

We're continuing our series in the book of Psalms. We've called this series, *Answering God*, because in the Psalms, we learn how to answer God as we respond to all the different ways he's acted in our lives. Sometimes we respond with lament, sometimes with confession of sin, sometimes with a declaration of our faith in God. All of those are legitimate and important ways to answer God, but today we're looking at what's perhaps the most important way to answer God, one that's expressed over and over again in the Psalms, and that's to offer Him praise and thanksgiving.

It may seem strange to talk about praise and thanksgiving at a time like this. These are hard times. We've been doing this sheltering-in-place thing for eight weeks now. Yes, there have been a few "silver linings" here and there, but most of us are tired of this, and we want to get back to some semblance of normal life. Why would I want to praise God now? Over 60,000 people have died. Thirty million people are unemployed. And there are just the little things I miss. I miss being with my kids and grandkids. I miss eating out at a good restaurant. I miss baseball. I miss travel.

But maybe all that's even more reason to praise Him. With all the changes we've had and all the changes we might still have moving forward, he doesn't change, nor do his promises. And so, it's good for us to focus on those things we can count on, things that will never change.

Sometimes we need to rouse ourselves to praise Him

I believe King David, as he wrote Psalm 103, understood this. Because he starts this Psalm out by reminding himself to praise the Lord, he says, *"Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—" (vv. 1-2).*

Notice David is talking to himself. He's rousing his soul. Maybe he's depressed or discouraged. Maybe he's just flat. So he speaks to his soul and says, "Soul, praise the Lord." In fact, he calls for more than a half-hearted response. He calls for all of his inmost being to praise Him. Deep down, he knows God is worthy of that, so he commands himself to do that.

Do you ever talk to yourself? One of the most embarrassing moments in a person's life can be when he is caught talking to himself. You can learn a lot about a person by what he says when he talks to himself. I talk to myself a lot when I play golf, and it's usually me telling myself to do something I'm having a hard time doing. Like, "Mark, keep your head down!" Well, sometimes, I

need to do the same with my soul. I don't feel like praising God, so I say to myself, "Soul, wake up! Remember God! Remember his promises?"

We praise when we forget none of his benefits

The key to doing this is that we "forget not all his benefits." This line is the hinge upon which the entire psalm turns because David goes on in verses 3-19 to describe exactly what those benefits are. He's like a little kid under the tree on Christmas morning. As he sits there, his eyes are bulging because he's surrounded by a pile of colorful packages just waiting to be opened.

But what do you say about a child who forgets the good gifts given to him? What do we say about anyone who's been given much but kind of just blows it off? What's the word we use for that? We use the word "ungrateful." It's interesting, in 2 Timothy 3, the apostle Paul is writing about the characteristics of this present world we live in. It's a sad commentary on this world. He lists 19 horrible characteristics. He says, *"People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents..."* Then he throws in *ungrateful*. I wouldn't have expected that in a list of heinous sins! But ingratitude is right up there with the worst of them. And the sad thing is ingratitude is usually one of those things we don't even see in ourselves until we lose what we have. Then we realize how much we've taken for granted. Think of all the things we took for granted before COVID-19. Sometimes it takes a time like this to make us more grateful, doesn't it? Many things we normally lean on are gone, so we appreciate them more.

We need to ask ourselves. "What are the benefits I have from God, for which I should be grateful and offer him praise and thanksgiving?"

As David recounts these benefits, he goes from one to the next in fairly rapid succession. But it really all boils down to just three benefits: unlimited pardon, unrestrained love and compassion, ultimate home.

Unlimited Pardon

The first benefit to remind ourselves of is unlimited pardon. Look at verse 3. *"Who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases."* Notice — he forgives all of your sins — not some but all. And with that, David says he "heals all your diseases." This comes right on the heels of forgiveness for a reason. Under the covenant God made with Israel, many diseases were the direct result

of sin. So when he speaks of being healed, he's referring to the removal of the consequences of sin, which under the old covenant was disease.

So this is all about unlimited pardon. How often do you stop and reflect on the fact he's forgiven all of your sins? Have you ever thought of what it would be like for you to confess a sin to God and for God to shoot back and say, "Sorry, you've gone too far this time; no more forgiveness for you." No! He'll never say that. You can't out-sin his grace.

If you look down at verse 7-8, David expands on this.

He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. vv. 7-8

He's reflecting on Israel's history. Moses was up on Mt. Sinai talking to God. Meanwhile, the people of Israel were at the bottom, having a wild party. They rebelled against God and made a golden calf to worship. God was angry. This was just one of many things they'd done up to this point to provoke Him. But Moses pleads on their behalf to avert God's anger. God responds with the exact words of verse 8, "*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love*" (See Ex. 34:6). The word for slow to anger literally means long of nose because when you get angry, your nose gets red and burns. God's nose is so long it takes forever to burn. You might say God has a very long fuse.

