

The Lord Is Active

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 66:1-14
Background Scripture: Psalm 103

Psalm 103:1-14

- ¹ Praise the LORD, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy
name.
- ² Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
- ³ who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
- ⁴ who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and
compassion,
- ⁵ who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the
eagle's.
- ⁶ The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.
- ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:
- ⁸ The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
- ⁹ He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
- ¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
- ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the
earth,

- so great is his love for those who fear
him;
- ¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgres-
sions from us.
- ¹³ As a father has compassion on his
children,
so the LORD has compassion on those
who fear him;
- ¹⁴ for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.



Key Text

The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. —Psalm 103:6

Introduction

A. God's Wide Mercy

Frederick Faber was a nineteenth-century preacher, theologian, and hymn-writer. Probably his most famous hymn was "Faith of Our Fathers." Less known is his "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." The latter hymn reminds those singing it that God's mercy is like the wideness of the sea. The lyrics connect God's love, mercy, kindness, and grace.

We may wonder how we can let others see those aspects of God's character in us in an increasingly post-Christian (or anti-Christian) culture. We wonder whether our reflection of God's merciful character traits will be interpreted as approval of ungodly behavior. We might begin to answer these questions by taking inventory of the mercies we have received as individuals and congregations. Psalm 103 will help us do so.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Psalms is often described as "ancient Israel's hymnal." Like hymnals today, the book of Psalms includes contributions by different authors and covers a wide span of time. The oldest psalm is by Moses (Psalm 90), and at least one psalm comes out of the setting of the captivity of God's people in Babylon (Psalm 137). These chronological bookends are separated by some 900 years!

About half of the psalms are attributed to King David, known as the "sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Samuel 23:1, *KJV*). Today's passage is one of those psalms. While some psalms include a superscription that provides the setting (example: Psalm 51), there is no such background recorded for Psalm 103. It simply notes the association with David, who reigned about 1010–970 BC.

The Psalter is traditionally seen as falling into five sub-books, their divisions being Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–150. Psalm 103 is located within the fourth of those five. A broad brush look at the 17 chapters of this sub-book reveals the following:

* Psalms 90–100 speak of God's role as king of the universe and ancient Israel's role in announc-

A King

Forever and Ever

Unit 2: Our God Reigns

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Give the reasons for praising the Lord in today's text.
2. Explain the importance of considering the history of God's work when anticipating his future work.
3. Write a prayer that celebrates God's character as the source of blessings.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. God's Wide Mercy
- B. Lesson Context

I. Call to Worship (Psalm 103:1-5)

- A. What to Do (vv. 1-2)
- B. Why to Do It (vv. 3-5)

II. Acknowledge Divine Grace (Psalm 103:6-14)

- A. Facts to Consider (vv. 6-10)
 - Like Father, Like Son?*
 - How God Works*
- B. Analogies to Ponder (vv. 11-14)

Conclusion

- A. God Knows Us!
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

ing and celebrating his reign (examples: 93:1; 95:3; 96:6, 10; 97:1; 99:1).

* Psalms 101–106 speak of the people’s responsibilities in various ways and tell Israel’s story in ways that challenge complacency. Psalms 103 (today’s text) and 104 fit within this grouping, as they encourage readers to continue being a community of praise.

I. Call to Worship

(Psalm 103:1-5)

A. What to Do (vv. 1-2)

1a. Praise the LORD, my soul;


The word *praise* translates a Hebrew word that overlaps in meaning with other Hebrew words. Psalm 104:35 is particularly interesting in this regard. Its translation, “Praise the Lord, my soul. Praise the Lord,” conceals the fact that different words stand behind the two translations of “praise” there. But their meanings do overlap. Reflecting that fact seems to be the intent of the psalmist.

Other words in this same grouping that reflect the imperative to *praise the Lord* include those translated “honor” in Psalm 22:23, “glorify” and “exalt” in 34:3, and “extol” in 68:4. All speak of lifting worship to the only one who is worthy of it.

The phrase *my soul* reveals the individualistic, personal element of the psalmist’s self-challenge. We see this reflected further in the half-verse that follows.

1b. all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

The second half of verse 1 stands parallel to the first half. The parallel elements are arranged in an X-shaped pattern like this:

Praise the Lord, my soul
 
all my inmost being praise his holy name

Unlike the verse before us, the phrase “praise the Lord” repeated in the last three verses of Psalm 103 (not in today’s text) is decisively plu-

ral. What the psalmist finds appropriate for himself applies equally to his fellow Israelites. But he begins with self. A life of regular, sincere worship draws us closer to God. The fact that God’s *name* is *holy* hints that we are to be so as well (compare Genesis 1:26-27; 1 Peter 1:15-16, quoting Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2).

2a. Praise the LORD, my soul,

The first half of this verse is identical to the first half of verse 1, just considered in both Hebrew and English.

