

Psalm 103: A Reason to Praise

By

Peter Martin

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“A Psalm of David. Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name!

-Psalm 103:1

As we approach Thanksgiving I thought it would be a good idea to look at the Biblical virtue of praise and thanksgiving; and, in my opinion, there is no better place to go in order to reflect on these important topics than Psalm 103. Our modern word “psalm” comes from a Greek word “psallein” which means to pluck, usually referring to a harp. Therefore the later word “psalmos” was a word that referred to any song that was sung accompanied by music. In other words it differentiated pure poetry from songs.

So when we look at the book of “Psalms” in our Bibles, we are really looking at the ancient praise music of the Jewish people, similar to the “hymnals” used in many more traditional forms of Christian worship. The key difference is that these songs are actually inspired by God and therefore not only provided the people of God with beautiful music that they could sing together, but also contained perfect theology and even prophecy for the people of God.

Contained within this book, which is actually the longest book in our Bibles, is this Psalm that is dedicated to the concept of “blessing” or praise. Another important point to make before we dive into this beautiful song is that the word used that is here translated “bless” is the Hebrew word “Barak” which means more than mere praise, but it actually means to kneel or to adore something. This goes beyond mere lip service, this is whole body and soul praise that is borne out of a heart of genuine gratitude and adoration.

The most interesting thing about this Psalm to me though, is that it begins with the Psalmist commanding his own soul to “bless the Lord...” This feeds into an idea that is not widely believed anymore, that we actually do exercise a level of autonomy over our own emotional lives. This also means that the virtue of praise is something that needs to be worked on, not something that we will naturally have. This is really a core belief in the founding of Thanksgiving. The day wasn’t given to those who “feel” thankful, it is a day in which people are encouraged to *be* thankful regardless of their circumstances. But since this is difficult for us to understand nowadays it would be good to read through this Psalm and see how David does this in his own life.

The Importance of Praise

Bless the LORD, you His angels, Who excel in strength, who do His word, Heeding the voice of His word. Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, You ministers of His, who do His pleasure. Bless the LORD, all His works, In all places of His dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!"

-Psalm 103:20-22

This Psalm begins and ends with a call to praise God. This "command" is not only given to the Psalmist's own soul, but it is directed at all things in creation, both physical and even the spiritual. So, before we discuss *how* we can cultivate a heart of praise and thanksgiving, it would be important for us to first look at *why* this is a good thing. I think we live in an age that values personal authenticity, an age in which the people who are given the most attention are those who speak in an "unfiltered" way. We see this at the top of our politics in a guy like Donald Trump, and even down the ladder to the most prominent podcast hosts and social media influencers.

In reality this is a reaction to what we view as the artificially polite culture of the 1950's in which the most popular shows were things like "Leave it to Beaver" and "Andy Griffith". Ever since then our culture has been in rebellion against that ideal and has elevated inner authenticity and challenged the norms of society until we arrived at our current moment. Because of this, I think the modern person might look at this Psalm with a fair bit of skepticism. This could feel like that concept of "fake it til you make it" run amok and might even be seen as a cause of psychological repression.

Before I address any of that though, let's look at why we should even bother. Because another thing that our modern culture has done is it has elevated internal experience to an incredibly high point. This is why phrases like "my truth" became so common for us. The basic idea is that beauty and goodness are concepts that exist in our own conscience, and they don't really exist outside of our own experience.

So if I see a movie and think that it is good, that is simply "my truth" based on a subjective experience and says nothing about the movie itself. This idea trivializes the concept of praise. It essentially means that when we are seeking to praise God or be thankful in a given circumstance, we are merely trying to change our subjective experience. However, throughout this Psalm we are given a much different view. We will look at later verses to really drive this point home, but look again at verse 1 of this Psalm:

Psalm 103:1 "bless His holy Name!"

