, O my soul, in verse 1.

And again at the end of the psalm, praise the Lord, O my soul. I wonder if we know who we are. There's a lot of the discussion today about identity cards and whether these are desirable or not. But there's an even greater confusion about personal identity.

We live in an era when people speak about reinventing their identity, of giving themselves a makeover. The idea that each person is an essential self is today considered to be old hat.

[ 1 : 26 ] And in our postmodern world, the self, the personality, is what we might call a DIY project. Personal identity, we're told, is socially produced and it changes in relation to different situations.

The self is regarded not to be an essential being, but rather a subjectivity, or sometimes it's described as a persona that we can construct, that we can deconstruct, and then reconstruct.

And you get people, stars like Madonna, who's gone through various phases of different identities which she believes she has herself constructed.

Now here in this psalm we have the psalmist talking with himself. And I think the psalmist like this helps us to have an understanding of who we are.

An understanding of human identity and the purpose for which God has created us. The psalmist speaks to his soul.

[ 2 : 45 ] But he looks to the soul not as a New Ager would look to the self, as a source of inspiration, indeed as a source of divinity.

The classic challenge in New Age spirituality is that the ego must seek to, the person must seek to overcome all the problems of the ego and find their salvation in the self, which they seek to integrate with the creation generally.

Now what we have here in the psalm, in this psalm and in other psalms, where the psalmist speaks to his soul, is that we see both the ego, the psalmist says I, and the soul or the self.

Both of them are called to worship the Lord. And both are two aspects of one single personality.

The Bible teaches us that we are who we are because we are made in the image of God.

We are made in his image. And we fulfill the purpose of our creation. We fulfill our identity, if you like, as we correspond with the image, with the reality of which we are the image.

[ 4 : 13 ] An image, as we know, exists only in reflection from the original. And this is what the psalmist here is teaching us, is that we fulfill ourselves.

And we find the fulfillment of our identity and the purpose of our creation as we reflect God in our lives, as we praise him, and as we honor him.

And that's why the psalmist says here, Praise the Lord, O my soul, all my inmost being. Praise his holy name. Robert Madden McChain used to say that a person is what he is on his knees before God and nothing more.

And that's what the psalmist is telling us here. He's telling us that he is what he is before God. And he's telling us that you and I are what we are before God and nothing more.

And the psalmist is challenging us here to reflect on who we are and whether we are fulfilling the purpose of our creation, the purpose of our existence, which is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

[ 5 : 40 ] I think this in some ways can be understood if we think of it as the storyline of a video or of a film.

Now, of course, it was composed long before the age of video. But nevertheless, there are a few different perspectives in this psalm. And I think the image of a video helps us to capture each of these different perspectives.

Some of you may have seen the recent video published by the Free Church called Discovery Psalms from St. Peter's.

And in that video there are quite a number of face-to-face interviews with people who say what the psalms have meant to them or what they meant to Robert Mary McChain.

And there are other aspects of the video where you have shots of the choir and of the congregation. And still others where you have panoramic views of Dundee and of the surrounding countryside.

[ 6 : 52 ] And I think there is a sense that there is a parallel between the progression of thought in this psalm and these three perspectives or we might call camera angles.

We have, for example, in verses 1 to 5 of the psalm the focus on the psalmist as an individual. The camera here is in close-up. The psalmist is bearing his own soul to us.

We who are listening or we who are watching. He conducts a conversation with himself in order that he might communicate with us and with God.

And then when we move on to verses 6 to 18 we find that the focus the psalmist is still speaking but he's not speaking about himself. He's speaking about the whole congregation of Israel as he reflects on God's amazing love and compassion to his people.

And the words love and compassion are key words in that central section of the psalm. And then as we come towards the climax of the psalm in verses 19 to the beginning of verse 22 the focus is not simply on the congregation of the people of God the focus is on the entire universe.

[ 8 : 16 ] It is on the heavens and the earth. It focuses on angels. It focuses on the mighty ones who do God's bidding.

