

PSALM 103

Praise for the Lord's Mercies

INTRODUCTION.

Thanks to James Burton Coffman.

- A. The superscription identifies this as a Psalm of David; and, "Nothing in it forbids the supposition that he was the author. However, nothing in the psalm or anywhere else enables us to determine the precise occasion on which it was written."
- B. This is a perfect psalm, suitable to all times and situations. Christians more frequently turn to this psalm than to any other. Its terminology has entered into the speech of all generations. This writer remembers from the prayers of his grandfather the employment of v10 verbatim as it appears in the KJV, and also an exclamation that, "The time and place that know us now, shall soon know us no more for ever," founded upon v16.
- C. The organization of this psalm appears to be:
 1. A self-exhortation to praise God (103:1-5).
 2. Israel exhorted to bless God (103:6-13).
 3. God's consideration for man's frailty (103:14-18).
 4. All in God's kingdom to bless Him (103:19-22).

THE TEXT.

- 103:1** Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And all that is within me, *bless* His holy name.
- 2** Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And forget none of His benefits;
- 3** Who pardons all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases;
- 4** Who redeems your life from the pit,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;
- 5** Who satisfies your years with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.
- 6** The LORD performs righteous deeds
And judgments for all who are oppressed.
- 7** He made known His ways to Moses,
His acts to the sons of Israel.
- 8** The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.
- 9** He will not always strive *with us*,
Nor will He keep *His anger* forever.
- 10** He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
- 11** For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
- 12** As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
- 13** Just as a father has compassion on *his* children,
So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.
- 14** For He Himself knows our frame;
He is mindful that we are *but* dust.
- 15** As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
- 16** When the wind has passed over it, it is no more,
And its place acknowledges it no longer.
- 17** But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,
- 18** To those who keep His covenant
And remember His precepts to do them.

- 19 The LORD has established His throne in the heavens,
And His sovereignty rules over all.
- 20 Bless the LORD, you His angels,
Mighty in strength, who perform His word,
Obeying the voice of His word!
- 21 Bless the LORD, all you His hosts,
You who serve Him, doing His will.
- 22 Bless the LORD, all you works of His,
In all places of His dominion;
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

COMMENTS.

- A. **[v1-5]** Who is it who cannot make the spirit of this worship his own? Every mortal life has received countless benefits at the hand of the Lord, has been healed of many diseases, has received forgiveness of sins, has experienced the redemption of his life from destruction threatened by many dangers seen and unseen, and has enjoyed countless satisfactions from the good things which the Lord has provided.
- "So that thy youth is renewed like the eagle" (v5). There was an ancient fable of the eagle renewing its youth in old age, similar to the fable of the Phoenix; but as Briggs noted, "It is doubtful whether there is any allusion here to the fable; but at all events it is the fullness of the life and vigor of the eagle that is thought of."
- B. **[v6-13]** That the children of Israel are the ones particularly addressed in these lines is evident from the mention of Moses and the specific mention of them in v7.
- "For all that are oppressed" (v6). The meaning of this may not be restricted to a minority of unfortunates, because the whole nation of Israel is meant. "The whole nation was once in bondage; and the thought here is retrospective to the days of Moses." [6]
- "Slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness" (v8). Here are given two of the "Thirteen Attributes of God" as revealed in Ex. 34:6-7; Joel 2:13. Jonah named five of these in his prayer (Jon. 4:2).
- "Thou hast not dealt with us after our sins, etc." (v10). "Just take a look at what the holy and righteous God did to the fallen angels, the antediluvian world, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the lost generation of Israel in the wilderness, and marvel at how leniently God has dealt with you; and this will surely deepen your gratitude and appreciation for the Divine mercy toward you."
- "As the heavens are high above the earth" (v11). Bold as this simile is, it is nevertheless inadequate, because God's kindness to them that love him is infinite.
- "As far as the east is from the west" (v12). How far is this? Again, we have a suggestion of infinity, because, there is no such thing as getting to the end either of the east or the west. The genius of this simile is that the same thing is not true of the north and the south. When God forgives the sins of his children, he even forgets them (Jer. 32:31-35).
- "Like as a father pitieth his children" (v13). God's pity of his human children is fully merited. The frailty and infirmities of life, its astounding brevity, the pressing necessities of work for survival, the prevalence of temptations, the weakness, uncertainties, doubts, fears and anxieties that continually encroach upon the thoughts of God's children, as well as the inherent danger in the implacable hatred of the righteous by the Evil One, are far more than enough to deserve pity, even from God.
- C. **[v14-18]** The first part of this paragraph gives some of the reasons for God's pity mentioned in the preceding verses; especially man's weakness and the brevity of his existence.
- "From everlasting to everlasting ... unto children's children" (v17). As a special encouragement to his children, particularly those who keep the covenant and remember the precepts of God to do them,

God reminds us here that his mercies and lovingkindness are eternal, benefitting, not merely those who love him, but also extending the benefits to their children.

"To such as keep his covenant and remember his precepts to do them" (v18). There is a reciprocal element in the great blessings and mercies of God, which are never bestowed upon the wicked and the righteous alike, except in the matter of such general blessings as the sunshine and the rain provided for both. The special lovingkindness and mercy of God in evidence here are promised to the obedient.

- D. **[v19-22]** This portion of the psalm is an exhortation for the universal adoration and worship of God. None are excepted. The mighty angels of heaven, all the "hosts" of whatever nature, over whom God reigns - let them all bless Jehovah and praise his holy name.

"His kingdom ruleth over all" (v19). The conception that God the creator of all things merely wound things up, set them on their way and then abandoned them is totally in error. Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon was humiliated by God Himself and compelled to eat grass for seven years in order to teach that vainglorious ruler that, "The Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever he will" (Dan. 4:25).

"Bless Jehovah, ye his angels" (v20). The angels of heaven are represented as worshipping God; and in Heb. 1:6 this verse is quoted and applied to Jesus Christ, indicating the Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

"All ye his hosts ... ye ministers of his" (v21). The psalmist is here still speaking of angels, as Briggs observed. "In the expression 'hosts,' the angels are conceived as an organized army; and as 'ministers' they are conceived of as faithful ministerial servants doing the Father's will." This view is confirmed in Hebrews: "Are they not all ministering servants (spirits) sent forth to do service for them that shall be the heirs of salvation?" (Heb. 1:14).

- E. It is impossible to think of an occasion of either public or private worship when this psalm would be inappropriate. It is one of the most priceless jewels of the whole Psalter.