



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 103

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Introduction

- This Psalm is titled *A Psalm of David*
- The inscription in all the versions, gives the same title
- So, according to this title, David is the author
- The circumstances in which it was written is not known
- However, many attribute it to David later years when he had a higher sense of God's forgiveness
- Still, many believed it to refer to the times of the conclusion of the captivity in which the redeemed Jews give thanks to God for their restoration



Introduction

- Psalm 103 focuses on the worship of the Lord
- It seems to have been composed after some visible manifestation of the mercy of God
- Or after some clear proof of His compassion and loving-kindness; after some danger which threatened life and now was over
- The Psalm can be adapted to all times and ages
- It fits to express the feelings of gratitude to God for deliverance from trouble, and for the manifestation of His mercy
- And it befits to elevate the soul, and to fill it with cheerful feelings



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- It is, moreover, highly suited to express the feelings of the soul in view of the redeeming love and mercy of God; the goodness of God in the forgiveness of sin through a Savior
- It is, therefore, one to which the Christian often turns than to almost any other of the Psalms as expressive of the deep and grateful feelings of the heart
- The Psalm contains not only the most expressive feelings of gratitude to God for His mercies; but the most reassuring motives to continue to trust in God, and be obedient to Him
- David desired to praise God for all that He has done



Introduction

- His focus is on reminding himself why he and the congregation ought to worship the Lord from the depths of their soul
- So, he speaks of God's personal blessings, His forgiving love and he ends with a general call for all of believers to praise the Lord
- This can be also the voice of the Church to her people, that the creature should praise the Creator
- For many it is a Messianic Psalm about Christ, to Whom praise is given
- The Jews used to sing this Psalm in all their worships; and the Orthodox Jews still use it in their feasts and special occasions



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5
- God's Mercy for His People 103:6-18
- All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- To *bless* is more than to praise; it is to praise with affection and gratitude
- David did not mean this in the sense that a greater person bestows a blessing on a lesser person
- God is infinitely greater than man, and man could never give a blessing to God
- David meant this in the sense that it honors God when His creatures praise Him and thank Him appropriately
- David called upon his *soul* to bless God
- It was as if David looked at his soul and understood that it was not praising God enough

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- He called upon his *soul* to do more
- He reflects on his gifts and praise God who bestowed them on him
- He asks his soul not to only praise but to acknowledge these gifts which he does not deserve
- David understood that true worship was something deeply inward, of the *soul*
- It is not just about outward forms or expressions, but also about something real from the *soul*, “*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*” (John 4:24)

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- There is no special occasion of thanksgiving mentioned, no particular time for it given here, from which we may gather that every event of our life gives us sufficient reason, every moment of it a fitting opportunity, to praise the Lord
- The psalmist calls upon his own soul, and so on each individual soul, to begin the song of praise
- *And all that is within me*, Intellect, emotion, feeling, sentiment - brain, heart, lungs, tongue; all the various organs of the body, which were regarded by the Hebrews as the seat of thought will and emotion

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- The psalmist commands all the faculties and powers of his being to unite in the praise of God
- St. Augustine considers the second part of this verse, *all that is within me*, to be a mere repetition, or perhaps, an explanation of the first part; as much as to say, let all my thoughts and affections, the very deepest within me, bless His Holy Name
- And it may be taken as the thanksgiving of the forgiven sinner, who has made his acknowledgment of sin and has received absolution
- In verse 2 he repeats his opening words, for the more effect of igniting and stirring the love and passion of his soul

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- Repetition, in Holy Scripture, is almost always for the sake of emphasis and it is not vain repetition
- He wanted to emphasize that the praise of God should never cease, and both the active and passive faculties of the soul should join in praise
- David then added an important idea, that this praise and honor to God should be given unto Him for rational reasons, not on the basis of mere emotion or excitement
- True *benefits* are given by God unto His people, and we must not *forget* them

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- Instead, we should use the remembrance of those things as reasons to praise
- For several commentators *His benefits* means how God repays us good for evil, how He has given us back, over and over again, all the gifts of grace which we lost by Adam's fall
- His gifts are double, first in withholding the punishment which is our due, the punishment we deserve for our daily sins
- And then in granting the prize, the eternal life, which we could never win, because of all our wickedness
- God's gifts flow not from the merit of men, but from the mercy of God

