

“Undoubtedly, one of the best-loved psalms,” observes John Stott.¹ Spurgeon called it the Song on the Mount answering our Redeemer’s Sermon on the Mount. “Our attempt at exposition,” he wrote, “is commenced under an impressive sense of utter impossibility of doing justice to so sublime a composition...It is one of those all-comprehending Scriptures which is a Bible in itself, and it might alone almost suffice for the hymn book of the church.”² Psalm 103 is the inspiration to two of our great hymns, *Praise My Soul the King of Heaven* and *Praise the Lord, the Almighty*; as well as the song of praise, *Bless the Lord*. “Admiring gratitude shines through every line of this hymn to the God of all grace.”³

The psalm is pure praise. There are no petitions, only heartfelt reflections on the mercy of God. David begins the psalm personally, “Praise the Lord, O my soul.” He first addresses himself, exhorting his whole being to respond to God. Next, he expands the circle of praise to include the covenant community. Then he summons the whole of creation to “Praise the Lord.” He finishes full circle, ending where he began, with self-exhortation, “Praise the Lord, O my soul.” These three concentric circles of praise, personal, communal and universal, encompass the scope of true worship. “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Ps 150:6).

The psalm's form and composition is a testimony to the skill and creativity involved in thoughtful praise. Those who worship the Lord seriously do so skillfully and joyfully. Worship is not a haphazard, half-hearted effort that we make up willy nilly. George Herbert, the 17th Century poet-pastor, engaged in the work of worship “by all possible art.” He sought to convince his congregation of the truth of God through “earnestness speech,” a passionate attitude, and an effective delivery. The psalms share this attention to style and structure. Psalm 103 consists of twenty-two verses, as many verses as there are letters in the Hebrew alphabet. This “alphabetizing” of the message may have served two purposes. Not only was the psalmist saying everything in the psalm is essential for true worship, but the message is complete from A to Z. So, here are the ABC’s of true worship, without any hint of “dumbing-down” the gospel.

There are three stanzas in this psalm. The first (Ps 103:1-5) and third (Ps 103:19-22) are nearly the same length, bracketing the central stanza (Ps 103:6-18). The whole Psalm is about God’s grace, which is received personally, revealed historically and extolled universally. An intentional pattern of repetition in each stanza reinforces the theme. The eightfold repetition of “my” highlights the personal emphasis in the first stanza and the fourfold “all” underscores the totality of our worship and God’s blessing. The repetition of “all” at the end further knits together the entire psalm. In the main portion of the psalm parallel lines add special emphasis: “the Lord is compassionate and gracious, // slow to anger, // and abounding in love;” and, “He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; // he does not treat us as our sins deserve // or repay us according to our iniquities” (Ps 103:8-10). The psalmist used three terms for disobedience: sins, iniquities, and transgressions, and three terms for those who practice

¹ Stott, *Favorite Psalms*, 95.

² Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*,

³ Kidner, *Psalms*, 363.

obedience, those “who do his bidding,” “who obey his word,” and “who do his will.”

The middle stanza is knit together by a series of comparisons. Thankfully the Lord does not treat us as our sins deserve nor pay us back for what we have done. We receive what we don’t deserve—God’s grace. His great love is compared to the height between heaven and earth, and the distance between east and west. The Lord’s compassion toward those who fear him is compared to a father’s compassion for his children. The Lord knows we are weak and frail. We are likened to dust, green grass and blooming flowers, but the Lord’s love is from everlasting to everlasting. His love is freely bestowed on “those who fear him,” “keep his covenant,” and “remember to obey his precepts.”

The name of Yahweh occurs eleven times in the twenty verses, twice in the first stanza, four times in the second, and five in the third as the psalm builds to a climax. This carefully crafted composition is more than a fine piece of poetry. Form and style serve a holy purpose – praise to the Lord. In the words of Henry Lyte,

*Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
To His feet thy tribute bring*

Self Exhortation

*Praise the Lord, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits –
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.*

Psalm 103:1-5

Spurgeon said, “Soul music is the very soul of music. The psalmist strikes the best key note when he begins with stirring up his inmost self to magnify the Lord.”⁴ The psalmist’s self-exhortation is critical for worship. Such positive and redemptive self-talk is essential for authentic worship. All real worship begins personally. We don’t feel our way into worship as much as worship our way into feelings. Worship begins with the conviction of self-exhortation. “Many talk freely enough to others, but never talk to themselves,” commented Spurgeon. “They are strangers to themselves – not on speaking terms with themselves – take no interest in their own souls – are dull and melancholy when alone.”⁵ One measurement of emotional maturity is a person’s ability to reason and exhort themselves. Of course, not all self-talk is productive. We may be inclined to list our woes, dwell on our problems, fixate on our weaknesses, and withdraw into ourselves.

