

“Forget not all his benefits”

Psalm 103

Wayne Eberly

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Billy Graham came to town. It was a big deal. Sacramento hosts the California State Fair each year, and Cal Expo is a huge outdoor stadium. Sometime in the mid-1980s we were fortunate enough to host a Billy Graham Crusade in Sacramento, and people came in droves to hear the good news of the Gospel. 40 to 50 thousand people attended each night of the Crusade. The night we took our youth group was such a time of blessing. The Crusades obviously feature the preaching of Billy Graham, but they also had organized a huge choir to sing each night. On the night we attended the choir lifted their voices in praise with an Andre Crouch song called, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” The chorus of praise drifted out among the huge throng and as it settled upon us it was such a blessing, such a spiritual blessing. Sometime later I discovered that chorus came from Psalm 103. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” Through the years I have read that psalm again and again, and I never read it without remembering a fall evening, crisp and clear, me and 40 thousand people who knew, who just knew, that the hope and purpose and meaning and joy of life comes through Jesus Christ. Something else happened. I learned the second verse of that song, the verse I want us to focus on this morning. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”

It probably goes without saying, but if you do not remember something, you more than likely have forgotten what it is you do not remember. So when the psalmist tells us, “Forget not all his benefits”, the psalmist might just as well say, “Remember.” Remember all God’s benefits. Which starts the psalmist on the road of remembrance. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits”...

- Who forgives all your sins
- Who heals all your diseases
- Who redeems your life from the pit
- Who crowns you with love and compassion

- Who satisfies your desires with love and compassion so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's

And there is more. There is always more. Of course there is more. Who can number all the Lord's benefits, all the Lord's blessings? Today I invite you to forget not all his benefits...to remember all the benefits, all the blessings that come to us through God's grace and mercy, all the blessings that come to us through the Beloved Son of God, Jesus Christ, the one we know as Lord and Savior.

In the spring of 1999 Julie and I led our first travel trip. We went to Greece and Turkey and walked in the footsteps of St. Paul. I had brought along a journal to keep track of all the things we experienced. But along about the second day I made a regrettable decision. What we were experiencing was so amazing and uplifting and it made such an impact, I decided that I didn't need to write it down. How could I ever forget the things I was seeing and hearing and learning and experiencing? One of my friends teases me. Whenever the two of us are together and I am trying to remember something, I tell him with a heaping amount of braggadocio, "I have a mind like a steel trap." And then every time we are together and I cannot remember something, or I forget something, all he does is make a little noise. He looks at me when I cannot remember something and he goes "Ping." As if to remind me the steel trap is not all it is cracked up to be. As much as I loved that trip we led in 1999, for the life of me there is so much I do not remember. I have forgotten so many wonderful things we experienced. Ping! Ping! Ping!

Humility wins out over hubris. This time, when we took a group of 27 to the Holy Land, I wrote things down. I wrote things down because I want to remember. I wrote things down because I do not want to forget. This morning I want to share with you a small portion of what we experienced on our recent trip. I want those of you who were not able to travel with us to have a taste of what we experienced. I hope those who did make the trip will share in the remembrances. But most importantly, I want us all to think of the spiritual journey we are on, a journey where God leads and directs our lives, a journey on which God blesses us over and over and over again, and as I share these brief remembrances from our recent trip, I hope and I pray that each of us will reflect on the

journey of our life, of our lives together, of our lives as brothers and sisters of faith, and I hope we will be among those who “Forget not all his benefits...” who forget not all his blessing.