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- They are many, even countless and infinite; they are new every morning and continue all day; and how great must be their sum, and not one should be forgotten
- He that can recount the sins of mankind, by which we daily offend God, can form an idea of the extent of God's love for us in daily bestowing so many favors on us; *"For He is kind to the unthankful and evil."* (Luke 6:35)
- David in verse 3 proceeds to count God's favors
- *Who forgives all your iniquities*, This is the first and greatest of benefits and is therefore placed first, for which we ought, above all else, to bless God

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- How important to know that God is ready to forgive and renew!
- And this, as St. Augustine remarks, implies a quick moral sense: “God’s benefits will not be before our eyes unless our sins are also before our eyes.”
- In David’s mind, the most important thing was to have sins forgiven, even more important than physical healing
- *your diseases*, Some believe he is talking here about spiritual diseases, the same with *iniquities*, as this phrase is used in Psalm 41:4; and Isaiah 6:10, 53:5
- Sin leads to spiritual illness which God only can cure

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- Or, physical diseases, of which this word is used in 2 Chronicles 21:18-19; and Jeremiah 14:18,16:4
- The Lord is the physician of the bodies as well as of the souls of men, and sometimes heals the diseases of soul and body at once, as in the case of the paralytic man in the Gospel
- *Who redeems your life from destruction*, Many know the powerful blessing of God's rescue from sure *destruction*
- Many troubles are spared the child of God, whether he knows it or not
- And not only from temporal destruction, but from eternal destruction

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- David possibly is looking forward, in the spirit of prophecy, to Jesus who became partaker of our flesh and blood, that He might have the right to redeem our souls from death by dying in our place
- Who, through the redemption that is in Christ, delivers us from eternal death and transfers us into His own kingdom, crowning us with a crown of glory, *Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies*
- Because, in order to deserve that crown of glory, mercy had to go before us, justifying us and compassion had to direct and protect us on the way

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- God's greatness extends beyond sparing us from sin, disease, or trouble
- Through God's blessing, we are crowned with His great love and mercy
- A crown described by the apostle, saying: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge will give to me on that day, and not to me only, but to all who have loved His appearance"* (2 Timothy 4: 7-8)
- Such a crown is woven with God's mercy and compassion

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- The result of God's work, both in what He saves us from and what He saves us unto, is to bring true *satisfaction* to our lives
- This is different from mere pleasure; God wants to bring true satisfaction to our lives from *good things*
- *good things*, of His favor and lovingkindness, of His forgiveness of our sins, His righteousness and salvation
- *with the good things* of the Holy Spirit, His gifts and grace
- And especially that *good thing* of the Holy Eucharist, the rich food of His own Body and Blood
- This satisfaction becomes a source of strength and energy to His people *your youth is renewed like the eagle's*

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- David's strength in old age became like the strength of the eagle
- Sustained by the bounty of God in his old age he became, as it were, young again
- This renovation of the eagle is referred by St. Jerome to the shedding and peeling of old feathers of that bird, after which the eagle seem to obtain fresh strength
- St. Augustine says it refers to the renewal of their beaks, that grow so bent and curved by age that they cannot take up their food, until they rub it and grind it against a stone, and by thus wearing it away form themselves a new one

The Psalmist Speaks of Personal Mercies 103:1-5



- This recovering of the eagle's strength, St. Augustine explains it of the sinner's appeal to that Rock which is Christ, and of the food which He bestows on the starving soul
- According to St. Augustine we are being renewed by the renewal of baptism, and through the pouring of the Holy Spirit; and we shall be further renewed by the resurrection
- As we read in Isaiah 40:31, *"But those who wait on the LORD Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint."* (Isaiah 40:31)

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- In the previous section, David described the greatness of God in His work to him
- In this passage he describes and shows God's greatness in bringing *righteousness and justice* to all
- God *executes righteousness and judgment*, not only for His own people, but *for all that are oppressed*
- Praising the Lord is ought to be for His goodness to others too
- He does not leave the poor and needy to perish at the hands of their enemies, but intervene on their behalf, for He is the executor of the poor and the executioner of the oppressor

