

Second Week of Lent

Spiritual Practice: Praying Scripture

Praying Scripture is personalizing God's Word as we pray. For example:

- Lord, I am casting all my anxieties on You right now, because I know You care for me. (see 1 Peter 5:7)
- God, please help _____ know how wide and long and high and deep Your love is. (see Ephesians 3:18-19)
- Lord, may Your Word be a lamp for _____'s feet and a light for his/her path today. (see Psalm 119:105)

Monday, March 2

"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." Psalm 103:1-2

All!

Nine times. That's how often the word "all" appears in Psalm 103. Right out of the starting block, the psalmist calls "all that is within me" to bless God's holy name and to remember "all his benefits." Then he gets down to specifics: God forgives all our iniquities. He heals all our diseases. He works justice for all the oppressed.

I wonder how King David, the author of this psalm, could declare these things so emphatically. There were certainly times in his life when he didn't sense God's forgiveness. There were times he was oppressed, running for his life from his royal predecessor with no justice in evidence. As time passed and David aged, he experienced physical frailties just as any old man might.

I guess David was speaking by faith (and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of course). So, his confident declarations offer encouragement to us today. For like David, we live in the tension of present reality and future fulfillment, of now and not-yet. Every day, we have the assurance of complete forgiveness through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, but we are not yet free from the struggle with sin. Now we experience partial healing through the touch of the Great Physician, but our bodies are not yet free of all pain and ills. Now we sometimes see justice prevail, but not yet completely or perfectly.

Perhaps you are living in the now and not-yet tension—praying and waiting, then praying and waiting some more. Whatever you are facing, the Lord is with you. He may work His healing. He may bring justice. He always grants forgiveness. Rest in that assurance now and remember the not-yet that will surely come, the day when He wipes away all tears.

Dear Savior, Help me to trust You while I await what is not yet and to bless Your name with all that I am. Amen.

Tuesday, March 3

"[Bless the Lord] 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."

Psalms 103:3-5

His Awesome Deeds

The old advice to "count your blessings" is as valid today as ever. Psalm 103 recounts the myriad reasons we must praise God: His awesome deeds that overflow with blessing on our undeserving heads.

Look again at today's verses from the psalm. There is forgiveness for those burdened by sin, guilt, and regret. There is redemption that lifts us out of the pits of despair or isolation. There is a love that is steadfast and reliable. There is mercy that offers deep soul satisfaction and renewed strength. All these gifts come to us freely by God's grace. Yes, how awesome are His deeds!

When I count my blessings, I start with the manger, the cross, the empty tomb, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And if that's as far as I get, I am blessed indeed!

Take a moment right now to name some of God's rich blessings to you....

Gracious God, Thank You for blessing me beyond measure, especially through my Savior, Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, March 4

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. 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."
Psalm 103:8, 10-12

His Unchanging Character

God's awesome deeds, some of which we considered yesterday, are always rooted in His character. Today's reading makes that connection. Why does God forgive sinners like you and me? It is because of His mercy and grace. His great patience with us, even when we are rebellious and foolish. Why does He remove our transgressions so far from us? Because His steadfast love is so great. Why does He resist giving us our just desserts? Because He chose to punish His Son instead.

What joy to know that God's awesome deeds flow out of His unchanging character! That means we don't have to worry that God might change His mind about loving us or decide He doesn't want to forgive us after all. James 1:17 (CSB) says, *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."*

Christ's redeeming work is full and complete. By His shed blood, we are forgiven. You can trust all He has done for you, because *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"* (Hebrews 13:8).

Dear Lord, Thank You that Your unchanging character is one of love and compassion, mercy and grace. I know I don't deserve it, but I am so humbly grateful. Amen.

Thursday, March 5

“As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. 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. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.”
Psalm 103:13-18

Remembering

What are some of your favorite memories? Perhaps they are of special moments, special places, special people. It is lovely to remember things like that. Perhaps there are also some things you remember that you would just as soon forget. Times that were hard or times that went desperately wrong, and you were powerless to change anything.

