

PSALM 103 – PRAISE THE LORD

[Chelmsford: New Year's Eve 2012]

When I was a child, we used to sing the old chorus:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one
Count your blessings, see what God has done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done*

In 1954 Irving Berlin wrote a more modern version of the song for Bing Crosby – unfortunately in this version God was left out:

*When I'm worried and I can't sleep
I count my blessings instead of sheep
And I fall asleep counting my blessings.*

*When my bankroll is getting small
I think of when I had none at all
And I fall asleep counting my blessings*

*I think about a nursery and I picture curly heads
And one by one I count them as they slumber in their beds*

*If you're worried and you can't sleep
Just count your blessings instead of sheep
And you'll fall asleep counting your blessings*

But the fact is that every blessing comes from God.

As Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase of the opening two verses of Psalm 103: “*O my soul, bless God. From head to toe, I'll bless his holy name. O my soul, bless God, don't forget a single blessing*”

Or in the more conventional translation of the GNB 103.1-5:

Praise the Lord, my soul! All my being, praise his holy name!
Praise the Lord my soul, and do not forget how kind he is.
He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases.
He keeps me from the grave and blesses me with love and mercy.
He fills my life with good things, so that I stay young and strong like the eagle.

The Psalmist lists five blessings:

1. **“He forgives all my sins”**: God doesn't forgive some of our sins – he forgives all of our sins. There is no sin too monstrous which God cannot forgive. As the Psalmist goes on to say: **“He does not punish us as we deserve or repay us according to our sins and wrongs”** (v10).. What a wonderful thought! Yes, **“praise the Lord”**!

2. “**He heals all my diseases**”. So if you have enjoyed good health this year, thank God. True God does not always heal in this life; I think of my friend John, who died of pancreatic cancer earlier this month. But I believe that my friend John is now fully free from disease – for now he is in the presence of his Lord. That too is a wonderful thought! Yes, “**praise the Lord**”!
3. “**He keeps me from the grave**”. King David, or whoever penned this Psalm, thanks God for preserving his life – for him that was a mega-deal, because he had no real hope of life beyond the grave. But we who live the other side of the resurrection, can praise God that death will not have the last word. We know that not even death will be able to separate us from the love of God. That too is a wonderful thought. Yes, “**praise the Lord**”!
4. “**He blesses me with love and mercy**”. Amazingly, God’s love knows no limits. As David says later in the Psalm: “**As high as the sky is above the earth, so great is his love for those who honour him**” (v11). God is good to us beyond measure. That too is a wonderful thought! Yes, “**praise the Lord**”!
5. And finally: “**He fills my life with good things, so that I stay young and strong like an eagle**”. Or in the words of the NRSV: “**He satisfies me with good things**”. He meets our deepest longings – he fills our very being with himself. That too is a wonderful thought. Let’s praise the Lord

Let me end my sermon by sharing my own testimony to God’s goodness by reading to you excerpts from the letter we have sent to our friends this Christmas.

The highlight of 2012 has been our sapphire wedding anniversary. 45 years ago – on 26 August 1967 to be precise – we were married in Chester Street Baptist Church, Wrexham. On the actual day of our anniversary we were at sea on board the Queen Elizabeth – we breakfasted on smoked salmon and scrambled egg, and drank prosecco. The celebrations continued into September when Timothy and Susannah and their families, together with Benjamin and his friend Kathryn, joined us for a special lunch. Although Jonathan and his family were in Vancouver, we were able to speak to them via Skype. As we look back, we realize that God has been amazingly good to us over these past 45 years. On our wedding day we could never have imagined the way in which God has led us. In the words of Psalm 103, God has filled our lives with ‘good things’.

Take the past 12 months. We have been truly blessed with our family. We delight in our children and their partners – and our grandchildren give us cause for special joy. With the obvious exception of Jonathan, Fiona and their children who live in Canada, we see a good deal of them all. Jonathan makes sure we keep in touch with David Aneurin’s development, sending us on average a photo a day via his own blog! But even better, this November Caroline was able to go and spend ten days with them in Vancouver.

In turn this reminds us of the blessing of travel that we have been able to enjoy over the years, and not least this past year. Immediately after Easter, we enjoyed a week of sunshine and relaxation in Sharm El-Sheik; in August we had a super two weeks on a Western Mediterranean cruise; and while Caroline was in Canada, I went to a seminary in China (based in Wuhan), where I experienced at first hand the amazing growth of the church there.

We have also been blessed with many good friends – including you! Again, as we look back over this past year, we think of all kinds of celebrations and parties in which we have been involved. We had great fun hosting in our garden a ‘Street Meet’, when many of our neighbours came to celebrate the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee – we are hosting them all again for a drinks’ party this Advent. Other friends celebrating their Ruby Wedding gave us an excuse for a weekend away in South Wales. While friends from New Zealand visited us so much that we almost opened a permanent tab in one of the local restaurants!

We are also blessed with work that satisfies. In spite of all the local government expenditure cuts, Essex County Council surprisingly are recruiting a further four coroner’s officers – true they were sorely needed, but nonetheless Caroline has now a large team of officers and support staff working with her. As for the church, not only does it continue to grow – it also lives up to its strapline of being a great ‘place to belong’; and, in particular, Paul is blessed with good relationships with all his three ministerial colleagues”.

Yes, in so many ways God has blessed Caroline and myself. And so tonight I happily join my voice of testimony with the testimony of others, and say. “**Praise the Lord**”.