There's an old story about Abraham. He was sitting outside his tent one night when he saw a weary old man approach his tent. Abraham greeted him and invited him into his tent. He washed the man's feet and gave him food and drink. Abraham noticed the man began eating without giving thanks. So Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?" The man said, "I worship the fire." When he heard this, Abraham became so mad he threw the man out into the cold night. After the man walked off, God asked Abraham, "What happened to your guest?" Abraham said, "I threw him out because he didn't worship you." Then God said, "Abraham, I've put up with this man for 80 years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him for just one night?"

God has a long fuse. He does get angry, but it's not a payback anger; nor is it a knee-jerk, fly off the handle kind of anger. We've all reacted that way to someone who hurts us or does something really foolish. Verse 9 says more about this. It says even when he does get angry, "*He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;*" It's like God has a long fuse, and he also has a short memory! He won't harbor his anger forever! He doesn't keep a file of your sins that he brings up whenever convenient. That's what we all tend to do, right? We get into an argument with our spouse, and we may not get hysterical, but we do get historical. We dredge up old hurts and grievances. But God isn't that way. He'll not always accuse; he won't harbor his anger forever. Verse 10 says it like this, "*he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay*

us according to our iniquities." We live in a world where we pretty much expect people to treat us according to what we deserve. I mean, that's how the world works, right? You get what you earn. You work hard and do well, and it pays off. But if you don't, or if you just fail, well, you get what you earn. But God operates differently. He doesn't give us what we deserve. Aren't you glad? Isn't that a reason to praise him?

Verse 12 says one more thing about his pardon. "*as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*" Let me ask you how far is the east from the west? Try this: Take a globe and start in San Francisco. Start moving east around the globe, but then stop when you're finally moving west. Guess what? You'll never get there! You'll always keep moving east. How far is the east from the west? It's infinite! How far has he removed your sin? An immeasurable distance! So, why do we keep trying to bring back what God has removed?

God's unlimited pardon is the first thing you need to grasp to cultivate a grateful heart of praise. Think back this past week, then this past month, then this past year. What would your life have been like if God hadn't forgiven you? Never forget what it was like to live under the guilt of sin and then be forgiven. It's like the old hymn, "My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin—not in part, but in whole—is nailed to the cross. I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, oh my soul."

Unrestrained Love and Compassion

The second benefit we must not forget is unrestrained love and compassion. Look what he says in verse 4. "*who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,*" Notice how complete our reversal of fortune is. We start out in a pit and end up with a crown. The "pit" is the pit of death. Of course, David had many occasions where God delivered him from life-threatening situations, from the pit of death. But he didn't just deliver him; he crowned him with love and compassion! David was a king. He wore a royal crown. That crown was a symbol of honor and authority. Here David speaks of a different kind of crown. God has placed a crown on your head, a crown of love and compassion.

The word he uses here for compassion is quite telling. It's a visceral word. It points to the strongest of emotions. In Isaiah 49:15, God says, "*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!*" This is God speaking. God's compassion is likened to a mother with a child at her breast.

My daughter Kim is over halfway through her third pregnancy. She has two boys, and we just learned she's having a girl. In a few months, she'll clutch her tiny baby girl in her arms, and we all know a mother's fierce and visceral compassion for her child. That's the picture we have here in this psalm of God's unrestrained love and compassion.

We see this expanded on down in verse 11. *“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;”* How big is God’s love? Look up into the sky. How far does it go? The distances are unfathomable. Researchers found a new galaxy that’s 13 million light-years away. How much does God love you? How high are the heavens above the earth? For starters, try 13 million light-years! That’s why Paul prays in Ephesians 3 we’d *“grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge”* (Eph. 3:18b-19a).

Look even further down at verses 13-14.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

Now he introduces the idea of God as our Father. Perhaps some of you have a hard time relating to this image of God as a father. Your father was anything but compassionate and understanding. So you may need to stop thinking of God the Father as you’ve thought of your own father. God, the Father, is the true measure of all fatherhood. He’s the standard. And the thing that most characterizes the Fatherhood of God is compassion (there’s that word again). Far too often, we think of God as our boss and not our Father. With your boss, it’s all about your performance. If you go off the rails, what does your boss do? He fires you. But what does a compassionate father do if you go off the rails? He gets more involved.

I’ve been blessed with three kids who are all adults now. I’ve seen each one of them go through their own trials and difficulties, as well as times of joy and victory. As a father, I sort of live and die by their ups and downs. But I want to know about all of it. And if they’re struggling, I really want to know. I want them to come to me. I want to get involved and help them. God, our Father, doesn’t move away from us when we’re struggling or when we fail, he moves towards us with compassion.

