

Memo to Self: Don't Forget God

DAVE BAST

So you are a Christian, and you are worried. You read the news every day. The world is a mess; the economy does not seem to be getting any better; housing values keep going down; you do not have a job, or maybe you do have a job but you hate it. You would like to retire, but you do not know if you can, or maybe you are retired and do not know if you will make ends meet. You are worried: worried about yourself, worried about your family; but you are a Christian, so what do you think and pray about?

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So Bob, we have been engaged in a series of *Groundwork* programs on the book of Psalms, and I think a couple of themes have come through these various programs. One is that there are psalms for every mood and every experience of life. There are laments, there are psalms of thanks and praise and confession.

BOB HEERSPINK

And God invites us to experience all those emotions. He invites us to lay before him all the feelings that we have inside as we walk with him.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. We are encouraged to be honest in our feelings and express them to God. There is nothing that we cannot express to him; nothing that we feel that we have to hide from him; and in fact, sometimes we don't know what we are feeling exactly, and we don't know what we should be saying, and the Psalms can help us there. If we pray the words... I think of that phrase from the Apostle Paul: We do not know how to pray as we ought; and sometimes with sighs and groans too deep for words. Well, the Psalms always can give us the words, and maybe sometimes the feelings will then come to the surface.

BOB HEERSPINK

And sometimes in the toughest experiences of life we really become intimidated by God and say: What do I really say? Can I really tell him what is on my mind? You go to the Psalms and there it is – God giving us his own words to speak to him about what we are going through.

DAVE BAST

Right; so today we come to one of the greatest of all the psalms, Psalm 103.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; it is a psalm that has been one of the most loved psalms in the Psalter because I think it speaks to so many different circumstances of life. It is a psalm that... It is like the psalmist puts everything in there. There is an acknowledgement of who we are; there is acknowledgement of grace; it is something of a psalm for all seasons.

DAVE BAST

It is, and I think especially in a season when we are tempted to fear or to be worried about the future. The interesting thing to me about this psalm is that despite what we have just been saying about giving us the words to pray and to speak back to God, this is a psalm first and foremost that is not addressed to God, but addressed to ourselves. The psalmist is actually speaking to himself.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; well, look at the very first verse: ¹Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name. He is addressing his own inner self.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes. I call it: Memo to self. Dear self, this is what you need to be doing. This is what you need to be saying and thinking.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, often at night before I go to bed I think about what I need to do the next day, and I say: I am going to forget – I am going to forget these things. So I pull out some sticky notes and jot down a to-do list and stick that to my cell phone. It is a memo to self because I am tempted to forget these things which really need doing...

DAVE BAST

Yes, I like that.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think that is something of what is going on in this psalm.

DAVE BAST

I like that idea, Bob, because I usually accuse my wife of allowing me to forget, you know; so maybe a sticky note would be better when I forget...

BOB HEERSPINK

You have learned a tip.

DAVE BAST

I tell her it is her fault for not reminding me, but this is a sticky note. Put it on the cover of your Bible. Just read Psalm 103 when you are fearful, when you are worried, when you are thankful, when you are up, when you are down – whatever it is, this would be a great one to memorize.

BOB HEERSPINK

But, now here is the question I have for you, Dave. Bless the Lord O my soul. Bless the Lord – that is what we are called to do. What does it mean to bless God? I mean, we look to God for blessing; we think blessing is something that flows from him to us. Now, here I am reminding myself, I need to bless God. What does that mean, do you think?

DAVE BAST

Yes, God blesses us when he gives us things. What do we give God back that blesses him? The answer is our praise. In fact, some modern translations will translate the opening verse: Praise the Lord, O my soul. But I love that older word, *bless* the Lord. It is actually closer to the original, because in Jewish idiom, to bless the Lord is a combination of thanksgiving and praise. When Jesus stood up in the Last Supper with his disciples, he blessed the bread and broke it and gave it to them, the Gospels say, and that meant that he gave thanks for it. In fact, the Jewish prayer before meals began: Blessed art Thou, O God; because he gives and bestows on us all the blessings of life.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, it strikes me that is another one of those relationship words, that God wants to be in relationship with us. It is easy for us to think of God as being up in the heavens. He has it all; he just hands out to us what we need; and we take, he gives; but the fact is, he wants a two-way relationship with us. He wants to receive our thanksgiving and our gratitude.

