

PSALM 103: GOD IS GRACIOUS

praying psalm 103 to undermine your need for power

Morning By Morning

You may not have noticed this, but rarely do you wake up praising God. Usually, from the moment we awake, life comes rushing at us. The cares of yesterday and the concerns of the day ahead of us dominate our thinking. Without any effort, we'll be drawn away by the idols of our hearts. So our first job each morning is to carve out time - a few moments or a few hours - for reading and meditating on scripture. This doesn't merit us anything from God, but it will benefit us greatly in centering our hearts on the truth we so desperately need. As you become more familiar with your own heart, be sure to meditate on scripture that deals with your specific idolatry and the truth you need (see the front page). As you meditate on who God is and what he's done for you, you'll find your need for control, approval, comfort, or power being undermined and their power over you greatly diminished. Thank God, and ask him to help you remember throughout the day.

John Owen says it this way: "Store the heart with a sense of the love of God in Christ, and His love in the pouring out of it; get a relish of the privileges we have thereby - our adoption, our justification, our acceptance with God. Fill the heart with thoughts of the beauty of His death - and you will, in an ordinary course of walking with God, have great peace and security..."

Throughout the Day

Unfortunately, within moments of a great time of mediation and prayer you can be right back to the idolatrous patterns of your heart! It is often helpful throughout the day to stop and remind yourself of the truth you need, and briefly pray along those lines. For example, if you struggle with comfort, pray like this: "God, you are good, so I don't need to give into this pleasure or avoid this challenge. When I do, I'm saying that the momentary pleasures of sin are better than your steadfast love, and I'm telling you that the comfort of knowing your love in Jesus isn't enough to satisfy my heart. Thank you for being the only real comfort I need, my sun and my shield, today."

You can do the same with approval, power, or control, using the "4 G's" to break the death-grip of your idols and "knock" your heart back toward grace! As you do this, you'll enjoy a sense of God's presence and delight all day long. In addition, you can use the 4 G's to help others and commend Christ to them.

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so we don't have to prove ourselves

The Four G's

Biblical meditation has nothing to do with emptying your mind or finding a place of stillness by looking within. Biblical mediation assumes that you will always be filling your mind and heart with something, even if that something is an attempted emptiness! Our job is not to clear our minds but to fill our minds with the truth about who God is and what God has done. Like "a tree firmly planted by streams of water" (Ps. 1), we're to soak our mind and heart in the life-giving "streams" of God's word: "blessed is the man who... delights in the law of the LORD... and on his law he meditates day and night."

Much of our negative emotions and sinful actions find their root in the fact that we are meditating on and delighting in some sort of God substitute: something else has become more real, important, and delightful than God. This month, we've looked closely at the four most basic God substitutes: Control, Approval, Comfort, and (this week) Power. We called these "idols of the heart," and the honest truth is that much of our lives - good and bad - are driven by the pursuit of one of these idols, hoping that by having them we'll have joy, significance, and purpose. This is unbelief or false worship: we decide we need something other than God and his grace in Jesus; we dedicate ourselves to pursuing it; and we make sacrifices of time, energy, money, and relationships in order to get it.

Biblical meditation is one of the key ways we undermine our need for these God substitutes. In particular, we must meditate on a specific truth about God that counters our most common idol or lie. Here's each idol, followed by the truth you need in a brief sentence:

- Control: God is great, so we don't have to be in control
- Approval: God is glorious, so we don't have to fear others
- Comfort: God is good, so we don't have to look elsewhere
- Power: God is gracious, so we don't have to prove ourselves

Each week we've looked at a specific Psalm that deals with the temptation to serve each idol, and listened in as the Psalmist meditated and preached the truth to himself. Rather than simply allow himself to be tossed about, the Psalmist repents of his unbelief - "I don't need *this!*" - and begins to rejoice in the truth that corresponds to his unbelief - "God you are *this!*" Rather than sim-

ply trying hard to stop the negative emotions and sinful behaviors, the Psalmist goes for the root, and in repentance and faith expels the lie from his heart. The 4 G's help us identify the lies to fight and the truths to believe.