- We began in Caesarea, where Herod the Great built a seaside city in honor of none other than Caesar. The remains are impressive, from a huge outdoor theater to an aqueduct that is a testament to the engineering talents of the Romans. Two of the most meaningful things that the bible tells us about Caesarea are 1. Peter came to Caesarea and preached the gospel to a Roman centurion named Cornelius. When the Holy Spirit came and filled the heart of Cornelius and all who had gathered in his home, Peter, and the early church, realized that God’s love was not limited to the Hebrew nation, to the Jewish people. Cornelius was a Gentile, and so are we, if we are not members of the Jewish faith. We were included that day in the embrace of the all-inclusive God who wants the whole world to share in the blessing of his love. 2. Paul was imprisoned for several years in Caesarea. It is likely that many of his letters, letters written from his prison cell, were written in Caesarea. As you might know, some of us had an extended vacation, remaining behind in our Jerusalem hotel for nine days, in quarantine. Quarantine in a hotel doesn’t come close to what Paul experienced in prison. But our days of quarantine caused us to look deep at our faith, to trust in God when we had nowhere else to turn, and to remember God’s blessings even in times of trial...or better yet, especially in times of trial.
- From Caesarea, a town right on the Mediterranean Sea, we made the trek to Mount Carmel. On Mount Carmel the prophet Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and he came out victorious, God came out victorious, in that battle. We had our first group member read from the heights of Mount Carmel. Dianne Lowther turned not to the passage of triumph, when the Lord burned up Elijah’s sacrifice as a sign of God’s power. We had Dianne read from a passage where that same prophet Elijah was hiding in a cave, overwhelmed at the opposition he faced. It was in the lonely confines of that cave that the Lord spoke to his prophet in a still,

small voice. We challenged ourselves not only to notice the big things that we would encounter on our trip, but also the small, the whispers, quiet voice of God calling to each of us.

- Our final stop that day was at the Church of the Annunciation, a church set right in the heart of Nazareth, a town bustling with activity and filled with people. Martha Hosp read that amazing passage in Luke chapter one when the angel promises Mary that she will be with child. When I asked Martha to read that passage, she immediately returned to a song from her childhood and lifted her voice as she remembered her teaching and training as a young girl in the church. The glow on Martha's face was a sight to see.
- That night we rested in Tiberias, a city set right on the Sea of Galilee.
 1. Our group had many travelers who are not a part of Dunn's Corners and who came from places far from Rhode Island. We began the next day with a beautiful experience, putting out on a boat onto the Sea of Galilee. Jan Paul, a Presbyterian from Denver, Colorado, read from Matthew 14 where Jesus not only stilled a storm that was raging, he allowed Peter the chance to walk on the water, an opportunity that lasted as long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus.
 2. Returning to shore we traveled to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where Teresa Utt, in the town of Capernaum, a town where some fishermen went out to fish one day and had their lives turned upside down, Teresa read from Matthew four the passage of Jesus calling fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him. The fact that Teresa's husband Rick is an avid fisherman was a nice modern-day connection, especially when we realize Jesus calls each one of us to be modern-day fishermen, casting our nets and throwing out our line in the hopes of sharing the good news of the gospel with others.
 3. At the Church of the Beatitudes Linda Griffin read those beautiful words of blessing from Matthew chapter 5. Because people from all over the world travel to see the holy sights, it was not uncommon to have signs in many different languages. Linda

finished her reading, and before we left, she showed me the Beatitudes written in Tagalog, the language of many Filipino friends. Linda's son-in-law is Filipino.

4. Next stop on this day filled with blessing was the church that commemorates the feeding of the 5,000. There is little doubt why I asked Tony Spino to read about multitudes who are being fed, for Tony and Cheryl, with that market that also bears the name of Dunn's Corners, have shown so much love to our whole community, and our church has received countless blessings from these two dear friends.
5. Martha Rice then read just a few hundred yards away, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, at a chapel that has been built in remembrance of another time when Jesus called Peter, that well-known disciple. This call came at the end of the Gospel of John, after Peter had denied Jesus three times. Martha read as Jesus three times asked Peter, "Do you love me." She whispered to me later, "My brother's name is Peter."
6. That night, a Friday night, we returned to our hotel right on the Sea of Galilee. Friday night marks the beginning of the Sabbath for the Jewish people. For whatever reason, many parents had come to our hotel with their children, and the laughter and celebration of these families was a reminder that the Sabbath is a joyful time of worship, of friendship, of celebration.
 - Our next day began in a small room under the church that marks the miracle of Cana, where Jesus turned water to wine. Billy Quirk was prepared to read from John 2. Being in that small room with Billy's rich and resonant voice filling that room was an unforgettable blessing.
 - Later that day we came to the Shepherd's field, right outside Bethlehem. Now we were no longer in Galilee, which is the northern part of Israel. Now we were right outside the city of Jerusalem. Our good friend from the church in Houston, Bob Lewis, read the words of the angel speaking to those shepherds in Luke chapter 2 about the birth taking place in Bethlehem. We lifted our voices and sang, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." In

another small chapel in the Shepherd's Field we remembered the angels with the carol, "Angels we have heard on high." I have always thrown myself completely into the chorus of "Glooorrrrrrrrrrrria..." but what I did not expect was for our guide, a delightful man of faith, Sami, what was such a joyful surprise to see Sami leading our group as he joined with us in praising the Lord.

- Finally, we came to the Church of the Nativity in the heart of Bethlehem. Julie read from Luke 2 about the census declared by Caesar Augustus and the road weary travelers we know so well, Joseph and Mary, coming and delivering to us all the gift of the Christ child. There is a place that is so sacred, where the birth of Jesus is commemorated. We made our way as a group down to that spot, people knelt and both touched the marker and said prayers of thanksgiving. We then sang again in a small space the song that ends our Christmas Eve service each year, "Silent night." People light candles in that small space, and somehow Charlie and Jane Larkin's son Eric leaned against the candles and his shirt caught on fire. The group responded immediately, using our booklet to put out the flames, but our singing was interrupted by this near disaster. And then one of the women serving as a host picked up the song and led us back to the peaceful words of Silent Night. When she finished, as if that blessing was not enough, another woman then sang that holy song in Arabic. Even without writing that moment down, even this steel trap would have a hard time forgetting that experience.
- Sunday took us to the ancient city of Jericho, where another of our new friends, Jerry Paul, who spent his career working in special education, led us in a rousing song about Zacchaeus as we stood next to a sycamore tree.
- Susan Dumouchel, a committed member of our Tuesday Bible Study who is a member of the Roman Catholic Church, she read for us in Jericho the passage when God tells Joshua not to be afraid, but to trust, because God tells Joshua as he had previously told Moses, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

- Before we went to Jericho that morning, a day which included a visit both to the Dead Sea Scrolls museum and the actual Dead Sea, we made a stop at Bethany, the town where Lazarus was raised from the dead. That story is told in John chapter 11. Ever since we have come to know Dan Potts and his family, the number 11, the number that was worn by their daughter Maddie, who died so suddenly, that number 11 has taken on new meaning. So Jane and Charlie Larkin, who worship with Dan every Sunday at our early service, they read and we remembered the words Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” After Jane finished reading she told me when she picked up her luggage upon arrival in Israel, she realized her suitcase had a sticker remembering Maddie Potts and number 11. When we toured the chapel commemorating Lazarus being raised from the dead, another tour group was having a worship service. We were walking by when they began singing one of our favorite songs, “Here I am, Lord.” Without invitation, and I must add, without interruption, for they gladly welcomed our participation, we stopped in our tracks and joined the other group in singing. What a wonderful blessing that was.
- Monday began our visit to the city of Jerusalem. Brenda Lewis, from Michigan, read the glorious words of Psalm 22, “I was glad when they said unto me, let us go unto the house of the Lord.”
- Cheryl Spino, a woman whose prayer life is central to who she is, read about Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- Deborah Anderson, a woman whose heart leaps for the joy of Jesus read the words of joy as we re-enacted the Palm Sunday journey from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. “Hosanna in the highest.”
- The Church of the Pater Noster has the Lord’s Prayer written in hundreds of languages. Eric Larkin, having survived his brush with fire, read the English version we know so well. Then Chin Yong, Eric’s wife, who is Korean, recited that same prayer in her native tongue. Not sure that moment could be matched, we then gathered in yet another small space, in a tiny chapel, and with a reverence fitting the moment sang together, “The Lord’s Prayer.” For thine is

the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever...amen. The sound swelled as we offered our unison prayer to the Lord.

