



Sermon Transcript

July 30, 2017

Psalms: Prayers of Faith and Hope

The Fuel for Worship

Psalm 103

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 30, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Matthew Schuberth. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Psalm 103

- 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 not all his 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
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- ⁶ The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
- ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- ⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
- ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- ¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
- ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
- ¹⁴ For he knows our frame;^[a]
he remembers that we are dust.
- ¹⁵ As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes 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 him,

and his righteousness to children's children,

¹⁸ to those who keep his covenant

and remember to do his commandments.

¹⁹ The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,

and his kingdom rules over all.

²⁰ Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!

²¹ Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!

²² Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Introduction

WORSHIP. Worship is one of those words that we use all the time in the church. I want you to think for a couple seconds and come up with a key word that you associate with the word worship.// I think some of the words that might have come to mind are music, singing, praise, or hymns. Maybe some of you would even go as far to say prayer or your lifestyle. In Romans 12, Paul tells believers that it is our spiritual act of worship to offer our whole lives as living sacrifices to Christ. Worship, quite simply, is declaring the worthiness of God.

Worship is a concept that we have become very familiar with. In fact, we come and worship God together every Sunday at this church. But like most things that we do so frequently, it can easily become just another task. It can become a mundane or routine thing that may seem to have little impact on our lives. Perhaps some of you are feeling this way this morning. Perhaps some of you are longing for meaningful worship, or you may be searching for a spiritual high, or you may long for those emotions and feelings you have felt before in a previous worship experience. If that is you this morning, let me encourage you: you are not alone.

I bet I can speak for many here in saying that this summer series on the Psalms has been very encouraging. When many of us think of the Psalms, perhaps the first word that comes to mind is this word: worship. This is interesting because over a third of the Psalms, as we have explored are psalms of lament. Many are honest cries, S.O.S.'s, as they call out to God while it seems their world is crashing down around them. Yet despite the initial lament, all but one of these psalms end with worship to God. Take Psalm 3 for example. If you recall a couple weeks ago in the series, David is fleeing for his life from his own son Absalom. He cries: "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God." Yet the Psalm ends with worship and a recognition of God's might. He says: "Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people!"

When it comes to facing hardships it is hard to have the same attitude as the psalmists. Worship can be one of the most challenging things at times. It demands your full devotion despite your emotional, your mental, your physical, or your spiritual state of being. However, despite the difficulty, I would be so bold as to say it is necessary for the growing and sustaining of your spiritual walk.

It is important to remember that worship is not contingent on our circumstances. The key to worship is not how we feel when we worship, but it is understanding who it is we worship. In my own life, over the years of going to different Youth Retreats, Camps, and Challenge, it seemed that I was often living from mountain top to mountain top experience in my worshipping. It led to a lifestyle of guilt and questions. Why wasn't always experiencing God like I did at these events? Was I doing something wrong? The issue was not my style or my spirituality or my holiness. The issue was the way I viewed worship. I gaged a successful worship based off of the way I left feeling. Graham Kendrick speaks to this when he says: "Worship has been misunderstood as something that arises from a feeling which 'comes upon you,' but it is vital that we understand that it is rooted in a conscious act of the will, to serve and obey the Lord Jesus Christ." In other word, we must come to realize that worship is not about us. It is about God.

But worship does not have to be a boring or mundane task. David exclaims in Psalm 27: "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD". The one thing David desires most in life is to worship God forever. I am convinced that once we understand who it is we worship and understand God's steadfast love, it will be our joy and natural response to worship God. And it is my hope that as we process through this sermon that this would be your joy.

Steadfast Love

Now before we dive too deeply into the passage, I want to examine what some theologians call one of the most important verses in the entire Scriptures. It is Exodus 34:6. It reads: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”. This is found in the context of the giving of the ten commandments. Moses comes down from the mountain only to find Israel worshipping a golden calf that his own brother, Aaron, set up. It is only after Moses intercedes for Israel that God agrees to go again with Israel. It is at this point God chooses to reveal Himself to Moses saying: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”. Remember this is right after the people of Israel set up a golden calf and rebelled against God. Yet God, God chose to reveal Himself as merciful and abounding in steadfast love. Of all the things God could describe Himself as: all powerful or all knowing, He chooses to reveal His character, which is merciful and abounding in steadfast love.