⁴ Spurgeon, Treasury of David,

⁵ Spurgeon, Treasury of David,

This psalm leads us out of a narrow, constricted view of life, and into the large world of God's salvation.

The psalmist takes responsibility for what he says to himself, even as all believers must, knowing that our self-talk has an impact on others. Cynicism among the people of God can spread like a virus through gossip and negative comments. It doesn't take much to turn, "Praise the Lord, O my soul," into a critical spirit. Self-exhortation addressed to the soul speaks to "the inner core of the whole person."⁶ The psalmist envisions the worshiper's conscience, imagination, emotions, memories, and hopes focused on praise. In a word, "soul" encompasses the breadth and depth of who we are. When David defined soul as "all my inmost being" he emphasized that our worship was derived from the inside out. To praise the Lord with our souls is to assure that our whole being worships the Lord.

The specific content of David's self-exhortation is God's amazing grace. Salvation is complete, encompassing the whole person. The first benefit of salvation is forgiveness, the foundation for our relationship with the Lord, followed by healing, redemption, empowerment, and fulfillment. The blessing of God's grace redeems every dimension of life. Holiness and health are God's blessing. *O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!*⁷ Spiritual and emotional well-being are his gifts. Even in the midst of dire circumstances, we are comforted by the Lord's love and compassion. God blesses us with inner strength and outward energy. Worship begins by focusing on God and His action. The Lord forgives, heals, redeems, crowns (empowers), satisfies, and renews. It is not our activism, but God's action that inspires worship. "Yahweh is worthy of a total response of grateful worship for the totality of his blessing."⁸

David's inner dialogue reminds us of how important it is to use our mind and our memory to "shake off apathy or gloom" and rekindle our emotions for God.⁹ Self-talk that is shaped by God's grace reminds us that "we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting."¹⁰ It is like learning to play a musical instrument. We'll never enjoy playing an instrument until we practice. The hard work of discipline and the joy of devotion go hand-in-hand. "Worship is an act which develops feelings for God, not a feeling for God which is expressed in an act of worship. When we obey the command to praise God in worship, our deep, essential need to be in relationship with God is nurtured."¹¹ We worship because we are,

*Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Evermore His praises sing. Alleluia!*¹²

Salvation's Story

⁶ Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, 177.

⁷ J. Neander, *Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty*,

⁸ Allen, *Psalms*, 22.

⁹ Kidner, *Psalms*, 364.

¹⁰ Peterson, *Long Obedience*, 50.

¹¹ Peterson, *Long Obedience*, 50.

¹² Henry F. Lyte, "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven."

*The Lord works righteousness
 and justice for all the oppressed.
 He made known his ways to Moses,
 his deeds to the people of Israel:
 The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
 slow to anger, abounding in love.
 He will not always accuse,
 nor will he harbor his anger forever;
 he does not treat us as our sins deserve
 or repay us according to our iniquities.
 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his love for those who fear him;
 as far as the east is from the west,
 so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
 As a father has compassion on his children,
 so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
 for he knows how we are formed,
 he remembers that we are dust.
 The life of mortals is like grass,
 they flourish like a flower of the field;
 the wind blows over it and it is gone,
 and its place remembers it no more.
 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 103:6-18

The psalmist moves from the personal benefits of salvation to the big picture of the history of salvation. The people of God respond to what the Lord has done and will do. *Let the amen sound from His people again!* If the first stanza is a solo call to worship, the second stanza is a powerful anthem of praise. The emphasis changes from personal salvation to the history of salvation among God's covenant people.

*Praise Him for His grace and favor
 To His people in distress;
 Praise Him still the same as ever,
 Slow to chide, and swift to bless. Alleluia!*

God's unfolding plan of salvation highlights the epicenter of redemption, the Exodus, the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, and the sacrificial system. Salvation history reveals his holy character, his enduring love, and our great need for salvation. When believers worship they take the grand themes of salvation and hold them up for praise out of joy and gratitude. We rehearse the full range of God's truth, past, present and future. We acknowledge our sinful frailty and the Lord's

holiness and unfailing love.

*Father like He tends and spares us;
Well our feeble frame He knows;
In His hands He gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes.*¹³

The psalmist celebrates the power of God's gracious forgiveness and deliverance from sin, by using spatial analogies to picture God's love; "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps 103:11-12). The apostle Paul echoed this spatial love language when prayed for believers "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph 3:18).

