

Psalm 103 “Who Takes Away the Sin of the World”  
Psalm 102/103  
John 1:14-34

December 24, 2017

The first 12 songs in Book 4 of the Psalter have dealt with the *problem* at the end of Book 3 – the question in Psalm 89 as to whether God’s steadfast love to David will endure. Psalm 101 brought all that to a conclusion with “A Psalm of David,” that *sings* of steadfast love and justice – and how the Davidic King will establish justice in the city of the LORD.

So the answer in Book 4 is a resounding *yes!*  
God *will* be faithful to David!

But then Psalm 102 seems to bring us back to the question again!

Psalm 102 is one of my favorite Psalms,  
so I was sorely tempted to preach on it again!

At least we can sing it today!

Psalm 102 has one of the longest titles of any Psalm in the Psalter:

“A prayer of one afflicted,  
when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD.”

Psalm 102 takes us back to the themes of Psalm 90 –  
the prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Psalm 90 was a corporate lament,  
asking God to show mercy –  
to have pity on his helpless servants;  
asking God to restore his helpless people.

Psalm 102 returns to those themes.

Psalm 102 begins as an individual lament –  
but the “I” is woven together with the plight of Zion.

*My* affliction *is* the affliction of Zion.

Zion’s affliction is *mine*.

The solo voice that we have heard from time to time in Psalms 91-101  
remains prominent here as well!

When will God truly and fully restore Jerusalem?

This is why we used C. H. H. Parry’s tune *Jerusalem* with Psalm 102.

The tune was originally used with William Blake’s poem,  
“And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time”

the idea that Jesus visited England when he was a boy.

Blake’s poem includes the idea that *we* can build Jerusalem in England.

Psalm 102 reminds us that *we* do not build Zion.

“The LORD builds up Zion.”  
How does he build up Zion?  
“he appears in his glory;  
he regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer.”

Only God can save!  
But God *uses* the prayers of his people to save!

And so let us who are afflicted pour out our complaint before the LORD!

Sing Psalm 102  
Read John 1:14-34

Who is God?  
For that matter,  
who are *you*?

How do you fit into this universe?

How do you make sense of all the bad stuff that has happened to you?  
For that matter, how do you make sense of all the good stuff that has happened to you?!

Psalm 103 shows us that I cannot understand *who I am* –  
until I see myself in the broader picture – the bigger story –  
of what God is doing in history – what God is doing in his church – his people.

In our day we tend to focus on the individual.  
But God has always dealt with people in their broader social relations.  
Adam’s sin infected us all.  
You cannot escape from sin and death alone!  
You can’t “opt out” of the curse.  
You are stuck!  
And God promised Abraham that he would be a God to Abraham and to his Seed.  
And that through Abraham’s Seed, all the nations would be blessed.  
Do you want God’s blessing?  
There is *only one way to get it!*  
You need to submit to the Seed of Abraham! – our Lord Jesus Christ!

And how do you become part of Christ?  
How do you share the blessing of Abraham?  
Paul says how in Galatians 3:27-29,  
“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.  
There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,  
there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.  
And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring,

heirs according to promise.”

The only way to be joined to Christ – is to be joined to his people.

And that is where Psalm 103 starts.

While Psalm 101 is the only song in Book 4 to be called a *psalm of David*,  
Psalm 103 is the other song in Book 4 to be *Of David*.

If Psalm 102 brought us back to the themes of Psalm 90  
(a prayer of Moses, the man of God),  
then Psalm 103 connects Moses and David with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Watch the pronouns in Psalm 103:

It starts with *you* (addressing the soul in verses 1-5),  
and then moves to *them* (Israel, in verses 6-8),  
and then to *us* (in verses 9-14)  
and then to “man” – humanity in general (v15-16)  
to those who “keep covenant” in particular (v17-18)  
and to all the hosts of heaven and earth (v19-22),  
concluding back with the soul at the end of v22.

In this way, Psalm 103 shows you *who you are*  
and *how you fit* in God’s world.

### **1. Bless the LORD – The Benefits of the Kingdom (v1-5)**

*103 Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name!*

Verse 1 begins by calling the *self* to bless the LORD.

I want you to think about this.

How often do you talk to yourself?

I think most of us tend to talk to ourselves either when we are berating ourselves:

“You are such an idiot!”

Or when we are patting ourselves on the back:

“You handled that really well!”

But the Psalms regularly use this “self-talk” to reorient the self to *God*:

Psalm 42:5, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?”

Psalm 62:5, “For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence”

Psalm 104 will also begin and end with a call for “my soul” to bless the LORD.

In other words, this a common way that the Psalms speak  
as we stir ourselves up to worship God.

