

## A Thankful Heart Part 2 (Thanksgiving 2009)

As we prepare this week to observe Thanksgiving, David lists several reasons why those who love the Lord can be grateful. He writes in Psalm 103:1-5 [RSV], **1. Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! 2. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, 3. Who forgives all your iniquity, Who heals all your diseases, 4. Who redeems your life from the Pit, Who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, 5. Who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.**

When Carey and I were employed as Certified Family Teachers, our supervisor used to have a plaque on his wall in his office which said, "Catch 'em being good!" Working in the field in which we did, which was dealing with a population of behavior-disordered, sexually abused teenage children, behavior modification was needed in order to turn those kids around to make them contributing members of society. Therefore, instead of always correcting negative behavior, it was extremely important to reinforce **positive** behavior whenever it was seen. And when I say when it was seen, that is exactly what I meant. Tell them right then and right there on the spot and as it was happening just how much you appreciate the good job they are doing. In order to be most effective in achieving the type of behavior you desired, that positive behavior needed to be praised immediately. Waiting would not be nearly as effective because delaying the praise takes away the impact. Even if a child was acting out, it was extremely important to find something positive to praise and appreciate about that individual. By doing so, and doing so consistently, which is also key, success can be achieved.

We are all used to having overbearing bosses who seem to delight in catching us doing something wrong. We all have people in our lives who do not seem to have a word to say to us unless it is something to criticize you about. How rare it is, indeed, to be praised when we have done something well.

Praising positive behavior on the spot is actually much more difficult than it appears. Why? *Because most of us are better at handing out criticism than we are at handing out praise.* We are much better at giving immediate blaming than we are at giving immediate praise for good behavior.

As we are approaching our holiday of Thanksgiving, all of us would do well to put positive reinforcement into practice this week. It is not just behavior-disordered teenagers who need positive reinforcement. You see, we all do. Catch someone doing something right. And praise them right on the spot. It could revolutionize your marriage, change the way you relate to your children, encourage those who report to you and, in general, make you a much nicer person to be around!

But it needs to be intentional. That is the point. And it applies very much to our relationship with God, too. Many of us are better at complaining. We take God for granted.

The children of Israel are prime examples of people who took God for granted. After all He had done for them and continued to do for them, they constantly grumbled. After the great miracle He performed at the Red Sea, they were griping and complaining and moaning and groaning. God sent manna, the very food of the angels, and they did not like it. They missed the good food they had back in Egypt. *In Egypt they were slaves, but they were willing to trade their freedom for a better menu.* So God sent them quail until they choked on it. Unhappy people were those Jews in the wilderness. I would be harder on them except for the fact that we are like them and they are like us in many ways.

*Sometimes we need to give ourselves a good talking-to.* That, I believe, is the message of Psalm 103. It is what it is all about. It is a prayer by David in which he talks to his own soul and reminds himself to **“bless the Lord”** and **“forget not all His benefits.”**

I wonder how many of us would give God some immediate praising for all of His blessings. We are sure excellent at telling the Lord what we want Him to do for us. *We need a good dose of Psalm 103 to wash out that complaining spirit and replace it with a heart of gratitude to the Lord.* I call your attention to this because we are only a few days away from Thanksgiving. Some people consider this the greatest of all the psalms. Charles Spurgeon called it “a Bible within itself” and said it contains “too much for a thousand pens to write.” We know from the superscription that David wrote these magnificent words. I believe he wrote them late in his life when he could look back and speak from experience about the tender mercies of the Lord.

We can outline Psalm 103 this way:

**Personal observations (verses 1-5)** – David reviews the mercy God has shown to him.

**National observations (verses 6-18)** – David reviews the mercy God has shown to Israel.

**Universal observations (verses 19-22)** – David calls all created beings to praise the Lord.

David begins by calling us to wholehearted, intentional praise of God. **“All that is within me, bless His holy name!”** exclaims David in verse 1 [RSV]. **“Forget not all His benefits,”** he adds in verse 2 [RSV].