It focuses on the heavenly hosts. It focuses on everywhere where he has dominion. And so we have this progressing expansion of the frame of the camera from an individual close-up to the body of the people of God and then to the entire universe.

And all is gathered up in a song of praise and of adoration and of worship to the Lord our God. So I'd like us for a few moments this evening to look at the psalm bearing in mind each of these quite distinct perspectives which follow one another and combine together to produce what is quite extraordinary a song of praise and of adoration and of worship to the Lord.

First of all then we look at verses 1 to 5 where if we use the video analogy the Samus's face to camera he's having a conversation with his soul a dialogue between their ego and the self.

Notice how tremendously enthusiastic he is. Praise the Lord O my soul all my inmost being praise his holy name.

[ 9 : 54 ] He's really focused on praising the Lord he wants all of his inmost being his soul to praise the Lord. Praise for him is not an accessory it's not an option it is something that is essential to his faith and he wants to commit his whole personality to fulfil this task this obligation this privilege of worshipping the Lord.

Notice how he repeats the word all again and again in the first six verses. he speaks about all of his inmost being he speaks about all of the Lord's benefits he speaks about the Lord forgiving all of his sins and healing all his diseases and he goes on in verse six to speak about the Lord's justice for all the oppressed and here in this opening section of the psalm the psalmist is listing the benefits of the Lord the benefits of the Lord the Lord had poured out upon him and as he considers these benefits words are simply pouring out he's so excited he's so thrilled that the words are pouring out and he's thinking in terms of superlatives he's thinking in terms of universals he's thinking in terms of all and it's interesting also that all the verbs in the first six verses of this psalm except the verb renewed in verse five are present participles they're very very active he speaks of the Lord who is forgiving who is healing who is redeeming who is crowning who is satisfying and working his theology is focused not upon nouns but upon verbs theology is something that happens it's not something simply a concept of the mind it is an experience of the soul and he speaks of the Lord's forgiving healing redeeming crowning and satisfying and working activity as a present transforming experience so we have a dynamic picture being presented to us here it is a verbal river flowing in state and all of these dynamic words describe how God's great salvation is impacting the psalmist's personal life all

the time when he speaks about the Lord healing his diseases the reference many commentators believe here is figurative because we know from the prophets especially Isaiah and Jeremiah that healing is used to describe the

Lord's ways of forgiving his sinful people but what he's doing here is making an inventory of blessings and he is encouraging us to do the same he speaks about these many multiple benefits that he has received in urging himself not to forget the Lord's benefits there's an old hymn that says count your blessings name them one by one and it will surprise you what the Lord has done and that's what the psalmist is doing here he's counting his blessings he's counting the benefits that the Lord has showered upon him and we're reminded here by the psalmist of the danger of forgetting the danger of losing focus here and of neglecting and forgetting what the Lord has done for us and the blessings that he's poured out upon his people and so the psalmist is here summing up the benefits that

God has poured out upon him and so the psalmist is here helping us I believe to see ourselves as God has made us to be to be the recipients of his grace to be the beneficiaries of his benefits to be those who respond in worship and in adoration and in praise those who are excited by the grace of God and by the love of God and by the redemption of God and who poured out their souls to him and so this psalm surely can help many people today to discover who they are to discover who God wants them to be to discover their soul in the word soul has been edited out of our vocabulary but in the post modern world of which we seem to be entering the concept of the soul is reappearing but there's lots of confusion about its understanding and what it means

I remember during a visit to South Africa last October to attend the meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches seeing an advertisement on the highway out to the black township of Mamelodi a big hoarding which said I can be anybody I choose to be refresh your soul you see that's the new age focus but there's a sense in which the psalm is responding to that and saying this is how you refresh your soul this is how you fulfil this spiritual instinct that everybody has by worshipping the Lord by responding to his grace and to his mercy and thanking him for all the benefits that he pours out upon us so the psalm here is urging his soul urging himself to bless the Lord to praise the Lord it's interesting the psalmist seems he seems free to be able to command his soul now sometimes we think that we need to wait until something happens the psalmist didn't wait the psalmist is commanding his soul to praise the Lord and sometimes we think because we're not in the mood therefore we don't need to praise the Lord or we can't praise the