Worship gives us a realistic and redemptive appraisal of our personal circumstances. Left to ourselves and our own opinions we may ignore the frailty of our human condition and neglect the love and mercy of God. We struggle to hold in tension the fleeting nature of mortal life and the promise of the Lord's everlasting love and life. The brevity of life does not mean the futility of life. "The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him" (Ps 103:15-17). In worship we are reminded that God redeems us from the pit. Our mortal bodies take on immortality, as the apostle Paul said, "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power" (1 Cor 15:42-43). Corrie ten Boom, a survivor of the Nazi holocaust, offers a perspective on our mortality compatible with the psalmist:

"Often I have heard people say, 'How good God is. We prayed that it would not rain for our church picnic, and look at this lovely weather!' Yes, God is good when He sends good weather. But God was also good when He allowed my sister Betsie to starve to death before my eyes in the German concentration camp.

I remember one occasion when I was very discouraged there. Everything around us was dark, and there was darkness in my heart. I remember telling Betsie that I thought God had forgotten us. 'No, Corrie,' said Betsie, 'He has not forgotten us. Remember His Word: 'For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; There is an ocean of God's love available. . . There is plenty for everyone. May God grant you never to doubt that victorious love, whatever the circumstances.'"¹⁴

Authentic corporate worship inspires our devotion to God, makes us more sensitive to sin (most of all our own), and deepens our passion for holiness. Worship has much more to do with being faithful than feeling good. As the psalmist emphasizes worship and ethics belong together: "The

¹³ Henry F. Lyte, Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven, stanza 3.

¹⁴ Corrie ten Boom, The Hiding Place

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” (Ps 103:17-18). This emphasis on righteous acts and obedience is clearly emphasized in the New Testament as well (see Eph 2:8-10). Goldingay writes, “Our relationship with God is wholly dependent on divine commitment, yet unless that meets with a response in the form of revering and thus obeying God, an actual relationship cannot come into being. It would be misleading to say that the divine commitment is conditional on the human response, because that would imply the relationship is a contract. But the commitment does require the response.”¹⁵ Commenting on this text, Augustine took issue with those who prided themselves on memorizing the psalms, but neglected to obey the commands of God. It is better to do them than recite them, Augustine argued. It doesn't help to sing a hymn, but disobey God's will. “What good is it if your voice sings a hymn, if your life doesn't honor God?”¹⁶ What is true of marriage can be said of worship and ethics, “What God has joined together let no one separate.”

Communal Exhortation

*The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.
Praise the Lord, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.
Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.
Praise the Lord all his works
everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the Lord, my soul.*

Psalm 103:19-22

Psalm 103 reminds believers that those who worship God in spirit and in truth bow before King Jesus. The third stanza widens the circle of praise to include all of creation. All the angels and the heavenly hosts are summoned to worship before the throne of him who rules over all. Total praise. There are no spectators. Everyone is in the choir and everything is centered around the throne of the Lord. "Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion." The end of Psalm 103 reminds us of something out of Revelation: “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’” (Rev 5:13).

This powerful, pulsating praise has practical implications for our worship. For a number of years now churches have been designing worship according to people's preferences. Everyone it seems has an opinion about what kind of music and liturgy they like. However, it is important to note that whatever your perspective on worship styles, whether you like to rock out on songs of praise or sing ancient hymns, in the end we'll be worshipping together. We will not find separate

¹⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 177.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Psalms*, 509.

worship services for contemporary and traditional music in heaven. Those of us who have strong opinions about what kind of worship music will be in heaven, may be surprised and stretched! It is probably a good idea to begin preparing on this side of eternity for the unimaginable range of praise that we will experience in heaven.

It is even more exciting to contemplate the inclusiveness of the global gospel of Jesus Christ. Everyone everywhere is called to worship the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is only one Creator, Redeemer and King, only one throne and only one kingdom over all. Modern multiculturalism envisions a chorus of “We are the world” but biblical universalism envisions the throne of God surrounded by angels and the heavenly hosts praising God. Worship acknowledges the rule of the Lord over every culture, tribe, nation, and people group. The key concept for the future of the human community is not ideological pluralism, but doxology:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heav’nly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Biblical universalism exalts “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:5-6). Psalm 103 reminds us “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). The psalm ends where it began with personal exhortation to worship. No matter how many join the concert of praise, our soul’s praise to the Lord still counts.

*Angels, help us to adore Him:
Ye behold Him face to face;
Sun and moon, bow down before Him,
Dwellers all in time and space.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace.¹⁷*

¹⁷ Henry F. Lyte, Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven, stanza 4.