

Our Benefits Package

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — March 8, 2015

Psalm 103 NIV

Praise the LORD, O my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the LORD, O 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.
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.
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.
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.
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, O my soul.

Our Benefits Package

Psalm 103:1-5

As Christians we think of ourselves as people of the New Testament, and that's right of course. But we should never forget that we have a spiritual heritage that goes much further back than New Testament times. We stand on the shoulders of pioneers in the faith like Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah and all the prophets, and many others. What we call the "Old Testament" is our book also. Remember, the earliest Christians we

read about in the New Testament had no New Testament. For them, the Scriptures *were* the Hebrew Scriptures (usually in the Greek translation we call the Septuagint).

We can't read any of the New Testament without being aware of how Jesus and the apostles were "soaked" in those Scriptures because they found in them the substance of what God was doing in the world to restore his creation and inaugurate his kingdom on the earth. In the message and ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, in the letters of the apostle Paul, in the Revelation to John, and throughout the New Testament we see constant reference to the Scriptures of the Law of Moses, the writings of the great prophets, and the Book of Psalms. To appreciate the role of the Old Testament in the shaping of our faith we have only to turn to Luke 24:44, where after his resurrection the Lord Jesus appears to his disciples and explains to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." The Old Testament books most often quoted in the New Testament are Deuteronomy (from the Law, or Torah), Isaiah (from the Prophets), and the Psalms.



Today we began our service with a short responsive reading from one of the Psalms, as I hope we'll continue to do. The Psalms are the hymnbook of the Bible; they were sung in the worship of the tabernacle and the Temple, and were the mainstay of Jewish and Christian worship for centuries. The church of the New Testament worshiped with the Psalms; consider, for example, what the apostle Paul urged the church at Colossae: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16).

Historically, the church has always worshiped using the Psalms; today they are sung or said regularly in Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and many other churches. Some Reformed Protestant churches, even today, sing no hymns except the Psalms of the Bible. Some of the finest hymns in our hymnal are actually poetic versions of Psalms, such as "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" (Psalm 90), "Joy to the World" (Psalm 98), "All People That on Earth Do Dwell" (Psalm 100), or "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven" (Psalm 103). In the Book of Psalms we find expression of every aspect of our faith and devotion, and in my opinion it's hard to improve upon what the Lord, in his inspired Word, has already given us as the sincere outpouring of our love for God and our dependence upon him as his faithful people.



Today I want to turn to briefly to one psalm in particular, one of my favorites which at one time I even memorized in Hebrew. (I won't do the Hebrew version today.) One reason I like this

Psalm is because of its opening words, which lay out what we might call our "benefits package" as the people of God. Let's review those words, using a different version from the one I just read to you:

Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalm 103:1-5)

I like the translation "bless the Lord" better than "praise the Lord." I think that when we *bless the Lord* we're putting more personal involvement into our worship. Blessing is more than praising. In the Bible, the word for "praising" God means "boasting about God," which is important to do but that's not the word used

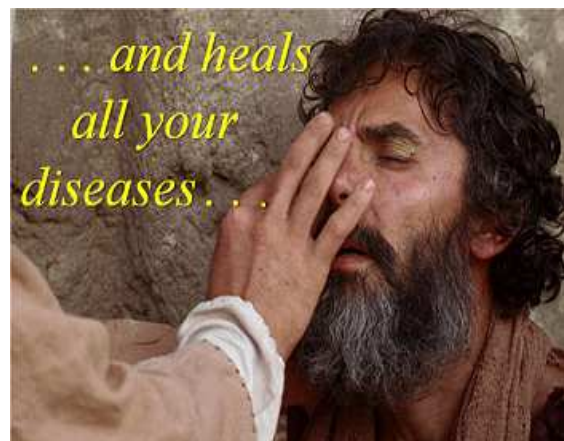
here. The Hebrew word is a different one that means to “bend the knee,” or to really put yourself into it. As the psalm says, “all that is within me, bless his holy name!” When you “bless” someone you commit yourself to their welfare — and, of course, Scripture teaches that God also blesses us in that same way!

What, then are our reasons for blessing the Lord? That’s where our “benefits package” comes in. First of all, “forget not all his benefits.” There’s always the temptation to forget what James, the brother of Jesus, tells us in his letter: “Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (James 1:16-18). The fact that we’re here at all, as people reborn into the new life of the kingdom of God, is a gift from God. And so is everything that sustains our life, because it’s part of the universe he made.