[16:30] Lord but that's not the attitude the psalmist takes he tells his soul he commands his soul to praise the Lord because the Lord has commanded him and as he commands his soul he's simply reiterating the command that God had given to him so this psalm can help us to get serious about our souls and this is a psalm which the Lord has given us not simply to meditate upon but to use as a song and as a prayer the psalms are given to us to help us in our devotions not simply publicly but also privately so the psalm begins with this individual focus this focus in depth on the spiritual experience of this man who rejoices in the benefits that God has poured out upon him through his covenant of grace and mercy which of course was later fulfilled in the new covenant made by our Lord and Saviour

Jesus Christ move then to the second scene in verses 6 to 18 where the focus widens from the personal or the individual dimension to the communal where we move from the psalmist to the community just as we saw in the video those of you who have seen it the video of the psalm psalm recital in Dundee they were not simply individual shots of face to face of camera to person face to camera there were shots of the congregation shots of the choir shots of the whole people of God gathered there to praise and to worship and so similarly here the focus is no longer on one person's experience but on the experience of the whole people of God and it's very important for us to recognize that the spirituality of the

Bible is not simply an individualistic thing it is also a cockey thing and you've got this intermission of the individual and the congregational of the personal and the communal and we see that in the psalm one helping the other one reinforcing the other he speaks in verse 6 of all the oppressed thinking of the people of God and he knows ways to Moses and his days to the people of Israel he's quite clearly thinking here of the ancient people of God and he seems to be referring to the wilderness years that these people these 40 years that were spent between Egypt and Canaan and in the 8th verse he seems to allude to the incident of the golden calf in a part of which we read or the consequence of which we read in

Exodus chapter 34 and as a result of that rebellion of the people God in his mercy and his grace demonstrated his compassion and his love and his mercy and in the passage that we read from Exodus chapter 34 these very words love and compassion love and mercy occur and it probably many commentators believe that the psalmist is thinking of that very episode and thinking about the Lord rather than blotting out the people as he had every right to do and banishing them and giving them up in fact forgives them and demonstrates his graciousness demonstrates his love demonstrates his compassion and his mercy and the word love or the word compassion is found in verse 4 and verse 8 and verse 11 and verse 13 of this psalm and so the psalmist is still speaking to us that the picture that his words conjure up for us is the picture of the congregation of Israel and we're to think here not of ourselves as the

Lord said when we pray individually to the Lord when we close the door as the Lord said and pray to our fathers in secret but rather we're to think here of ourselves as part of a greater number as part of a congregation a worshipping community of the people of God and so the psalmist here rejoices in the love of God he rejoices in the love of God as it has been manifested to his people and is still manifested to his people today what the psalmist seems to be saying here he said in the opening words he said I am loved he speaks he thanks God for his love and for his compassion but in the second part of the psalm he as it were follows us up and he's like saying I am loved therefore we are and that in many ways is the logic of the gospel that is the logic of

[ 21 : 57 ] Christian identity I am loved therefore we are we are because we are loved by God we are brought into that love brings us into the body of the people of God so we have the image of the family which is a very strong image both in the old and in the new testaments of the people of God and so the psalmist invites us to look back across the history of the church not only to that episode in the wilderness but to many episodes since then which have demonstrated the love of God the compassion of God the mercy of God and what the psalmist is saying here is that God's mercy and God's grace and God's compassion is so great he's saying it's so wonderful it's so great and he encourages us to look back and to see the tokens and manifestations the outpourings of God's grace and of

