

Session 3

December 17

THE EXPRESSED LOVE IN GOD'S NAME

Psalm 103:1-5, 8- 13, 17-19

Of God's many attributes, none stands more prominently than His love. He not only demonstrates love, He embodies it. He epitomizes it. It is essential to His character. First John 4:8 simply and profoundly states, "God is love." Psalm 103 is David's exuberant explanation of God's love toward us...and what our love should be toward Him. Three key elements are highlighted.

Because He is good to us (vv. 1-5). "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name!" Like so many of the traditional texts, this one is most recognizable in the King James Version. In the usual usage, a blessing is something God's people receive. It connotes a measure of happiness, or contentedness. To be blessed is to receive all the good that God has to offer. But the opening words of this beautiful and popular psalm are instead aimed at blessing God. Here, the idea is one of praise and adoration (nevertheless, the KJV still sounds best!). David's use of "my" and "me" in verse 1 makes the declaration personal. The terms "soul" and "all that is within me" highlight the totality of David's praise, and since a name encompasses all the characteristics of the individual, blessing "His holy name" indicates the totality of God. In other words, all that David is, is responding to all that God is, in an attitude unfettered praise. Verse 2 then explains the reasons for his exuberance (God's benefits), and even lists them out: He forgives sin, heals disease, redeems life, rewards with lovingkindness, grants tender mercies, satisfies one's desires, and strengthens the weary and worn. Notice how what began as a personal statement of praise ("my" and "me") is then applied to the entire congregation ("you" and "yours"). For reflection: Notice the progress in David's list of benefits: he begins with the forgiveness of sin and ends with the strength of eagles. What significance do you think this progression might have?

Because He is gracious to us (vv. 8-13). While God's goodness and His grace are related, they are not quite the same thing. His goodness is generic; He is a benevolent God. But grace always emphasizes unmerited favor. The linking of grace with mercy is also significant. Grace is God's giving that which we do not deserve, whereas mercy is God's withholding that which we do deserve. Verses 9 and 10 emphasize His mercy, indicating what He will NOT do, even though we deserve it. He will NOT always strive (that is "contend") with us; He will NOT remain in anger; He will NOT deal with us according to the measure of our sins; He will NOT punish us according to the measure of our perverseness. Verses 11-13 then state what He WILL do for us, even though we do not deserve it: He WILL remove our transgressions (and subsequent judgement) as far as the east is from the west, and He WILL deeply love His children as a compassionate father (just as He has always done!). For reflection: Look at verse 12. Notice again that our transgressions are removed "as far as the east is from the west." Why does the Bible never say, "as far as the north is from the south?"

Because He is faithful to us (vv. 17-19). Verses 17 and following mean a whole lot more when taken in context. The preceding verses tell us what the "But" of verse 17 is all about. Those verses (vv. 14-16) talk about the frailty of humanity. Our bodies are but dust (v. 14); our days on

earth are as short-lived as the grass; our prime is as fleeting as a wildflower's bloom (v. 15). Those metaphors are in contrast to the "mercy of the Lord," which is "from everlasting to everlasting" (v. 17) and the His righteousness, which endures for generations. For reflection: Isn't it wonderful to know that God is always faithful to us, even when we are not very faithful to Him?