The command to “bless the Lord” is linked to His “holy Name.” “Name” in the ancient world was tied to identity and value. For the Psalmist, He isn’t trying to praise God because he wants to, but because He believes that God is *worthy* of his praise. But what does it mean that God, or any other thing, could possibly be worthy of our praise? I think that C.S. Lewis explained this point the best in his book “Reflections on the Psalms:

“The sense in which a picture “deserves” or “demands” admiration is rather this; that admiration is the correct, adequate or appropriate response to it, that if paid, admiration will not be “thrown away”, and that if we do not admire we shall be stupid, insensible, and great losers, we shall have missed something. In that way many objects both in Nature and in Art may be said to deserve, or merit, or demand, admiration. It was from this end, which will seem to some irreverent, that I found it best to approach the idea that God “demands” praise. He is that Object to admire which... is simply to be awake, to have entered the real world; not to appreciate is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Reflections on the Psalms”

To put this point more simply, our praise of particular things is not a mere subjective experience, this is instead “participation” with actual reality. To praise something that is “praise worthy” is as important as recognizing that 2 plus 2 equals 4 or that loving your neighbor is a good thing and hating him is a bad thing. These are not arbitrary values that we assign to deeds or objects, instead this is man’s capacity to *recognize* reality as it is, to render to deeds, objects, and God Himself what they are due. To push this point even further, it is in praise that we most experience the goodness of God, and in praise that we actually become righteous.

True Righteousness

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

-2 Corinthians 3:18

According to Paul, the transformation that a Christian experiences comes from us “beholding” the “glory of the Lord”. The word “behold” here carries the same significance that we have been talking about with praise. This is not merely “observing” God’s glory, but it is admiring His beauty or bowing before His beauty. This is an authentic gesture of praise which results in our transformation into His same image.

This is a fascinating concept that the Bible tries to teach us, what we behold is what we are becoming. So if I behold the glory of Christ, I am becoming like Him, but if I behold some lesser glory, I am becoming like that. This even includes empty idols, one Psalmist comments about those who make and trust in idols:

“Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.”
-Psalm 115:8

What we adore with our eyes is the image of what we are becoming and what we are trying to please. So for the Christian, it isn't merely enough to believe in God, we are called to love God with all our hearts. And love is not merely reduced to obedience or good deeds, instead love is the expression of obedience and good deeds that comes from genuine affection, adoration, and care. When Christians seek to worship God, we are trying to fulfill this high calling. This how the Christian poet Thomas Traherne put this point:

“Can you then be Righteous, unless you be just in rendering to Things their due esteem? All things were made to be yours; and you were made to prize them according to their value: which is your office and duty, the end for which you were created, and the means whereby you enjoy. The end for which you were created, is that by prizing all that God hath done, you may enjoy yourself and Him in Blessedness.”
-Thomas Traherne - “Centuries of Meditation”

We will talk more about his latter statement in the following section, but for now let's focus on his early statements. That God has designed us to enjoy and glorify Him, and this extends to His creation. This is the honor due to man, that being made in the image of God it means that we were made to see His image and to glorify it. Only in doing this will we be able to restore the image of God that was fractured during the fall. To adore “images” that are against the image of God, images of greed, lust, wrath, and selfishness is to reflect those images. This is why it is correct that we call social media personalities “influencers”. They don't just comment on things, they influence our behavior as we “behold” them.

Furthermore, it is our ability to guide our emotions that allows us to gain the virtue of self-control:

“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit Is like a city broken down, without walls.”
-Proverbs 25:28

The spirit for the Hebrew was the center of their internal world, which would include their emotions and internal experiences. Solomon tells us that if we have no “rule” over this part of us we are like a “*city broken down, without walls.*” An unwalled city in the ancient world was a city with no stability or protection. It was a sitting duck for any invader and furthermore would be a “city broken down”. Something corrupt, vulnerable, destructive, and fractured.

In our modern quest for authenticity we have forgotten the wisdom of our ancestors. While it is bad to deny our emotions or to pretend away our feelings, this is not the same thing as exercising “rule” over our spirits. Think for a second about a leader and this will hopefully make more sense. Two types of bad leaders would be passive leaders and oppressive leaders. An oppressive leader believes that it is their responsibility to empty out their followers of their individuality and make them extensions of their own will.

This style of leadership will ultimately fail because the followers who are oppressed will have broken wills and will therefore be less valuable, but many followers will refuse to be oppressed and so they will rebel. But, fearing this outcome, some leaders believe that it is therefore impossible to properly lead people into their vision and so they become passive. This is what happens to us in our emotional world. Some try to “oppress” their emotions, shutting out the ones that they don’t want. This tends to break down our emotional world, and it even causes emotions to “break out” causing difficulties and problems that we can’t fully account for. But someone who becomes passive about their emotional world will have no self-control. Each emotion will vie for control and they will find themselves fragmented and anxious.