God's mercy upon the people of God now what the psalmist seems to be saying here is that there is a surplus of God's love why do I use this phrase surplus of God's love well in verses 8 to 12 the psalmist makes the dramatic contrast between God's anger and God's love in the back of his mind as we have already suggested is the golden calf event and the people's idolatry in the wilderness when God's anger was manifested in Exodus chapter 32 but the psalmist's choice of praises reflects the terms of the Lord's gracious proclamation to Moses that brought that sad chapter of the golden calf episode to an end and in that proclamation the Lord came as we read and explained to Moses and to the people the meaning of his name the meaning of the word Lord the meaning of the word

Yahweh the covenant name for God in that proclamation the Lord said the Lord the Lord the compassionate and gracious God is slow to anger abounding in love and faithfulness maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness rebellion and sin and what that incident illustrated was this that the love of God is abounding the love of God is overflowing the love of God is in surplus the psalmist is as we already noticed here speaking for the whole congregation in verse 10 he speaks of us in verse 11 he speaks of them in verse 12 of our verse 13 of these and in verse 14 of we the congregation is praising God in these verses because his love is so much greater than his anger and that's why God has saved us because although his anger is a reality and God's strange work is a work which we dare not ignore yet his mercy his love is a much greater work and his love and his mercy is much greater than his anger and he invites us all to rejoice that grace abounding is God's name that although his judgment is a grim reality and a strange work extending according to the second commandment to the third and fourth generation in contrast that commandment reminds us that God's love and God's mercy extends to a thousand generations now think of that the third and the fourth generation three four generations compared to the thousand generations that's the contrast that the word of God presents to us of the greatness of God's love and the surface of God's love over his anger and over his judgment yes God is a judge but God wants to demonstrate his love and his mercy and his grace and his compassion to the world and to demonstrate that to a thousand generations and so the psalmist goes on urging us to praise the Lord with great exuberance to rejoice that his love unlike mortals who are like grass here today and gone tomorrow his love remains from everlasting to everlasting with those who fear him and keep

his covenant and the picture that the psalmist paints here of God's love of God's grace is that it is we might say today ginormous in Jesus he has given us access to a veritable mountain of grace that is infinitely larger than the biggest wine or butter mountain that the EU has ever accumulated the psalmist is inviting us to share his great excitement that this mountain of grace is available to all who are burdened by guilt in verse 12 who are fearful of mortality in verses 14 to 16 here the psalmist is able because of the love of God to rejoice that the two major predicaments of human existence the problem of guilt and the problem of mortality the problem of death can be dealt with by

God God's grace God's love God's mercy can overcome the problem of human guilt and shame and the problem of death which is a consequence of our sins and so the psalmist in this psalm reminds us that God's love is greater than our guilt that God's love is greater than death itself and that God's love can give us victory over these enemies of our souls God can forgive our guilt and transform our mortality by the gift of eternal life what the psalmist says is that God's love is so great that he removes our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west he absorbs in himself our guilt and thus dissolves it God's love is from everlasting to everlasting there's nothing that can separate us from the love of Christ not even death and so the psalmist here rejoices in the greatness of God's love for the people for his people for the people of God and so the psalmist rejoices not simply as an individual not simply as a sole believer he rejoices as one among many one among others members members of the body of God's people but the psalmist's song of praise is not yet finished his song of praise has a much and even greater perspective a perspective that not only embraces his own soul a perspective that embraces not only the people of

[ 29 : 20 ] God but a perspective that embraces the entire universe here the video if we come back to the video analogy the video pans out and we have a panorama of history we have a panorama of the entire universe the entire cosmos in verses 19 to the beginning of verse 22 22 what we have here is much more than a landscape if we had a camera the camera would be going for no camera has gone before to capture in its lens the entire universe the salvation that we sing about in verses 6 to 18 cannot be contained within the bounds of space for the Lord has removed our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west nor can this salvation be limited to time for the life that he sows on us is from everlasting to everlasting so having said that the psalmist naturally goes into the entire universe beyond space and beyond time and he envisages the entire creation worshipping the Lord and not only that but he becomes if you like the song leader of the creation encouraging the creation to worship the Lord

