

"GRACE REFLECTIONS"
PSALM 103
7th in "Power from the Psalms" series
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Do you ever feel like a circus performer - the kind that keeps several balls in the air.

Fall has fallen upon us - and with it the busyness that seems to surpass every other time of year. Vacation seems like years ago.

You run, you hurry, you rush, you work overtime just trying to keep all the balls in the air - the mortgage, the cars, the house, the kids, church responsibilities, the job.

The pressures of the assignments at work,
the nights out every week to keep up with the kids,
the projects at home or for work every weekend,
all combine to make you wonder if you can keep them up.

It's not only adults who experience this crazy rush of activity, it's also the youth and children among us.

It is amazing how long most of us can keep that mad pace of life going before we tire or crash but later if not sooner we begin to get a gnawing sense that something is missing - the busyness is not satisfying. It keeps us numb, anesthetized, but not satisfied.

Later if not sooner you realize there is a frantic pace but no peace.

I want you to experience peace today - not just learn about it but experience it today.

This peace will come from reconnecting with the anchor of your soul. Life for many becomes like floating in a dingy in a wild stormy sea. We are busy as beavers bailing water and rowing but we are not sure where we're going or if we'll get there. The sea is too big, the waves too high, our energy about spent, and our dingy insecure at best.

Oh, how we need an anchor - something to hitch on to that is rock solid, secure, and stronger and more certain than our dingy or the waves around us.

We need an anchor for our souls.

Sundays are a great time to get back in touch with the larger themes of life - to ask and answer, "What's it all about?"

Today I want you to look at Psalm 103 with me -

A Psalm that will help us remember, reconsider, and reconnect with God.

I want you to experience the peace with God and the praise of God that can become the stabilizing anchors of your life today.

In all the hub-bub of life it is reasonable to ask, "Who am I?"

And the answer coming from Psalm 103 is "I am a man or a woman who is LOVED by God."

As I drift in my storm tossed dingy in life I may wonder if I can lay hold of something secure that will stabilize my life and put it on course BUT what the Psalmist makes clear is that God has already laid hold of me - I am loved by Him and he is God.

That is grace! And grace breeds gratitude.

A middle-aged man was seen each morning and evening walking along the beach not far from his home.

He was always seen with hundreds of sea-gulls crowding around him anticipating, as they had for years, the food he would toss to them.

People noticing this would soon ask why he so faithfully and so liberally fed the birds.

He answered, "When the ship I was on sank I was set afloat on a small raft. I bobbed out there for days until I was out of food and nearly out of water - I was preparing to die when a tired gull landed on my raft.

That bird became my food, sustaining me until I was rescued.

So everyday I come out to feed the sea-gulls thinking of the one that saved me.

(from sermon by Dwain Patrick, July 20, 1992)

Grace engenders gratitude.

In Psalm 103 King David of Israel reminds himself and then calls us to express gratitude to God for his Grace.

Listen to his opening words:

"Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits."

David's call to himself is a call to each of us:

Shake off your indifference!

Shake off your gloom, your pessimism about life!

Shake off your thoughts of other things in this hour!

Stir yourself to thoughts of God

Sit up, think, meditate on the grace of God

From out of the depths of your being, with the utmost sincerity, from all that you are at root, with full mind, soul and strength put yourself into thinking of what God has done.

"Forget not!" Don't forget, don't be absentminded about the grace of God.

Forgetfulness is the plague of the human mind regarding God. Oh, how we forget.

Oh, how quickly we think that God has abandoned us or that he never knew us.

Oh, how likely we are to live as if we were the beneficiaries of our own grace - we made it happen.

Instead of forgetting, we are called to remember and when we remember what is the proper response? Gratitude.

Imagine yourself standing across the bay from Ellis Island in New York harbor.

It is the 100th anniversary of the statue of liberty.

You are there because your own great-grandparents found port in this harbor escaping from the crushing poverty of their homeland. Some of the family died before getting here and some on the way.

You've heard their story many times and you stand there thinking of the benefits you have received because of their bravery and the subsequent blessing of God on this land and your life.

As the tall ships sail past in the sunset and then the fireworks break into the night sky you are filled with emotion.

And when the National Anthem is finally sung at full volume by the Naval Academy Choir and Orchestra your heart is in your throat and your eyes are filled with tears as every molecule of your body seems to express your gratitude for a free and prosperous country.

Greater still is the gratitude we feel when we remember all God's benefits - all his kindness' toward us.

Praise the Lord! Let everything that is in me praise the Lord. Let me enter into it with full thought and emotion.

Let the memory of my God's grace "move me", emotionally impact me so that I rise up to call him blessed.

I call you this morning to enter into reflecting on God's grace.

