

The start of the third stanza compares our mortality to grass and a flower. There is a time when plants grow and a time when they die. Our days on Earth are numbered, but this Psalm tells us that God's love for us endures forever. Just like the third verse of the song, our soul will sing of God's unending praise, "10,000 years and then forevermore." Verse seventeen talks about God's steadfast love again being given to those who fear him and this love lasting for generations. A caveat presented at the end of this verse is steadfast love belonging to those who keep God's covenant and honor the Ten Commandments. We can honor the commandments daily, but sometimes we slip up and God will get mad. When we do mess up, we can ask God for forgiveness, and he will grant it and move on, as we know from earlier verses in the Psalm.

The fourth and final stanza reminds us that God has a kingdom in heaven, and He sits upon a throne there. It is in this place that He does His forgiving and showers us with love. He blesses us, the angels who do His bidding on Earth, and rewards us for being obedient to Him. The Psalm closes out with its refrain, blessing God.

Blessing the Lord can come in a variety of ways. It allows us to show him that we appreciate the things He does for us and how He is present in our lives. We are called to bless the Lord because it is right to do so. Our congregation blesses the Lord in many ways: offering hymns of praise, volunteering talents and time, attending worship services, and spreading God's message to others.

Throughout my life, I have had the privilege of finding God in Pittsburgh, Purdue, and Saudi Arabia. Being able to connect with fellow Christians, gain new experiences, and visit places for the first time in the name of God is an amazing feeling. In these places, we did the blessing, but we also got blessed. Through worshipping God before going to do construction for those less fortunate in Pittsburgh, we blessed the Lord. By meeting with Presbyterian youth groups from across the country at Purdue University and sharing the word of God, we blessed the Lord. By holding a rudimentary church service in a tent in the desert where we sang "10,000 Reasons," we blessed the Lord. And by listening to a radio station that I had never listened to before, a step out of my comfort zone, God blessed me. God can find us anytime and anywhere. And one of the memorable places that I found God was the same place Moses did: in the desert.

1 <https://pres-outlook.org/2013/07/presbyterian-youth-triennium-prepares-for-more-than-5000-participants/>

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtwIT8JjddM>

3 <https://www.grammy.com/news/matt-redman-in-the-grammy-winners-circle>

4 <https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/celebrate/eagle.pdf>



July 28, 2024
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Elder Douglas Ryan
Scripture: Psalm 103

I'll start by saying that I know I'm not the person that you'd expect to see up here in the pulpit. My name is Douglas Ryan, and around ten years ago, I was the Youth Elder, providing a voice for the youth on our church's Session. I like to call that position the "oxymoron" because can an Elder come from the youth? I was ordained to be in that position, and this qualifies me to deliver today's sermon. I'd like to thank Mr. Helenberger for introducing our congregation to the idea of ordained church members preaching as he delivered his own sermon a few years ago. I'd also like to thank Pastor Emma and our director of music ministries, Joseph Jackson, for their guidance during my sermon writing process. Today, I will preach about an atypical place where I found God: the desert.

I first encountered contemporary Christian rock music during a mission trip with the FPCRO Mid-Highs in 2009. That summer, we went to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and participated in the Pittsburgh Project. For five days, we enjoyed doing light construction and home renovations for individuals unable to do it themselves. Before leaving for our job site each morning, we had a mini worship service with other youth groups who were at the Pittsburgh Project. During the music portion of the service, we sang, danced, clapped, and shouted, all while worshipping in t-shirts and shorts. We did not need collared shirts, an organ, or a choir; instead, we had guitarists, an electric keyboard, and a drummer leading our songs. In this way, we blessed God.

A few summers later, I went to the Presbyterian Youth Triennium at Purdue University with our Senior Highs. There, we worshipped in the same way we did in Pittsburgh: sang Christian rock songs in shorts and t-shirts, clapped, danced, and were led by a band. That week, we participated in discussions, workshops, and social events with Presbyterian youth groups from around the country. With 5,000 other teenage Presbyterians and their chaperones, we blessed God together.¹

Fast forward to the summer of 2022, and I found myself in Saudi Arabia with the Michigan National Guard. I was stationed at an air base in the middle of the desert—so located to deter bad guys from easily accessing the installation. There was a mix of servicemembers from the United States there,

including the Army and Air Force. My unit's mission was construction projects on the base: we poured a concrete pad for a new basketball court, replaced plumbing lines near a row of outhouses, and improved existing fortifications. The overarching mission of the base was to show the Saudis that the United States was a partner they could count on. I had never been outside North America before, so I was excited, nervous, and curious to be in Saudi Arabia.