It is the essence of who God is. In 1 John 4:8 it clearly states that “God is love”. It seems that one of the first songs taught in Sunday School to children is “Jesus Loves Me”. This is the first thing we want our children to know: how great the love of God is for us. In the song there are different verses but each return to the refrain: “Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.” How simple, yet so deep and complex.

It is through this very basic, yet profound truth that God chooses to reveal Himself. This morning I want to draw attention to this particular attribute. God’s steadfast love is mentioned all over the Bible and it is especially prevalent in the Psalms. It is mentioned 248 times throughout the Bible and 127 of those are found in the Psalms. The word is even used three times in Psalm 103. In verse 4: “who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy”, in verse 8: “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”, and in verse 17: “But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him”.

Now what does this steadfast love mean? It comes from the Hebrew word “Hesed”. It means a love that is abundant, a love that endures forever, a love that extends higher and deeper than any distance, it is great, it is better than life, and most importantly it is for those who fear the Lord. This means that if you believe in Christ, you have the steadfast love of Christ forever. Let me say that one more time. This means that if you believe in Christ, you have the steadfast love of Christ forever. How quickly we forget this basic but foundational truth. But it is something we must remind ourselves of everyday.

Let me be the first person today to tell you that if you are in Christ, you are deeply loved with a love that is far greater than anything you have ever known. Once we come to know and understand the steadfast love of God, worship will begin to flow from our lips and from our lives naturally. My desire is much like Paul's in Ephesians 3: that you "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge". Let me share three observations about God's steadfast love found in the passage that will help you delight in the Lord.

God Knows We are Weak

First of all, God knows that we are weak. Time has become one of the most valuable currencies in the modern era. We have these sayings in our culture such as "time is money" that show how much value time holds. In recent years, a new saying arrived in pop-culture: YOLO. This is an acronym for "You Only Live Once". While it may not mean much to many, it is a reflection on the realization that we are all going to die one day. In return we must use our time wisely and live it to the fullest. Time is something that we only have a set amount of and out of our hands, it progresses rapidly. We can try to prolong our lives a few years by eating healthy and exercising but in the end, all die.

David compares humanity to the flower of the field. He describes in verse 15: "As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more." It seems like no matter what we do, our time is limited. It is interesting to think of us as grass. I don't know about many of you but it seems to me that with this past heat wave, everyone's grass has seemed to wilt away. However, this doesn't fret many of us, looking into the audience it doesn't look like anyone is lamenting over their grass. I bet some of you are relating back to Ecclesiastes and agreeing with the author that all of this work to keep your lawn alive is 'hevel' or futile. Anyways we do not fret over dying grass because grass can always be replanted and it comes and goes. While we may live a few years longer than grass, compared to eternity, our lives are just a second on the eternal clock. David's comparison is sobering in showing us how short our existence is in the grand scheme of things.

David earlier famously puts it this way in Psalm 8: "what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" In other words, David asks, why do you, an incredible, all-powerful God, care for me, a finite, rebellious creature. David reflects on our existence in our passage this morning in verse 16. It says: "the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more." The reality is, a couple

generations after we die, it would be hard to find someone who knew us.

I do not mean to be dark or bleak, but rather to put in perspective what David is trying to convey. David is trying to show us the vastness of God's steadfast love. David does compare us to grass withering, but he continues: "But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him". Despite our frailty, God loves us with an everlasting love and because of His love for us, our lives have meaning and value. And we are certainly not fooling God with our condition. Just before this section in verse 14, David explains: "For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

However, it is the steadfast love of God that is shown unconditionally to His people. In the constant hustle and bustle of life, things change constantly. We aimlessly try to grasp at the air to find something that is familiar. It is hard to find things that are long lasting in our culture. But this is not the case with God. He loves us with an everlasting love. A love that is never failing. Peter writes in his first book: "The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." God's love endures forever. It is rooted in who God is.