I wonder how often when we praise the Lord as we have sought to praise the Lord tonight singing this psalm we think of us as praise leaders of the universe inviting angels inviting the celestial beings that God has created to worship the prophets tell us that the hills shall break out with joy and rejoice at the coming of the Lord the whole universe will praise the Lord that's what Paul's vision in Romans chapter 8 of the whole universe regenerated and renewed this is the vision which the psalmist here gives us a glimpse of and is later worked out in greater detail in the writings of Paul and of the other apostles so we here we have the psalmist in his imagination going beyond both space and time into eternity to call upon the angels and the heavenly hosts that even the galaxies and the black holes of the universe to bless and to praise the Lord and what the psalmist presents to us here is a picture that is literally mind-boggling it embraces not only the earth and its people but heaven and all its inhabitants the psalmist is envisaging the entire universe notice how the word all reappears three times in the text in these last verses of the psalms in the Hebrew text it's four times all comes in again it is what he sees here is the whole of creation worshipping the Lord no camera lens on earth could capture the sight and sound of angels and of the heavenly hosts who do the word and will of the

Lord as they join the earthly chorus of those who sinned are forgiven and who obey the Lord's commandments and what we have here is a great vision a vision when the Lord will bring a consummation of all things when the whole universe will be renewed and it's easy for us sometimes to forget that there will be an end there will be a climax to history or indeed beyond history history will be wrapped up and we move into an eternal dimension a new order a new heavens and a new earth when God's original purpose for this earth and this universe will be fulfilled a universe of which sin will be banished and in which righteousness and glory of the Lord will dwell that is the vision that the psalmist ends with this great vision of the glory of the

Lord filling the entire universe and that's the vision that he invites us to share as we seek to praise the Lord and surely this is a vision that we need to communicate to others to tell men and women who today feel that there is no future one of the most popular images in modern literature of a human being is that he is a nomad and a nomad goes just from one place to another place there is no purpose just no man goes on from one oasis to the next oasis and to the next oasis there is no idea of pilgrimage no idea of purpose now to this generation we are given here in this psalm a message that tells us that there is a purpose that tells us that there will be a new heavens and a new earth that God has a purpose for this world and for the earth and for the human race and that that purpose will be fulfilled and perhaps we should focus more on that than we often do and so this is a vision which I believe could transform the life of all who embrace it this great vision would fill and satisfy the void that many people try unsuccessfully to gratify through binge drinking drug addiction compulsive gambling recreational sex and controllable consumerism and a host of other things and for a world that has lost faith in the future here is a vision of hope and so we have here the climax of the sanness vision here was the climax of his song of praise a psalm which began with him pouring out his own soul to the

Lord a psalm which proceeded to envisage the Lord's mercy and grace and compassion being poured out in such abundance upon his people down through the years and a psalm which envisages that day when the whole created universe will join together in praise and in adoration but the climax wonderful and magnificent as it is it's not the end of the psalm at the end the psalmist goes back to the beginning again and he simply comes back to himself and he says praise the Lord oh my soul he's so thrilled he's so excited he's so moved that he can only praise the Lord he's not lost in some contemplation of the future he is in one sense but it is not something divorced from the reality of where he is he comes back to where he is he comes back to the real to the world as it was then and is now and he says here and now praise the

[ 37 : 04 ] Lord oh my soul and so the psalmist is challenging us here challenging us here to discover our soul to discover the purpose for which he has given us a soul to discover our role in God's in God's great in God's great purpose for his people and indeed for the world and for the universe and he's challenging us tonight to respond as he responded and he said to himself praise the Lord oh my soul and what the psalmist indeed did was not simply to have this vision of a great reality and a great blessing that in the past and in the future that he responded by giving himself by praising the Lord he responded by glorifying God and really enjoying him and that ought to be our response tonight ought it not to praise the Lord to bless the Lord to glorify the Lord and really to enjoy it as the psalmist so obviously does this is a song of joy a song of jubilation a song of celebration and he's inviting us to share it to make it our song and may this be our song may this be our vision and may the psalmist soul become our soul let us pray