2b. and forget not all his benefits—

The second half of verse 2 adds a negative imperative alongside the positive one of Psalm 103:1b. Worship of God includes, even requires, an accurate recall of who God is and what he has done (compare Psalm 77:11). Forgetfulness in this regard—whether intentional or otherwise—invites God’s wrath (compare Deuteronomy 6:12; 9:7; Judges 3:7-8; 1 Samuel 12:9; etc.). The history of ancient Israel testifies relentlessly to the fact that forgetfulness is a precursor to sin and apostasy.

The Hebrew word translated “benefits” occurs four times in the Psalter. In the other three places, its sense is decidedly negative (Psalms 28:4; 94:2; 137:8). Putting those three negative senses alongside the positive one here, the idea is that the faithful person should remember that God sorts out the effects of human behavior, blessing those who strive toward righteousness and visiting wrath on the wicked.

What Do You Think?

How does blessing the Lord guard against forgetting what we ought to remember about him?

Digging Deeper

What daily habits can you cultivate to bless the Lord continually?

B. Why to Do It (vv. 3-5)

3. who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,

The next several verses feature a series of action verbs that describe how God relates to humanity. The psalmist begins by speaking of

the completeness of God's works toward humanity as he deals with both issues of the spirit (*sins*) and the body (*diseases*). This combination does not necessarily argue that sin causes disease (or vice versa). God-as-healer is a major theme in the Psalter (examples: Psalms 6:2; 30:2; 107:20; 147:3).

4. who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,

In a general, abstract sense, we want two things for our lives: (1) we want to avoid negative things that take us down, and (2) we want to embrace positive things that move us forward. The verse before us specifies that God is the key in both areas. He's not a one-dimensional god, as are the fictitious deities of paganism. The word *crowns* also appears in the past tense in Psalm 8:5, and its cross-connection with Hebrews 2:7 is interesting and insightful.

5. who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

God provides abundantly. Two extraordinary features of food are its sheer variety and the forms of enjoyment it gives when not consumed to excess (Proverbs 23:2, 21). This bounty is an important symbol of God's goodness (compare Psalm 23:5).

Various comparisons with eagles occur about two dozen times in the Old Testament. The image projected is almost always one of strength or capability (examples: Exodus 19:4; 2 Samuel 1:23; Job 39:27; Isaiah 40:31).

What Do You Think?

Which blessing in Psalm 103:3-5 is most evident in your life today?

Digging Deeper

If all these blessings seem lacking, can you assume you are being punished? Why or why not? Cite verses that support your answer.

II. Acknowledge Divine Grace

(Psalm 103:6-14)

A. Facts to Consider (vv. 6-10)

6. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.

The series of action verbs continues, extending

the ideas of the two previous verses. The characteristic actions or concepts of *righteousness* and *justice* are closely related, coupled as we see here about 50 times in the Old Testament (examples: Psalm 33:5; Isaiah 5:16; Jeremiah 9:24).

God expects the way he supports *all the oppressed* to be a guide to how the Israelites were to do so as well (examples: Psalm 106:3; Isaiah 5:7; Jeremiah 22:3). This expectation is no less important in the New Testament era (John 16:8; Acts 24:25).

Like Father, Like Son?

A promotional video from the 1960s features a series of short sketches where a father is doing something his young son imitates. First, it's the father painting the house, with the son imitating the brush strokes. Then it's the father washing the car, with the son imitating the same. Finally, the man reaches for his pack of cigarettes to light one up. As he does so, the son reaches for the pack, and the ominous voice-over intones, "Like father, like son?"

Human fathers don't always set the best example. But our heavenly Father does! And the emphasis he puts on something determines our priorities. Consider his actions of ensuring *righteousness* and *justice*. These aren't just idle descriptions of his character; they set an example for us to follow. In what way can you please God this week by doing so?

—R. L. N.

7a. He made known his ways to Moses,

We come now to the conclusion of the series of action verbs begun in Psalm 103:3. What is different here is that the verbs shift from what God was doing in the psalmist's present to what God did in Israel's beginnings via *Moses*. The fact that humans lived hundreds of years before the psalmist (David) reveals God's consistency. He *made known his* unchanging *ways* in giving his law at Sinai. Those laws were to guide the path of redeemed lives.

7b. his deeds to the people of Israel:

As the second half of the verse points out, the words of the Torah are not merely words to live by. They also use *deeds* by God as a model for *the*

people of Israel for those requirements (examples: Leviticus 19:2; Exodus 20:11). We have heard of people who don't "practice what they preach." That may be true of humans, but it is never true of God!

8. The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

This verse deepens the psalm's connection to the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt. The verse at hand quotes Exodus 34:6, probably the verse of the Old Testament most quoted within the Old Testament itself (examples: Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Psalm 145:8; Jonah 4:2; compare James 5:11).

