



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Bless the LORD, O My Soul!

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ AUGUST 21, 2022

Psalm 103 is one of my “go-to” psalms. It is not only a favorite, but I find it most useful. Like many of you, I love my quiet time with the Lord—sitting and reading a devotion and studying the Word. Sometimes, I meditate on His love and a portion of His Word or a prayer that I have read, and I just “abide” with Him. Sometimes, I can hardly wait to spend time with the Lord again, or for that matter, to spend time here in worship with you. But there are times when I just do not “feel” like it! I might be excessively tired or pre-occupied with something, or the business of ministry and life has gotten the better of me, or I simply do not feel well, and I do not feel connected with God. Then I say to myself, “What is the matter with you, Steven?”

I take comfort in the fact that this “disconnection” can even happen to some of the spiritual giants who have been among us. In fact, Mother Teresa, one whom you would expect to have had a 24/7 spiritual connection with God, said this was true. There were times when she looked upon the misery of all the poorest of the poor in India with whom she ministered, and felt disconnected from Almighty God. She said that was when faith mattered most. That was when we need to hold on to that which we know to be true. She said that God would remind her that she was on the right track, and she would persevere.

From the very beginning of Psalm 103, it seems that David is trying to gear himself up to worship God. When I begin to read this psalm,

I say to myself, “Steven, it is time to give praise to One Almighty God. It does not matter how you feel; do it because He deserves it!” And shortly after I start reading this psalm, the Lord has my full attention and energy. Let’s see if we can pick up on David’s momentum.

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name! (Psalm 103:1)*

This first verse is like a call to worship in one sentence. Notice that David says, “all that is within me.” This is not passive worship. This is not casual worship, nor an obligatory prayer. David says that he gives his full attention and energy, everything he thinks and feels, to the throne of grace.

In sports, a phrase often used by players, coaches, and commentators in talking about an individual athlete’s or team’s performance is that they “left everything on the field”—that is, they held nothing back. Praising God should be that way, too. As David said, “All that is within me, bless his holy name.”

We must be careful not to judge from an exterior viewpoint. Some people are very demonstrative in their church worship. They dance in the aisles, pass around tambourines, wave their arms, and clap their hands. I wave my arms, walk around, and get excited, but that may not be your style. Some people are perfectly quiet, but inside their hearts are the brightly burning flames of faith which give meaning to the phrase “still waters run deep.” Regardless of how you worship, bring your whole self before Almighty God. I encourage each of you to ask yourself when you come to worship, or when you come to prayer, or when you come to choir practice, or whatever you are doing, “Am I holding anything back?”

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits... (Psalm 103:2)*

David is perceptive enough to realize that the best way to get ready to praise God is to remember who God is and what He has done.

In a previous sermon (“Render Unto God,” July 31, 2022), we discussed listing our blessings from the moment we wake. Do you remember the conclusion? If we tried to minutely list every blessing we experience in a day, it would be impossible! The blessings that God has showered upon us, even in the worst of times, would be endless. David goes on to list a few of the most significant blessings and we can feel his momentum building:

³...*who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,*
⁴*who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,*
⁵*who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.* (Psalm 103:3-5)

First, He “... forgives all your iniquity...”; **all**, not just **some**! Many Christians hold on to one or more sins from their past and revel in guilt because the sin continues to plague them. When they do this, they deny the Cross. They are saying Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross was not sufficient for all their sins, sin is still burdening them, and they are paying the price for it. Why hold onto sins for which Jesus has already paid?

Some will excuse this by saying, “I know that God forgives me, but I can’t forgive myself.” Really? First, you do not have the authority to forgive your own sin; it is God’s place to do so, and He already has! Do you have a higher standard than God? Embrace the Cross and let it go! Until you do, you will be burdened and spiritually weighed down, and the more you allow that to happen, the more incapable you are of forgiving others.

The psalm goes on, He “heals all your diseases.” He did this for my Uncle Paul, who experienced a healing miracle though later God chose not to do this when He called Paul home. The content of the psalm suggests that David is not only referring to healing physical diseases but also—as the hymn “There Is a Balm in Gilead” suggests—“...to heal the sin-sick soul.” We do not need to be plagued

by despair, regret, unforgiveness, secret sins and habits, bitterness, and those faults we excuse as, “just the way I am” when we have the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit forever with us!