I invite you to meet with God this morning.

I began this sermon by speaking of experiencing peace today.

It is when you meet with God, when you reflect on His grace that you will reconnect with the anchor of your soul and find real peace.

It is in getting back in touch with the greatest themes and truths of life, it is getting back in touch with God that you begin to feel that your dingy in the

storm of life is attached very securely to the rock of ages - you cannot be threatened because God is holding on to you.

That is peace.

That's what I want for you today.

That peace comes through gratitude

And that gratitude comes through grace reflections - reflecting on God's grace.

(Lead in prayer asking for God to help us shake off our lethargy and join into reflecting on his grace. God meet with us today.)

In verses 3-5 the songwriter spells out the first evidences of God's most personal grace to us: READ

I want you to try to put yourself in touch with the thoughts and feelings of the man I'm about to describe.

John was reared in a Christian home by parents who loved him.

Though he gave verbal testimony to having faith in Christ he knew in his own heart that it was only words.

After marrying in what appeared to be a storybook romance and wedding John quickly lost interest in his bride and began to flirt with other relationships.

Over the next 15 years he entered into one and subsequently several relationships with other women - at first deceitfully unfaithful to his wife and children and then openly so. Time and time again John's wife welcomed him home.

But John could eventually stand the duplicity no more and after 15 years of marriage he walked out of his home.

For the next five years John lived with first one woman and then another all the while accumulating greater and greater debt as he lived far above his means. What at first seemed to be freedom soon became evident to be a prison far deeper and darker than anything he had imagined. His misery knew no bounds.

In that place John was met head on one morning by Jesus himself. As if a blindfold was pulled from his eyes he saw himself for what he was and he saw Jesus in all his mercy and grace ready to forgive.

John had never known repentance as he came to know it that day - a true acknowledgment of the sin of the past and a turning to follow Christ.

With a mixture of fear and hope he called his ex-wife and asked if she would have him back.

You can imagine the turmoil in that wife's mind but after time and counseling that woman not only forgave John but she remarried him, helped to pay off his debts and lavished on him her love and affection. She truly loved him and John knew it.

Folks, that is not a fictional account - it happened.

Now what do you imagine are the thoughts and feelings of John toward his wife? Deep, deep gratitude!

He is a man (to use the words of vs 3-5) who has been forgiven, healed, redeemed, and crowned with love. His life is now filled with good and he feels like he has been born again - a whole new life.

And what are his feelings toward his God?

John realizes that his sin against God was greater far than his sin against his wife.

God had never dealt unfairly with him.

God's love was pure, always only had been for John's good.

Yet John had been unfaithful to God as surely as he had been unfaithful to his wife.

And yet God in his love had forgiven, healed, redeemed, crowned, satisfied and renewed him.

Even if his wife had never done so God would have and did.

John was a free man and a new man by God's grace.

Is that you? Maybe your sin was not adultery but your unfaithfulness to God was just as clear.

But God in his grace met you, showed you your sin, then showed you his love and forgave you. Is that you?

And what is your response? Will you join David:

"Praise the Lord, O my soul,
all my inmost being praise his holy name."

Through the first five verses the songwriter has been remembering God's grace to him personally but now beginning in verse 6 he reflects on God's grace to all who are part of God's family.

It's the same grace he has personally known but now the magnitude, the extent of God's grace impresses him and fills his heart with praise.

It might be helpful to think of the thoughts of the Psalm as three concentric circles:

vss 1-5 The Psalmist thinks of his own relationship to God

vss 6-19 The Psalmist thinks of the grace of God in the context of the entire community of believers - all God's people.

vss 20-22 The Psalmist thinks of the grace of God in the context of not just himself or the people of God but in the context of everything that has been made.

It's as if his memory keeps reaching ever outward as he thinks of God's grace and what starts close to home ends up encompassing everything - And as he reflects on grace his gratitude grows.

Verses 6 and 19 are like bookends on either end of six pairs of verses: 7-8, 9-10, 11-12, 13-14, 15-16, 17-18.

Each pair reminds us of some further aspect of God's grace.

But first notice verses 6 and 19:

These are first of all significant statements of the sovereignty of God.

V 6 says that God is working everything out for the good of his people.

Righteousness has to do with putting things right and justice has to do with proper punishment for sin.

and v 19 says that God is absolutely sovereign everywhere - nothing will keep him from accomplishing his goals.

Now in between those statements of God's intent (v 6) and power (v 19) we see how God deals with his people.

Noting vss 7-8 the Psalmist says that God chose to make his ways known to us.

I might add if God had not done so we would have no way of knowing of his love. His divinity and power are seen in creation but his love in its fullness awaits his actions for us to see and understand it.