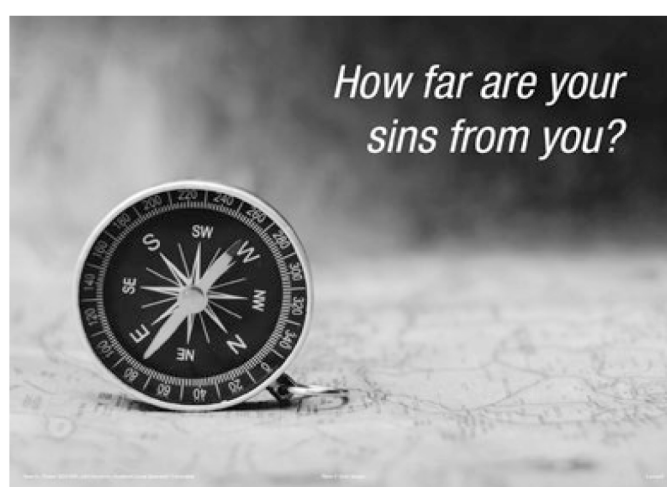
In its historical context, the quoted verse comes after the notorious episode of the golden calf (Exodus 32). Moses pled for the people, asking God to forgive their idolatry and accompany them to the promised land. Thanks to Moses' intervention, God agreed to begin again with the people, as though their idolatry had never happened. By leading with patience and forgiveness, God made it possible for Israel to survive and, eventually, to flourish. And by reaffirming that great truth, the psalmist reminds the reader that the divine-human relationship rests on God's mercy, not human merit.

9. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;

The thoughts of this verse are also reflected in numerous other passages (compare Psalm 30:5; Isaiah 57:16; Jeremiah 3:5, 12; Micah 7:18). God's judgment of sin does not cancel out his mercy, and even times of punishment cannot be the last word (the notable exception is Jude 13).

Regarding a connection with Isaiah 57:16, that verse is part of a more extensive discussion of sin and redemption in which the prophet both notes how oppressed people can be, as well as the need for God to intervene on their behalf (Isaiah 56:9–59:21). God indeed does punish the guilty. However, he wants mercy to triumph as people repent (2 Peter 3:9). All this is reflected in the prophets' relentless message, which can be summed up in three words: *Repent!*

10. he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.



Visual for Lesson 8. While discussing verse 12, ask learners to consider reasons for the psalmist's confidence that God had removed "our" transgressions.

Once again, the parallelism that characterizes so much of Hebrew poetry is observed: the phrase *does not treat us* expresses the same thought as *repay us*. And *as our sins* expresses the same idea as *according to our iniquities*. Good news bears repeating! This verse does just that as it summarizes the previous observations about God's mercy. The clearest evidence of that mercy is how he deals with sin: the punishment is less than the sin deserves. Were he to treat sinners immediately as we deserve, our situation would be hopeless. "If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you" (Psalm 130:3-4).

A temptation might be to think of punishment-tempered-by-mercy in terms of "striking the right balance." But we should be cautious about our conclusions here. God's two primary attributes are his *holiness* (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8) and his *love* (1 John 4:8, 16). The fact that he is utterly holy requires that our unholiness (sin) be punished; the fact that he is love results in a delay of punishment so that sinners have time to repent (2 Peter 3). Furthermore, God's unmerited kindness guides an individual toward repentance (see Romans 2:4).

It's not a "right balance" in terms of God's actions being 50 percent sin-punishing holiness and 50 percent merciful love. Rather, when viewed across the entirety of salvation-history, God's actions reveal themselves to be 100 percent

in line with his holiness and 100 percent in line with his love. The requirements of both his holiness and his love ultimately are met in the death of Jesus on the cross. When sin's penalty was paid there, the requirements of God's holiness and love were both satisfied to the full (John 3:16; Romans 3:25-26).

How God Works

I heard a loud crash from the room where my daughter was playing, and I ran to see what had happened. Entering the room, I saw her standing before a pile of rubble that had once been ceramic figurines and handmade art projects. Their shelf lay on top of them. "I don't know what happened, Mom! It just fell off the wall!" my daughter exclaimed.

As we began the clean-up process, I told her that accidents happen. And we went back to our separate activities.

A few minutes later, she emerged from the room with a contrite look. "I have to tell you something. It didn't just fall off the wall," she said. "I was jumping, and I knocked it down." While I was unhappy that my daughter had lied to me, her obvious shame and regret went to my heart; I forgave her.

We have read thus far that God is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, [and] abounding in love." As we repent, he forgives and does not reward us "according to our iniquities." Do you forgive as God forgives you? See Matthew 18:21-35; Ephesians 4:32; and Colossians 3:13. See also the next two verses in our text. —L. M. W.