DAVE BAST

Sure he does, and that is one of the great messages of this psalm – maybe unspoken messages – but it is conveyed in that idea of blessing. The way we live, the things that sustain us; this is not some impersonal process; this does not happen automatically; nor is it just due to our own efforts. God gives these things to us as blessings because he wants us to bless him in return – to know him – to be related to him. He is much more important than just the gifts that he gives.

BOB HEERSPINK

And we need to make the memo to self because this is the part of our spiritual life that we can easily procrastinate, push off the plate – I will do it next week.

DAVE BAST

Yes; memo to self: Don't forget God. Start there. So, let's take that up and begin to get into this psalm after this short break.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. Dave, we are exploring Psalm 103 as a psalm that speaks to so many situations in life – a psalm that invites us to bless – to praise God; and I would like to share just a few of the verses that follow from that first verse because it really sets the tone as to why we have reason for praise. ²Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: ³who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases. ⁴Who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy. ⁵Who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. ⁶The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. ⁷He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

DAVE BAST

Right. We have said that this is... this psalm is really a kind of memo to self on the part of the psalmist reminding him to remember God and to begin by blessing God or praising God; and that is a theme, really, Bob, that runs through the whole Bible; but it is especially prominent in the Old Testament. Let me just read another passage where this is what is done, and actually, this is said to the people of Israel. It is from the book of Nehemiah, the ninth chapter. Now, I know you remember the story of Nehemiah. It was about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem after the exile – after the people had returned; and when that was finally done and there was this sense of sort of a collective sigh of relief now; talk about a worrisome situation; you know, here they are, vulnerable. Their enemies are all around. Finally, they have made provision for their safety, and then they have this great public worship, and it begins with the Levites saying: ^{9:5}Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise. ⁶You are the Lord; you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens with all their host, and the earth and all that is on it; and you preserve all of them. The host of heaven worships you.

So, that is really what this psalm is doing; it is inviting us to bless God and to praise God for who he is.

BOB HEERSPINK

But then it gets into Moses. You know, to me that is an interesting little twist because so often when we thank God and praise God, we are saying: Well, thank you Lord for this personal blessing or that personal blessing; but the psalmist goes right back to this big history lesson and says we have to thank God for things that happened, from our perspective, thousands of years ago, as Moses brought the people out of Israel and

Israel was established in the Promised Land; and I think that gives an interesting twist to the reason for our gratitude. We as Christians are grateful for a story – a history – that if we lose, well, we don't have all that much to celebrate today.

DAVE BAST

It is, I think, extremely significant – and again, this is the Bible way of proceeding – that they always begin with praising God for his great acts of salvation – saving his people. It is also significant for many of us in our tradition, this psalm, 103, is part of our communion service. It is called the communion thanksgiving, when we really do remember; and you notice that the psalmist begins by urging us to remember. He says: Bless the Lord O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits – forget not all his benefits, i.e., in other words, remember; remember his blessings beginning with the blessing of salvation.

BOB HEERSPINK

I think the importance for us as Christians is to be a people who remember; who remember what God has done in history; and recognize that that story is now our story, too; but we live in a culture that does not celebrate history very much, you know. One philosopher has said: Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. There was a study done recently that said school kids really don't know their history. Well, for us as Christians, we have a reason to remember history, not just because there are great teachings from the past, but because knowing our history defines who we are; that we are the people of God caught up in this saving work that culminates in Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

To remember in the biblical sense is far more than simply to recall or to call to mind. When I was a youngster in grade school, I had a teacher who must have noticed something about me – about the way my mind worked – and realized I might be interested in history; and I remember a day very clearly when she took me to the library in our elementary school and showed me where the history books were, and there was this series of history books that told kind of great events that had kids brought into the story, and they were all entitled: We Were There...