- We journeyed down the Mount of Olives and came to the Old City of Jerusalem. In a place commemorating the Upper Room, the room where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples. Kevin and Wil Lowther read about the washing of the feet and the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. Of those twelve disciples that gathered with Jesus, there were two sets of brothers. Those two Lowther brothers were such a blessing to us, and to have them read in the Upper Room was powerful.
- That day ended with another Houston friend named Robin reading about the time when Peter denied Jesus three times. After Robin read, we descended far beneath that church into what really could only be described as a dungeon. Some believe that when Jesus was arrested after the Last Supper that he was cast into a dungeon, a pit. Huddled in a room that seemed so hopeless, our guide Sami showed me a loose-leaf binder that has the words of Psalm 88 in many languages. Psalm 88 is where a seemingly abandoned child of God prayed mournful words, “You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.” No matter how deep our despair, how difficult our struggle, it was never more real to me than in that pit to know that Jesus has experienced every single sadness and every single sorrow known to humanity.
- Our final tour day began with a reading outside the chapel of St. Ann, whom tradition tells us was the mother of the Virgin Mary. Our friend Ann read that day, and we paused to remember our spiritual mothers and grandmothers and fathers and grandfathers, the ones like Eunice and Lois who passed on their faith to that disciple named Timothy.
- After walking the stations of the cross, we entered the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Ten years ago our group waited more than hour to spend a brief moment at one of the sights tradition tells us was the place Jesus was buried. This day, we had run out of time, because we had to get to the Garden Tomb, the other site that

might be where he was buried. But Julie looked at the line, ordered us to go forth in faith, and in five minutes our whole group made it through and had a moment of blessing that will be etched in our memory. As our final two left that sacred space the staff closed the doors. We had just made it.

- And so we ended our tour at the Garden Tomb, near a rock that many believe was Golgotha, the place of the skull. We stared at and imagined eyes and nose and mouth cut into that rock. Then we entered the Garden Tomb. Finally, a communion service was prepared for us. After singing, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”, and “I come to the Garden alone”, we broke bread and shared the up, 27 travelers whose lives will be bonded in a beautiful way by this shared experience.

That closing communion service was memorable in another way. A man named Davis, a man of Chinese descent who was born in Japan and then became a dentist in Tucson, Arizona, Davis told me he had never celebrated communion. He asked me what it meant. I told him, and I said Jesus invited all who put their faith and trust in him to share in the meal. With a gleam in his eye he said, “I believe that.” Davis took the bread and the cup that day for his first time. Another friend also celebrated his first communion. His story is the one I want to end this little reflection with.

This friend’s name is Dave. Dave had not only never had his first communion, he had also never been baptized. As members of our group renewed our baptism at the Jordan River, Dave went under the waters of baptism for the first time. I guarantee he will not forget that moment. And I want to ask you, do you remember your baptism? We remember our baptism, even if we were baptized as infants, we remember our baptism whenever a new person is baptized. With every infant, with every child, with every adult, we rejoice at the blessing of knowing we belong to the God who will never leave us and never forsake us. We belong to the God who sent his Son Jesus to show us the full extent of God’s love. We are filled with the Holy Spirit who lives within us and brings the power of God, the peace of God, and the very presence of God right into the heart of each one of us.

The passage I asked Dave to read, Dave who was baptized on this trip, Dave who celebrated his first communion on this trip, the passage I asked Dave to read was from the chapel that marks the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, the passage that we find in the first chapter of the Book of Acts. Just before Jesus ascends to the right hand of God, he tells his disciples, disciples 2,000 years ago, and disciples right here and right now in the year 2022, which is also the year of our Lord 2022, Jesus tells his disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Might that passage ring in our ears and resonate in our hearts as we hear the psalmist tell us, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” When we forget not, when we instead remember all his benefits, then we do exactly what Jesus told us to do. We become his witnesses. And that is what we are.

Friends, you might not have traveled to Israel, but we all are traveling with Jesus on the journey of life, on the journey of faith. As I am remembering this most recent experience of God’s blessing, I pray that we all remember, that we never forget all that Jesus has done for us. And in our remembering, I pray that will be his witnesses. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.