



Standalone Lesson – Learning to Think and Feel in the Psalms

Text: Psalm 103

Date: August 6, 2023

Main Idea: God’s kindness to us is specific and vast and he gives us words for our gratitude.

Personal Study Guide

READ PSALM 103

Highlight – What stands out?

Last summer, we looked at the first eight psalms in the book of Psalms. As we looked at the psalms, we learned that there are general categories for the psalms. Though there are other categories we could point out, there are three major categories that the majority of psalms fit into.

- **Psalm of Orientation** – Telling us how life should be (psalms that exalt God and give us a big view of him and his work in the world). Some psalms of praise are in this category.
- **Psalm of Disorientation** – Telling us how life is (lament, suffering, and sorrow).
- **Psalm of Re-orientation** – Telling us what life will be like when we're delivered. Sometimes these are psalms of thanksgiving or praise after a psalm of disorientation.

These two standalone lessons will be heavy application and response largely because the psalms are heavy on emotion and application. The psalms are a response to life—in fact, many psalms are directly related to a specific event that happens in the historical books (like Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 12). So they are meant to be applied to our lives.

1. As you read Psalm 103, what type of Psalm is this one?
2. Where is God in this psalm? What are his actions? List all the ways you see him move.
3. What do you learn about the human condition in this psalm? List all the ways you see humanity on display.
4. Write down everything you notice about the psalmist's gratitude and praise.
5. What emotions come up as you read this psalm?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Are there categories to the praise mentioned? Or themes?
2. Who is the psalmist talking to in verses 1-2?
3. Do you notice a structure to this psalm? There seem to be two alternating perspectives in this psalm. The psalmist goes back and forth between them.
4. Hyperbole is used in poetry frequently, even in the psalms. In verses 3-19, there are parts of the psalm that speak to God doing something in entirety (like healing disease or working justice), yet we live in a broken world where disease still ravages, and injustice still has a foothold. Look up Psalm 1-2 (which many consider is the introduction to the book of Psalms) and then look up Psalm 150 (which many consider is the conclusion). How do both these bookends make Psalm 103 entirely true, even when it's not true right now?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. Of all the things mentioned in this psalm, which is most personal to you? Do you have a story of God healing you from a disease? Or forgiving your sins? Can you think of a time where you knew he was good to you and it led you to praise him?
2. The psalmist says to “bless the Lord, my soul.” We tend to talk to ourselves a lot. When we’re having a hard time or even having a good time, we have an inner monologue. How does the inner monologue of Psalm 103 change how you think about your circumstances?
3. Look back at Psalm 103. Is there an attribute of God, or an action he performs in this psalm, that stands out to you and encourages you? Is there a truth you can share with someone else this week?

Respond – What’s my next step?

Gratitude is a discipline that is best honed and expressed together. Use these questions to discuss in your class time how you can grow in gratitude.

1. Make a list of at least five things you are grateful for. When you are done making the list, thank God for the things he has provided for you. How does the list change your perspective?

2. Make a list of five attributes of God that you are grateful for. How does this list change your perspective?

Commentary: Taken from Mark Futato Commentary on Psalm 103

N. Psalm 103

NOTES

103:5 life. The word *'adi* [TH5716, ZH6344] (“jewelry”; cf. Isa 49:18) is problematic in context (see, e.g., NIV, “desires”; NASB, “years”; and NKJV, “mouth”). NLT’s “life” presumes a simple emendation to *'od* [TH5750/2967.1, ZH6388/3276] (duration), which is likewise used with a pronominal suffix in 104:33 in parallel with *khayyay* [TH2416/2967.1, ZH2644/3276] (my life); see Allen 1983:18.

TH Tyndale-Strong’s Hebrew number

^{ZH} Zondervan Hebrew number

cf. *confer*, compare

NIV New International Version

NASB New American Standard Bible

NKJV New King James Version

TH Tyndale-Strong’s Hebrew number

^{ZH} Zondervan Hebrew number

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103:22 *Let all that I am.* The Hebrew text has the exact same wording as is found in 103:1 and 103:2. The repetition of language brings the psalm back to the starting point and provides closure to the whole.

COMMENTARY

Psalm 103 is the first of four songs of praise that form the conclusion to Book 4. It is appropriate for the book that celebrates the kingship of the Lord to come to a close on such a high note of praise. Two invitations to praise the Lord (103:1–2 and 103:20–22) surround the central section of the poem (103:3–19), which contains the praise called for in the introduction and conclusion. The central section shares with Psalm 102 the alternating perspectives of the individual (103:3–5) and the community (103:6–19). The good things the Lord does for the individual are celebrated in the context of the good things God does for the community as a whole.

