



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
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SPARTANBURG

DRAWING NEAR TO GOD'S...GLORY

Psalm 103:1

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To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing. - Martin Luther

Whether or not you agree with Luther's assessment, prayer is clearly central to the life of faith and the key means we have to connect to God. But, like public speaking, many are intimidated by prayer, whether it is in public or in the privacy of their own mind. But not to worry.

There is a way for us all to grow into God through prayer – no matter our facility – and it has been performed by the faithful since the Psalms were first written thousands of years ago. It is called “praying the scriptures”. If you have trouble knowing what to pray, reading the scriptures with a prayerful mindset is a profoundly simple and powerful way to enter into prayer.

For those of you who were here a few weeks ago, you learned how praying the scriptures, specifically praying the Lord's Prayer, helped my son Matthew during a very traumatic experience. It turns out the Lord's Prayer is Matthew's go-to prayer. He has found he can use it for any occasion and any need. But this is hardly surprising when you think about it! It is the very prayer given to us by the Lord himself and, of course, it is part of scripture.

Since scripture was given to us by God, there is an inherent power in it. The third century theologian Origen described scripture as sacrament. He believed that Christ was incarnate in the scriptures and therefore could connect us to the higher wisdom of the divine.

In an ancient book on praying the scriptures, *The Ladder of Monks*, a four-stage process is described that, like the steps on a ladder, raises us higher with each rung we ascend. It culminates in “the quiet stillness of the presence of God”.

The quiet stillness of the presence of God!

Perhaps more than anything, I imagine many of you are grasping for something as sublime and beautiful as quiet stillness. Something like sitting in the peace of our Columbarium when the only thing you hear is the gentle flow of the Spirit of life in the waters of the fountain.

But through praying the scripture, such moments can be found anywhere!

The invitation this month is for all of us to find our go-to prayer verses. I would love to hear what yours are and we will continue on this path this morning with the Psalms.

The Psalms are the Bible's prayer book and, as such, any of them can be used for this practice. Today we will explore how to pray Psalm 103:1. I first used this verse in my prayer life in Seminary. Professor Jacks, who was a classmate of my father's at Princeton Seminary, taught us an ancient chant:

*Bless the Lord O my soul...and all that is within me Bless God's Holy name...
...Bless the Lord O my soul... and forget not all God's benefits...*

The tune and the words have stayed with me, even though it was 25 years ago! That is the power of praying (and singing!) the scriptures.

This morning we are turning to this text to learn how we can draw closer to the glory of God. God's glory is hard to define, but you know it when you see it. Perhaps, most simply, it is the beauty of the divine spirit – that which makes God lovely and wondrous – which instinctively leads us to deep admiration and wonder.

This beauty of God, of course, is easy to see in nature. As Psalm 19 declares, “the heavens proclaim the Lord's endless glory!”

Wendy and I have accumulated six birdfeeders so that every morning we can see this glory. The hummingbirds are my favorite! To see the swift,

aerial maneuvers combined with their bright colors is amazing! They move so quickly it sometimes looks like a rainbow in flight!

The hummingbird is an astounding creature and it shows us something of the inner Spirit, the character of God, just as a painting shows us something of the artist.

Our instinctive response to God's glory is to turn to God in blessings. So, let us now turn more deeply into the text to move us closer to God's glory.

The beginning of this verse is rather surprising. Blessing the Lord hardly seems possible. God is the one who blesses us, who gives us everything: our life; our breath; our food; our forgiveness; our hope. How then can we possibly bless God, specifically God's name?

It begins with proper respect and awe of the holiness of God. It is a respect lost to the modern world. To learn how, we turn to the chosen people. The Jews cultivate this awe through refusing to speak the divine name. Instead of "Yahweh" they say *Ha-shem* which simply means "the name" in Hebrew.

The caution is founded on the third commandment, "Thou shall not take the name of thy Lord in vain." The ancient Jewish rabbi Maimonides explains,

Therefore if because of a slip of the tongue, one mentions [G d's] name in vain, he should immediately hurry to praise, glorify and venerate it, so that it will not have been mentioned in vain...

And no, he is not talking about swearing. Rather phrases like "God willing" or "God help us" that are often spoken without real thought of the divine. These, through their lack of thoughtfulness, diminish our respect.

Avoiding the use of the divine's name keeps us ever aware of just how holy the Lord is. Like not putting coffee cups on the Communion table. There is nothing inherently sacrilegious about coffee cups, but treating the Communion Table like any

piece of furniture can lead to a numbing of the specialness of the meal.

As we begin to grow proper reverence for the divine name, a gradual, deepening awareness of the holiness of God grows within us.

His name is utter perfection, utter purity. God's being is something so perfect and beyond us; this is the overwhelming part of the prayer; where we consider how finite we are in relation to this holiness; how fallen we are in relation to his perfection. How weak we are in relation to His infinite strength.

