

Psalm 103:2

Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits

My daughter rang me the other day; she is at the University of Portsmouth

- She is supposed to be doing geography, though she never seems to mention that much
- Its nearly always an emergency when she rings and this time was no different
- She was on a quiz team and they were doing opposites
- ‘what’s the opposite of glory?’ she asked
- to be fair, my answer was not as it quick as it could have been because I misheard
- I thought she asked, ‘what’s the opposite of gory?’
- With the help of the synonyms button on MS Word which also has antonyms
- I was offering a selection of opposites that left her rather puzzled
- ‘pleasant’ I said – ‘pleasant is the opposite of *glory*?’ she queried
- Oh! ‘glory’ I thought you said ‘gory’ – the opposite of glory is shame

Unlike our style of poetry, the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms does not use rhyme

- But it does use synonyms (words that mean the same)
- And antonyms (words that mean the opposite)
- Our Psalm (103) begins with the exhortation, ‘Praise the LORD, O my soul’
- All my inmost being, praise his holy name – there’s a repetition with synonyms
- Soul and inmost being are essentially the same
- And the title ‘the LORD’ is the holy name of God
- We can know something of God’s nature by his holy name
- Jesus is the best name for God that the Christian has – the name above every name

I didn’t find it too hard to come up with the opposite of glory – shame

- But here’s a tough one – what is the opposite of praise?
- MS Word offers admire, commend, extol, honour, eulogize
- congratulate, pay tribute to, go into raptures over
- I think each of these might help Christians as we think about praise
- But there were no antonyms, no opposites – what is the opposite of praise?
- That’s a tougher one than glory, let alone gory – but Psalmist has the answer
- ‘Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits’
- ‘forget not’ there’s an odd phrase – why not just say ‘remember’
- surely remember is a much easier word than forget not, or ‘don’t forget’
- most of the times I say ‘don’t forget’ is when I expect someone to forget
- I needn’t say to one of my children, ‘don’t forget it’s football on Saturday
- But I might need to say, ‘don’t forget to hand in your homework’

One of my college friends writes long lists every day of things he doesn’t want to forget

- We used to say that at the top of his list he should write, ‘write list for today’
- And at the bottom of his list he should write, ‘start list for tomorrow’

Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits

- The Psalm-writer reminds his innermost being not to forget all God’s benefits
- Literally all the good things that God has done for him (and you, and me)
- And in case anyone should be in any doubt he starts to list them
- And I have chosen three, FORGIVENESS, FATHERHOOD, FAITHFULNESS

I FORGIVENESS

‘Who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases’

- The LORD forgives, heals, redeems, crowns and satisfies
- But it is to his forgiveness that we are turning our attention
- The phrase ‘forgives all your sins’ does not mean much in modern Britain
- Last year *The Guardian* carried an article about sin, defining it as an obsolete word
- Meaning ‘something young people do not know or care about’
- ‘Sin is as alien to the contemporary mind as fetching water from a well’
- ‘Or darning your own socks’ – it is a notion many people find senseless or irrelevant

In a previous generation when many Mums made Sunday dinner an excuse

- For missing the Sunday morning service at church
- A little boy returned home from the morning service and his mother asked him
- ‘What was the sermon about today, dear?’
- To which he replied, ‘It was about sin.’
- ‘And what,’ asked Mum, ‘did the preacher say about sin?’
- To which the boy replied, ‘He was against it.’

Over the years the church has had a great tradition of being against things

- Giving rise to the conclusion that Christianity was one long ‘thou shalt not’
- Everyone’s answer to temptation became like the advertiser’s slogan
- For cream buns, ‘Naughty but nice’ the suggestion being that temptation
- Was simply giving into things that were self-indulgent but basically harmless
- Especially in moderation – eating too many cream buns might not be good for you
- But eating a cream bun is not sin – and it does not need forgiving

To be fair, there are many things that the church ought to be against

- Poverty, injustice, exploitation, cruelty, child abuse to name just a few
- the trouble is that these sound like the sermon on sin – where we are against it
- The Bible has three basic understandings of sin
- Falling from God’s glory, straying from his path, disobeying God’s commandments
- Fallen-ness, trespasses, disobedience

But the real root of the problem lies in a broken relationship

- we live in a generation where the great insights of the Genesis stories are overlooked
- even in the church – but the Genesis stories remind us that we are created
- for a relationship with God – but that relationship has been broken
- broken by doubt and disobedience – to doubt someone’s word
- is a symptom of the breakdown of a relationship

Sometimes I am asked what Christians believe – we believe that God created us

- And that God loves us all personally – so far so good
- God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, Jesus, to die for our sins
- But the great thing is that we can know and feel our sins totally forgiven now
- And our relationship with God can be as real as our relationship with our family
- Because the great way in which God is revealed to his children is by his:

II FATHERHOOD

‘As a father has compassion on his children so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him’.

