

## MY LIFE AS A DUSTBALL

Psalm 103:14-22

### INTRODUCTION

I generally don't read *People* magazine. Typically I only read it is in the waiting room of a doctor's office. Given a choice between something like *Today's Health*, *Nutrition magazine*, *Architectural Digest* and *People* I will occasionally opt for *People*. I have a bone to pick with doctors who can't seem to subscribe to *Sports Illustrated* or something of that ilk.

Yet *People* has been a very successful endeavor. It was first published in March of 1974 and within ten months had circulation of 1.25 million. Today that number is up to 3.5 million. Richard Stolley, the editor, correctly read the culture and saw that people in our society have an insatiable appetite for details of the lives of the rich, famous and beautiful. He had a set of rules for who could appear on the cover of the magazine. The rules were: young is better than old, beautiful is better than ugly, rich is better than poor, TV is better than movies, movies are better than music, music is better than sports, anything is better than politics.

Those rules explain why I've never been on the cover of *People* and never will be. Young is better than old. I lose. Beautiful is better than ugly. I lose. Rich is better than poor. I lose. And I've never been and never will be in TV, movies, music, sports or even politics. I will never be a celebrity. So by the standard of our celebrity infected culture I am worthy of no notice. This is a message that injures my soul. Within me a voice protests, "But I matter!" My soul cries out for recognition that I have worth and importance and longs for affirmation. Those are cries that frequently go unheard in this world as it mostly ignores me.

But there's good news. The good news is that the magazine with the highest circulation in the country is...*AARP* magazine at more than 22 million. Now that's a magazine I maybe could make the cover of. Their rule is old is better than young. Actually there's much better news than that. Though our society may not think I'm especially significant, certainly not worthy of putting on the front of a magazine, God has a different perspective. We get a glimpse of

this in Psalm 103:14-22, a passage that at first might seem slightly depressing, but ends up being truly joyful.

## WE ARE DUST

The second verse of this Psalm lays out an important theme. “Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” David wants his readers to never forget the good that God has done for them. He begins in verse 3 listing some of those good things. He forgives our sins, heals our diseases, in verse 5 he satisfies our desires with good things. But verse 14 seems like a departure from that theme. The Lord remembers how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust.

Obviously this is a reference to Genesis 2:7, which says “the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground.” That was a remarkable statement for an ancient document. It did not mean that human beings are literally made of dirt. It meant that there is nothing special about the elements of human beings. We are made up of the same kind of elements you will find in the earth. They are common in the world around us. The human body is largely made up of oxygen, hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorus. Those elements account for 99% of our body. About 85% of that remaining 1% consists of potassium, sulfur, sodium, chlorine and magnesium. The rest is made up of trace elements.

There is nothing unique about those elements. They are found throughout creation. One estimate puts the value of the chemicals that make up a human body at \$160. Long ago the Bible revealed that we are made up of common elements. We are created from the stuff of this world.

So David uses dust here as imagery to depict all of us human beings. Consider the significance of that image. Recently everyone in our family attended a family reunion. I have a cousin named Lisa who owns a horse ranch in Lakeside. That was the site of this reunion. It took place last September on one of the hotter days of the year. I have driven through Rancho Santa Fe and noticed the horse ranches there. One is surrounded by those classic white rail fences and has beautiful barns and big stretches of green lawns. Lisa’s place doesn’t look anything like that. There are a few eucalyptus trees and some small patches of scrub brush here and there, but

by far the primary theme for the landscape is...dirt. There is dust everywhere.

I did not gush to Lisa, “Where do you ever get such wonderful dust? I wish we could have dust like this at our house. If there were a way to do it I would love to take some home with us.” It’s just dust. It’s a nuisance. It got all over us and we tried to brush it off. To be described as dust is not to say “this is something special and of enormous value.” It is to say “this is something ordinary, common and not particularly valuable.”

Unfortunately that is an apt description of us. Do you know how many human beings there are on the planet? The Census Bureau says there are 7.061 billion. That’s a huge number. Why even bother with specifying that it is actually 7.061 billion instead of just saying it is 7 billion? The .061 part can help us begin to grasp how large a number 7 billion is. That tiny .061 seems negligible, but it actually is 61 million. If we just lop off the .061 we have lopped off the entire populations of California, Pennsylvania and Ohio. That gives an idea of how vast the human population on planet earth actually is. If you were going to count all 7.061 billion people on the planet counting 1 per second without stopping 24 hours a day it would take you 224 years to count them all.

Yeah, you and I are dust. We’re common. We’re found all over the place in abundance. There’s nothing unique or special or valuable about us. In fact we’re kind of a nuisance. Remove me from the 7.061 billion and you have 7.061 billion left. I am about as significant in the scope of the universe as is a roly poly bug that I accidentally stepped on recently. Well thanks, Rick. That’s very encouraging. You’re really strengthening my self-esteem and helping out with my worth issues. Oh, don’t thank me yet. I’m just getting warmed up. It gets better.

#### OUR DAYS ARE LIKE GRASS

In verse 15 we move from dust to grass. “As for man his days are like grass.” That’s an improvement isn’t it? Grass is better than dust, right? Not really. Don’t envision the lawns you see in our area. Laurie and I live in a nice neighborhood, but it isn’t a blow your socks off neighborhood. You won’t encounter mansions on our block. You won’t see eye-popping landscaping. Most of the homes have nice, but far from pretentious landscaping. They have postage stamp sized lawns. There is a guy on our

street whose pride and joy is his lawn. It is immaculate. Laurie has seen him out there cutting grass with scissors. Yes, he does need a life. I hate that guy's lawn because it makes ours look weak by comparison. But even ours is green year around. We water it and feed it so that it is always green.

That was not what David was picturing. The climate of Israel was not greatly different than ours. What happens to grass that springs up in the fields around here during the rainy season? It lasts a few months then it turns brown and dies out. It doesn't last long. Nor do we. The grass appears, but soon withers and dies. That's the picture of the brevity of human life this Psalm shows us. David says man, "flourishes like a flower of the field." Laurie loves color. She loves to have flowers in our yard. I love that too. But you know what's irritating about that? They don't last. You plant them, they grow, they bloom, then they disappear. David probably had in mind the wildflowers. It won't be long before we'll see them blooming in the fields. But they'll be gone long before the summer ends. They are here but an instant.

"The wind blows over it and it is gone; and its place remembers it no more." What an accurate and melancholy description that is of our lives. We're here, the wind blows, we're gone, and we are remembered no more. I can attest to that. My life is going by at Mach speed. Somehow without my noticing I have gotten old. My life has flown by. I realize how old I am when I encounter those quizzes to see if you are old? They have questions like:

- Who said, "Just the facts, Ma'am"? (Sgt. Joe Friday)
- Who sang "I got you, babe"? (Sonny and Cher)
- What builds strong bodies 12 ways? (Wonder Bread, which was made by Hostess Bakery, now bankrupt)
- Who was Wally Cleaver's best friend? Eddie Haskell

Sadly, I know the answers to all those questions. I am so old that I know what a television test pattern looks like. I am so old that I, and I hate to confess this, not only know what a slide rule is, I actually owned one and used it. Dude, did you use an abacus before that?

I am getting so dated. I learn the latest popular slang expression but by the time I start using it, it is already obsolete. Words like "epic" and "awesome"

and “wicked” to mean something good are already considered passé by some. Now the young people are saying things like “cheesetastic” to mean something so cheesy it’s almost cool. When you Nancy Drew something you are overanalyzing. I was pleased to learn that now if you want to say something is out of date you say it is Old Testament. Yeah, using “epic” is so Old Testament.

My daughter got married on Friday. Where has the time gone? I look at pictures of myself and my family from years past, and I wonder where have the years gone? They’ve gone by, that’s where. And they’ve done it in an almighty rush. Seemingly in the space of a few pictures we go from my daughter being an infant to her being a grown woman now a bride. Psalm 102:11 says, “My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass.” James 4:14 says, “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” That is painfully true. We’re like the marine layer on a summer morning that burns off before the middle of the morning. It’s here, then it’s gone before you know it. Who remembers a particular marine layer on a day even last summer?

So there’s the picture of us as we really are. We go through life thinking that really, this whole thing is about...me! Everyone should take notice and applaud...me! Everything should serve me. Our culture tells us the earth has been here billions of years, but it doesn’t matter. All that matters is the time I’ve been here. Everything before that was just prologue. Of course I am going to go on forever. I am permanent. We wish. The picture that David paints couldn’t be more of a contrast. It accurately says that we are microscopically small, utterly common, totally insignificant, and about as permanent as a zephyr, a brief breeze that wafts by and disappears.

In my sane, objective moments, I know this is true no matter how sad that may be. All too soon it will be my entire life that is gone. And when that day comes the world will take no notice whatsoever. My passing will be utterly insignificant. I can recall my grandfathers and grandmothers to some extent. But go one generation farther back and I know nothing of them. I can’t even tell you their names. My children will remember me. My future grandchildren will have some distant memories of me most likely. But go beyond that and I might as well never even have existed.

Wow, this is really depressing. And this is in a Psalm whose theme is not forgetting all the good that God has done for us? What in the name of Nancy Drew does this depressing picture David is painting have to do with the good that God has done? Ah, glad you asked. Read on.

### THE LORD'S LOVE IS WITH US

Verse 17 begins with the word “but.” What a relief. Yes, the picture in the preceding verses is definitely one of insignificance and impermanence, yet in verse 17 something dramatically different comes into play. Here David announces the astounding news that the Lord's love is with us. Yes, the Creator, the center of it all, has chosen to love those who fear him. Yes, these infinitesimally small and unimportant creatures, these human beings, are loved by the one who according to verse 19 has established his throne in heaven and rules over all.

How much does he love these tiny creatures? David said earlier in the Psalm, “as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him” (verse 11). How high are the heavens above the earth? David wanted to express how vast God's love is. In this poem he used the image of the heavens above the earth. You can imagine him as a young shepherd, out in the field looking up at the night sky. It seemed so distant, so far up there. He did not know exactly how high those lights were, but they were surely distant and out of his touch. In his poetic way this certainly gets the point across. The heavens are way up there.

Today we have some measure of how high the heavens are above the earth. The closest star is Proxima Centauri, actually a part of a 3 star system known as Alpha Centauri. Proxima is our next door neighbor in the universe, a mere 4.22 light years away. Let's assume that you could travel there at the speed the space shuttle traveled, 17,000 miles per hour. At that dizzying speed it would take you a mere 160,000 years to get to Proxima Centauri. That's one measure of how high the heavens are. God's love is great as that.

Sometimes it doesn't feel like God's love is with us. Life can send us into some pretty barren places, it can bring us some awfully painful surprises. Yet David says God's love is always with us. In fact in verse 13 David said, “as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.”

How does a father have compassion on his children? I can't speak for other fathers, but I can tell you this father has a seemingly bottomless well of it. I have memories of nights when Toby was sick. He had a fever and felt awful. He couldn't sleep. I couldn't sleep when my son was sick and unable to sleep. So I would go into his room and lay down on his bed with him. For some reason that seemed to comfort him. I would stay there for probably a half hour until he had finally fallen asleep. I was exhausted, so I wanted to go back to my bed and sleep. I carefully began to get off that bed, but of course he immediately woke up. I was there for hours got almost no sleep. I didn't begrudge a moment of that, and today I still don't. That's what a dad does when his child is hurting.

Carissa was in college. She was lonely. She had briefly dated a guy that year, but she knew he was definitely not the right guy for her. Her friends all were paired up and had plans and she was going to be alone on what she called Single Awareness Day. Most people call it Valentine's Day. And it was a Saturday night. Saturday nights are not the best nights for me because I work on Sunday morning. At that time we had three services, which made for a long morning. But the thought of my daughter all by herself on Valentine's Day, sad and lonely, just cut me to the core. I couldn't stand it. Laurie and I knew we had to do something. So we drove the hour and a half plus up to Carissa's college, took her out to dinner and went to a movie with her. I knew that being with parents on Valentine's Day was far from every college girl's dream, but it was better than her sitting alone in her apartment. All I can say is I am more thrilled than I can express that Carissa has had her last Single Awareness Day as a single woman.

As a dad I have compassion on my kids. This Psalm reminds us that God looks at you in the same way. In those hard times, he is hurting with you and will do anything he can to bring about your good. That's what a father does. The events of this weekend have certainly testified to that in my life. I have told you before that at times I have agonized for my daughter. I have wondered where God's faithfulness is. But now I see it. God once again has shown his goodness. Laurie and I are thrilled with the man God has given to Carissa. He is truly a man of character. God has given our family a great gift of love in giving us Michael.

That has been a wonderful evidence of God's compassion on some of his children, but it is not the greatest. The most profound evidence of God's love and compassion for us though is not one that has to do with whatever our current circumstances may be. It is the cross upon which Jesus Christ was executed. How do you measure that kind of love? Jesus' entire purpose for his existence was that cross, to take the pain and the penalty that we have earned so that we do not have to. He did it to save us from that horror. How vast is that love? There is no way we can ever comprehend it.

There will be times for all of us when we do not understand what God has allowed in our lives. Why do tragedies occur? Why doesn't God show up and solve a difficult problem in our lives? I have no answers for those questions. But here is what we know for a fact: God has proven his love for us in this, Christ died for us. He has proven in beyond any reasonable doubt. So though there will always be questions that we cannot answer, there is one we can always answer with certainty. Does God love me? Yes, the cross proves it forever.

The truth that God loves us changes everything about who we are. Who am I, really? How important am I? I got a haircut this week. You should have seen what happened when I walked into Supercuts. People's mouths dropped open, their eyes got big as they stared at me. They whispered to each other as they pointed me out. The receptionist was agog, she kind of babbled because she was so in awe. She kept saying, "I can't believe you're here. I can't wait to tell my family that you came into our store today." Then she asked for my autograph. This is just what happens when you're a celebrity.

Oh, wait. That didn't really happen. I just dreamed it. In real life, none of that happened. Except for the receptionist asking for my autograph. I paid with a credit card and she needed me to sign the bill. What happened in real life was...nothing. Nobody noticed me at all. I was just another air breathing customer. That's it. Nothing happened because I'm nobody.

Welcome to my life as a dustball. I am dust. Just one of 7.061 billion on this planet. Common, unimportant with little to no value at all. No doubt someone is thinking, "Yeah, that's you, Rick. That's why I want to be famous. I want to be like Kristen Stewart or Tom Cruise or Taylor Swift. Then I won't be just a dustball like you." Well, yes, people will recognize you. Today. But a hundred years from now no one will remember you. You



will be forgotten, just as all those celebrities will be. You will have become dust and your existence will have meant nothing.

I know that's true. I have learned it from doing crossword puzzles. Laurie and I like to do crosswords. We have learned that those who create them tend to use particular words and clues repeatedly. One of the clues we have encountered a lot is a three letter word "famous actress Hagen." Her name is Uta. It seems that Uta Hagen was one of the most famous actresses of her day. This was less than a hundred years ago. You've likely never heard her name. We only learned of it through doing crossword puzzles. From famous to unknown in only a few decades. That's how fleeting the fame of this world is.

You can earn all the acclaim, the trophies, the awards you long for. Do you know what they will count for in the end? They end up in a box in the garage that some day when you are gone your children will have to go through and throw away. They don't mean anything.

If I were in a restaurant watching people come and go I would take little notice of them. It is interesting to watch people I suppose, but essentially all those people are dustballs. Do you think it would be any different if one of my children or children-in-law walked into the restaurant? That's a game changer. That would matter, *because I love them*. They matter because I love them.

So what? So you are one of God's beloved children. That's a game changer. Whether other people know it or not, you are enormously important to him, which makes you far more than a dustball. You are a child of God, and that means that everything about you and your little life is significant.

You and I and every other human being have an awesome choice before us. We can choose to fear make life about ourselves, or we can make it about God. But when we make it about self what we are left with is that we are dust and grass. We are utterly insignificant and as fleeting as a bolt of lightning. When we choose instead to fear God and make life about him, suddenly we become something hugely valued, something important, and everything we are and do means something.

## HIS LOVE IS EVERLASTING

We must not miss the beginning words of verse 17. The Lord's love is from everlasting to everlasting. It is eternal. God is not going to love you today then tomorrow say, "I am so over you."

This is the answer for the fleeting nature of our lives. Our days on this planet go by so quickly. They are so brief, and when you get to be my age you find yourself asking how did this happen so fast? And there is considerable sadness that goes with the fleeting nature of life.

I don't know about you, but I don't want it to end. I love being with Laurie. I love my family. I love you, my friends and I enjoy the adventure of life with you all. I enjoy so hugely the holiday season and I hate to think of the joy of Christmas coming to an end. I love the seeming unending cycle of sports. Yes, it was a down year for the Padres and Chargers, but in the future maybe it will be better.

I don't like to think of the joy, the pageantry and the beauty of it all coming to an end for me. After the wedding on Friday Toby and I were walking to the restaurant where we all had dinner. I made the comment that I have no more weddings as both kids are now married. Toby said, "Well, I guess next will be the weddings of your grandchildren." I said, "Uh, I think it's a pretty good bet I won't be around for that." He said, "Yeah you will." I said, "Do the math." He didn't like hearing that. I don't like facing that. I want to be around to see my grandchildren, to see them grow up, fall in love, get married, have children of their own. I want to be with my children as they go through the process of parenting and grandparenting. It saddens me to think that at some point I will lose all of that. It saddens me to think of the day when I will have no more Christmas, no more summer, no more sunsets over the ocean. That time is coming for all of us.

But here is the incredible truth: God's love is from everlasting to everlasting. It will be with those who fear him forever. It can only be with me forever if I also am forever. God's everlasting love is the guarantee that while this phase of my life will come to an end, my life, and the lives of those I love do not end. There is another phase to come, a phase that does not end, a phase that will be better.

In Philippians 1 Paul wrote about his dilemma. It was possible that he might be executed or he might be released. Obviously we would think that he would be praying and hoping for release from prison. It was not so clear cut for him. At the end of verse 22 and in verses 23-24 he said, "What shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body." He said it would be better to depart this earth. Not just a little better, but better "by far." It was no contest. Why did Paul think it was so much better? What made him think so? Was it just that his life on this earth was so miserable it had to be better? No. In 2 Corinthians 12:4 he tells us how he knew. God gave him a glimpse of what that life will be like and he said it was so amazing he had no words to explain it.

Revelation says in that life we will be restored, everything will be made new again. That doesn't mean it will be made into some totally different thing that we could never really relate to. We will have physical bodies that are recognizable, but immortal. I have been playing tennis recently with Dave Marrs. I've never been a great tennis player, but my body is showing the wear and tear of this life. I used to be able to on occasion hit the ball hard. I can still hit the ball hard, but it doesn't seem to go fast like it used to. And the past few weeks I've had to stop playing to let some nagging injuries heal. Those kinds of injuries never used to happen. And then there's my hair. Or there used to be. I can't tell you how jealous I am of guys with a full head of hair. It's all going to be made new.

This is not a pipe dream. It's not wishful thinking. It is our real and solid hope based on the real and solid historical victory Jesus claimed over death itself. God's love is everlasting, and so shall we be. The best is yet to come.

Because God's love is everlasting, because you and I are everlasting, that means two things for us: There is hope. Our lives will go on in a way that is far better than what we experience on this earth. Second, there is meaning. Our lives have eternal significance. Oh, it is not the trophies we win that will go on in eternity, it is not the empires we build here on earth. Those will all go away. What will last is everything we have done to serve God, every word or deed that has expressed love to other people, every kindness, every act of praise and worship to God, every act of obedience, no matter how small. Every single one of them has eternal significance!

This is why David reflected on our existence as dust balls in the wind. It shows what an incredible thing God has done for us. He has ennobled us, made us loved, secure, significant, given us hope and infused our every moment of every day with meaning.

#### APPLICATION

So how are we to respond to the great news we have seen in these verses?

#### DON'T FORGET

Let's do what David said at the beginning of the Psalm. Forget not his benefits. It is so easy for us to get caught up in the pursuit of the trophies of this world, to get worried about what is going to happen, to become obsessed with trying to get others to affirm and notice us and fail to realize all we are doing is being dustballs. Let's not forget what God has done for us, that he has made these dustballs into eternally significant beloved children.

#### SAY SOMETHING

Look at the final verses of this Psalm. David calls on the angels to praise God. Then he says, "Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion" (verse 22). Does that include you? David thought it included him. He concluded the Psalm saying, "praise the Lord, O my soul." He told himself to praise. I think it's noteworthy that he told his soul to praise. In other words, he wanted not just to praise God dutifully, but from the very core of his being. He wanted his very soul to praise the Lord. This is the appropriate response when someone has done a great thing for you. You thank them and praise them for their generosity.

This Psalm calls us to a life of praise. In Psalm 34:1 David wrote, "I will extol the Lord at all times: his praise will always be on my lips." At all times, always, praise of God will be on my lips. What a radical way to live. There is a truth that we all know. It is that what determines the kind of person you are and what kind of life you have is not what happens to you. It is all about your attitude and how you respond to whatever happens to you. We are all going to experience hardship, losses, and pain as well as joys and victories in this life. All of us. What separates us is how we respond. I guarantee you if you forget none of God's benefits and you live a life of praise, you will be a person characterized by peace, joy, hope and confidence. You will be a beacon for others.

But praise requires that you actually say something. Suppose that you really liked Carissa's wedding gown. What would it mean to praise it? You would have to say, "Isn't Carissa's gown gorgeous?" You might go to her and say, "That is a beautiful dress." If you don't do either of those, have you praised her gown? No, all you've done is admire it. This Psalm doesn't say, "Admire the Lord, O my soul." It says praise him. Take the risk of actually praising God verbally for his benefits, and make that your response to every situation. It will change your life for the better.

I preached this sermon in part because I want to praise God for his goodness to Laurie and me. In his goodness he gave our son a wonderful woman as a wife, and now he has given our daughter a terrific man as a husband. He has shown himself faithful, merciful and good. I rejoice in his goodness. I praise him for what he has done. I hope you will praise him too.