It is easy to look at our lives and ask how can God love me, a sinner and a rebel. God knows our frame, He knows we are unable to live holy lives. He knows we are broken. That is why He sent Jesus in the first place. To do what we couldn't do. To not only die for us, but to also live for us. In fact, Jesus took on our weakness by becoming one of us. He took on our weakness and knew hunger, exhaustion, pain, and suffering. This is the ultimate display of God's steadfast love. His love goes beyond our actions. If we are His, He promises to never leave or forsake us. "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so, Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong, yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so." What a sweet truth, that brings joy and peace to our restless hearts. This is the God we worship this morning.

It is True throughout the Ages

The second observation that I made on God's steadfast love is that it is true throughout the ages. We can observe God's steadfast love through the lives of Moses, David and the rest of Israel. But it doesn't stop there. We can also see it in the history of the Church. And much like Pastor Scott was sharing about last week, we can see a testimony of God's steadfast love in this very room. God's steadfast love isn't just a concept; it is real and it is active. It is the consistent testimony of his people.

So we are take a moment to look at those that I mentioned earlier. First let's look at Moses. David in verses 6-14 considers the life of Moses. We already talked a good deal

about Israel during the time of Moses, but through all of the rebelling that Israel had done, the Lord was still merciful and abounding in steadfast love. David reflects: “he does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” There were multiple times that both Israel and Moses disobeyed God. Yet God, gave mercy instead of judgement; grace instead of wrath. God continued to guide them through the wilderness, bringing them to the place He promised their ancestors, demonstrating His unfailing and steadfast love.

Next we look into the life of David. In our journey through the Psalms, we have seen the various trials that David faced during his life. When he was still a young adult, he was running for his life, being chased by the mad king, Saul. He lost his son that he had with Bathsheba as judgement for his adultery with her. He was chased out of his own city by his own son, Absalom, who wanted his throne, only to later have Absalom die by the hands of one of his own men. Yet among these trials and tribulations that King David went through, he still in Psalm 103, attests to God’s steadfast love shown to him as he begins and ends the chapter singing “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” We can look into the life of David and see his testimony of how God, despite David’s shortcomings and sinfulness, still loved David and called him a “Man after God’s own heart”.

As if these two examples were not enough, we have billions of Christian brothers and sisters that have gone before us and could all attest to the steadfast love of God. This summer, on top of the internship, I have been taking a Church History course through my school online. As I was reflecting on what I was learning, I took a step back and looked at the grand spectrum of the hundreds of years I learned about. Through just the few hundred years of Christianity that I had read about, God’s steadfast love was displayed from the everyday people to the people of royalty. I especially saw this come through the persecution of the early church in the Roman Empire. While Christians were being suppressed and some even hunted down and killed, there was a consistent testimony from those who witnessed the persecution of these Christians. Their persecution attested to God’s steadfast love. I saw this go two ways. First, it was alarming to the non-Christians how the Christians would care for the poor and sick; people that were normally neglected in society. The second way I saw the love of God manifested was the way that the Christians died. While the early Christians were being executed for their faith, there was a consistent testimony from the executioners and others, of the kindness that the Christians showed despite their fate and the great peace they had through their last moments. These are both evidences of God’s steadfast love first impacting the Christians and then flowing out for all to see. There is much more in church history that I could share. But the same love the God showed to them is the same love He shows to us. And even up until this very day, God has been abounding in His

steadfast love and mercy to His church.

Lastly, and perhaps one of the easier examples to relate to, is to look around this room and remember the stories of the people around you and how God's steadfast love has shown through their lives. Last week we heard about how the very presence of us being here is a living testimony to God's faithfulness. If we take a step back and look at the stories of those around us we can see the steadfast love of God penetrate, what we may think of as, the most hopeless situations. The stories around us bear testimony that God's steadfast love prevails over job loss, it prevails over sickness, loneliness, depression, cancer, and the list goes on and on. How strange to the outside world it may look when we celebrate the love of God, even at grim settings such as funerals.

I can probably guarantee that if it wasn't for the many people who have poured into my life, I would not be standing here, preaching to you today. It is through this church and those who I have seen live out their Christian lives faithfully that my image of God turned from a concept to a reality. It is through the Christ-like love I was shown from various people in this church that would eventually lead me to a saving faith in Christ. I am a living testimony of the steadfast love of God.