You know how this works!

There are days when you don't *feel* like worshipping God!  
There are days when "all that is within me" is heading the wrong direction.  
And so sometimes we need to kick ourselves in the soul –  
and just do it!

So how do you stir yourself up?  
How do kick yourself in the soul?

Well, verses 2-5 provide a good example.

Remember who God is – remember what God has done – and what God has promised:

<sup>2</sup> *Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits,*  
<sup>3</sup> *who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,*  
<sup>4</sup> *who redeems your life from the pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,*  
<sup>5</sup> *who satisfies you with good  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

What do we do with this?

After all, God *does not* heal all diseases.  
God does not give everyone good things all the time –  
sometimes we get *bad things!*  
Sometimes the person on the brink of death – simply dies.  
Sometimes the sinner does not repent – and so God does not forgive!

There are many echoes of Exodus 34 in this Psalm.

In Exodus 34, Israel had just broken God's covenant  
by worshipping the golden calf at Sinai.  
In Exodus 34, God forgives Israel and reveals his glory to Moses.

The word "forgive" in verse 3 connects with Exodus 34:9 – "pardon our iniquity and sin"  
Likewise, verse 8 quotes from Exodus 34:6-7,

where God proclaimed his Name: "the LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for thousands,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
but who will by no means clear the guilty..."

That last line, however, does not get included in Psalm 103!

So you might say that Psalm 103 is the “good-parts version” of Ex 34.

Psalm 103 has been used in the “name-it-and-claim-it” tradition:

“who heals all your diseases...”

can be used very badly!

I have known people who would use that line to say that if you are sick,

then if you believe, God will heal your sickness!

With the result that a continued illness becomes a sign of a lack of faith.

So how do we understand that line – “who heals all your diseases”?

We need to start with Exodus 15:26 –

when God had made the bitter water sweet,

he promised that if Israel would diligently listen to the voice of the LORD,

“and do that which is right in his eyes,

and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes,

I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians,

for I am the LORD your healer.”

In other words, if you want to understand what it means for God to heal all our diseases,

you need to see that the healing of Israel’s diseases

is closely bound up with Israel’s faithfulness

in *doing* all that God commanded.

(And of course, that is where Psalm 103 will go in verse 18!

To those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments)

God *is* the one who heals all your diseases!

That does not mean that God is your cosmic genie.

No, look at how these five benefits all fit together:

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...

You cannot cherry pick one thing out of the list!

These five go together!

He forgives your sins.

He heals your diseases.

He redeems your life from the pit.

He crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.

He satisfies you with good.

At Sinai God told Israel to put aside their fine clothes – and to humble themselves –  
because of their sin.  
But now God has dealt with their sin –  
and so God himself will crown you with steadfast love and mercy –  
he will feed and clothe you with so much good that you will be sated!

Psalm 103 takes Exodus language and exalts it!  
This is what God does when he restores his people from Exile –  
“so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

In Exodus 19, God says that he brought Israel to himself “on eagle’s wings” –  
and Isaiah 40:31 uses the same image to speak of the return from Exile.  
So when Psalm 103 says  
“so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” –  
it is again connecting the Exodus with the return from Exile.

At the same time, the eagle is contrasted with the owl and the lonely sparrow of Psalm 102.  
The lonely sparrow of Psalm 102 was a cry of one who is *waiting* for God to come.  
The eagle of Psalm 103 is the song of one who sees *by faith* the coming of the Lord!

When God restores the fortunes of his people,  
sin is forgiven,  
diseases are healed,  
we are redeemed from the pit,  
crowned with steadfast love and mercy,  
satisfied with good things.

When do you someone forgiving sin, healing disease, raising the dead?  
Psalm 103 is talking about what happens when God’s kingdom comes.  
Psalm 103 is talking about what happens  
when the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

Psalm 103 is what *Jesus does*.

And you see this even further in the first “who is God” section in verses 6-8:

## **2. Who Is God? Righteousness and Steadfast Love to Moses (v6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> *The LORD works righteousness  
and justice for all who are oppressed.*

Righteousness has to do with how you order your community.  
Justice has to do with how you make particular decisions.

The LORD works righteousness – he does what is right –  
he sets up his community in a way that is right and good and fair –

and he judges particular cases in a way that is right and good and fair.

And the LORD works righteousness and justice  
*for all who are oppressed.*

So often, our communities are ordered in a way that privileges those with power.

If you are a person *without power* –

you have undoubtedly discovered this!

And this is why those who claim to follow Jesus

must make sure that we working to order our communities in such a way  
as to protect the weak and rescue the oppressed.

And I'm not just talking about government here.

