

Six Reasons to Celebrate God the Father
Psalm 103:1-5

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*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits* Ps. 103:2

It is appropriate to think of God as our Father, especially on Father's Day.

One of my teachers once suggested that God the Father is the forgotten person of the Holy Trinity.¹ I won't take time to make a case for it this morning, but I think he is probably right. We can at least use Father's Day to make a special point of remembering God the Father.

The 103rd psalmist does not call God *Father* but he does call upon his soul to remember God. He must see he is capable of forgetting God in his life's busy course. So he calls his forgetful spirit to a distinct act of remembrance. "Bless the Lord, O my soul," he reminds himself, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, / and do not forget all his benefits." After assigning himself that task, he goes on in his psalm to name all the reasons he has for remembering God, and there is reason after reason after reason.

We can use his list this Father's Day to call out reasons we have for celebrating God the Father. We have time now to study just the first stanza of Psalm 103. Follow it line by line with me and find six reasons for celebrating God the Father.

Celebrate God the Father because God forgives.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who forgives all your iniquity."

Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam" is about grief but one of its lines applies to guilt as well, I think. Tennyson writes of how frequently sorrow enters life and says,
never morning wore
to evening, but some heart did break.²

We know the breaking of hearts, and, to our shame, often the breaking is due to something we said or did or neglected to do. Hearts break not only because of sorrow but because we are guilty of something. And there is nothing we can do about it after it is done. The hearts are broken. The tears are shed. The damage we have caused is there.

You may remember the scene from near the middle of *It's a Wonderful Life*. The money Uncle Billy was to have deposited in the bank has turned up missing, and George Bailey is beside himself with worry. He takes it out on his kids. He snaps at Tommy, who wants to know how to spell a word. He lashes out at Janie for practicing her piano piece for the Christmas program. Suddenly catching sight of the pain he has caused he tries to get his words back. He

¹ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2000), p. 48.

² Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H.," <https://poets.org/memoriam-h-h>. Accessed June 14, 2021.

apologizes. He tries to undo his wrong. But it can't be undone. Morning has turned to evening in Bedford Falls, and little hearts in the Bailey household lay broken broken.

I take it that all of us know guilt like that, at least in some measure. We have broken hearts.

The psalmist does not tell us what his sin was or what his sins were, but he rejoices that God has forgiven them all. "Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who forgives all your iniquity." It is a line that calls to mind the father in Jesus' story who sees his wayward son from a distance and races out to greet him, embrace him, and welcome him home (Lk. 15:11ff).³ God forgives even those most egregious wrongs we cannot undo. That is cause for celebration. Celebrate God the Father because God forgives.

Celebrate God the Father because God heals.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who heals all your diseases."

Be very careful with this bit of a verse. Keep it in its context. Take it literally and see that the psalmist is talking to no one but himself.⁴ He is speaking to his own soul and drawing upon his own experience. His experience is that, to date, God has healed him of all his diseases. "Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who heals all your diseases." He is talking to himself.

We cannot transpose his experience and say that it is everyone's experience. That takes the verse wrongly. It also takes it insensitively, if not stupidly. We all know that God does not heal everyone of every disease. We all know people who prayed for healing and did not get it. I have at home a few sheets of paper precious to me. One is written in pencil in my father's hand. It is a chronology of his cancer – his first doctor's appointment, his first surgery, and so on. Other pages filed along with that chronology are ones written in the pencil scribbles of a two-year-old child. Those pages are in my hand and are the get-well notes I sent Dad while he was in the hospital. He didn't get well. His death certificate, signed in ink in the doctor's hand, is in the same folder with Dad's chronology and my letters. God does not heal every disease.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who heals all your diseases" is not a blanket statement that applies to every person all the time. It is a personal statement that applied to this psalmist at this time. Still it is a realistic faith worth holding. God *does* heal. God in the mystery of his providence does not heal everyone every time; but he does heal and we should not lose sight of that or fail to give God thanks for it. You have been sick and have been healed; I have been sick and have been healed. And the hand of God has been at work in all that healing. Perhaps we can rejoice especially now that God is healing the nation and world of this pandemic that has been so crippling and so dangerous.

Celebrate God the Father because God heals.

Celebrate God the Father because God rescues

"Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who redeems your life from the Pit."

³ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 44.

⁴ Elmer A. Leslie, *The Psalms* (New York: Abingdon, 1949), p. 47.

We can think of this as deliverance from trouble. Dr. Blackwood tells of two rescue stories. One took place during the financial panic of 1907. There was a banker in Ohio at that time who saw that his bank was about to go under. If the bank failed any number of people would have been made destitute. The banker felt personally responsible. The people trusted him. He was an elder in their church. He was their friend. No effort of his seemed to keep the bank from drawing closer and closer to crashing. The banker's anxiety was so great he could neither eat nor sleep. One night of terrible insomnia he looked for something to read, something to take his mind off his troubles. Finding nothing else immediately at hand, he picked up his Bible and read the Gospel According to Mark. He read it straight through in about an hour and landed into a restful sleep. He woke in the morning, had breakfast, and went to the bank a new man with fresh courage and hope. He trusted God was with him. He worked with new composure, and the bank did not fail. He believed God had rescued him and his investors from trouble.⁵

The other rescue story Dr. Blackwood addresses comes from his own life. He had two of what he called nervous breakdowns, the second worse than the first. Stress and worry – much of it over finances, it seems – kept him from peace of mind when his children were young. It even kept him from working for a time. Help came from a number of sources, among them a kindly doctor and a sermon by a favorite preacher. He was helped to gain a grip on his life by learning God had hold of him day by day and could be trusted not to let go.⁶

I wonder if you have had an experience like one of these. I wonder if you have had times when you have been in some kind of trouble and at your wit's end but found peace in the valley because blessing came and God lifted your soul. If so, then you know the heart of the testimony: God redeems my life from the Pit. Celebrate God the Father because God rescues.