And if we take a moment and just look at the past week or month or year, we could recognize all of the ways God has shown His steadfast love in our own lives. God's love for us is far greater than we can imagine. How quickly we can be distracted from the love God has for us. It is a love that has lasted through the ages and has impacted the lives of generation after generation. Church, let us not forget the steadfast love that God has for us. We have seen it in our own lives and throughout history. It is for this everlasting love that we worship God.

Consider the Benefits

Third, I want you to seriously consider the benefits of God's steadfast love. Now this may seem strange at first, since God is not an insurance package, but maybe this isn't something we do enough. David writes: "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 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." Look at this list of benefits David gives. I feel like he is saying: "Hey guys! Don't forget who we are worshipping." God has forgiven us of all our iniquities. He has healed all of our diseases. He has bought us back from the kingdom of darkness and has transferred us into the kingdom of light. Not

only that but He crowns us, the lowly blades of grass, with His steadfast and everlasting love. And He satisfies the desires of our souls and calms our restless hearts, renewing our youth like the eagle's. What a God we serve and worship this morning. (Amen?)

And all of these benefits listed above meet at the cross. Through the cross we have received the greatest amount of benefits we could imagine and more. "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." It is at the cross that the greatest tragedy, the death of Christ, turned into our greatest victory. It was the Father's steadfast love for us that sent his Son. It was the Son's steadfast love for us that died for us. It was the Holy Spirit's steadfast love for us that seals us in Him. Consider the benefits.

David praises God for his deliverance in Psalm 103 as well. He says: "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." Now I want to take a step back and look at these two verses. Never has there been such a grand image as this. God's steadfast love is so grand it stretches from the heights of the heavens to the earth.

When David wrote this He was looking with a naked eye at the sky. Today with the technology we have, we can see 13.4 billion lightyears away. We have seen over 100 billion galaxies that exist in our universe and scientists still say we have seen but a drop in the bucket. This, brother and sisters, is how deep the love of God is for those who fear Him. It is exactly this that caused Paul to sit back and say: "may [you] have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge".

He also removes our sins as far as the east is from the west. This stirred an image of a little kid. It is always funny to watch children try to describe things. As I thought about this verse, an image popped in my head. When a little boy is asked to show how much he loves his mommy and daddy, I imagine him stretching out his arms as far as he can, straining to make the distance as large as he can. So too is God's steadfast love for us. He removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. From one nail pierced hand to the other. Stretched out as far as he could go, straining, saying: "I love you this much". Consider His benefits. After all, Jesus said it Himself: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." Church, listen close. God's love for you is far greater than anything we

can do, think, or say. You never need to question or doubt how God feels about you. That is the steadfast love God shows to His people.

Conclusion

Lastly I want to look at the way David concludes the Psalm. When David looks and remembers the steadfast love of God, he can't help to not only worship God himself, but to also call all of heaven to worship. Look how he ends: "Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will! Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!" In other words, God's love is not only our cause to worship but the cause for all of heaven to worship. It is David's initial reaction, it comes natural to him.

"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness". This is the God we have come together this morning to worship. It is only natural when we consider the steadfast love of God, to fall to our knees and worship Him. It was only natural for David to sing praises to God for the love and mercy that was shown to him throughout his life. N.T. Wright says: "Put it this way: if your idea of God, if your idea of the salvation offered in Christ, is vague or remote, your idea of worship will be fuzzy and ill-formed. The closer you get to the truth, the clearer becomes the beauty, and the more you will find worship welling up within you." In other words, it is our idea of who God is that informs our worship. It is when we consider how He loves us even though we are weak. It is when we consider how God's love has prevailed throughout the ages. It is when we consider the benefits of the steadfast love of God. It is from our theology, or the way we view God, that our worship will flow. If you view God as distant or a strict authoritarian that is all about the rules, then your worship will reflect that. But when you step back and consider the steadfast love God shows to us, "the closer you get to the truth, the clearer becomes the beauty, and the more you will find worship welling up within you." May the joy of God's steadfast love, lead this morning and on to worship our awesome creator.

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