In order for us to do this properly we must *think* before we can *thank*. We must *ponder* before we can *praise*. We must *remember* before we can *rejoice*. Here are five blessed benefits of the Lord that we must not forget. And each one of these is reason in itself to be thankful to God: His **pardon**, His **healing**, both physical and spiritual, His **deliverance**, His **coronation**, and, finally, His **satisfaction**.

Let us begin by talking about how we can all be thankful for God's pardon. As the Apostle Paul so rightly phrased in Romans 3:23 [RSV], "***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,***" we stand guilty and convicted before God Almighty. He owes us nothing. He did not have to offer us redemption, and He did not have to offer us pardon. But because He is a loving God full of grace and a compassionate Father, "***not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance***" (2 Peter 3:9 [RSV]), He offers us both redemption and pardon through His Son, Jesus Christ.

In Psalm 103 verse 3 David begins by reminding us that God forgives all our iniquity. Speaking of the Lord, David says God "***forgives all your iniquity.***" It is no surprise that he starts here because this is the foundation for everything else. *Our greatest problem is the guilt we feel because of our sin, and our greatest need is to know forgiveness from the Lord.* Note that David says that God forgives "***all***" our iniquity. He did not say God forgives some of it, and neither did he say God forgives even most of it. He said God forgives all of our iniquity! That is great news, is it not? Some of us have really blown it big time, and we have messed up over and over and over again. And we have done the same dumb things repeatedly even after promising never to do them again. I, for one, am glad the word "***all***" is included because it means that God intends to forgive my future sins when I commit them, too, if I remain faithful and put my trust in Him. The Apostle John tells us in 1 John 1:8-9 [RSV], ***8. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.***

Think about the significance of what we just read. Most of us secretly imagine that when we come to Christ, all our past sins are forgiven, but then it is a footrace with the devil until the end of our life. In a sense I suppose that is true, and we certainly know that we can choose to walk away from the Lord, *but when Christ died, all of our sins were in the future.* And when we come to Christ, all our sins are forgiven, even the yet-to-be-committed sins, ones that would shock us if we knew about them right now. But as John said, God will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, if we confess our sins. That forgiveness of sins is also future tense for everyone who has come to the Lord in obedient, saving faith. We do not have license to sin, as some believe, but we do have God's word that when we do stumble His grace is still there for us, and the blood of Jesus Christ continues to wash and cleanse us from all unrighteousness! Is this not something to praise God about, and offer up our

heartfelt thanks! What a God we serve! What grace is poured out on His children! He forgives all of our sins – past, present and future. That is a huge insight because it touches upon how we see God. He is more willing to forgive than we are to be forgiven. In fact, He is **eager** to forgive. He is **ready** to forgive. And He **wants** to forgive you.

David reminds us in verse 3 that God **“heals all your diseases.”** This benefit of the healing arts is close to my heart. *Healing arts is an apt phrase to use because healing is truly an art and not just a science.* After doctors and nurses have done all they can do, and after we have used all the latest technology imaginable and taken all the newest drugs produced by the pharmaceutical companies, healing must come from the Lord. That is why we pray for the sick. They may be healed by medicine or by surgery or by some other course of treatment, or they may find healing through prayer or even by a miracle from the Lord, if He chooses to perform one. All of those things are possible, and they are not mutually exclusive. If you were sick and are now healthy, give thanks to the Lord. If your cancer is in remission, give thanks to the Lord. If you nearly died after an accident but somehow survived, give thanks to the Lord. And remember that any healing that occurs in this life is limited and temporary. *Our ultimate healing comes when we are raised immortal and incorruptible.* In that happy resurrection day, when Jesus comes **“and the dead in Christ will rise first”** (1 Thessalonians 4:16 [RSV]), then at last we will be totally, completely, and finally healed once and for all.

