

PSALM 103: 1-18, 22

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless God's holy name.

² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all God's benefits—

³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,

⁴ who redeems your life from the pit,

who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

⁵ who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

⁶ The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.

⁷ The Holy One made known God's ways to Moses,
God's acts to the people of Israel.

⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ The mighty One will not always accuse,
nor will God keep God's anger for ever.

¹⁰ The Lord does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is God's steadfast love towards those who fear God;

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far God removes our transgressions from us.

¹³ As a parent has compassion for their children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear God.

¹⁴ For God knows how we were made;
God remembers that we are dust.

¹⁵ As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;

¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.

¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear God,

and God's righteousness to children's children,

¹⁸ to those who keep God's covenant...

²² Bless the LORD, O my soul.

(Note: our English translation uses non-gendered terms for God, recognizing that gender comes to be as part of God's diverse creation. See Genesis 1)

Psalm 103 is a wonderful praise song. If you're feeling great about your life; if you have come through situations of serious illness or injustice and found health and vindication; if you're excited about your relationships and about life's possibilities, this is a gorgeous psalm to boost your positivity even further. Whether you recite it by yourself or in group worship, you can imagine how it can not only make you feel good, but also reinforce your faith that all good things ultimately come to those who put their trust in God, those who "are forgiven all their iniquities." To be forgiven also means things ultimately turn out great in your life.

So, what if you're down in the dumps about life right now? What if things have not worked out too well for you of late? What if you're struggling right now in your mental health, a core relationship in your life where you feel torn down rather than built up, resented rather than loved? What if you can't get past a major loss in your life, a tragedy, a cruel accident, a betrayal or an act of violence that continues to haunt you? Does that mean you are also not "forgiven your iniquities", that you are somehow being punished?

It's very sad that many people have been taught to read psalms more literally than spiritually. If anyone knows the hardships, tragedies and injustices of life it is the psalmist. Many psalms were composed while people were in exile, forced to leave their homes, villages and lands, forced to witness devastation and death, forced to serve alien masters, and forced to struggle with whether their God would act to save them. Had they been that iniquitous before God that this was the price they had to pay? How could they find their way back to their God, their identity, their vindication, restoration, healing and "forgiveness"?

Read from this perspective, Psalm 103 serves a very different purpose. Rather than reinforce a prosperity gospel where success, health and wealth are a sign that God is on your side, Psalm 103 is empowering you to transform your state of mind – from disillusionment to hope, from despair to faith, and from bitterness to openness to gifts of love yet to be felt and known. Now, some of you may think: 'That's really nice, Dr. Harris, but how do I get there from here?'

Mindy was a fascinating young woman I came to know some years back. Mindy had a troubled youth. Within an abusive home where she could just not mute her upset and resistance, she developed an eating disorder combined with anger issues and self-harm which included cutting herself. Even as she got a lot better into young adulthood with good therapy and programs, Mindy continued to grieve her broken family situation. Her family would accept her visits but never wanted her to stay very long as they were afraid

of her. Mindy named things for what they were and was always trying to find ways to challenge them to get help themselves. She continued to suffer their rejection.

But one of the things Mindy taught me is how a state of mind can really change one's outlook on life. Mindy would love to read the psalms, and she especially loved the praise ones like Psalm 103. I would ask her how she squared all they promised with her own life situation. Even as she was very honest about her life, her struggles and her relationships, she also said she had no regrets, that she was exactly where she needed to be in her life and she knew her purpose was to help people because of the very things she had been through. Psalms of praise not only made her feel good, but they also reinforced her faith that God is, indeed, good. She felt totally loved and "forgiven" by God.

Who was I and who am I to question Mindy, the psalmist and so many others who have also found comfort and joy in these songs of praise? Yes, we're all different. I can't say I am where the psalmist and Mindy are in their capacity for praise. I struggle often enough, and if my life was not as good as it was, I can't imagine I'd embrace it as a gift of love as they have done. And yet, the fact that it's possible to be fully alive even when life is punishing at times, is a wonderful thing to know is possible. It opens up hope for me. What about you?

PRAYER: We come to you, O God, not always ready for praise. There is failure in our lives. There are mistakes. There is iniquity. There is pain and hurt, too, even rejection. If not for us, then the person next to us. And if not in our families, in families around us. Is this all to be interpreted as punishment for iniquity of some kind? Or are we being called to be transformed from the inside out so that we can become the blessing for others you see in us? Are we actually made for praise, O God? Is this truly our purpose? Make us so, we ask, and ever more so... In Jesus' name; Amen.