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- God, in His goodness, delivers us from every trouble, and from the hands of the unjust
- One of His particular mercies is, that He shows judgment to all that suffer wrong, for He delivers those that suffer it, and punishes those that inflict it
- This He did for us men, when we were oppressed by the wrongdoing of the enemy that held us in bondage, for He executed mercies, *righteousness*, for men in redeeming them with His own Blood
- While at the same time executing *justice* in overthrowing the dominion of our spiritual enemies, triumphing over them openly on the Cross

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- When His people were in Egypt, He heard their groanings and brought them forth
- But He overthrew Pharaoh in the Red Sea
- Man's injustice shall receive retribution at the hand of God
- No blood of martyrs shall be shed in vain
- *He made known His ways to Moses*, A proof of what he said in the preceding verse and is another ground of praise
- When in His mercy He delivered the people from the captivity of Pharaoh, and drowned him and his army in His justice; and thus gave a clear proof of His mercy and His justice

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- *His ways*, had been done in an undoubted manner to Moses
- These revelations had been recorded by him for the instruction and guidance of His people
- God gave Moses the Law, through which He made known His will, not only to Moses but to all the people of Israel
- The essence of the Law was, that men should be merciful and just like He Himself was merciful and just
- Those ways of God were designed for the Israelites to walk in
- *His acts*, in permitting Israelites to witness the miracles He did in their deliverance out of Egypt, and for sustaining them in the wilderness

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- And as He literally taught Moses the way by which the Israelites were to journey towards Canaan, so in the Church He makes known His ways to His people, teaching them the spiritual life and showing them the path to heaven
- There is a progression of thought in verse 8
- At first David referred to his own individual experience; then he referred to the dealings of God toward the Israelites; and now he rises to the general contemplation of God's character as it relates to all mankind
- Those aspects of God's character are true, but so also are His mercy and graciousness

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- God *is merciful* towards His people, as those of a tender parent to his/her child, as the word signifies
- He is *gracious*, in providing a Savior and a ransom for His people
- In giving all grace and the blessings of it to them in His Son
- In justifying them by His righteousness; in forgiving their sins for Jesus' sake and in taking them into His family
- His *anger* comes, but slowly even to wicked men, to the vessels of wrath and after much *mercy* has been shown
- *His mercy* seems to have reference to that great mercy, through which God will raise us to a level with the Angels, and to His own likeness, which will happen when we shall see Him as He is

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- David now explains in detail the Characters he applied to God in the preceding verse
- First, the tender affection God has for those that fear Him
- God will not always manifest His displeasure with sinners, but is ready to be reconciled to them upon their true repentance
- God is sometimes angry with His children when they fall into sin
- He chastises us for our sins, and purifies us with trials and afflictions
- The affection of the parent remains in that very heart that prompts Him to discipline them, which David repeats when he says, *Nor will He keep His anger forever*

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- He comes now to the second description of God, and says *He has not dealt with us according to our sins*
- David knew the slow anger and abounding mercy of God personally
- He knew that his sins (and the sins of his people) deserved much greater judgment or discipline than they had received
- God deals with His people for their sins, reproving them by His Spirit, but not according to them, or as they deserve
- For what did the sinner and the unjust deserve but death? *“For the wages of sin is death.”* (Romans 6:23)

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- Now God not only withheld such wages from us, but He even gave us the life of grace, promised us eternal life, and meanwhile gave us with a bountiful supply of all necessaries for this
- Definitely, this is a ground of thanksgiving and praise
- *For as the heavens are high above the earth*, David compares God's mercy to the distance between the earth and the sky to show how boundless it is
- It is the greatest distance known, or can be conceived of
- There is nothing beyond it; that we cannot imagine that it could be greater - as we can imagine nothing higher than the heavens

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- The space between the heaven and the earth is seemingly almost infinite; and nothing can more illustrate the mercy of God, which reaches to the heavens, and is in heaven; though this is but a weak representation of its abundance
- St. Augustine says, “Men sin beneath heaven: they do all evil deeds beneath the heaven; yet they are covered by the heaven. So is light for the eyes, so air, so breath, so rain upon the earth for the sake of its fruits, so all mercy from heaven. Take away the aid of heaven from the earth: it will fail at once. As then the protection of heaven abides upon the earth, so does the Lord’s protection abide upon them that fear Him.”