*Between now and then every last one of us should give thanks to the Lord for every bit of healing we have ever experienced.* If you took an aspirin and now your headache is gone, that, too, is from the Lord. Good medicine and good prayer go together hand in hand.

People ask, “Do you believe in divine healing?” The answer is that there is only one kind of there is: Divine. It just comes in many different varieties.

**“Who redeems your life from the Pit,”** writes David in verse 4. To redeem means to rescue from danger in the time of trouble, and to buy back. The **“Pit”** refers to death itself. This benefit may be hard to grasp, so picture in your mind, if you will, the speedometer in your automobile. Think of the thousands of miles you have driven with no accident. And yet every day people are killed on the highway, but you were not killed when you could have been. *That you are hearing these words is proof positive that you are not dead.* God has preserved you to this very moment and has protected you every step of your journey. If God willed it to be so, you would die today – and you might die today – but it cannot happen without God’s permission. Satan himself cannot touch you without God’s permission, as we learn from the *Book of Job*.

I knew a woman who once told me that her father’s favorite saying was, “If you’re going to die by hanging, you’ll never drown.” She said she hated it when she

was growing up, but as an adult she grew to understand it as a profound statement regarding God's sovereignty.

*If you're going to die by hanging, you'll never drown so don't worry about it either way.* You can only die one way, and since all our days are written in God's book (Psalm 139:16), and He alone knows how our earthly journey will end, we do not have to live in fear of the future. We will all die someday unless the Lord returns first, and when the moment comes we may hang or we may drown, but we will not do both. So cheer up, saints of God. If you are going to die by hanging, you will never drown!

To me that means we ought to live life with no care for how or when we are going to die. *Every day the Lord rescues us in a million ways that we do not see.* His angels encamp around us to deliver us from trouble. When the time comes to die, we will die. We are immortal until our work on Earth is done.

Often we are too flippant about God's protection, as if we were in charge of everything. "What happened today?" asks someone. "Nothing," is a usual reply, especially if one is speaking to a teenager!

But think of what *did not* happen. No one robbed you. No one shot you. You were not fired. Your arthritis did not flare up – or if it did, you made it through the day. A truck did not swerve and hit you. You were not rear-ended. No one scammed you on the Internet (although some people tried). Your identity was not stolen (as far as you know). Your wife still loves you. Your husband is still happy to see you. You do not have cancer – or if you do, you are still living. You have got your health (what there is of it), your friends (most of them, anyway), your money (maybe not as much as you once had but you are not broke), your job (if you are not let go tomorrow), and on and on it goes. Think of all the bad things that could have happened to you today that did not. Can you not be grateful to God for that? The fact that you think nothing happened today means that God has been doing His job!

*I like to refer to this as the doctrine of "perpetual preservation."* It means that while we are on Earth, with all of its dangers and troubles, God is constantly at work behind the scenes, working to protect us from trouble, to clear the way ahead, and to give us strength for each new day. The story is told that over a bed in a hospital in England there is bronze plaque with these words: "This bed has been endowed by the savings of a poor man who is grateful for an unexpected recovery." If we could only see life as God does, we would make a new plaque like that every day.

David continues in verse 4 by telling us, God "***crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.***" The older translations say that he crowns us with "***lovingkindness.***" It is the loyal, unending, unchanging love of God toward us. He heaps up His blessings and then He pours them out on us. Then He crowns

us with **“tender mercies.”** Why does He not say “tender justice”? There is nothing “tender” about justice. Mercy implies failure and defeat. *Tender mercy means He knows what we are going through and He meets us where we are.* If we were to receive what we truly deserve from God, we would stand no chance. But instead of justice, God give us **“tender mercies.”**

The crown reminds us of our position as the children of God. In our day only kings and queens wear crowns, but it is the privilege of every Christian to be crowned with lovingkindness and the tender mercy of God.