We are reassured when David says, “who redeems your life from the pit,” or as some translations say, “from destruction.” This reminds us that there is something at stake. There is something **from** which to be saved as well, as when life on this planet can make us feel like we are in a pit! What an incredible reassurance to know that He “crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.”

As Psalm 23:6 says, “... goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” This is a living reality if we would but notice! People tend to gloss over this line, but when they really focus on it, they say, “Really... do you realize the burdens I have to deal with?” We are so focused on whatever our problems are we do not see that God’s goodness and mercy are all around us—if we would just use our eyes to see! We might not get what we **think** we want, but we can embrace the blessings that God **knows** are good in our lives. They satisfy us and uplift our spirits. They are not the result of sinful human desires and practices. Our burden is lifted from us, revealing the goodness of Almighty God rather than the sinful ways of the world. And as the psalm continues, David tells us that, ultimately, there is justice in the world.

*⁶The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.*

*⁷He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel. (Psalm 103:6-7)*

There are times when it seems as if sin and evil get are getting the upper hand and that the world has gone crazy. It has always been that way, which was the point that Billy Graham made to a colleague of mine shortly after the Oklahoma City bombing. Dr. David Swanson, the senior pastor I worked with at my last church, got bumped up to first class on a flight and was seated next to Billy Graham.

David was in awe, but Dr. Graham was totally sweet, friendly, and very approachable. Nothing like the bombing had happened in our country for a long time, and David asked Dr. Graham, "What are we supposed to do with this? How are we supposed to understand this? How should we respond?"

Dr. Graham, with a smile on his face, very quietly but very confidently told David that he must understand that God is still on the throne and that He has seen all this before. This is new to us, but if you look through history, it is not new to Him. If we really believe that God has the whole world in the palm of His hand, it is in times like these that we must trust and recognize the God with whom we are dealing. God is still on the throne, He is working out His purpose amid all that He has seen before. As Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, "... there is nothing new under the sun." God is in control; He has this. This, again, is where faith matters most.

As David says in verse 7, "He made known his ways to Moses." God always prevails, even against seemingly impossible odds. All through human history, He has established His righteousness; He brings renewal. We see it as we read the stories of Israel, the ebb and flow of their faithfulness and their wantonness. God has a way of bringing renewal in His own time. That is why John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence and whose portrait graces our Lightner Conference Room, wrote, "We have no warrant to ask national prosperity [meaning in prayer] without a revival of religion." He went on to say that our Republic is dependent on our ability to be in relationship with and be obedient to One Almighty God, and that requires a spiritual revival.

I do not know when God is going to act, I do not know how He is going to act, but I know that it will require a spiritual revival in America to bring us where God wants us to be. Sometimes we think an election or certain laws will fix things, and those things might help. But until there is a spiritual revival to bring us back to One Almighty God, it will not happen. We as Christians must pray earnestly for

revival in Bonita Springs, in Florida, and across America. We must trust that God is the One who will establish righteousness and justice—in His time.

David continues:

*⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever. (Psalm 103:8-9)*

Though God is the Supreme Judge of the world who hates sin, He is merciful and gracious. Notice He is “slow to anger.” That does not mean He does not get angry—He certainly does—but He angers slowly, so when judgment finally comes there should be no surprise. Just as a supervisor must sometimes terminate an employee for not doing a proper job, it should not be a surprise to that employee. The employee would have been warned that his work was not acceptable and, after having been given guidance and time to make corrections, if there had been no improvement, the employee should understand his termination.

David says that He will not always accuse, though He will when it is called for, but He will not keep His anger forever. When He corrects us, it is for our own growth, like a refiner’s fire; it is for our good. Think about raising children. When we must chastise our children or exact punishment, it is not because we hate them or are trying to destroy them; it is because we want them to be better people. God does the same thing. God sends us mentors, and we all need mentors. Mentors are those people who are willing to tell us the truth. As the proverb says,

*¹¹My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
¹²for the LORD reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights. (Proverbs 3:11-12)*

Psalm 103 continues:

*¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

*¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*

*¹²as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:10-12)*

He does not deal with us according to our sin, because if He did, we would not be able to stand. As we grow and mature spiritually, we begin to recognize more deeply the all-pervasiveness of sin—things we never noticed before, things that we did not even call sins before. We start to realize that we need a Savior. We do not despair as Martin Luther did.