But for our lives to truly bless the Holy name of God, our actions cannot be mere rote behaviors, like tossing some coin in the plate simply because it passes in front of you. The purpose of passing the plate in worship is not so much to get money to run the church (though we certainly appreciate it!) but rather to cultivate within us a disposition of deep thanksgiving and an offering of self to the Lord rather than a payment for membership in an organization.

To pray ourselves into this place we add the words "my soul" – "Bless the Lord, *O my soul*". It levels up our actions with deeper intent and more vital passion. When we put our soul into it, we are asking God to help us to be fully and thoroughly committed to the path of blessing God. Thus, we move into the words, "Bless the Lord, *O my soul* and... *all (everything!) that is in me.*"

When you pray the scriptures, you don't simply move directly through the text. You may hang onto a phrase and let it sink more deeply or you might repeat it over and over again. Through repeating this section multiple times, "all that is within me, all that is within me, everything that is me, God!" your soul begins to connect to this concept; your soul resonates it in the repetition, like a singing bowl. The first few revolutions make little noise, but in the continued motion they reinforce and a glorious sound is heard.

That is what you are seeking when you pray the scriptures. To resonate the divine in your heart.

As you say the word, “all that is within me,” you begin to examine yourself. Which part of myself am I not blessing God with? It leads you to ask God to show you these places in your life, to show you where you’re holding back? Is it with my love of others? With my trust of you? Is it with my money? Is it with my body? Soon, instead of wondering, the deep-prayer process leads you to clarity and a soul-felt yearning to wholly and utterly devote all that you are to God’s glory.

Once we have grasped God’s holiness and wonder, we are ready to move into blessing God.

To bless God is to live the life God desires for us, to treasure what God treasures and to care for that which God loves. Jesus so embodied this path that his life led people to see, believe, and glorify God. Jesus is the one who shows all of us how to bless God’s holy name through our lives.

...Jesus had compassion for the poor; to care for the poor is to bless God;

...Jesus was filled with forgiveness; to be forgiving is to bless God;

...Jesus heart was filled with love; to love others is to bless God;

To bless the Lord is to live a beautiful life which leads people to give thanks to God. This is what delights our Lord.

Recently, I experienced this delight in a way I never quite realized. This past week, my family and I spent some time in Ocean City, New Jersey – a place my extended family has gone to for over 80 years. In fact, back in the day, my mother waited tables at a restaurant on the Boardwalk at Ocean City. And Ocean City does have a few advantages over the Carolina beaches. One of which is that it is not a stifling 100 degrees when you are sitting on the sand. But it does have its drawbacks, because sometimes – in June – you have to wear a parka to walk along the shoreline!

So I was walking along the beach with my daughter, Liz, my niece Johanna, and her new boyfriend, Matthew. As we were talking, we were having to raise our voices to hear each other over

the wind and waves. Suddenly, we see a beach ball rolling by. It was brightly colored and fun to watch as it picked up speed – going faster and faster and further and further – until it was almost a quarter mile down the beach.

Then Matthew turned around to see where this beach ball had come from. And we all turned our heads as well. We saw this young mother with her very young toddler slowly making their way to the beach ball. They were never going to reach it – it was getting further away by the second. This young mother couldn’t dash off after it; she couldn’t leave her toddler.

When Matthew realized this, he took off after this beach ball in a full sprint and, after about a quarter of a mile, he reached it – right before it went into the ocean. He comes back huffing and puffing and hands the ball to the mother. We all thought, “what a wonderful thing that he did.”

But then, the mother turned and handed the ball to her young child. Suddenly, the child was hopping up and down. You would have thought he had won the lottery; he was giddy with delight; absolutely ecstatic! Filled with the most joy that only a child could have – it was unfiltered giddy delight.

And I thought, “That’s God.” When we do those simple acts of kindness for others, it makes God giddy with delight. And that’s how we can bless the Lord – make God just as joyous as a young child who, through an act of loving kindness, was given back their beach ball!

With that in mind, I’m going to invite you to listen in to my own prayer. Perhaps this will help you forge your own.

So, let us pray...

Bless the Lord, Bless the Lord, Bless the Lord...

Lord, I scarcely can know what it is to bless you. You have showered upon me a life of great and exceeding joy. Eyes to see the beauty of your creation, ears to hear its wonders, and a heart to know the love of others. You have blessed me with

two wondrously-made children and a devoted, passionate wife.

You have called me to your service and brought me to a congregation filled with life and challenge; committed to a deeper walk with endless willing servants.

I cannot possibly begin to bless you, Lord.

Bless the Lord, O my soul....

O my soul, my soul; move me, God, move my soul, my innermost core of self to yearn and hope for this with all my being... The very center of who I am, move it to bless you...

May which is within me point to your glory, to your wonder

...O Lord, O Lord, Lord!....

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

All within me... all of it...my mind my whole being, my work, my words, my will, my house, my family, my town, my energy, my purpose, my yearnings, my struggle, my questions, my doubts... May it all build to something greater than my finite and feeble will, so that somehow, beyond reason, I might do something good for you, God;

Bless your name through rising above my own meager intentions, efforts and will...

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

Amen.