

“Praise that Directs Our Heart”

Introduction: Many of you are familiar with a man named C.S. Lewis. A professor of English at Oxford and Cambridge, Lewis came to faith in his 30's and became a wonderful writer and apologist for Christianity. His works, *Mere Christianity*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* have become classics. But you may not know that as he began to draw near to faith in Christ, and even for some time after he had come to faith, he had to get over a significant hurdle. As he put it: “I found a stumbling block in the demand so clamorously made by all religious people that we should ‘praise’ God; still more in the suggestion that God Himself demanded it. . . . It was hideously like [God was] saying, ‘What I most want is to be told that I am good and great.’” [*Reflections on the Psalms*, 90-91].

What Lewis was struggling with was the apparent egotism of God. What Lewis eventually worked out is the understanding that praise is actually the expression that completes our enjoyment of a thing. Like observing a game winning home run, or hearing a fantastic piano recital, it's not until you are on your feet cheering a performance that the fullness of what you have just experienced comes home to your heart. But I think there is even more, which is where Psalm 103, and others like it, come in. Praise not only makes an experience come home to our heart; praising the Lord actually directs our heart to that which is most valuable and satisfying, especially during those times when we simply don't feel like praising him.

I. Speaking to our Soul

A. David begins, “Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being praise his holy name.” What is David doing here? He is addressing himself. He is talking to his soul. What is our soul? I appreciate the way Ruth Haley Barton defines it. She describes our soul as that part of us which is most real. It exists beyond our roles or accomplishments or even failures. Our soul is what God knew of us before he gave us a physical body, and what will continue to be us after we leave this earthly body behind. So David is exhorting what is most real about him to praise God.

B. Why would he need to exhort himself in such a way? Why not just let praise naturally flow? Notice how David continues: “Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” David is a realist. He knows that sometimes, maybe more often than we would like to admit, we are not going to feel like praising God. Sometimes it's because life has become too sour. Why would we praise God if things in our life are going badly? On the other hand, we can fail to praise God because life has become too good! God, in his wisdom, knew this could happen to his people. So he instructed them, through Moses, that when they came into the Promised Land they were to make praise a regular habit (Dt. 8:7-11):

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God . . .

And the issue with forgetting, as the text goes on to describe it, is that life would be so good that the people would become proud, forgetting the grace of God that had rescued them from slavery in Egypt in the first place, and believing that all they now had and enjoyed was as a result of their own power and strength. Now we don't know whether David is calling his soul to praise because things were going badly, or because things had gotten too good. In either case, David is calling

himself, and us, not to forget, as one of our older hymn writers puts it to "tune our hearts" to the channel of God's grace by declaring his praise (*Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*).

II. Great Benefits and Benefactor

A. David called his soul to praise in two directions: for what God had done – for his great benefits – and for who God is – our great benefactor. As it pertains to benefits, David piles them up in vv. 3-5. They include forgiveness of sin, healing from disease, redemption from the Pit (death), love and compassion, the provision of that which truly satisfies, and the renewal of our youth. Some of these are immediate benefits, like forgiveness, love, and compassion, and some seem to have God's new creation in mind with foretastes along the way, like the healing of disease, redemption from death, and the renewal of our youth. But whenever we experience them, David wants us to remember the great benefits that are ours through faith.

Illustration: Thais has a summer job working in the digital communications office at Harvard University, which she hopes will turn into something permanent in the fall. The other day she was exploring some of the internal job postings at Harvard and was amazed at the benefits a full-time employee received. As she shared it with me, "You get health care, several personal days off, they cover 50% of your train pass, and you get 3-4 weeks paid vacation." With this last one her eyes got really wide as she said, "Can you imagine someone actually paying for you to go on vacation?!" It has begun to dawn on her that working at a place like Harvard is indeed a different employment experience from that of babysitting, camp counseling, and waitressing.

Of course, not all of us receive the benefits that a Harvard University provides, but we all, by faith, qualify for the benefits of which David speaks. What David wants to do for himself is to have his heart directed back to the wonder of those benefits and to that wide-eyed enthusiasm that he undoubtedly had when he first became aware of them.

B. Then, David turns from praising the great benefits that the Lord offers to the even greater benefactor that the Lord is. He turns from praising God for what he's done for us to who God is in himself. In many ways, David is answering the question, What is God like, that we should praise him? Is he really an egotist? As verses 6-19 lay it out, this God is the one who cares for the oppressed, who reveals himself to his people, who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love, who is filled with grace, not treating us as we deserve, who is the one who has given us life and breath and cares for us eternally, and who is on the ruler of all. As David no doubt not only lists these characteristics of our benefactor, but ponders them, he is led to conclude that in addition to his own soul, and those of God's people, even angels, and really, all of creation, should be praising this amazing LORD! Why? Because ultimately, God is the most valuable thing there is; only he can truly satisfy the deepest desire of our soul.

C. Well, is this true?! A pastor and writer who has thought a great deal about this subject, John Piper, can be helpful to us here. Piper observes that if God were not the source of infinite joy, if there were something or someone more valuable and satisfying, then God would cease to be God. But there is nothing that is more truly satisfying. One of the intriguing ways we can see this in through the relationship of the trinity. If the Son reveals the image and likeness of the Father, then when we see the Father delighting in the Son, beholding his own glory, as it were, then he is delighting in what is truly most satisfying – himself. Therefore, the most loving thing God can do for us is to direct us to himself [*Desiring God*, pp. 44-48]. He does that by calling us to praise, which directs our heart to that which is most valuable and most satisfying: Him!

One of the great benefits of the Psalter is that it helps us to praise, especially when we don't feel like it, or know what to say. If that's true of you, you might want to sit with this particular psalm a little bit each day this week. Read it all through, and then ponder just one of the benefits or character traits of our great God. Allow it to help you give voice to your praise, and see if it doesn't help tune your heart more clearly into the channel of God's amazing grace.