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- *As far as the east is from the west*, This is a description of the great forgiveness of God mentioned in verse 10
- God's mercy is the cause, the removal of sin the result
- *As far as the east is from the west*, According to the rite of the sacrament of Baptism, the mother, looking towards the west, lift her right hand and recite after the priest a statement to renounce Satan
- Then the mother, looking towards the east, raises her right hand to repeat after the priest the confession of faith
- The west signifies darkness, sin, and evil while east signifies new birth

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- No people are more patient than parents, in caring for and raising their younger children
- Paternal love brings them to labor persistently and relentlessly for them, and to bear up against their ingratitude and even their violence in a most extraordinary manner
- Such is the meaning of God's mercy to *those who fear Him*, in regarding their daily transgressions
- God *pities* men's ignorance, weakness, foolishness, stumbles and falls
- It is in the present tense, and carries the idea of continuity

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- The wise reaction to this is, *fear Him*
- How much better to be on the side of His pity and compassion than to be on the side of His anger or righteous judgment
- The fear of God would never bring us forth into a condition of terror, but rather into the taste of the compassionate fatherhood of God
- As according to Christ: *“What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone. Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?”* (Matthew 7:9-11)

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- In His love, God deals with us according to our weakness; for He knows that we are *dust*
- The pity and compassion of God toward *those who fear Him* are rooted in His knowledge and understanding the frailty of our nature
- He knows of what we are made and how we are made
- This is given as a reason why God *pities* us - that we are so frail and weak, and that we are so easily broken down by a pressure of trial
- From the loving kindness and mercy of God David passes to the weakness and helplessness of man

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- Comparing the life of man on earth, with its short duration, to the grass, which soon appears and soon withers, is common in the Scripture (Psalm 37:2,90:5; Isaiah 40:6-8; James 1:10-11; 1 Peter 1:24)
- Humanity is so transient that *his days are like grass* and like a *flower of the field* that blooms one day and withers the next
- *As a flower of the field, so he flourishes*; which describes man in his best estate, as had health, riches, honor, and many gifts
- Yet, with all these, exposed to every wind, likely to be cut by every hand, and to be trampled upon by the beasts of the field
- Therefore, flourishes not long: so uncertain is man in his most flourishing circumstances; Isaiah 40:6

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- *the wind passes over it*, The reference is either to a hot and burning wind, that dries up the flower
- Or to a furious wind that tears it from its stem
- Or to a gentle breeze that takes off its petals as they loosen their hold and are ready to fall
- So man falls - as if a breath - a breeze - came over him, and he is gone
- How fast does beauty vanish; how soon, like a dying flower, does such a one pass away!
- God considers this, and *pities* him

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- Man ought to consider this himself, and be humble, dead to this world and considerate of another permanent one
- St. Augustine says, “In your reflections therefore on yourself, think of your low estate, think of your dust: be not lifted up: if you are anything better, you will be so by His Grace, you will be so by His mercy.”
- Men may pass away, but God’s lovingkindness and righteousness, His covenant faithfulness, endure
- The eternity of God is the rock upon which faith can lie in view of the uncertainty of man, Psalm 90:1,102:12,27; Isaiah 40:8

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- There never was a time when He did not love us
- *the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting*; nor a time when He will love us less – it is to everlasting
- Those who fear Him can securely commit their *children's children* to His care
- As St. Peter declared to the Jews in his Pentecostal sermon, *“For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”* (Acts 2:39)
- St. Augustine says, “You who fear not Him, will be grass, and in grass, and in torment with the grass: for the flesh shall arise unto the torment. Let those who fear Him rejoice, because His mercy is upon them.”

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- These promises of everlasting love and mercy are given with conditions
- The promises are made to *those who fear Him*, to those who *keep His covenant*, and those who *remember His commandments to do them*
- God is faithful to His part of the covenant; and where there is faithfulness on the part of His people, the blessings implied in the covenant will be bestowed on them and on their children
- There are no promises of blessings to the unfaithful, nor have those who are unfaithful any reason to hope that they will be partakers of the blessings of the covenant of mercy

God's Mercy for His People

103:6-18



- We are all bound to God in the covenant made with Him in Baptism, and have His Scriptures to teach us what are the commandments
- But those who merely think upon it, and admire its beauties, but do not put its teachings in action, are, *“they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them”* (Ezekiel 33:31-32)
- Accordingly, the Fathers use many metaphors to describe the uselessness of mere reading of Scripture apart from living it

All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22



- In conclusion, the incomparable majesty of God is set before us, in contrast with the weakness of man, and He is the One and Only fit Object of worship
- His throne is *established*, will never be moved, and His dominion is unchangeable
- His reign is not, like the reign of earthly kings, dependent on the variability of a changeable will
- St. Augustine says, “Who but Christ has prepared His throne in heaven? He who descended and ascended, He who died, and rose from the dead, He who lifted up to heaven the manhood He had assumed, has Himself prepared His throne in heaven.”