The true leader is the one who can actually *inspire* those beneath them to believe in their vision. This means that those beneath them have actually bought into their vision and will actually fight to carry out that vision in their own strength and ingenuity. This doesn’t mean that good leaders don’t use a heavy hand, but that their goal is genuine inspiration and not mere obedience. To rule over our emotions we must love our emotions, we must care for them. We can’t dismiss or repress them, but we also can’t submit ourselves to them. We have to learn how to “excite” the right emotions at the right time, and to fight, or wrestle, with our wrong emotions.

We will talk more about how to do this later, but for now it is important to see that in order to be truly righteous and virtuous we must learn to “rule” over our spirits.

Experiencing God

“Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, Who satisfies your mouth with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

-Psalm 103:3-5

As the Psalmist tries to worship God, the effect is that he begins to experience the goodness of God. This happens to be the case for all of us. The expression of praise itself can have a profound effect on our souls. Even in something as trivial as a movie, when we speak to others of our love for a movie, we move our own hearts to experience the goodness of that movie over again and it actually helps us to enjoy it more. This is why going to concerts and movie theaters still appeals to us in spite of our technological advancements. When we can share an experience with others, we are, in essence, publicly “adoring” the beauty that we enjoy.

This expression of adoration, this praise, actually enables us to experience the beauty of something at a deeper level. This is why we actually delight in giving praise to those things that we enjoy, it not only expresses what we feel, it actually makes the experience even more profound. This is something that has been widely lost in our current culture. It used to be that all the shows we watched were shared around the culture. We all had the same channels and therefore we all watched the same shows. They also came out once a week so we had to watch them together. This made it easier to “share” that experience with others.

Nowadays, we stream shows at our own convenience and we don’t all have the same streaming services. This means that entertainment has become a more isolated event. This actually makes modern films and shows less enjoyable, which is why our current moment is not producing as many “classics” as previous generations did. The shows and movies that I watched as a kid had a “specialness” to them. My nostalgia is wrapped up in more than merely watching the show, but in the “experience” that I had with that show as it aired. This actually elevates the experience to an even higher level and makes it more enjoyable. When things are only enjoyed in private, it’s not that the enjoyment is gone, but that it is mitigated, it is less enjoyable than when the experience is shared and “praised”.

This is why Sunday worship is so important. It is true that we ought to be praising God throughout the week, but on Sunday we get to share this experience. And since God is the most worthy being in the universe, our time praising Him is not wasted. By praising Him, we “discover” just how good He really is.

This truth really only works on the premise of worthiness though. If we try to praise something that is “unworthy” the more we talk it up, the more false it seems. I think we have all had an experience with this when we try to show a beloved childhood movie to someone else. When we see that it isn’t as good as we remember, it is almost like killing that childhood experience. But when a movie not only holds up, but actually is better than you remember it, it fills us with more joy and more praise. This is why the call of the Bible is to experience and praise the goodness of God:

“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!”
-Psalm 34:8

God will always exceed our praise, no experience with Him will exhaust His goodness and so the more we praise Him, the more we enjoy Him, the better our relationship with Him becomes.

“Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”
-C.S. Lewis - *“Reflections on the Psalms”*

This same thing is true in relationships. Simply knowing that you love someone doesn’t actually make the relationship deepen or maintain its passion or goodness, the goodness must be experienced. I have amazingly deep relationships with many of the men that I served with in the marines, arguably, I have never experienced friendships deeper than these. However, we are now spread out over the country. We still love one another, but we don’t “experience” one another and therefore we have emotionally drifted apart. Our relationship with God works about the same. Without times of experience, our love for God can grow cold.

The Difficulty of Praise

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits...”
-Psalm 103:2

Once we understand the truth and the beauty of praise, it becomes a priority for us. We actually understand that the main thrust of our relationship with God circles around the virtue of praise and thanksgiving. However, just because something is good, doesn’t mean that it is easy to do. As a matter of fact, the more beneficial something is for us, usually, the more difficult it is to cultivate. We live in a fallen world and so weeds will always grow more easily than roses, vice will always grow faster than virtue, and complaint will always be easier than praise.