Celebrate God the Father because God loves.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who crowns you with steadfast love.”

All of you know the Greek word for love – *agape* – and its importance in the New Testament. There is a Hebrew word for love I would like you to know equally as well. The Old Testament, as you know, was written in Hebrew. There is a Hebrew word our psalmist weaves throughout Psalm 103 and he has it make its first appearance in the first stanza. The word in Hebrew is *hesed*.

To define *hesed* for you I turn to a heavy tome entitled *I Love You, Stinky Face*.⁷ *I Love You, Stinky Face* is a children's story about a mother's love for her little boy, but it appertains to a Father's Day message just as easily. In the story, the mom is putting her boy down for the night and she says that she loves him. He decides to test her love, and asks, “But what if I was a smelly, smelly skunk and my name was Stinky Face?” She answers, “If you were a smelly, smelly skunk and your name was Stinky Face, I'd say, ‘I love you, Stinky Face.’” The boy goes on to ask what if he were a scary scary ape or a slimy slimy creature from the swamp or a

⁵ Andrew W. Blackwood, *Preaching from the Bible* (1941, rpt.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 117-118.

⁶ Andrew W. Blackwood, *The Growing Minister* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), p. 118ff. See also Jay E. Adams, *The Homiletical Innovations of Andrew W. Blackwood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), p. 42-43.

⁷ Lisa McCourt, *I Love You, Stinky Face*, illus. by Cyd Moore (New York: Scholastic Cartwheel Books, 1997).

dinosaur or some other thing he supposes to be unlovable. Each time his mother says that she would love him even if he were one of those things.

That's *hesed*. *Hesed* is God's steadfast lovingkindness that is true in every season and in every circumstance.⁸ With this grand word the psalmist – and other Old Testament writers who use it – anticipate the ringing words of the Apostle Paul that come at the end of Romans 8 – nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Celebrate God the Father because God loves.

Celebrate God the Father because God puts good into life.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . who satisfies you with good.”

The phrase *satisfies you with good* has a sense of extravagance about it but also restraint. There is limitation but not lack. It does not say that God makes you rich or that God gives you more than you need. It certainly doesn't say God gives you everything you want.⁹ It says God “satisfies you with good things.”

Let your mind's eye page back in your Old Testament to the Book of Exodus and the story of the manna (Ex. 16). Manna was bread from heaven that came each and every day to feed the people in the wilderness. It wasn't extravagance but it was enough, and it was abundant enough to be enough for everyone, as much as they needed. It was goodness sufficient for the day.

I wonder how many of you had a childhood like that. You look back and see that by every measure in any account book you can imagine, you were poor. But you never felt poor. There was enough, especially of the things intangible that matter.

Such is the goodness that comes to us from God the Father. It is satisfying because the best goodness God gives is himself. Celebrate God the Father because God puts good into life.

Celebrate God the Father because God renews strength.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . your youth is renewed like the eagle's.”

When you read your Bible you will find there is always new strength that comes with a fresh discovery of God. Moses was beside himself over the unjust treatment his people were receiving from the Egyptians. He wanted to counter that racial injustice but he did not know how. He ended up just fleeing from it and taking his concern with him unacted upon. But then it was as if he met God at that burning bush and he knew what to do. He had strength to return to Egypt, to lead his people, and to confront injustice (Ex. 3).

Or watch those two disciples walking from Jerusalem and home to Emmaus. They were spent and depressed and at sixes and sevens about how to go on. But their eyes were opened to fresh vision of God in Christ and they had newfound strength (Lk. 24:13-35).

⁸ E. M. Good, “Love in the OT,” *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick, *et. al.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 165.

⁹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. II (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, nd), p. 289.

So it is that hope and strength come when God is seen afresh: new power follows a fresh vision. Celebrate God the Father because God renews strength.

Well we have read just the first stanza of Psalm 103 and have found in it six reasons to celebrate God the Father: God forgives, God heals, God rescues, God loves, God puts good into life, and God renews strength. When you are remembering your father today, remember your Heavenly Father as well and say to yourself, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, / and do not forget all his benefits.”

In saying all of that in light of this psalm’s first stanza, I haven’t yet said the strongest thing to be said about it. The strongest thing is this. It has to do with the word *benefits* at the end of verse 2: “Bless the Lord . . . and do not forget all his benefits.” I understand that the Hebrew word there for *benefits* is a pay-back word, a word of retribution. It is a word of legal punishment as in “this is what you get when you do that.”¹⁰

Well, how have you treated God? Probably not as well as you would like. How will God repay you? How will God get back at you? How will God punish you? God will forgive. God will heal. God will rescue. God will love. God will put good things into your life. God will renew your strength. That is how God will repay you.

“Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”¹¹

Let that dawn upon your soul, giving you a fresh revelation of God the Father, and a new start in your relationship with God.

¹⁰ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IV, ed. by Leander Keck *et. al.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 1091. See also Spurgeon, *Treasure of David*, p. 297.

¹¹ Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” *New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), # 224, verse 4.