

Psalm 103

Freedom from the List-Centric Life

James Gandolfini died recently. I have never watched the Sopranos, but a lot of people did. He was 51 and now he is gone. Like a puff of smoke, he was here then he was gone. Psalm 103 speaks to us regarding the fleeting nature of life. While it is primarily a Psalm of Praise and Remembrance, praising God for who He is and remembering what He has done for us - His Benefits, it is also a lesson in how we can walk in God's benefits - how we can enter into the benefits of God while avoiding the idols that trap us so easily. Verses 15 thru 18 read:

*¹⁵As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
¹⁶When the wind has passed over it, it is no more,
And its place acknowledges it no longer.
¹⁷But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting
to everlasting on those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,
¹⁸To those who keep His covenant
And remember His precepts to do them.
Psalm 103:15-18*

First, we must contemplate our mortality – “our days are like grass” – here today gone tomorrow. Secondly, we must fear God. And we must have both of these together.

Contemplating our mortality is recognizing our smallness in the grand scheme of things. It is awakening to the giganticness of God – His immensity. It is grappling with eternity and just how long that is, and how

small our lives are relative to eternity. It is the realization of the enormity of the gap between us and God, His thoughts and our thoughts, His reality and our reality, His ways and our ways.

Fearing God comes in several ways. In some cases it is the realization of judgment for sin and the fear of hell that often drives us to the cross or to “walk an aisle” or “pray a prayer”. It can also be the fear that we have when we realize we are out of God’s will and He may actually be opposed to us - quite possibly the most terrifying experience a human can ever have in this life. Fearing God also refers to revering Him for who He is, being awestruck by His majesty, marveling at the greatness of His created world, pondering the vastness of God, His knowledge, His abilities, His awesomeness. These are all forms of fearing God. Taken separately one without the other leads us to fall into one of two common extremes we see in the world.

To live contemplating our mortality without the fear of God leads to a “Bucket List” lifestyle. A life where we realize we only have so many days on this earth, and we have got to pack in all of the things we want between now and the end. This often leads to a hedonistic “party animal” approach, and leaves a path of destruction in the lives of everyone around us as we chase one adrenaline rush after another. We end up making idols out of worldly things such as sex, drugs, music, money, power, fame, cars, boats, spouses, children, houses, second houses, toys, extreme sports, work, etc. We see this life illustrated in the life of the son who left home and squandered his inheritance in the “Prodigal Son” story that Jesus told in Luke 15. We take the blessings of God and run, squandering them on ourselves.

To live fearing God but not contemplating our mortality leads to a “To Do List” lifestyle. We take on an overinflated importance of our part in the play of life, giving more weight than we should to how well we do at keeping the To Do List. We become legalistic, mechanical, unloving, disconnected, prideful. Our lives become a checklist of things to do in order to receive God’s blessing, to earn His favor. We unknowingly negate the work of the cross. And when our kids don’t turn out the way we want, we are mad at God, thinking that we did our part, why didn’t He do His? We end up making idols out of good things like reading the Bible, giving to the poor, going to church, doing missions, teaching Bible studies, singing in the choir, working in the soup kitchen, etc. Even good things can become false idols in our hearts, and the “To Do List” lifestyle leads to many. We see this life illustrated in the life of the son who stayed at home and kept

the rules in the “Prodigal Son” story that Jesus told in Luke 15. We try to earn the blessings of God, rather than just receiving them with joy.

Both of these “List Based” approaches are wrong. And one of the great tragedies of the Prodigal Son story is that the son who stayed home never got it – he never figured out that he was after the father’s stuff rather than the father himself. The prodigal came to his senses and returned to the father’s embrace. But the son who played by the rules and stayed home refused to enter into the father’s embrace, refused to attend the party. He was blinded by his goodness. His rule keeping and good works kept him from the father. All he could think about was the calf that came out of his inheritance for his brother’s party.

But when we live a life that includes both contemplating our mortality and fearing God, we become free from both lists - both “Bucket” and “To Do”. Our lives are no longer driven by our lists, but are driven by God’s love in us, His love for us and His for others (also in us). We are no longer exhausted by the work we must do to maintain our status, nor are we exhausted from the party last night. We have rest in the cross of Christ where the work has been done – as Jesus said, “It is Finished” – there is nothing left to do. He has done it all, there is nothing left to do but to rest in Him.

Several things flow out of the life that embraces both contemplating our mortality and fearing God. We “Bless God with all that is within us” as verse 1 of Psalm 103 reads. We “Remember” God’s benefits, blessings, forgiveness, lovingkindness, longsuffering, compassion, etc. We also “Remember” and “Do” God’s precepts, living our lives based on His word. Not because we must do so to be approved (the “To Do List” life), and not in spite of how we feel about it (the “Bucket List” life), but because we want to. We become free to “delight to do His will”. “Blessing the Lord, O my soul with all that is within me” is the outward sign that God is in us, His spirit is working in us and we are living in the realization of our mortality and the fear of God. Remember, Do and Bless. These three are the natural outworking of the work of the cross in our heart, the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the fruit of the word of God that has been planted in our souls. They are the outward manifestation of a life that is connected to God through Jesus Christ. They are signs of life, spiritual life.

If you are struggling with blessing God, if you are struggling with remembering his precepts (reading the Bible), if you are struggling with “things you must do”, take a step back for a moment. Contemplate your mortality, the brevity of your life. Think of all of the people who have lived

before you and will live after you. Think of eternity and how long that must be, and then compare the length of your life to eternity and realize how small it is. Remember that eventually even the great things that we do will fade away and be forgotten in light of eternity. Even the sun, the moon and the earth itself will fade away some day – everything will be forgotten – history as we know it will end. Our lives are but a drop in the unmeasurable bucket of time. If eternity is a line, then our lives are but a dot – are you living for the dot or the line?

Then step outside and look at a tree or an animal and ponder what kind of intelligence it takes to make one of those. Think about it on a cellular level. Think about the DNA and RNA and ask yourself what kind of intelligence it must take to design such a mechanism capable of procreation. Then look at the sky and try to grasp the size of the universe, remembering that it fits in the palm of God's hand. How big is your God? Is He big enough to have made the world and all that it contains?

Then finally, remember that as big as He is, He has reached down from the heavens and spoken to you in His son Jesus. To you, personally. This gigantic being, who is so far above us that we cannot even begin to imagine what He must be like, came and lived among us, explained Himself to us in terms that we can understand, and then gave His life for us so that we can have a relationship with Him. A relationship like a son has with his father. But really more than a son is to a father, He is an infinite father, with infinite love, infinite mercy, infinite grace - they never run out, are never exhausted, He never gives up on us, ever. And He has taken our sins and has removed them an infinite distance away from us – as far as “the east is from the west”. Don't stand outside and refuse to come in, like the son who stayed home in the Prodigal Son story. Embrace the Father. Come in and join the party.

*“Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And all that is within me, bless His holy name.”
Psalm 103:1*