The background for this statement by David in verse 7 is found in the book of Exodus.

God had promised to deliver the descendants of Jacob from slavery in Egypt. The misery of the people was seen by God and He made good on his promise by leading them out of that country under the leadership of Moses.

If ever a people should have been grateful and obedient to a gracious God it should have been the Israelites.

They had seen him do marvelous miracles.

They had seen him part the Red Sea and bury their enemies afterward in it.

They had seen food come from the sky and water from a rock.

But if ever there was an ungrateful, rebellious, faithless and sinful people it was the Israelites.

While Moses was meeting with God on the mountain, the people were building for themselves a golden idol to worship.

In that context Moses asks God to show him God's ways - how will God deal with this people.

God's response in Exodus 34 is quoted almost verbatim here in Psalm 103:8

God says these are my ways and deeds toward you: READ (8)

Verses 9 and 10 spell that out more fully.

Though God has every right to accuse and to satisfy his anger against us in justice

the Psalmist says. READ v 10.

God has chosen to treat us differently than he justly could.

Have you ever done something and gotten off "scot free"?

God says in verse 10, I'm not going to give you what you deserve - that's mercy.

Now in verses 11-18 he will tell us what God will give us - That is grace.

In Verses 11 and 12 the Song says that God gives us a love that is immeasurable and a forgiveness that is complete.

Try to comprehend the distances of the universe when it takes light traveling 186,000 miles per second, 8 minutes to travel from the sun to the earth. And the sun is closer to the earth by thousands of times than other stars. And there is every reason to believe that there are stars yet undiscovered almost infinitely further away than the sun.

Measure all of that and you have some sense of the limitless love of God for you.

As to forgiveness, do not be limited by the curvature of the earth and then consider going in one (left) direction forever and then the other direction (right) forever and imagine the separation between those two points.

That is how far your sins have been removed from you by your God when he forgives.

They are gone, never to be used against you.

Once you are forgiven God will never judge you for your sins.

How has God decided to deal with us?

With boundless love and complete forgiveness.

But Verses 13 and 14 go on to tell us more of the grace of God.

It extends to him understanding exactly how frail we are and then to him compassionately meeting our needs.

So not only does God not punish us for our sins,
and flood us with his love and remove our sins,
but he also tenderly deals with us as a father with a child who is frail and in need.

Less than a week ago a young woman in our church sat down and wrote a letter to God recounting the grace of God to her in just the past two years. I want you to hear parts of that letter and especially hear God's compassion. READ

As a father cares for his children so the grace of God extends to his most tender provision for our daily needs.

And then in verses 15 and 16 coupled with 17 and 18 David tells us that the grace of God is eternal.

v 15-16. Like the grass of the fields we are born, live for a season and are gone. In fact it doesn't take long and we aren't even remembered.

v 17. BUT GOD's love is from everlasting to everlasting.

We may be soon gone, and soon forgotten here but God never forgets us and never stop loving us.

And that promise is certain for our children and grandchildren as well.

Verse 18 does not mean that God will love us only so long as we obey Him (as if we purchase his love) but that those who are loved by God and become part of his family are the ones who keep his covenant and respond in willful obedience to his desires. He initiates, we respond.

A sovereign God has promised not to treat us as we deserve but to treat us with abounding love, complete forgiveness, tenderness and to do so forever - his love perseveres even through death - we belong to him forever.

With those thoughts coursing through his brain, the Psalmist ends his song of praise with a reminder that God's grace extends to all who belong to Him and were made by Him and they too should praise him. READ v 20-22

But he ends with bringing it back to himself: vs 22c READ

If this Psalm was set to music I would expect it to begin softly as the Poet recalls with deep emotional gratitude the very personal nature of God's grace to him.

It would then pick up in tempo and volume as the song tells of the grace of God to all his people - grace spelled out in forgiveness, love, compassion, and duration.

Throughout that middle section the volume would be increasing subtly until it broke out into full volume with the last section where the songwriter tells everyone and everything to praise the Lord.

Then in sharpest contrast that great sound would vanish and in hushed tones almost too quiet to hear the song would speak from the soul of one person - "Praise the Lord O my soul"

I said as I began this morning that with reflection on grace comes gratitude. Has the Psalmist described your God?

Have you allowed your mind to be filled with thoughts
of his grace to you?
Does gratitude fill your heart?

I also said that out of gratitude flows peace.

There is no greater peace than to know that you are forgiven, loved, and cared for eternally by this sovereign God.

The busyness may not stop, the storm may continue to threaten your boat but your soul is anchored to God by his grace. Reconnected. You know who you are and you know what it's all about. That's peace.

Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my innermost being praise your holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul; and forget not all his benefits."

Reread Psalm 103 together

Benediction