

Psalms 103

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Date: 08 July 2018

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[0 : 00] Do take a seat and come back to that song, Psalm 183. Community stories can be so powerful, can't they? Placing you. I only have to say one word maybe to evoke a collective memory for you. Independence Day or the Blitz.

! It's an important theme as we carry on tonight in this psalm. If you remember last Sunday morning we started looking at it, didn't we? Where David the king rouses his own soul into worshipping the Lord. He thinks of himself, his own soul, and he says, get out of bed soul, wake up soul, bless the Lord my soul.

Behold your God soul. But one thing that strikes us about this psalm is that David's self-preaching, the health of his individual soul, finds fuel not just in what God has done for him personally, but through God's dealings with the many of God's people. And verse 1 to 5, if you kind of glance down, it's all in singular language as he speaks to his own soul.

But from verse 6 to the end, the language is plural. Where can I go for soul food? To see why God is better?

Well, he goes to the corporate witness of Israel, of God's people, for what God has done for them. The psalm moves from the me to the we, to the us.

[1 : 46] Verse 7, to the acts of God with the people of Israel. The collective memory of God's work in our lives sweeps me along.

As he surveys that collective history, he tries to measure across time and space, far and near, short and long, slow and fast, measuring God's kindness and why God is worthy to be praised in the life of his people, in the collective memory.

Bless the Lord, bless the Lord, my soul, for what God has done for us. First of all, the long slowness of God's anger for his people. The long slowness of God's anger amongst his people.

I've realised something this week, that I'm really fast at something. I'm really quick at this thing. I never put it off. I never procrastinate with it. I do it first time, every time. It's immediate. It's getting angry.

I was angry. I was angry at the lady who lets her dog do its business outside our front door every morning. I was angry at the person who left the sofa bed next to our flat. I was angry at my own family. Quick, knee-jerk, snappy, angry.

[3 : 21] And then, reading this passage this week, I realised that one of the things that David loves about his God is that he is so different to that. That even though God has much more reason to be angry with me, his anger runs at a very different pace to my home.

And the long dealings of God with his people show that. David remembers how God has been with his people from the beginning. And verse 7 to 10, he pictures, doesn't he, particularly the Exodus. And the reality of God's patience is shown by the number of repeated offences. I wonder how many slaps in the face could you take before you finally cracked and exploded.

I wonder if kids, do you hear your parents say, don't test my patience. How many times can you hear the same question and see the same naughty thing over and over?

And eventually I do crack. But I'm not like God, am I? And there's something that we see in God in relation to his people over the rolling years that builds and shapes what we think he is like with us.

[4 : 40] And there's that great line in verse 8, isn't there? The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

That is the self-portrait that God gives to Moses in Exodus 34. Guess when that happens? It happens just after another slap in the face, after the golden calf.

Another betrayal by God's people. With another fresh start, isn't it? And the theme there is God's long suffering. They keep failing and they keep disobeying and they keep rebelling and turning

away.

The word chide in verse 9, it's the same word that is used in a law dispute. It is to contend with somebody. And haven't we seen that in numbers?

God has contended with the people of God. In the wilderness particularly. He brings judgment upon them. He destroys some of them. He keeps some of them back from the promised land.

[5 : 45] But time tells us, doesn't it, that in the end he is also long suffering with them. And as we extend that time throughout the whole of Bible history and salvation history, if you like, we see, don't we, that the whole of the salvation story is kind of dragged out in human terms.

Why? Why doesn't God just send Jesus in Genesis 4 and whip us into heaven straight away? Part of it is to show us this about himself, isn't it?

Where slowness of anger is seen better over a longer period with a whole people. And our collective behaviour today and going all the way through to the past to Israel, as we're joined with one people, it is like that black background in a jewellery display.

We are the black background that brings out in bright relief the diamond, precious, shining grace of God's long suffering, of his slowness to anger.

And so the things that we expect with God to be short are long, his fuse and his temper. And those things that we expect to be long are short.

[7 : 10] Verse 9, David says he will not keep his anger forever. Don't we so often imagine God, he's there, isn't he, on the edge of his seat, peering down from heaven at us, just waiting, just on the edge of his seat, waiting for us to sin so that he doesn't slam us and splat us, ready to chide, contend with us, just relish us, relish us, relish us, catching us in the act.

And once he's angry with us, he's always angry with us. But no, that's not how he is. He doesn't bear grudges. He's slow to be angry with his people.

And maybe tonight you're thinking of some besetting sin, and you're thinking, no, that the last time was just one time too many. Let me say, actually, the first time was one time too many, wasn't it? That the years and the centuries and the millennia of God's people show us how slow he is to anger with us. He is slow-moving and sluggish, I'd want to say, in a way, with this.

And he is patient. And he abounds, he abounds in covenant love. And the way he treats us in that way is unfair, isn't it?

[8 : 31] It's not what we deserve. God's grace is unfair, wonderfully. That's what grace means, treating us better than we deserve. You know, if someone asks you, how are you doing today?