Individual Invitation to Praise the Lord (103:1–2). Twice the psalmist exhorts himself to praise the Lord. This praise is to be wholehearted praise, owing to the holy character of the God who is praised. Specific aspects of God’s holy character will come to expression in the central section of the poem. And God’s holy character is revealed in particular through “the good things he does,” which are enumerated in 103:3–19.

Praise for the Lord’s Benefits (103:3–19). This section is a detailing of the good things God has done—the benefits people receive from him. Who are these benefits for? And what are the benefits God grants?

The benefits are for “those who fear him.” This is stated three times in 103:11, 13, and 17. “Those who fear him” are those “who follow his ways,” in the language of 128:1. They are “those who are faithful to his covenant” and “those who obey his commandments,” according to 103:18. While this faithfulness and obedience must be real, it cannot be perfect, for if perfection is required, no one would receive the benefits. As the proverb says, “Who can say ... I am pure and free from sin?” (Prov 20:9). That sinlessness is not meant is also abundantly clear from the first and chief benefit enumerated: “He forgives” (103:3).

He Forgives Our Sins. We do not always obey God’s commandments. God does not get angry at us very quickly, and even if he does, he does not remain angry very long. If the Lord did hold on to his anger over our sins, who could ever survive (130:3)? No one could, for our sins are a burden that would crush us. They can trouble us in body, mind, and spirit. But they need not, because God forgives. He forgives comprehensively: “He forgives all my sins.” We can bring any and all sin to the Lord, knowing that he will forgive them all. He forgives thoroughly: “He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west” (103:12). He does not forgive partially, leaving us with some guilt to carry. His forgiveness is a complete removal of sin. He forgives

because of his character: “The LORD is compassionate and merciful” (103:8) and “The LORD is ... tender and compassionate” (103:13). It is just like God to forgive! It is in perfect keeping with the “unfailing love” that fills his heart. He forgives in response to our frailty: “For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust” (103:14). Just as God was merciful to Paul because Paul acted “in ignorance and unbelief” (1 Tim 1:13), so he is merciful to us. We are like grass—here today and gone tomorrow—but the Lord’s great love “remains forever” (103:17).¹

His unfailing love “is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth” (103:11). His unfailing love is seen in his willingness to sacrifice his Son for our sins (John 15:13) and to raise him up for our forgiveness (Rom 4:25). As we believe in a God of such love, mercy, and grace, we have no hesitation in coming to him just as we are with all of our sins, for we know how freely he forgives.

He Heals Our Diseases. The benefit of healing² follows the benefit of forgiveness. We have seen that there are times when sickness is the result of sin (see Pss 32 and 38). The corollary is that healing can come in the wake of forgiveness. This is why James says,

Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. (Jas 5:15–16)

Since sickness can lead to death, God not only heals but also redeems his people from death. So bountiful is God in his “love and tender mercies” that his healing is followed by his filling of our lives with good things and blessing us with the youthful vigor necessary to enjoy them (see 1 Tim 6:17).

Universal Invitation to Praise the Lord (103:20–22). The theme of Book 4 and the theme of the book of Psalms is “The LORD is king!” (93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1; 102:12). His throne is in heaven. This does not mean that God is unknowable and unreachable. It *does* mean that God is above all of life and is not subject to its vicissitudes. Since he is above all, he can and does rule over all (see Ps 93). As the one who rules over all, he can forgive all and heal all.

Since his throne is in heaven, the angelic inhabitants of heaven are invited to join in the praise of God. Interestingly, these angelic beings are repeatedly described as living in conformity to God’s ways. They “carry out his plans, listening for each of his commands” and “serve him and do his will” (103:20–21). In so doing, they provide us with an exemplary response to the loving and merciful character of God. Since he rules over everything, “everything he has

¹ See Ps 102 for more on the contrast between human transience and divine eternity.

² See Brown 1995 for a full discussion of God as healer.

created, everything in all his kingdom” (103:22) is invited to join in his praise. Vast and innumerable though this praising choir may be, individual people in all their humanness are not insignificant. Each person’s praise counts: “Let all that I am praise the LORD.”¹

Additional Resources:

Podcast: Help Me Teach the Bible on Psalms

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/help-me-teach-the-bible/mark-futato-on-psalms/>

¹ Mark D. Futato, [“The Book of Psalms,”](#) in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 7: The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 325–328.