B. Analogies to Ponder (vv. 11-14)

11-12. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

These two verses allow us to explore the concept of parallelism a bit deeper, since there is more than one kind. Many instances of parallelism are easily recognizable as *synonymous parallels*, where the two lines under consideration say about the same thing using different words. That's the kind of parallelism we see in verse 10, above.

But now, we encounter what is called *alternate parallelism*. Rather than featuring the two lines of synonymous parallelism, an alternate parallel has four lines. Those four lines alternate as the third line repeats the first line in some way, and the fourth line repeats the second line. To the ancient mind, the distance between *the heavens* and *earth* (the first line) is as incalculable as the distance between *east* and *west* (the third line). These two lines begin two analogies completed by the second and fourth lines as the psalmist marvels that *so great is his love* and that *so far has he removed our transgressions*, respectively.

These features help us understand the text as the original writer intended. The ancient Israelites knew of the possibility of long journeys (compare Genesis 28:14; Jonah 1:1-3; etc.). But they also "knew what they did not know": there was more to encounter beyond where any Israelite had personally traveled, either to the east or the west. Likewise, the ancient Israelites knew certain things about the relationship between heaven and earth (compare Genesis 11:4; 28:12; Ecclesiastes 5:2; etc.). But again, they also "knew what they did not know," as the psalmist uses that fact to marvel at the incomprehensibility of God's removal of sin.

What Do You Think?

What role should guilt or shame play in the life of someone whose sins are so far removed?

Digging Deeper

How would you encourage someone who still struggles with these feelings after receiving God's forgiveness?

13. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

God shows the sort of compassionate mercy to us that a good parent does to a child. Parents gently educate, correct, guide, and encourage. The image of God as *a father* also appears in the Torah (Deuteronomy 1:30-31), wisdom literature (Proverbs 3:11-12), the prophets (Malachi 3:17-18), and the New Testament (2 Corinthians 6:18). Those

texts mention God's fatherhood as a way of calling the people to reconsider the direction of their lives. In Psalm 103, however, the emphasis is slightly different. Remembering that God works as a parent should comfort the reader in times of distress (compare Galatians 3:26–4:7).

What Do You Think?

What wrong ideas have you heard about what it means to fear God?

Digging Deeper

What does it mean to fear God as his children?

14. for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

The Hebrew word translated *how we are formed* occurs nine times in the Old Testament (here and in Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Deuteronomy 31:21; 1 Chronicles 28:9; 29:18; Isaiah 26:3; 29:16; and Habakkuk 2:18). In six of those other passages, the word speaks of a person's frame of mind; in two passages, the idea is that of someone's physical being.

The latter would also seem to be the case here if the word *dust* is taken to be a synonymous parallel with *how we are formed*. This conclusion is entirely consistent with the fact of the creation of humans in Genesis 2:7. The Creator knows his creation.

Moreover, God's mercy reflects his awareness of our limits. The fact that our bodies decay into dirt results from our limited life spans. God works with due regard for our limitations.

What Do You Think?

What encouragement can you experience knowing that God remembers our limitations as creatures?

Digging Deeper

What freedom might you experience if you remembered our human limitations?

Conclusion

A. God Knows Us!

Psalm 103 insists that God knows us. And because of that knowledge, he is compassion-

ate toward us. This cause-and-effect may be surprising because knowledge of another person's limitations can lead to estrangement, anger, disappointment, or even hatred. Those negative consequences present themselves because of our limited commitment to virtue and capacity for love. The contrast between the consequences of our knowledge and the consequences of God's knowledge could hardly be greater.

The amazing thing is that God's mercy creates the space in which we can come to know ourselves, each other, and even God. In Psalm 103, this commitment to merciful knowledge comes out in its reference to the story of the golden calf episode in Exodus 32–34. There, both God and Moses know the Israelites to be a stubborn and sinful people. Yet that knowledge should be cast against the backdrop of years of Egyptian enslavement as they try to cope with unexpected freedoms.

Psalm 103 and the texts that undergird it point to a different approach to the life of faith than we sometimes hear. These texts anticipate that life will be filled with signs of God's mercy. How would others see such signs in you?

B. Prayer

O God of mercy, you have given us every breath we have. You have taught us to think, question, wonder, and even protest when the world does not go as you intend. Hear our prayers for your world as you have heard them in the past. Teach us a little more daily about your compassion for all human beings, and may we be your hands and feet in that regard. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Expect signs of God's mercy.
Be one yourself.

How to Say It

Colossians	Kuh- <i>losh</i> -unz.
Deuteronomy	Due- <i>ter-ahn</i> -uh-me.
Ephesians	Ee- <i>fee</i> -zhunz.
Leviticus	Leh- <i>vit</i> -ih-kus.
Torah (<i>Hebrew</i>)	<i>Tor</i> -uh.