(Psalm 103:13)

‘Compassion’ is a good word but it has a rather formal meaning in English

- The sense of the word here is ‘hold in your arms’ and ‘fear’ is not wrong
- It does not have the sense of petrified but ‘reverence’ or ‘awe’
- If reverence means little today it means something like ‘respect and esteem him’
- As a father holds his children in his arms
- So the LORD holds in his arms those who respect and esteem him (a relationship)

Some people who are here with us this evening have come to remember their natural father

- After the recent death of my father-in-law in September this year
- Memories of my father, who died in September 1989, have come to my mind
- Happily, most of us will have many good memories of our natural fathers
- Even if we are sometimes more aware of their weaknesses because we share them
- But whether we our relationship or memories of our natural father are good or not
- Most of us have some idea of what fatherhood is meant to be

When children have a falling out with parents a relatively common complaint

- Is that the parents don’t understand – parents don’t understand:
- Relationships – though they have probably had at least one significant relationship
- And were once much younger themselves
- Parents don’t understand the relative importance of various things
- Maybe, that’s true - but God is the Father who understands perfectly
- And the Psalm writer reminds us that he understands us perfectly
- Because he never forgets how he made us
- For he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust

To the teenager the most pressing need in life might seem to be an MP3 player or a computer

- To the young adult the most pressing need might seem to be a car or a mortgage
- To the middle aged the most pressing need might seem to be financial security
- To the retired the most pressing need might seem to be a pension or endowment
- But the most pressing need is much more obvious than this

As a father holds his children in his arms, so the LORD holds in his arms those who respect and esteem him, for he knows how he made us, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.

I like to imagine the Psalm-writer sitting in the countryside on a spring day

- Marvelling at all the colours of spring around him – but unlike our climate
- Soon, the hot south wind will blow and all the flowers and colours of spring are gone
- It all reminds us of human frailty – but the Psalm writer does not leave it there

But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children - with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.

(Psalm 103:17-18)

III FAITHFULNESS

The Psalm writer emphasises the contrast – our days are like grass (brief, transitory, passing)

- Whereas God's love, like him, is from everlasting to everlasting (poetic, eternal)
- Again, his eternal love is with those who 'respect and esteem him'
- It is a reminder that God does not respond to our faithlessness in kind
- In the very sign that the Psalm writer used to show human weakness and frailty
- But it is a sign that Jesus transformed
- unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed
- But if it dies, it produces many seeds – here Jesus is speaking of his resurrection
- The Psalm writer had seen the flowers flourish and wither (a sign of death)
- But Jesus saw the seed that fell into the ground bring new life (a sign of resurrection)
- This was something that the prophet Isaiah (40:8) already knew:
- "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever."

I think that what we must learn from this Psalm is that despite our fallenness and frailties

- God loves us, he is ready to forgive us, he wants us to know him as loving father
- There are pictures of motherly care in the Bible but fatherly love predominates

Those of us who are parents know what it is to see one of our children stumble and fall

- For toddlers and younger children, the meaning of this is obvious
- But let's not pretend that stumbling and falling is limited to grazed knees and elbows
- We stumble and fall, both physically and metaphorically, throughout our lives
- And the effects of this are often much more lasting than simply tripping over
- We all go through life getting battered and bruised, cut and wounded
- Sometimes because of the actions of others – sometimes through our own fault
- But if we esteem and reverence God, and do not forget all he has done for us
- Supremely in giving his one and only Son, Jesus

To battered, bruised and broken people

- Even when it is our own fault, God is forgiving
- When we feel that no one else understands, God is our Father
- He understands our frailties and weaknesses and cares for us
- He is the Faithful God who will never let us down – and this is our vision of heaven

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits