

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

After I left the Air Force, I was a graphics specialist in an air reconnaissance group. There were three of us and we didn't have a lot of publications or other production work to do in peacetime so we would invent things to do that (usually) kept us out of trouble. The coolest project was a mural that we painted with airbrushes. It was probably 15 feet tall and 30 feet wide. It had three F-4E reconnaissance planes and one was being refueled by a KC-135 tanker (our sister group was an air refueling group). There was a sunset and clouds—and in the clouds we worked in a revolutionary war drum and fife corps—watching over the whole thing. That kept us busy every weekend for most of a year.

I also did comics and caricatures—my version of how the Air Force worked. I had done a few and the commander happened by. I was afraid I was in trouble, but he loved them and had them framed and hung in the entrance hallway. The state Guard paper even came out and photographed them and interviewed the commander and me.

My favorite was the Air Force recruiter. He was sitting at a desk and on the other side of the desk was a young man signing a paper that says, “your life” at the top. At first glance, the recruiter looked like a handsome man who was facing the young recruit, smiling. BUT when you looked closer, you could see that the handsome face was a mask and he was REALLY facing the wall and he was the devil—red with horns and all that. In his other hand was a pencil and he was marking tabs on the wall—under the word “souls.” Seems that most everyone loved that one, because it seems a recruiter will tell you anything to get you to sign your name.

I did the cartoon from personal experience—if my recruiter had told me the truth, I'd have joined the Navy instead :)

Recruiters are not the only ones who talk one way and act another. I know you have heard someone say, “well, I'll do it, but my heart won't be in it...” Some people go to work at the same place for 35 years even though their heart is not in it. Some people get married and never open up and let the other person inside—never let them know who they are. Never have a heart/body/soul relationship.

One excuse people give for not going to church is all the hypocrites that are here. Face it, sometimes we DO talk one way and act another, just like the rest of the world. I HOPE it is minor and accidental, not major and on purpose, because when Jesus was walking and teaching, he had the most trouble with those who worshiped with their mouths, their presence, and their money, but refused to open their hearts and souls to God's leadership and his love.

Their worship looked good, but it was not acceptable before God because it was not real. Maybe we can fool others, but God always knows when we are giving him lip-service and not heart-and-soul-service.

In the passage I just read, David shows us what kind of worship is pleasing and acceptable before God. He shows us how to worship God in spirit and in truth. With acknowledgment and love and with a shout and a song—hopefully just like we have been doing today.

Go back to the passage with me—it is in your bulletin. *Bless the Lord, O my soul...* That is hard to say without an exclamation point, isn't it?

Try it with me. *Bless the Lord, O my soul!* It is hard to say that without feeling [do just that]. Its better the other way, isn't it? *Bless the Lord, O my soul!*

The soul is the best part of a human being. It is the part that is eternal—that which came from God and returns to God. If we look at the New Testament, we see that our souls are priceless—they are more valuable than the rest of creation.

Worship from the soul is the most real and the most valuable and the most acceptable to God. God is pleased when we worship with our spirit. The Bible says to worship in spirit and in truth.

God loves to hear the songs we sing and hear the praises we give and the prayers we pray—but if the spirit, the soul of a person is not involved—if our worship is not from our soul then our worship is nothing to God—in fact, less than nothing. If our hearts and souls are not in it, God doesn't want our praises.

*Bless the Lord...* You and I know that God doesn't NEED our blessings—in the sense of a priest giving a blessing or in ancient times, a father giving a blessing to his oldest son. God stands in NEED of nothing—but I see our blessings as a kind of “congratulations.” When we bless God from our souls we are acknowledging his power and his might and his goodness—you might say, his GODness and the unspoken of that is thankfulness for his provision and his mercy.

David doesn't stop with the soul. *...and all that is within me.* We are to bless God with our souls and our hearts and our mouths and our talents and our minds and our will and our reason—all that is within us, all that makes us us.

David repeats, *O my soul, almost* as if he is pleading with his own soul to be totally immersed in worship of God, in blessing God.

*...and forget not all his benefits.* These aren't the benefits that come in a salary package. They aren't taxable. They don't come from work or effort on our part or even worthiness. These benefits come through the mercies of God. Every day, God's children have the benefit of God's hand and his mercies.

David reminds us of the benefits that come to those who place their faith and hope and trust in God's saving grace. The first is forgiveness. A pardon, if you will. This is the first in order and I believe, the first in importance. Without that pardon, the other benefits listed are hollow and temporary.

In order to properly bless the name of God, maybe we should start with a sense of guilt—an understanding of where we come from. True blessing comes when we have a sense of God's grace having been applied—in the past, the present, and in the future—to our hearts and lives. Notice what David says has been forgiven. *Iniquities.* This is a strong word for sin—not little slip-ups but big ones. Not little white lies, but big scarlet lies. If you think back on David's life, you will remember that he was pretty familiar with big slip-ups—or *iniquities.* The forgiveness David is talking about is linear in nature. It began at a point in time, but it continued—and is still continuing.

Another benefit David mentions is the healing of diseases—but in my understanding of this passage, he is not talking about the physical, but the spiritual. David was writing about the spiritual realm. God is the physician of physical bodies also, but I believe David is talking about hate and lust and greed—

diseases that can only be healed by divine love and divine grace.

When that pardon comes, that divine healing is applied to the soul. In a real sense, you might say that the forgiving and the healing are one and the same.

Another benefit he mentions is God redeeming his children from the pit—or from destruction. This CAN be physical. He can and does sometimes protect his own from harm—but it seems that David is addressing the spiritual aspect of God's protection, his redemption.

The destruction or the pit he is talking about is greater than physical destruction, it is spiritual destruction. God redeems our lives from the pit by granting forgiveness and by healing our spiritual disease. He saves his own from spiritual destruction.

Then, David says that the LORD places a crown on the head of the believer, the child of God. A crown of steadfast love and tender mercies. This crown—these blessings—bring with them blessings we cannot even imagine. Many fruits flow from the grace and the mercy and the love of God. He crowns his children with this crown—a symbol of God's protection and pardon and love. It symbolizes our relationship to the King.

Finally, God renews his children with strength and youth like that of an eagle. You and I are perfectly aware that our bodies start to go downhill almost as soon as we are born—in fact, some parts seem to go downhill faster than others. God renews our SPIRITS in spite of the physical difficulties we may have. He is willing and able to renew our souls—our inner beings—day by day, so that we are renewed and refreshed.

What a benefit package. Forgiveness—not just the small stuff, the big stuff too. Spiritual healing—taking away the diseases that harm the human soul. Saved from the pit—from destruction. Given a crown of God's love and mercy. And being given the good that renews our souls and our spirits so that we can soar like eagles.

Don't those benefits make you want to quote the first part of our passage?

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Say it with me: *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*

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