The Negative Effects of Idolatry

The unfortunate part of all this is that we rarely notice that we are idol worshippers. Many of us are sincere believers who've had real experiences of the grace of God in our lives, and we're trying to respond obediently to what God has done. When we see anxiety, fear, or anger, we try hard to stop it, knowing that God doesn't want us to do those things. What we often fail to realize, though, is that those negative behaviors have a deeper root. "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" says Jesus, and we could expand that to include our actions, too. Our lives are shaped by what we treasure deep within. I get angry not only because I'm a sinner in general, but because I'm a specific kind of sinner - the kind who believes he needs (and treasures!) comfort, approval, control, or power to be happy! We sin when someone or something threatens our idol because we feel as though they are threatening our very *self*.

While it can feel very threatening and unsettling to think of yourself as an idol worshipper, it can also become incredibly freeing. Without drilling down to the root of our sin, we're often left feeling as though Christianity is simply a matter of trying hard to not sin, confessing when we do, and then going right back to our diligent efforts. If, on the other hand, we take time to ask good questions of ourselves in those moments, we'll often find deeper patterns that connect to idolatry. If my main problem is the few places where sin shows up, then the answer is *try harder to not sin*. If my main problem is that I worship a God substitute, and my sin is a result of trying to protect my idols, then the answer is *repent and believe the good news of the gospel*. Idol worshippers need to see their unbelief, repent, and rejoice again in all they have in Christ. When we're honest about the idols we worship, we can see how the gospel is the answer to my deepest needs, not just at conversion but every day after, as well!

Do you know what happens when you begin to repent of the lies at the root of your negative emotions and sinful behaviors and start to rejoice in the free grace of God? *You become a lover of God and a lover of people*. You want to worship him for his grace, and you want others to know his grace. You become willing to re-arrange your life in order to make the grace of God known! When Jesus begins to free you from your idolatry, overwhelming your need for these substitutes by filling you with a love so powerful and profound that you no longer need your idols, you become a conduit of grace. You love God's people as Family, love your neighbors as Missionaries, and love your city as Servants!

Psalm 103

Psalm 103 is an exceptional Psalm in that there is no clear sin to confess or enemy to confront. Psalm 103 is David simply stirring his heart to rejoice in all that God is and all that God has done. It is a perfect picture of the daily work of meditation, as David is preaching to himself, stirring his soul to worship God, and inviting us to join with him!

God is Gracious

David begins by calling himself to focus his mind and heart on God and God's "benefits." He shows us one of the greatest spiritual dangers: forgetting. This is particularly dangerous for those of us who tend to find identity in our performance and joy in being respected. We like to think of ourselves as mostly good people who have tried hard to get our junk together. We're not like *those other guys* who are lazy, undisciplined, and needy. This is the idol of power: I deserve to be respected because I've accomplished so much and performed so well; I justify myself through what I do; I'm self-sufficient. Though we'd never say this out loud, it is the default mode of our hearts. We are what we do.

What happens when we forget that God is gracious, that all we have is a gift, and that we are unable to justify ourselves? The most obvious sign is pride, but it is often well-hidden by a mask of false humility. We live under great pressure to perform, beating ourselves up when we fail, but heaping more pressure on ourselves when we succeed. In the pursuit of power, we tend to see people as useful (when they are awed by us) or unnecessary (when they aren't). We often avoid real and intimate relationship because it might reveal us, and instead opt for positions of influence where we're admired but isolated.

God is Gracious, So We Don't Have to Prove Ourselves

David is a man of power and influence, and is engaged in the daily battle to keep himself humble and aware of all God has done. David has nothing that has not been freely given to him. He reminds himself of his own frailty, saying "As for man, his days are like grass," and he rejoices that God "knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust." In contrast to human weakness, God is the abundant provider. He forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, and satisfies. He is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." When David thinks of God, he doesn't see a harsh task master who keeps records of good and evil. Rather, David sees a compassionate Father, eager to forgive sin and rejoicing over his children.

Psalm 103 points us forward to Jesus, who perfectly reveals the Father's heart toward us in giving his own life for our sin. All the benefits David recounts are secured for us each one of us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.