Psalm 103 talks about remembering. It offers a sharp contrast, too. First, we read “as a father” and hear the reassurance of God’s tender, enduring compassion for His children. Then we read “as for man” and are told that our days are fleeting. One day we are thriving, and the next we are gone. I don’t know about you, but I would rather remember God’s everlasting kindness than my own brief mortality.

And that’s exactly what the psalmist wants us to do: to remember that “the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.” When we know that, when we trust Christ’s love that sacrificed Himself for us, our hearts respond with another kind of remembering. We remember to keep God’s commands, because we know that walking in His ways is the best way to live.

Dear Savior, Thank You for remembering me in love every day. Amen.

Friday, March 6

"Bless the Lord, all of his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul!"
Psalms 103:22

Bookends

King David began Psalm 103 by encouraging whole-hearted, even whole-being praise of God! He concludes in the same way, calling all of God's creatures everywhere to join in. These opening and closing verses are like bookends to the psalm. Between the bookends, we are given many reasons to praise God, which we've looked at in this week's devotions.

This reminds me of another set of bookends in Psalm 92:1-2: *"It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night."* Here, the psalmist suggests bookends for each day. As morning dawns, declare God's steadfast love. At the close of the day, recall His faithfulness to you. And in between, remember the God who forgives your sins, renews your strength, and satisfies your soul.

I wonder if Jesus had "bookends" to His days or to His ministry as a whole. A defining mark of His life was a commitment to do the Father's will and to bring glory to God. Angels sang of God's glory the night of His birth. On the eve of His death, Jesus prayed that He would glorify God as He was lifted up on the cross. In between those bookends, the 12-year-old Jesus reminded His parents that He must be about His Father's business. Later, Jesus told His disciples that what sustained Him, what was food for His soul, was doing the Father's will.

Christ's focus on God's will and God's glory must have given Him stability and perspective as He walked this earth. And, certainly, prayer was woven throughout. Jesus spent time with the Father; He poured out His heart and gained wisdom from above. Especially in the agony of Gethsemane, Jesus turned to prayer and then received the strength He needed to endure suffering and death to save us all.

Heavenly Father, Guide my life from beginning to end. May Your steadfast love and faithfulness be the bookends of each day. Amen.

Lessons on The Path of Prayer from Ruth Niehaus

Relationships are a key element of being a teacher (my profession for 23 years). God helped me develop a skill that affected my relationship with a parent. When a student named Ryan was in kindergarten, I observed a negative attitude and an unhappy demeanor. When he reached my class in middle school, this behavior was a dominant characteristic. Interaction with Ryan's mother was always negative. Fellow teachers joked about hiding under a desk to avoid confrontation when her steps were heard in the hallway. Her reputation was well known.

A devotion I read led me to wonder about the home environment of this student. How bad was his home life that when he arrived at school in the morning, he was already crabby? While thinking about this, I was moved to pray for his family, especially his mother. It became my practice to pray for her and the whole family. Praying for someone I usually avoided in all circumstances changed me. Other people in my school even asked how I could be compassionate toward her. I smiled and gave credit to the Holy Spirit for the change in my heart.

I am happy to report that Ryan and his brother both now work in Christian ministry. The mother posts positive things on Facebook. She is divorced, which makes me wonder if the cause of all that negativity was part of a troubled marriage.

I continue to apply this lesson in prayer today. Praying for an individual with whom I disagree helps with the negative attitude that used to control my interactions. In retirement, I am able to avoid interacting with many negative contacts. However, I still find the need to turn to prayer during times of conflict. I need the power of the Holy Spirit to remind me to pray for those who challenge my positive approach. I can't know what causes an individual to behave the way he or she does. But I do know that prayer coming from my heart will help my attitude. I'm thankful for this prayer lesson I learned many years ago.