Notice that the Psalmist commands himself to “forget not all His benefits...” The temptation of the human heart *is* to forget goodness and to fixate on problems. This isn’t a complete result of sin however. If you think about it from a survival standpoint, it actually makes a fair amount of sense. Negative things require attention, positive things don’t. If I feel cold, hungry, or tired, these negative emotions are telling me that I have to address a problem. However if I feel comfortable, satisfied, and rested, none of these emotions require my attention, they merely communicate that things are going well.

As a result, we are naturally oriented towards the negative to the exclusion of the positive. Think about feedback. If you make a post, give a presentation, or finish an assignment and you get 100 compliments about how good a job you did, but you receive one negative comment, it is usually the negative comment that absorbs our attention. Or, if you receive damage to one part of your body, this one part of your body will take most of your attention, whereas the other parts of your body that are healthy won’t be noticed.

Many today believe that we have been made this way by the media, since the news fixates on problems instead of positive things, but this isn’t the media making us a certain way, this is us making the media a particular way. The fact is that negative posts and stories garner more attention than positive posts and stories for this exact reason. And our modern therapeutic culture further encourages this way of thinking. We are taught to be honest with our negative feelings, and everyone around us is taught to show us empathy and understanding. This again reinforces our natural orientation. We want to focus on negative emotions, and now we get more attention when we are feeling bad as opposed to when we feel good.

When the Bible encourages a virtue in us, it is actually prescribing something that goes beyond our nature. This doesn’t make virtue “unnatural”, since we are made in the image of God virtue is a part of our nature, but it is instead “supernatural”, super meaning higher or beyond the natural. This means it requires effort for us to do this, but as we do this, our nature is elevated.

This is what the Psalmist is doing when he commands his soul to bless the Lord. He is actually encouraging himself to act in the virtue of praise, whether he feels it or not. As I said before, positive emotions don’t need any practical attention, but they do require attention to produce praise. Since our minds naturally move these things to the side to fixate on negative things that it believes require our attention, we actually have to, intentionally, through effort, fixate on the things that are worthy of our praise. As the apostle Paul writes, while in prison:

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”

-Philippians 4:8

He is encouraging believers to try to find “anything praiseworthy” to meditate on. He isn’t speaking to a church that is beyond troubles, but to a church that is experiencing growing persecution. He is telling them to actually make it a habit to focus on the things going right as opposed to focusing on the things going wrong. It is actually more important to praise when things are going poorly. Because when things are going bad enough, there is no practical path to make things better. The main threat in times like this is not the circumstances themselves, but the despair that comes from the circumstance. As we read in the Proverbs:

“The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, But who can bear a broken spirit?”

-Proverbs 18:14

Even in sickness, our spirit can sustain us, but if we have a broken spirit, (which is another way to say if we are depressed or despairing), no circumstance is sustainable. It would be wrong to say that praise is the antidote to despair, but it is certainly the medicine for despair. Just as medicine doesn’t cure a sickness, but instead it aids in combatting the illness, so praise aids us in combatting despair and sustaining us even in our greatest grief. After Job lost everything, this is how he responds:

“And he said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.”

-Job 1:21

If you read the book, this wasn’t said in order to bottle up his emotions, Job does grieve, but his praise enables him to grieve “with hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13), to maintain his courage and inner strength in the midst of his great grief. If we don’t know how to do this, our spirit is not under our rule, but we are under the rule of our spirit. Our emotions have taken us captive and therefore we don’t know how to overcome them, or to live above our emotional state. This is how C.S. Lewis put this point:

“A healthy and unaffected man, even if luxuriously brought up and widely experienced in good cookery, could praise a very modest meal: the dyspeptic and the snob found fault

with all. Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Reflections on the Psalms”

Just as our external health is our own responsibility, so is our emotional health. Sure, I can receive encouragement and advice from others on how to keep healthy. I am still responsible to discipline my body in order to maintain my health. In the same way, others can encourage and instruct me, it is ultimately my responsibility to live out the disciplines that cultivate a heart of praise as opposed to a heart of complaint. I think that our modern culture makes us believe that our emotional well-being is the responsibility of others, but this isn't how the Psalmists treat their spirits:

“Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance.”