I'm talking about our homes – our workplaces – our church – our neighborhoods –  
the places where we live – where we have a say in how things are run!

What are *you* doing to work righteousness and justice for the oppressed?

Not – what do you think the government should do –

but what are *you* doing?

How are you using your influence, your connections, your wealth, your home, your car,  
for the sake of those who are oppressed and helpless?

If you want to know what this looks like,  
look at what God did in the Exodus:

<sup>7</sup> *He made known his ways to Moses,  
his acts to the people of Israel.*

<sup>8</sup> *The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

Verse 8 reminds us of Exodus 34 – after the golden calf at Sinai –  
where God was slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But at the same time, verse 9 makes it clear that God *does chide* –  
he *is* angry for a while!

### **3. Who Are We? He Does Not Deal with Us as We Deserve (v9-10)**

<sup>9</sup> *He will not always chide,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.*

We saw this in our series on Lamentations this fall.

God is *right* to be angry with us.

But God's anger is itself a function of his *love*.

Because God *loves* the world,

therefore God is *angry* with those who destroy his world!

Think about it:  
if you love your child,  
what happens when someone starts beating up your child for no reason?  
You get *mad!*  
And you are right to be mad!  
Someone is harming one that you love!  
Why is God angry with you?  
Because God loves you.  
He created you for himself –  
he made you so that he could be in relationship with you.  
And so when you walk away –  
and you don't just *walk* away –  
you have been harming other people – *others* whom God loves!  
So – you don't love him – you don't love others –  
you have *not* been seeking righteousness and justice in your relationships –  
you have been seeking your own selfish pleasures!

So *because* God loves you  
he is *angry* with you.

But...

<sup>10</sup> *He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

Verse 10 makes it abundantly clear that if God dealt with us according to our sins,  
we would be in deep trouble!

If God repaid us according to our iniquities,  
we would be wiped off the face of the earth!

The picture is clear:

the wages of sin is death.

Book 3 of the Psalms showed us this –

Lamentations showed us this –

the Exile shows us this!

If God deals with us as we deserve, then he will send us to the pit forever!

But God has not dealt with us in this way.

The verb in the second half of verse 10

is related to the noun “benefits” used in verse 2.

Of course, you cannot say in English,

“he has not “benefited us” according to our iniquities”!

But God loves us.



He didn't want to destroy us!  
And so verses 11-14 show us the *tender love* of God the Father:

#### 4. The Father's Tender Love (v11-14)

- <sup>11</sup> *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*  
<sup>12</sup> *as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*  
<sup>13</sup> *As a father shows compassion to his children,  
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.*  
<sup>14</sup> *For he knows our frame;<sup>[a]</sup>  
he remembers that we are dust.*

God made the man of dust from the ground.  
We are dust – and to dust we return.  
Our only hope is that God *does something* to deal with our sin.

And that is the promise of verses 11-14.

How high are the heavens above the earth?  
How do you measure the distance between the earth and the highest heavens?  
We know of galaxies that are millions of light-years away!  
How far is east from west?  
Keep going east and let me know when you “arrive” in the west!  
(It's almost as though the Psalmist knew that the world was round!)

And God does this because of his great mercy – his *compassion*  
(the word compassion in verse 13 is the same word translated “mercy” in verse 4).  
The God who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy  
does this because he is a compassionate and merciful father!

When your son does something *really dumb* –  
and gets himself into a heap of trouble –  
sure, at first you may be angry!  
But when you see how much he is suffering for his own actions –  
what happens?  
Your heart melts!  
You cannot bear to see him endure such agony.

You want to do something for him!

How often, as fathers, do we feel helpless – because there is nothing we can do  
to bring comfort to our children!  
All we can do is give them a hug and let them know that we love them.

But God is a Father who not only has compassion –

he also has the wisdom and power to be able to *do something* about our helpless estate!

What does God do?

How does God remove our transgressions?

Verse 13 contains a hint that will become clear when the Word became flesh!

After all, God has been *Father* before ever man existed!

In the beginning was the Word,

and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He is the eternal Son – the only-begotten Son of God.

And so, as Augustine put it,

“Man's maker was made man

that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother's breast;

that the Bread might hunger,

the Fountain thirst,

the Light sleep,

the Way be tired on its journey;

that Truth might be accused of false witnesses,

the Teacher be beaten with whips,

the Foundation be suspended on wood;

that Strength might grow weak;

that the Healer might be wounded;

that Life might die.” (Augustine, Sermon 191)

Because

### **3. Who Are We? We Are Like the Grass (v15-16)**

<sup>15</sup> *As for man, his days are like grass;*

*he flourishes like a flower of the field;*

<sup>16</sup> *for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,*

*and its place knows it no more.*

Having seen so clearly who God is at the center of Psalm 103 –

the Psalmist returns to the question of who *we* are –

only this time, it is not just “we” Israelites.