Martin Luther had made up his mind that he would be the best monk the world had ever seen; he would follow all the rules and be very diligent. But the more he worked at it, the more he realized that it was impossible through his thoughts and actions to be 100% righteous all the time. He was in despair until he, as a professor, was told to teach the book of Romans. When he started studying Romans, he read that Paul talked of being saved by the **grace** of God. We are not saved by the works we do; it is not about our being perfect; only Jesus is perfect. We are not saved because we are able to please God by all the things we do or do not do. It is because of Jesus' grace that we are saved.

A great burden was lifted from his shoulders when Luther finally realized that, and his desire to serve God skyrocketed. He realized that if we put our faith in Jesus Christ, when God looks at His scroll to review all our sins, His scroll will be blank! God looks at us as if we had never sinned a day in our life, not because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus did!

David asks, "How far has God removed our sin from us?" Scientists are trying to calculate numbers big enough to describe the universe

to illustrate his answer: “as far as the heavens are above the earth” is how far your sins are removed. “As far as the east from the west.” These are in opposite directions which is what “repent” means. Turn your back on sin and go in the opposite direction. Embrace the great joy of knowing what Jesus did for you and why.

Continuing in the psalm...

*¹³As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.*

*¹⁴For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:13-14)*

Can you feel God’s heart? I remember May 30, 1989, when the pediatrician first handed my son to me. I held him and looked down at the miracle so fresh from God, and it hit me that there was nothing this child could do to stop me from loving him. I may not approve of everything he does (and I haven’t), and there can be things that disappoint me along with all the things about my son in which I delight! He will struggle with life and find his way just as I did, but there was nothing he could do to make me stop loving him.

My friends, that is exactly the way the Lord looks at you. He could not possibly love you more or love you less than He does now, and He delights in you! As David says, “...he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.” He remembers how frail and vulnerable we are, regardless of our bold exteriors. He continues:

*¹⁵As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;*

*¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.*

*¹⁷But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting
to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children’s children,*

*¹⁸to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments. (Psalm 103:15-18)*

He says our life passes “like grass... like a flower.” Without the Lord we are nothing, but God’s love is everlasting, and we will enjoy it forever. We will not pass out of existence when we pass from this life. Death is not the end; it is the beginning—the beginning of eternity. It is the continuation of joy and communion with Him and with those who have gone before us. David tells us that it is for those who have a saving relationship with Him, and Paul reminds us that faith is a gift from God.

If there is any person within the sound of my voice who at this moment does not have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, what is preventing you at this very moment from turning your life over to Him and allowing Him to claim your life for His own? You do not want to leave this planet without a saving relationship with Jesus Christ! You might think this is very simple-minded, but we must never lose the ability to embrace the childlike faith Jesus calls us to.

Remember the hymn, “Give Me That Old-Time Religion”? As the words say, “It was good enough for your father, it was good enough for the prophet Daniel, it was good enough for Paul and Silas, and it is good enough for me!” When I was at seminary for my ministerial training, we were participating in “cutting-edge” theology and thought we were especially smart; people would actually snicker at and mock hymns like that. We lost the childlike faith that said, “We had better make our peace with God’s Word because we are going to see Him soon, and He has already seen us!” As verse 19 says, “*The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all!*” (Psalm 103:19)

David is energized by considering God’s benefits, and he even calls the angels to join him in praising God! In the final verses of this psalm, David focuses on the goodness, mercy, love, graciousness, and patience of God:

*²⁰Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!*

*²¹Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!*

*²²Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.*

Bless the LORD, O my soul! (Psalm 103:20-22)

After reading through those benefits how can he not call out to the angels to praise God? How can we not heed the call to praise the Lord? Can you see how useful and practical a psalm such as this can be? Praise God! Hold nothing back!

There are things in life to which we give our whole selves: our businesses, causes of all sorts, family, and any number of things that are good. Given the benefits that David listed, do you not think that Almighty God is the One to whom we should give the most? He is the One who loves you with everlasting love! He is your Savior! ■