-Psalm 42:5

I heard one pastor say that the problem we get into is that we spend far too much of our time listening to our hearts and not enough time speaking to them. No matter how bad things get, God is always worthy of our praise and there are always reasons to praise Him.

A Reason to Sing

“When the pieces seem too shattered

To gather off the floor

And all that seems to matter

Is that I don't feel you anymore

No I don't feel you anymore”

-All Sons and Daughters - “Reason to Sing”

The above lyrics are from one of my favorite worship songs by the band All Sons and Daughters. The title and theme of the song are in keeping with what we are talking about as we study this Psalm. When life begins to fall apart, the only thing that seems to matter is that we don't feel the goodness of God anymore. This removes us from praise and makes us despair. As Christians, we are not called to be naive and pretend as though our lives are going well when they really aren't. We also are not called to manufacture praise for things that we don't feel grateful for, we are called to find an actual “reason” or cause to sing to God. This is why the chorus goes like this:

“I need a reason to sing

*I need a reason to sing
I need to know that You're still holding
The whole world in Your hands
I need a reason to sing"
-All Sons and Daughters - "Reason to Sing"*

While this might sound contrary to everything I have said so far, it really isn't. What the Psalmist does in Psalm 103 is to focus his attention on the good things of God as a cause to praise God. We will talk more about Psalm 103 in a second, since even this is not as easy as it sounds, but the quote from Psalm 42 that I shared above isn't as optimistic. Instead of searching for causes to praise God, the Psalmist merely commands his soul to: *Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance.*" The Psalmist doesn't yet see the help or the goodness of God, but he assures his soul that he knows that it is there.

Sometimes this is the best we can do. We can merely assure ourselves that the help and goodness of God are present, even if we can't see them. This is more or less what the song by All Sons and Daughters is expressing. By declaring that they need a "reason to sing" that they need to "know that You're still holding the whole world in Your hands" they aren't denying the goodness of God, but merely declaring that they can't *feel* that goodness and are seeking a cause to praise God. But this statement is made in hope that God will provide that reason.

With that in mind let's look through the specific reasons that Psalm 103 gives us to praise our God. As we will see, these causes are more categorical than they are specific. So no matter what we are going through one, or multiple of these categories will help and encourage us.

Forgiving Iniquity

*"Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases..."
-Psalm 103:3*

The word "iniquity" in our Bibles is actually different from the word "sin". Just to show this, in a later verse the Psalmist separates these concepts:

*"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities."
-Psalm 103:10*

The word “sin” means to “miss the mark”. It is a word that describes an offense, a mistake, or a failure. Iniquity on the other hand has to do with perversity or an innate “bentness”. What this means is that the Psalmist is not only praising God that he forgives individual sin, which is amazing in itself and we will talk more about this later, but that God even forgives our innate perversity.

That God knows and understands the frailty of our hearts, our internal temptations, struggles, and inadequacies, and yet He forgives and loves us anyways. This idea is elaborated on later on in the chapter:

“For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting On those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children’s children, To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them. The LORD has established His throne in heaven, And His kingdom rules over all.”

-Psalm 103:14-19

What these passages are praising God for is His undeserved love and acceptance of us. However, it is also acknowledging that this acceptance is truly undeserved and it built upon God’s forgiveness:

“The LORD is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him.”

-Psalm 103:8-13

God does not love us because we are worthy, but actually in spite of the fact that we are unworthy. And it is actually only when we put these two ideas together that we can understand what a true loving relationship is all about.

As I said, negative emotions tend to predominate over positive emotions. What this means relationally is that we tend to fixate on those who we are trying to “win over” over those who innately accept us. This is what makes puberty so difficult. As children we are content to accept the free love of our parents, but when we are teenagers we begin to “contend” for the love of our peers. In order to do this though, we tend to devalue our

relationship with our parents and even move away from them emotionally. The desire is to find our value through earning acceptance.