Which brings us to satisfaction. David says in verse 5 that God **“satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”** The text tells us God satisfies you with good. That means there is nothing on Earth that can satisfy us deeply except God Himself. The “good” of verse 5 comes from God. It does not come from anything we see around us. One translation says, **“He fills my life with good things”** (NLT), which is true enough but that might leave the impression that God promises certain material benefits, such as money or status or promotion or some sort of earthly prosperity if we will only serve Him. *But the emphasis is not on what we possess but on what possesses us.* Eugene Peterson captures this nicely in *The Message*: **“He wraps you in goodness – beauty eternal.”**

*To be satisfied means to be so full that you need nothing else.* It is what happens at the end of Thanksgiving dinner when you simply cannot eat anything else. You have had two helpings of everything and even though there is more food on the table, you cannot eat any of it. If you are hungry, to be full like that is a wonderful sensation. But that satisfaction eventually wears off and you have to eat again.

Here, David speaks of satisfaction deeper than anything the world can offer. In many American households Thanksgiving is a time for three things – food, family, and football. After the meal is over comes the big event. Many men (and some women) sit in front of the TV and watch the Dallas Cowboys on national TV, or the Detroit Lions if they need a good laugh. Football provides a good reminder of the fleeting nature of earthly satisfaction. In the early 1970s the Dallas Cowboys had a star running back named Duane Thomas who was known to be somewhat unpredictable. One year the Cowboys made it to the Super Bowl. During the lead-up to the big game, someone asked Duane Thomas what he thought about playing in the “ultimate game.” He replied with an answer that might have come right out of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. “If this is the Ultimate Game, why do they play it again next year?”

Why, indeed? So it is with everything the world offers. *We are here today, gone tomorrow.* God says to His fading, frail, perishing children, “I will give you whatever you need so you can soar like the eagle.” All of us need this. I know I need it.

There is a way to renew yourself, your energy, your outlook and your attitude. It is better than aerobics, cheaper than health food, quicker than dieting, and altogether less strenuous than jogging. And what is this “miracle cure”? Fill your life with God’s good gifts to you. If you will let Him, the Lord will give you something the world cannot match. The result will be immortal youth.

Immortal youth. That’s what Ponce de Leon tried to find in his quest for the fabled Fountain of Youth. *He never found it because it is nowhere to be found in this world.* God says, “I want to satisfy you – not with gold but with good.” Not with that which glitters today and is gone tomorrow but with that which is permanent, eternal, and ever increasing in value.

God intends to give us: Contentment. Satisfaction. Strength. Vigor. And so we come to the end of this magnificent succession of benefits. *They form a perfect summary of Thanksgiving for anyone who wants to wake up his soul and praise the Lord.* And what are the “blessed benefits” again? They are **pardon, healing, deliverance, coronation and satisfaction.**

If you do not know where to begin in praising God this Thanksgiving, start right here. William Law offers these wise words:

What is the application of all this? *It is not hidden or complex, and it seems more important to me today than it did twenty years ago.* As the years roll on and life teaches you some important lessons, you learn that not all your dreams will come true. That is a good thing. The wise among us have learned to thank God for prayers that God never answered and dreams that never came true. It is good to dream big dreams and to imagine all that you might do someday. But living forever in the future tends to make you unhappy where you are today.

If you do not know where to begin in applying this sermon, let us circle back to the beginning and take the advice we heard then. Let us all do some positive reinforcement this week by heaping immediate praise on others. Catch your spouse doing something right. Catch your children doing something right. Catch your friends doing something right. Catch your teacher doing something right. Catch you co-workers doing something right. When you do, give them some immediate encouraging words! That alone will do your soul good. Just focusing on the positive will lift your spirits. *But then give God a great big thank You praising, too.* I know that sounds trite. But start there. Try praising the Lord for one minute without stopping. Do it every day for a week and see how much it strengthens your heart and brings you closer to God!