Now it is “man” – humanity.

Because the man was made from dust –

not just Israel, but all humanity.

*Your days* are like grass.

This draws on the imagery from Isaiah 40 (and Psalms 90 and 102)

about how man is fleeting.

The flower of the field is a powerful picture.

Don't think about our wildflowers in the Midwest!

We get so much rain in the summers,

that our flowers continue for months!  
Instead, think of the high desert –  
where the occasional rain will produce a glorious array of color –  
that will wither and fade a few days later.

I spoke with my father yesterday.

He is 85 years old –  
and his Alzheimer's has progressed to the point where all of his days are the same.  
He commented on how he had no news to share –  
since nothing ever happens in his life.

Verses 15-16 would say that he is more right than he knows!  
Your days are like grass.  
You flourish like a flower of the field –  
here today – gone tomorrow –  
we disappear into the mists of time...

At the moment, you may think that you are *something!*  
You have places to go – people to see – something to be!  
And then you die – the wind passes over you –  
and you are gone.  
200 years from now, who will remember you?

But Psalm 103 does not say this to tell you that you are irrelevant!

No, Psalm 103 says this in order to redirect your focus to what really matters!

Remember what we saw earlier about righteousness and justice?

Well, it comes back again in verses 17-19:

## **2. Who Is God? Steadfast Love and Righteousness to Children's Children (v17-19)**

<sup>17</sup> *But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,  
and his righteousness to children's children,*

<sup>18</sup> *to those who keep his covenant  
and remember to do his commandments.*

<sup>19</sup> *The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,  
and his kingdom rules over all.*

God shows his steadfast love and righteousness to those who fear him –  
and to their children's children!

God is a faithful Father who has ordered his universe in steadfast love and righteousness.

Verse 19 particularly emphasizes the *kingdom* of God –  
how the LORD has established his throne in the heavens.

We are not just talking about God's universal rule as the Creator.

This is God's redemptive rule – the kingdom of grace and of glory.

And Jesus is the faithful Son – he is the covenant-keeping King –  
the one who remembered to do all that his Father commanded.

This language of “remembering” keeps coming back!  
Verse 2 – “forget not all his benefits”  
Verse 14 – “*he* remembers that we are dust”  
Therefore, he shows steadfast love (verse 18) –  
“to those who remember to do his commandments.”

Psalm 103 reminds us that there are two parts to our salvation.  
The first part is that while we were helpless – while we were sinners –  
Christ died for us.  
If God is angry forever – then we have no hope!  
But God has provided a way for his anger to be satisfied –  
for his anger to come to an end!  
That's why John told us,  
“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

But then the second part is that God calls *us* to keep his covenant  
and remember to do his commandments.

We are to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus.  
We are called to walk in the same steadfast love and righteousness that saved us!

Yes, you are a passing shadow in the course of history!  
But Jesus came in our flesh!  
The eternal Son of God joined himself to the nobodies of history!  
He became a nobody – so that we might become a somebody.

He remembered that we were dust,  
so that *we* might remember his commandments to do them.

The steadfast love of the LORD is so great – and so enduring –  
that it transforms us!

We, who once were strangers and aliens from his covenant –  
now are transformed into covenant-keepers.

And so the Psalm concludes by coming back to the call to “bless the LORD” –  
but this time, it is no longer simply “my soul” that blesses the LORD!  
Now I understand who I am and how I fit into God's world –  
into God's purposes for history!

## 1. Bless the LORD – The Beneficiaries of the Kingdom (v20-22)

<sup>20</sup> *Bless the LORD, O you his angels,  
you mighty ones who do his word,  
obeying the voice of his word!*

<sup>21</sup> *Bless the LORD, all his hosts,  
his ministers, who do his will!*

In Isaiah 40:26, the “host” of heaven refers to the stars.

There is a long tradition of connecting the stars of heaven  
with the angelic hosts.

It would not surprise me if there was some truth to that!  
After all, the angelic hosts obey God as unceasingly  
as the stars move in the heavens!

So the angels bless the LORD as they obey the voice of his word.  
The starry hosts bless the LORD as they serve his will.

Indeed,

<sup>22</sup> *Bless the LORD, all his works,  
in all places of his dominion.*

And if *all* his works should bless the LORD –  
if all under his lordship should bless his holy name:

what about you?

What will *you* do with the LORD of heaven of earth?

The Father who loved you and who sent his Son to die –  
so that whosoever believes in him might not perish,  
but have everlasting life!

*Bless the LORD, O my soul!*