In itself this isn't actually a completely negative thing. Because parents tend to love their children no matter what, they also tend to be overly indulgent towards the bad behavior of their children. Meaning that even if their children are acting in a way that is unattractive, parents are still drawn to their children and will continue to love them. Peers don't have this problem. When someone is acting poorly they will lose friends, this is the natural order of things and it actually helps us to change and become better over time.

This issue is usually more pronounced for those who had toxic relationships with their parents. If someone never experienced genuine unconditional love, they will usually spend their lives fighting for acceptance that they never feel that they have, and will usually choose toxic people to love. But the correct development is that we put these two things together. As we become adults we realize that true love is undeserved. That there are plenty of things that are "unlovable" about us. But we also understand that this isn't an excuse to abuse the love of those that care for us.

Love is meant to be respected. If someone loves me in spite of my faults I should honor that love by treating that person well and seeking to become more and more the kind of person that is "loveable" but also someone that genuinely loves that other person. By putting these two things together, the Psalmist is praising the quality in God that is most beautiful and powerful, His love:

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

-1 John 4:7-8

Anyone who doesn't understand the significance of this point is someone who doesn't understand the goodness and the power of love. The fact that the love of God is offered freely, that we have a God in the heavens who loves us enough to forgive our iniquity and our sin, but One who is worthy enough to guide us to a higher form of virtue and goodness is beyond our understanding. But to praise God for this truth is a way that we can begin to appreciate it. In many ways, love itself is our highest good.

No matter how many good things that we accumulate, without love, they seem to be hollow. And yet, no matter how bad things get, the genuine love and affection of those around us can be enough to help us through any circumstance. The *fact* that God loves and forgives us is our most powerful reason to praise Him, no matter what.

Redeeming Life

“Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies...”

-Psalm 103:4

However, within this Psalm there is an acknowledgement of the existence of destruction and disease. Notice that the Psalmist does not praise God for preventing disease and destruction, but instead for healing disease and redeeming his life from destruction.

These are very different promises that we need to talk about. When the Psalmist says that God heals all of his diseases, he is not saying that God has supernaturally healed him from his various illnesses, instead he is praising God for the natural mechanisms in his body that enable him to heal from disease.

This needs to be stated, God is the creator of every good thing in this universe. We tend to forget to give God praise for the “natural” good things that happen to us, seeking only the “supernatural” actions of God as a cause for His praise. In other words, if I get sick and receive medicine from a doctor and wait for my body to fight the illness, I don’t tend to see that as an action of God and so I don’t give Him praise, I only tend to praise God if I pray over an illness and have a supernatural, instantaneous healing.

To behave in this way is to almost ensure that I don’t cultivate a heart of praise towards God. Remember that even though physical health is in view in this verse, it is a category of thanksgiving not a specific praise. There are many natural things that God has provided His people to help us in this world of death and decay. He has given our bodies natural ways to fight off illness, He has given us communities that support us, families that love us, food to sustain us, jobs to provide for us, even governments to protect us and execute justice on our behalf.

But again, the Psalmist doesn’t praise God for preventing disease, only for giving him the means to “heal” from disease. In listing the above things, (especially the last one) it would be easy to complain about all of them. To complain about our jobs, our governments, our families and our communities for not doing for us what we would want. Just as we could complain about our bodies for getting sick or injured as often as they do. The Psalmist is exercising his soul to thank God for these common mercies, to remind himself of the daily goodness and provision of God even within a fallen and imperfect world.

But, he doesn’t stop there. By praising God for redeeming his life from destruction, he is praising God for removing him from the natural state of decay that the creation is in. In other words, though everything in this world is falling apart, God is eternal and has

redeemed the soul of man to partake in His eternal kingdom, to be redeemed from the destruction of this world:

“As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting On those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children’s children, To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them. The LORD has established His throne in heaven, And His kingdom rules over all.”

-Psalm 103:15-19

A common reason why we don’t praise nearly as much as we should is because we are looking to the kingdoms of this world to give us what only the kingdom of heaven can. We complain about our health, the justice in our society, and state of our culture and so on because we notice the failures in these systems and we despair over them. This isn’t wrong to do, after all, negative emotions spur us to seek change, but we have to be reasonable in our desires. We praise God for His provision in an imperfect world, but we primarily praise God in hope of the world that is to come. The more we do this, the more we can find contentment even in the current problems that predominate around us. Notice what he says even about justice:

“The LORD executes righteousness And justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel.”