BOB HEERSPINK

On, I read that series.

DAVE BAST

Did you?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, I did. I read them all.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you see? There is another link between us. We Were There: that is what it means to remember in the biblical sense.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, that is good.

DAVE BAST

When you remember the cross, it means we were there.

BOB HEERSPINK

We were there.

DAVE BAST

The power of the Holy Spirit is such that he makes us a part of these events. The same thing is true of the exodus in the Old Testament. This psalm refers to the exodus when it talks about Moses, and in the Jewish Passover a child would always ask of the father at the supper table: Why do we do this? Why do we eat this food? Why do we celebrate this night? And the answer would be: Because this is the night when the Lord delivered us. Now, this is centuries later, but we were there; that is what it means to remember.

BOB HEERSPINK

See, and I think telling those kinds of stories – not just the big story of salvation, but even our personal stories of faith, become a very important way in which we form faith, we encourage faith in the next generation. A lot of our kids really do not know much about the stories of Mom and Dad; and yet one of the ways I think we can really encourage our kids is to share with them our stories; especially as our personal stories intersect the story of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

I like that, and I think that is good, and I would suggest that the psalmist is telling us: First of all, remind yourself about them. Rehearse your story to yourself. That is what it means to remember. The big events – the cross, the resurrection – but also how God has worked in our own lives; do not forget all his benefits – all the things he has done on a personal level to us. Remind yourself of that. Again, what do you think about? How do you pray when you are worried? You start by remembering times in the past when God has saved you – when he has delivered you; but then tell those stories, as you say, yes... Tell them to the next generation.

BOB HEERSPINK

They do not necessarily have to be the big victory stories: Look what I did! They are actually just the opposite. They are stories where you say: Hey, this is where I struggled, and this is how God came beside me. Here is a situation where... You know, I think back to some of the stories I heard growing up. A story of helping a neighbor during the Depression, and it was just a simple story, but it was a way of saying this is what we do as Christians. This person was not a person of faith, but we reached out to them; and you hear those stories and they start to become your story. They begin to shape you in terms of your own, I think, Christian discipleship from generation to generation.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so what are you thankful for? What has God done for you in the past? The psalmist gives us some specific pointers – some special categories. Let's dig into those specifics after this short break.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. Dave, we have been digging into Psalm 103 and discovering how our praise, our gratitude to God, is motivated as we think about God's great salvation story and the way it intersects our own personal stories.

DAVE BAST

Listen again to these opening verses – verses 3 and 4: God is the one 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; and there he unpacks it for us. What do we give thanks for – what do we praise him for? Well, the first thing is forgiveness.

BOB HEERSPINK

Forgiveness; now that means we are really brought to a place where we recognize the fact that we have messed up. We have not just messed up with other people, but we have a relationship to God where we have broken his Law and we need his pardon if we are really going to be able to have this relationship of blessing with him.

DAVE BAST

It goes back to something we said earlier in this program. The fundamental thing is the relationship; and so, the beginning of that is forgiveness – is the restoration of the relationship. Calvin – the great theologian, John Calvin – once said that reconciliation is the fountain from which all other blessings flow from God. So, you know, you could have the whole world and if you don't know God it amounts to nothing in the end. The first and fundamental thing is this restored relationship that he gives us.

BOB HEERSPINK

So many of the psalms that we have been studying come back to the fact that having a relationship with God is really the most powerful, the most valuable thing we have; and that foundation of that relationship is our forgiveness.

DAVE BAST

And then he goes on to healing. That is the second thing: Who forgives all your iniquity; who heals all your diseases. The Lord is the one who heals us. I mean, that is just fundamental Bible teaching. Now, that is not... Maybe we need to qualify that?

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, okay; all diseases... What does that mean?

DAVE BAST

Yes, eventually, you know, right? In the end; maybe not here and now, immediately. I think it was Joni Eareckson who said: The Lord has healed me; he will heal me. It is just going to take the last day to make that healing manifested.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I think we have to recognize that there are those who struggle with physical burdens, emotional brokenness, all their lives; but in those experiences time and time again I have heard people say: God has come to me and sustained me; and we live with that new creation hope that at the end of time all things will be made new, including our bodies.