The great answer to that is, well, I'm doing better than I deserve. The long slowness of his anger. Secondly, the great lengths of his compassion for his people.

The great lengths of his compassion. And David uses some more measurements, doesn't he, in verse 11 to 13. He shows us two sets of measurements.

And the first set are kind of on a scale that is just unimaginable. The distance between heaven and earth.

And the distance between the east and the west. Gaging God's love and the removal of sin. And they're pictures to help us to grasp the inconceivable, really.

[9 : 29] Where the lengths of God's compassion for his people are just, we cannot grasp them. Try and measure my love for you, he says. As high as the heavens are above the earth.

You know, you have to travel at light speed for 46 billion years to get to the furthest point that we can even see in the universe. As we go out and as we look at the stars at night, as we look at the heavens, maybe if we're on holiday and there's no light pollution.

It's like that cheesy game, isn't it, where kids play with their parents. And the kid says, mummy, I love you this much. And the mummy says, well, I love you more, I love you this much.

The kid says, well, I love you more, I love you this much. And we're taken back. And by the awesome sight of the stars, God kind of trumps all of that. And he says, I love you this much. God says, this is a picture of the ridiculous length and size of my love for you, my people, if you could measure it.

And then removing sin like that scapegoat that would have been sent into the wilderness. Might's in place on it.

[10 : 48] Maybe just bring it to mind if it helps you. Picture that thing. That issue. That thing that your conscience is wary of at the moment.

Tells you that you've done wrong. That shameful thing. That thought or that word. Or that hardness in your heart.

And God takes it, doesn't he, as we trust in him. And he throws it out into the wilderness. And he gets it away from us as far as it can be.

And the goat that was sent out is trying to get to the east, but the east never comes, does it? As it kind of circumnavigates the earth. Since the time of Moses, that goat has walked around the earth 363 times.

And it still has not reached the east. Never the two shall meet east and west. It's one very tired goat. Because when he removes sin, it is as far from you as it possibly can be.

[11 : 53] And it's not coming back. It's still wandering the earth. And it's further and further away from you. It's disappeared completely. When God forgives, he really forgives.

He's slow to anger. And he removes all traces of sin and offence against him. Again, it's surprising, isn't it? Because it's all, the measurements are all upside down.

Because what we expect to be near is made far. And what we expect to be far is brought near. The sins that cling so closely to me and the mud that sticks is somehow moved away.

And the God who should be so far away from me because of what I have done and how I've treated him is brought near. Look at the closeness of the picture in verse 13.

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. The closeness there of that picture, the intimacy of a family.

[13 : 01] And again, it's another picture of God in the collective memory of God's people. As God says to Pharaoh through Moses all the way back then, Israel is my firstborn son.

I say to you, let my son go, that he may serve me. He speaks through the prophet Hosea, doesn't he? I raised you, my people, and I taught you how to walk.

God has bound himself by covenant to his cost, to us as his children. And isn't that something that we all long for, really? To be fathered.

Despite what may have been our experience of an earthly father, we want that, don't we? I saw the story this week of a son who'd run away from home.

And the father is desperate to find the son and to bring him back. And so he searches for months, but he gets nowhere. And finally he decides to put an ad in the local paper.

[14 : 04] And it reads like this, it was in Madrid. It said, Dear Diego, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven.

I love you, your father. And Saturday finally arrived. And on the day, more than 80 Diegos arrived. Looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

We long for that, don't we? And the God who's bound himself to his children of old is a God who fathers us and has compassion on the children of his people.

A child might cry over the silliest things. He won't mind me saying this. Gabriel, he gets really upset when he can't press the button on the lift.

It's too high. It's dach, isn't it? It's really, really silly. Really upsets him. Shouldn't upset him, should it? But the child just has to say, Daddy.

[15 : 06] And that is more than enough, isn't it, to move Daddy with compassion. God is like that with us. So much more so, though.

In that most of the stuff that we cry about and that we worry about must seem so silly to him, the God of the universe. Mustn't it? But he moves sin far away so that he can be close.

Not just to satisfy himself as a judge in a kind of legal sense, although he does. So that he can come into our home and that he can be near to us. That he can come into our hearts.

That he is moved by compassion for us. Daddy. The long, slowness of his anger. The length of his compassion. Thirdly. And lastly, the timeless endurance of his love.

Timeless endurance of his love. The third comparison that David makes takes us back, actually, to the very beginning of sort of our collective memory as people.

[16 : 13] Because he is not only the God of rescue and of long-suffering and of renewal, but of our origins as well, isn't he? He was there at the beginning of our creation.

He was our creator. Verse 14 then. He knows our frame. And remembers that we're dust. And God knows what we're really made of.

Great temptation for fathers is to place too greater an expectation on their children, isn't it? To kind of live vicariously through them. Make up for their own mistakes.

Keith Hernandez was a baseball player. And he'd won the Golden Glove Award several times. He'd won the Best Batman Award.

He had the highest average score. He was the most valuable player in his league. And he'd even won the World Series. And when he won the World Series, he had one of those press conferences. And he spoke to his father down the camera.