-Psalm 103:6-7

He is praising God for delivering perfect justice for all who are oppressed, and he relates this to the Israelites. We need to remember that many Israelites died under the oppression of the Egyptians without seeing justice. When our eyes are on the earth, we have no hope but to despair, but if our hearts are in heaven we have no choice but to praise.

Even though it may seem as though we are living in uniquely broken and evil times, this isn’t the case. The church has gone through times far worse than this, and yet they were able to maintain hope because they had their hopes rooted primarily in heaven. If our ultimate hope is in this earth, then we will have a faith that is as subject to decay and destruction as this earth itself. By reminding himself to praise God for the kingdom yet to come, he is focusing his attention on his inheritance in heaven, an inheritance: “where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:20-21)

Satisfying Us With Good

“Who satisfies your mouth with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

-Psalm 103:5

Beyond the provisions that God has given us to sustain us in this life, He has also given us “good things”. These wouldn’t be necessary things, but good things as in luxuries or pleasures. When we look around at the universe that God has created for us, it is filled, not with things necessary to us, but with things that are beautiful to behold. Think about the heavens themselves, the universe that is beyond our planet is vast beyond our comprehension, none of these distant stars and galaxies that we see in the night sky benefit us in a single practical way, and yet they fill our nights with beauty beyond compare.

For a Christian to praise, we need to see not only the practical and good world that God has given us, but to focus our minds even on God’s beauty and goodness. And this beauty and goodness is something that not even the greatest suffering can remove from us. I was always struck by a line from the holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl when he describes the effects of beauty on him and his fellow prisoners in the holocaust:

“As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances.”

-Viktor Frankl - “Man’s Search for Meaning”

Later on he records this event:

“One evening, when we were already resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds and see the wonderful sunset. Standing outside we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colors, from steel blue to blood red. The desolate grey mud huts provided a sharp contrast, while the puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, “How beautiful the world could be...”

-Viktor Frankl - “Man’s Search for Meaning”

This is similar to a journal entry made by a young girl who was killed in the holocaust named Anne Frank. When she was hiding from the Nazi's with her family, trapped in a small hidden room with a couple families, in constant fear for her life she says this:

"But I also looked out the open window, letting my eyes roam over a large part of Amsterdam, over the rooftops and on to the horizon, a strip of blue so pale it was almost invisible. "As long as this exists," I thought, "this sunshine and this cloudless sky, and as long as I can enjoy it, how can I be sad?" The best remedy for those who are frightened, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere they can be alone, alone with the sky, nature and God. For then and only then can you feel that everything is as it should be and that God wants people to be happy amid nature's beauty and simplicity. As long as this exists, and that should be forever, I know that there will be solace for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances. I firmly believe that nature can bring comfort to all who suffer."

-Anne Frank - "Diary of a young Girl"

It isn't enough for humans to merely survive, we need to actually live, and the experience of life is the experience with beauty itself. The natural beauty that surrounds us each and every day is truly profound and worthy of our praise and attention. It reminds me of a song by one of my favorite bands Sleeping at Last:

*"With golden string
Our universe was clothed in light
Pulling at the seams
Our once barren world now brims with life
That we may fall in love
Every time we open up our eyes"
-Sleeping at Last - "Sun"*

This beauty that surmounts the ugliness of this world, this goodness that surmounts all the terrible evil that we experience is so abundant that even those in the deepest pits of suffering can feel it and experience its implicit promise, that their souls are redeemed from destruction. That there is a kingdom of heaven that is calling them home, and its presence and its goodness is all around us and accessible to all who have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart that is trained to praise. And in this, they can experience, as an eagle renews its youth through molting its feathers, a renewal of their spirit.

But if we can't praise God for the beauty that He has placed around us each and every day, if we refuse to praise because of a problem that we are facing or a trial that plagues us, no amount of miraculous blessing will ever change that within us. Every

day, we have many reasons to sing the praises of God, and what this Psalm encourages us to do, is to seek those reasons with all of our hearts that we might receive a heart of genuine praise and thanksgiving.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.”

-2 Corinthians 4:16