All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22



- He reigns over all the universe - the heavens and the earth; and He can, therefore, execute all His purposes, Psalm 47:2
- And therefore we, if we wish to stand by that throne, if we would gain the merciful goodness, must have, *“our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.”* (Philippians 3:20-21)
- David began the Psalm by telling his own soul to bless the Lord, and was founded on the benefits which he had himself received

All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22



- And now he closes the Psalm with an exhortation to *bless the Lord*, yet on a much wider scale
- David invites other creatures to bless Him and give Him praise; and he first invites the Angels, as being creatures of the highest order; and, therefore, most suited to praise God
- God is worthy of universal praise; and all ranks of beings - all worlds - should join in that praise
- Just as Jesus Christ spoke about the angels in heaven rejoice over the repentant sinner, so in David's view the mercy of God to His faithful people is cause for high acclaim among the hosts around the throne

All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22



- These *angels*, not having sinned, have lost nothing of their original strength and power, and therefore must greatly excel fallen man; who is become a very weak creature, and unable to do the will and work of God, which angels are
- The Angels are tireless and determined, gifted with great strength, are always obedient to God, and thus, never fall into sin, but are agreeable in the sight of God
- All *you His Angels* who surround Him, and thus have a more thorough knowledge of His greatness, praise our Lord
- *who do His word*, They carry out His commands to the letter

All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22



- *Heeding the voice of His word*, They stand before the Lord, waiting His orders; listening with great attention to what He says, and then readily execute it
- *His hosts*, Some say they are angels, some call them God's soldiers or armies, and some understand them to be the sun, moon, and stars
- And some say that since these seem to be distinguished from the angels before addressed, by them may be meant the church militant and her members
- They are like an army consisting of soldiers under Christ; whose battles they fight against sin, Satan, and the world

All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22



- David is asking *His hosts*, to give Him the honor and praise due to Him
- They have a great reason to bless and praise the Lord, for all the great and good things He has done to them, and for them
- *You ministers of His*, Employed in His service, and appointed to execute His will, they are called on to bless His name
- The fact of being employed in His service is a sufficient reason for praise
- It is implied here that those *ministers of His* actually do His will

All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22



- They are obedient to His commands; they regard themselves as employed for Him
- *all His works*, Having invited men and the Angels to praise God, he now summons all created things to praise their Maker in their own way
- *all His works, Bless the Lord*, though not in the same way
- His intellectual creatures praise Him consciously and audibly, as witnesses of His might and glory
- His irrational and inanimate works praise Him silently, by fulfilling exactly the purpose of their creation

All the Creatures Are Invited to Praise Him 103:19-22



- And lest any exception should be made, or that it may be thought David did not include all created things, whether in sky, earth, or sea, he says, *In all places of His dominion*
- Where God has no dominion, there is no need to praise Him
- But wherever He has dominion, He is to be praised and as that is everywhere, no one can be excused from praising and worshipping Him
- David ended the Psalm as he began it, with a call to his own *soul* to bless God, giving Him the honor and praise due to Him
- Blessing God and giving Him glory must be the beginning and the end of all our services



Discussion

- What call introduces and concludes the Psalm?
- What is the focus of this Psalm?
- What is David reminding himself to not forget?
- What mercies did the Lord give to the nation of Israel?
- How is God's love and forgiveness shown?



Discussion

- To whom does the Lord give His blessings?
- What specific instructions conclude the Psalm?
- How can reflecting on God's character and His attributes bring us back to what is real and true?
- What does it mean to fear the Lord?

Discussion



- What can we do to ensure that we are doing God's will?
- How has God made Himself known to us?
- What can we learn from this Psalm about how to praise God?
- David wrote this Psalm at his latest years, what practical advantages in old age does a believer have that an unbeliever or younger people lack?