So Psalm 103 begins to enumerate the benefits in our package, and the first benefit is that the Lord forgives all our sins. To be forgiven is basic to receiving all other benefits, for without forgiveness there’s a blockage that keeps us from receiving what God has to give. Sin, in the Bible, isn’t just specific actions. It’s a state of being alienated from God, of having a barrier erected between him and us. We erect that barrier whenever we say, “I don’t need God.” That barrier goes up whenever we give in to the enticement the tempter offered to Adam and Eve in the garden: “You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).



Before we can receive any benefits from God, that barrier has to come down. Jesus taught us that unless we, in turn, forgive others their sins against us, we can’t receive God’s forgiveness. He taught us to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Messiah Jesus came to sum up in himself the life of God’s people Israel, whom God had chosen to spread his name across the globe. Because God’s people weren’t faithful to their calling, Jesus carried their sins to the cross. In his resurrection he became the “firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29). He created a renewed people of God, and all who unite with Jesus know God’s forgiveness because Jesus, in his death and resurrection, took away the condemnation of sin. Psalm 103 testifies to that forgiveness God gives through Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).



Once we’ve received that first benefit, we can receive the rest of God’s “package” for us. The next item our psalm lists is this: he “heals all your diseases.” Perhaps, today, you’re dealing with some kind of disease or condition in your body and you wonder why God hasn’t answered your prayers and healed you. There’s no simple answer to this question. We know that, across the world, miracles do occur and people do get healed in answer to prayer. But healing is always part of a larger picture of life; if we concentrate on just our physical condition we might miss the presence of God’s healing power in other ways. George

Müller, who built orphanages in England in the nineteenth century, received all the financial means to do that simply in answer to his prayers. The lives of thousands of helpless children were changed and made better. It was a remarkable exercise of faith on his part — yet Müller suffered from physical ailments all his life.

If you’re dealing with a physical ailment, or even an emotional issue, today and you’re seeking the Lord’s help, I don’t have a “magical” answer for you. I can’t tell you to say a certain prayer, as if you could snap your fingers and say “Abracadabra” and everything would suddenly be okay. God is not some cosmic vending machine, as if all we have to do is put in the right coin and pull the right lever and get whatever we want. What I *can* say is that we have the promise of Scripture that he heals all our diseases. We have the witness of

Scripture that there's healing in the sufferings of the servant of God, Messiah Jesus: "Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). And we have the witness of thousands across the world for whom prayer *has been answered*, not only in times past but also in our own time, with evidence of God's intervention to restore them to life and health. That's why we always take prayer requests for healing and submit them to the Lord, every time we gather in his presence.

The rest of Psalm 103 builds on what we've already looked at, the Lord's promise of forgiveness and healing. He "redeems your life from the Pit," he "crowns you with steadfast love and mercy," he "satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." We don't have time today to elaborate on these extended benefits, but only to mention them.

Because we're connected with the Lord, members of his family, we're not headed for the Pit of eternal torment, but rather for resurrection life in God's new creation. Nor are we headed for the pit of despair and discouragement in the here and now, because we know we can live in God's blessing. We can experience the life of faith that brings financial blessing, wholesome relationships, success in our worthwhile endeavors, and a sense of well-being — as the psalm says, being "satisfied with good as long as we live." I like Gloria Copeland's motto: "Live long, live strong!"

A worker gets a benefits package when he becomes an employee of the company, or organization, that offers it, and he enjoys those benefits as long as he sticks with the organization. It's the same with the people of God. We're members of his organization, and as long as we remain faithful to it we get the package that goes with it. Don't let Satan talk you out of enjoying the Lord's benefits package. Don't let the enemy point to circumstances you may be dealing with and try to persuade you that God's promises aren't valid for you.

As the apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians, "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Our benefits package, as servants of the Lord, isn't based on what we see happening around us, or what's happening to us, or on what we can do by our own efforts to get what we want. Instead, it's based on our faithfulness to God and his faithfulness to us — a relationship the Bible calls the *covenant*. God has made an agreement with us, to receive us into his own family through membership in his son, Messiah Jesus. As Psalm 103 says, "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." So I just want to say, as we conclude, that I'm thankful today for all the benefits I receive as a member of this organization, the family of God. Let's close, then, with the last words of Psalm 103:

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.
Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
hearkening to the voice of his word!
Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers that do his will!
Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul! (*Psalm 103:19-22 RSV*)



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