DAVE BAST

We don't take a verse like that and wrench it out of context and just sort of apply it willy-nilly. The psalmist is telling us a profound truth here. That does not mean that we don't need doctors or medicine. In the biblical world view, God is the ultimate source of healing. That does not mean that he does not work through secondary means; and it does not mean that automatically always we say the right words and we get instant healing; no; but it is a profound truth nevertheless, for which we bless his name, that he has healed us; he is healing us; he will heal us.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that when we receive healing that is a gift that ultimately comes from God, not just from the clinic down the street.

DAVE BAST

Right; and then, listen to these verses, very familiar and beloved because they point to grace; that is the third thing for which we praise and thank the Lord.

⁸The Lord is merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins or repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. God is gracious and merciful.

BOB HEERSPINK

God understands what we are really like. He understands what we really need.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I think... I heard someone once say the difference between grace and mercy. Mercy is *not* giving you what you deserve; grace is giving you what you *don't* deserve... which is kind of a nice idea. He does not deal with us the way our sins would call forth because he forgives us instead of punishing us; and he does give us what we don't deserve, which is this incredible blessing and life.

BOB HEERSPINK

Really, grace underlies all the blessings that God gives us – the healing, the forgiveness – this all flows from the grace of God that we see in Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

Right; and then, the final thing, which is basically everything – every good thing: So that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. That is kind of an interesting image, but I think it is playing off an idea that they had in Bible times that somehow the eagle was reborn continuously and...

BOB HEERSPINK

Kind of like the phoenix...

DAVE BAST

Yes, maybe something like that; but the point is...

BOB HEERSPINK

That is from Greek mythology.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he gives you...he gives *us* everything good.

BOB HEERSPINK

That, I think, today is probably one of the challenging pieces for Christians to accept – for *anyone* to accept – because we tend to think that what we have is ours; we earned it, we worked for it, it belongs to us. There is a whole vision here that, you know, the gold, the silver, the cattle on a thousand hills all belong to God and everything that we have comes from him.

DAVE BAST

Right; there is this beautiful phrase a little bit later in this psalm: He knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust – I kind of naturally go to the King James when I get to that point, but God does not treat us like angels – like disembodied spirits. He knows everything that we need. He provides it for us for the sake of our wellbeing, and ultimately so that we can share with others. You know, Jesus said don't worry about the things of this life or of this world. Your heavenly Father knows that you need those things.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; God knows we are physical beings. We need food on the table, we need shoes on our feet. He knows, and he provides – sometimes providing through others; and I think the challenge of this is to look at the text and say: Okay, who around me can I bless in the name of Jesus Christ by providing good things in his name?

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; that is a great application. If God has given you a lot, maybe he means you to share it and be his hands and feet to provide for someone else in need; so, just count your blessings; name them one by one. That is what the psalmist is saying. This is an Old Testament version of that gospel hymn.

BOB HEERSPINK

Regardless of your circumstance in life, praise and blessing are part of our obedience.

DAVE BAST

We had a wonderful response to our *Groundwork* website. Groundworkonline.com is our website, and there we post questions; and in this case, questions about the psalms; and one of the questions we asked was: What are you afraid about when you think about the future? What are you worried about? We got a wonderful response from someone named Bill, who wrote this: I can see that although hard times of one form or another can be expected, the Lord will be with us. He does not take us out of suffering, but will be with us to comfort and support us through the suffering. There have been events in my life that I am glad I did not know were coming, (I think we can all agree with that.) and that I certainly would not have chosen; but over the years I have learned to give thanks for them. We need to be constantly on guard so that when fears take hold of us, we need to know where to take them. When the worst happens, we need to know where to take that, and quickly, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and see, that is the experience that Psalm 103 speaks into. Psalm 103 is a psalm for a person going through that experience.

Well thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation; and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating in online discussions that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you are thinking about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear about on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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