[17 : 17] And he said, Dada, I've done it. I've won the World Series. What more do you want? And later on, his father replied, Sunday, son, you're going to look back and say, you could have done more.

God is not like that. He doesn't have unreasonable expectations. Because he was there at the beginning. He made us. And he knows what we're really made of.

He knows that we are dust. He knows what we're capable of. And what we're not capable of, in all honesty.

Even if we think we are. He knows our limitations. He doesn't expect from us. Often what we think he expects from us. He isn't folding his arms in heaven.

Is he reluctant to forgive? Reluctant to welcome us? Reluctant to approve? He's not snappy with his children when they inconvenience him.

[18 : 18] Or frustration. No, because verse 19. His throne is established. And his kingdom rules over all. He's not in his office, is he? And when we kind of come in, he's like, don't bother me now, child.

If you come in, you'll put me off my train of thought. You'll ruin my concentration. Now, as somebody once said, the biggest compliment we can pay to God is to ask big things of him.

It's like those pictures. Have you seen them? Taken by Alan Stanley Treтик of John F. Kennedy. Junior, his son. And he sat under the resolute desk in the Oval Office.

The Oval Office is a space that is exclusive to the president, isn't it? It's not open to the public. It's untouchable because Kennedy is the president.

But for Junior, Kennedy is also father. And as his father governs the nation, he quietly sits at his feet and enjoys his company.

[19 : 28] Daddy. The father knows our frame, doesn't he? He knows what we're really made of. He knows when we cry and why we cry when we can't press the button.

While he sits on the throne, we are under the throne. There is a longevity of his love too, isn't there? It's not just a flash of passion in the pan like so much of the love that we hear about in this world. It's hard to get our heads around it because we are so used to the brevity of things.

Our days are like grass, like so much in this world that is there one day and it's gone the next. It's glorious in its time, but it's just a passing thing.

But this is not what God's love is like. And even long after we are gone, God still loves us, doesn't he? And he is with us even in the shadow of death and beyond.

[20 : 32] His love outlasts us and resurrects us. The slowness of his anger, the lengths of his compassion, timeless endurance of his love.

And just as we close, in all of these things, the question isn't whether God finds these things easy, actually. Whether he finds it easy to keep his temper with me, or whether it's easy to forgive, or easy to have compassion, or easy to love.

It's not whether it's easy for him, actually, it's how on earth it's even possible for God to do these things. Verse 10, if you look at this, I meditate on this this week.

It is a logical impossibility. God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

Emil Brunner said that forgiveness is the very opposite of anything which we can take for granted. Nothing is less obvious than forgiveness, than any of these things which David sees in his God.

[21 : 48] His long-suffering is not just difficult. It is actually a profound problem for God, if I can put it that way. God is love and he is holy.

And he doesn't justify the ungodly, does he? That's unfair. Calvin puts it like this, that one sinner in the presence of a holy God is like one snowflake on the surface of the sun.

It's not just difficult. It's impossible. But nothing is impossible with God. And somehow God finds a way to display his patience and to hold back his anger and to deal with us and repay us in a way that we don't deserve, to love us instead of punishing us.

He treats us very unfairly, doesn't he? Thankfully. And he gifts us with fatherly love instead of what we deserve.

Better than I deserve. Paul says in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. His temper is long.

[23 : 04] He was, of course, going to repay and treat another according to our iniquities, wasn't he? The Christ himself.

David's greater son. The Christ who was so committed to the corporate witness of Israel. He gave his life as a ransom for many.

whose delight and goal was in the us and not just in the me. His own soul took pleasure in the offspring that God would give him, his family.

He knew, didn't he, that the best fuel for his own soul, his individual soul, was appreciating and giving his life for God's work amongst the many.

In the corporate witness of Israel. Of those who keep covenant with him. Our testimony isn't just what God has done in our lives, is it?

[24 : 05] Although that is a great... It is saying there is a people whom God has loved and rescued and set his love upon. And he has brought me into that people.

He has grafted me into that people and we have got a great history. A long history. A great collective memory of what God is like amongst us.

And to see that, I need to look beyond myself, don't I? I need to recognise God's people. There is something about the church, corporately, that displays Christ and the gospel much more than it can in me as an individual.

Paul speaks of the church as the fullness of him who fills all in all. That is Jesus Christ. That is using massive language, isn't it?

And I can't say that just about myself. I can't say I'm Chris, I'm a Christian, I am the fullness of him who fills all in all. The whole church, throughout the world and throughout history, display God's grace and kindness in a much fuller way.

[25 : 20] Where my soul is concerned is more the merrier, isn't it? And I need to dwell on God's work in all of your lives and all of the church's life throughout history.

Church history and creeds and corporate worship and corporate prayer meetings, they are all soul food. So when's the best time to preach to yourself like we thought about last Sunday morning?

The best time for me actually is when I'm with us, isn't it? When I'm with the people who belong to this long-suffering, compassionate Father God.

Shall we pray to him now? Amen.