The military unit ministry teams there hosted worship services for a variety of faiths, and I attended the non-denominational Christian service on Sundays at 11am. This air base was a tent city, so the church service was held in a tent. Some of you may remember military tents like those featured on the T.V. show *M*A*S*H*, and the tents we had in Saudi Arabia were tan in color and half-cylindrical with ceilings about fifteen feet tall. The pastor we had at church was a portly Air Force major from Mississippi who was a self-described Southern Baptist—drawl and all. He loved making us laugh. The services he led were simple: three opening hymns, a scripture reading, his sermon, and a closing hymn. During a few of the worship services, we sang “10,000 Reasons,” which we just sang here, and this song got stuck in my head. The services lasted about one hour, and afterward, everyone would walk a few tents over to the cafeteria for lunch and fellowship. At our outpost in the desert, we blessed God together.

When I got home a little over a year ago, I found that one of the preset radio stations in my car had changed its format. FM 93.1 switched from a country station to Family Life Radio, a nationally syndicated Christian radio station. I was too lazy to find another radio station to take its spot, so I left it on my presets. As the months went on, I scanned the radio stations on my daily commute and heard “10,000 Reasons” on FM 93.1, the same song I came to know during church services in Saudi Arabia. I found myself stopping the scan to listen to this song when it came on. Hearing it when I was back home rekindled my fondness for it, and I blessed God by listening to a song about Him that I grew to enjoy. If I didn't have the chance to get out of my comfort zone, I may not have found God through this song.

As I heard “10,000 Reasons” on the radio more often, I wanted to know more about it. I did some research on it, and I found it is a contemporary Christian rock song that was released in 2012 by an English singer-songwriter named Matt Redman.² This song won two Grammys in 2013, which may be something that our typical anthems cannot brag about.³ Both the song and the Psalm share a refrain: “Bless the Lord, o my soul.” The Psalm was written by King David, who wrote many Psalms. I read the Psalm and got three themes from it: blessing the Lord, fearing God, and God's steadfast love.

The Psalm begins with a reminder of what God does for us: forgives us, heals us, saves us, and gives us good things. It talks about not forgetting His benefits. One might not think of us reaping the “benefits” of God, but we could more

appropriately call them blessings. And in the Psalm, these blessings aren't talked about in a quid pro quo context: these blessings are not conditional or transactional, they are freely given by God to His people. They are unearned, a reflection of the goodness and grace of our loving heavenly Father through His Son, Jesus Christ. Some benefits from God could be food on the dinner table, a roof over your head, or being part of a community to worship Him. Next, God forgives us just like we ask for forgiveness each Sunday with our prayer of confession. God also heals all our diseases. One day, when we get to heaven, all our maladies will be remedied.

The next verse in the first stanza references redemption from a Pit—pit with a capital “P.” It's not talking about a peach pit or the pit in one's stomach when they are anxious or nervous. Scholars have interpreted this pit to mean the threat of oppression of going into exile. This Pit is also referenced in Isaiah chapter 51, verse 14, as a place where people don't want to go. We cannot free ourselves from the pit; God needs to act to save us. After being lifted out of the pit, God showers us with steadfast love and mercy, satisfies us with good for the rest of our days, and renews our youth like an eagle. One might not normally compare youth to an eagle, but an eagle is a majestic bird that represents freedom and strength. This description of the eagle is in line with it being adopted as our country's national bird by the Second Continental Congress in 1782.⁴

Moving into the second stanza, the Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. Vindication is having proof supporting someone who has been wrongfully accused, and seeking justice goes along with the same theme. God obtained justice for Moses and the Israelites, the subject of the next verse, and he lifted them out of slavery in the Egyptian desert. God is merciful, gracious, patient, and has plenty of love to share. While he might be angry at times, it is only temporary. Verse nine says, “He will not always accuse.” We don't always need God to tell us when we did something wrong; sometimes, we can figure that out for ourselves. In verse twelve, a simile is used: “as far as the east is from the west...he removes our transgressions from us.” It's not Huntington Woods and Royal Oak, or New York and Los Angeles. It's an infinite distance that he separates us from our transgressions. Jesus bore God's anger and wrath towards the transgressions we have committed.

Verse thirteen talks about the compassion a father has for his children. We are children of God and He is our heavenly father, and God has compassion for those who fear Him. The fear talked about in Psalm 103 is a marvel at the awesomeness of His power and all the things He has done, some of which were mentioned in the Psalm: saving Moses and the Israelites, redeeming us from the Pit, giving us steadfast love, forgiveness, and his benefits. The fear is more like admiration. The end of the second stanza of the Psalm is a gentle reminder that we belong to God, from dust to dust, as we say on Ash Wednesday.