This is the Father heart of God. And part of the reason for that is what he says in verse 14. *“for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.”* He knows we’re made of dust! Dust falls apart. Dust blows away in the wind. He knows we’re weak and frail individuals. I remember teaching each one of my kids how to ride a bike. With all three, it took time and patience. They’d fall, get mad at me, and want to give up. But I didn’t give up on them. I understood they’re just kids trying to learn. God understands we’re weak. We’re going to fall. We’re still trying to figure it out. We have the freedom to be weak with God. He knows we’re but dust.

He crowns us with love and compassion. Can you praise God for that? When you wake up in the morning, and when you lie down at night, remind your soul about his unrestrained compassion

and love. And then just take a moment and praise him and thank him for that.

Ultimate Home

The third benefit is what I call ultimate home. Look what he says in verse 5. *“who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”* David is getting older, but he doesn’t feel old—God renews him with the energy of a young man. He likens this renewed youth to that of an eagle. It’s not that eagles live so long. They normally live 20-30 years in the wild. But, regardless of their age, all eagles lose and replace their feathers each year (molt), so they do indeed get renewed each year. We live in a society terrified of old age, but in the Lord, we don’t have to be! I love how Paul put it, *“Though outwardly we’re wasting away, yet inwardly we’re being renewed day by day”* (2 Cor. 4:16). Like many of you, I work hard to stay physically fit. But you know what? It’s a battle I’m going to lose. I’m reminded of that every time I look in the mirror. It’s not a pretty sight. But here’s the deal: my body might be wasting away, but my soul is being renewed day by day. But why do I say this is all about having an ultimate home? Well, look down at verses 15-18.

The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children—with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts. vv. 15-18

He starts out and describes how fleeting our lives are — like grass, like the flowers of spring swept away by the wind, we’re gone. Someone asked Billy Graham in his old age what was the biggest surprise in getting old. He simply replied, “It went so fast.” It does go fast. Like James says, *“You’re a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes”* (James 4:14). And notice in verse 16, the psalmist says of our lives, *“the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”* What a sad statement! Our “place” (home) here in this planet will remember us no more. No matter how hard we try to be remembered, in the end, we’re forgotten.

From the time I was born to the time I left for college, I lived in the same home. And then, when my mom died, my own family moved back into that same home and raised our kids there. Talk about “the house that built me.” But now I go back, and the whole house has been remodeled, and strangers live there, and it’s like, “it remembers me no more.”

I think there’s something in all of us that wants a home where we’ll always be remembered. I think that’s what David is getting at down in verse 17, *“But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children.”* You see, our lives may be short, but God’s love is

long. The Lord's love is our place, our home. The Lord's love not only continues to our grandchildren, but it continues forever. It's the only place where the fire in the fireplace is always burning. God's love for us will continue right into eternity. And that will be our home — forever! That'll be the place we're always remembered. Jesus said to his disciples, *"I am going there to prepare a place for you..."* Where? He says, *"In my Father's house"* (John 14:1-2). That's your home. That's the ultimate place of safety and contentment.

David ends the way he started, *"Praise the Lord o my soul"* (v. 22b). *"Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits."* Unlimited pardon. Unrestrained love and compassion. Ultimate home.

One thing this psalm doesn't tell us is how far God was willing to go to make all of this possible. You see, God isn't some generous grandfather in the sky who's too nice to ever demand justice. God is holy. God is just. He can't look at our rebellion and say, "No big deal." It is a big deal. It's such a big deal to pardon our sin, crown us with love and compassion, and secure for us an ultimate home that God the Father did something unthinkable. He sent his only Son to die for us. Like the hymn says, "Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued? Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, should die for me?"

And the only thing we can do to take advantage of all these benefits is to embrace this gift of God's grace through Jesus by faith. It's a gift. You cannot earn it. You just believe it and receive it. Psalm 103:18 says all of these benefits — unlimited pardon, unrestrained love and compassion, and ultimate home — they all come to those who "keep his covenant." What does that mean? Jesus talked about that. In Luke 22:19-20, when Jesus broke bread and passed the cup with his disciples on the night of his arrest and betrayal, he said, *"This is my body, which is for you. This cup is the New Covenant in my blood."* Jesus is pointing to his death on the cross and saying, This is how you become the recipient of all these benefits — through this covenantal relationship. Through his broken body and shed blood.

Let's be reminded that communion is called "the eucharist" for a reason. Eucharist means thanksgiving. Take some time to give thanks for each of these things we have by virtue of Jesus' death: unlimited pardon, unrestrained love and compassion, and ultimate home.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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