

Pastor Joe McKeever

"Your words have stood men on their feet." Job 4:4

The Old Testament's "love chapter": Psalm 103

Posted on **February 19, 2019** by **Joe**

"Bless the Lord, O my soul" (Psalm 103:1,22).

If I Corinthians 13 is the "love chapter" of the New Testament, then Psalm 103 gets the honor for the Old Testament. It's all about the love of God, from beginning to end.

Over twenty years ago, I preached a series of messages from Psalm 103 and encouraged our people to memorize it. Memorizing this great psalm is one of the better things I've done in my brief years of ministry. I love Psalm 103 and recite it often, usually in the car when I'm alone or lying in bed unable to sleep.

One day, going through my grandmother's Bible—Bessie Lowery McKeever (1895-1982)—I happened to notice she had written beside verse 17 "One of Papa's favorite verses." Her "papa", who would be my great-grandfather, whom I never met, of course, was a Baptist preacher named George Marion Lowery. I know almost nothing about this beloved ancestor other than Grandma used to say when she was a little girl, he would take her with him when calling on church families. "If the father was at work and the wife there by herself," she would tell me, "he could not enter the house. But with me along, it was all right." Grandma grew up to be a powerful force for the Lord and may have been the greatest Christian I ever knew. I'm so happy to own her Bible which is well marked-up and written throughout.

Back to Psalm 103. Here are a few observations to encourage a reader to discover it for oneself...

One. Psalm 103 begins and ends with the same refrain.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul."

Is there another chapter in Scripture that does that? I can't think of one.

Two. Psalm 103 reminds us that God has commanded us to "Bless the Lord."

God told Israel that once they were inside the Promised Land and settled it, "When you are eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:10).

When we were children and ignorant, we were bothered by the Lord of the universe commanding that He should be blessed. "What kind of God is it," we wondered, "who is so insecure that He needs constant praise?" Then, in time, as we matured, we learned that while the praise is directed toward God, the benefits are all ours.

When we praise God we are the ones who are blessed.

At a future time, we will try to produce a written piece for this website listing all the benefits of our praising God and blessing Him. Suffice it to say for the moment, praise blesses us. When we bless God, we are strengthening ourselves.

Three. Psalm 103 encourages us to "talk to ourselves."

The psalmist—David or whoever—is giving himself a good talking-to. "Hey you! How about blessing the Lord. There are so many reasons to do so."

I imagine I'm not the only one who has stood in front of the fridge saying to myself, "All right, Joe. Close the door. You're not hungry and that ice cream will still be there tomorrow."

I love the psalm that goes, "Return to thy rest, O my soul, for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with you!" (Psalm 116:7) That speaks to my anxiety about the future. "Get back in your hole, anxiety!" it seems to be saying, "for the Lord has always taken care of you!" Indeed He has.

Four. Psalm 103 lists five of the chief blessings we have from the Father....

There are so many, but these are the top five.

–1. He pardons our iniquities. The forgiveness of our sins is such a great gift from the Father to us! *I'm free!*

–2. He heals all our diseases. All healing is from our Creator. Any physician will tell you, "I don't heal you. I try to set things in order so your body can heal itself." And who did that but our magnificent Creator. *I'm whole!*

–3. He redeems us from the pit. He delivers us from death. *I'm alive forever!*

–4. He crowns us with lovingkindness and compassion. He certainly has flooded my life with evidence of His love and mercy. You too? *I am loved!*

–5. He satisfies your years with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle. (The NKJV reads, “He satisfies your mouth with good things...”.) We are the recipient of such gifts. And yes, even in our old age—I’ll be 79 in a month!—our youth is renewed. We are still “full of sap and very green,” as Psalm 92:14 puts it. *I am forever young!*

Five. We must not forget these benefits.

I love the way Psalm 68:19 puts it: “Blessed be the Lord, who daily loads us with benefits.” Does He ever. “Count them one by one” the song says.

Forgetting seems to be what we humans do best. Again and again, God told His people to “Remember, O Israel...” When they were in the wilderness, God told them that eventually they would arrive in Canaan. And when they did, when they moved into houses they did not build, harvested crops they did not plant, and enjoyed a land they had received as a gift, they must “beware, lest you forget the Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:12).

And notice this from 2 Peter 1:8-9. “If these qualities (which he had just mentioned) are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful... But he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.”

Our Lord gave to His church two mnemonic aids, baptism and the Lord’s supper. “Do this in remembrance of me,” He said.

Six. Psalm 103 now remembers something God taught Moses, something unique in Scripture.

“He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel” –103:7. With this, the psalmist refers us back to Exodus 34:6-7 where God hid Moses in the cleft of the rock and passed behind him, calling out these amazing words:

The Lord, the Lord God! Merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth! Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sin! By no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth generation.

Don’t miss this. This is unique. It may be what inspired the Apostle John to give us this memorable line: “God is love” (1 John 4:16).

There’s nothing else like this in Scripture—God telling us His very nature—except for one thing: This confession from God is repeated all through the Old Testament! Later Moses quoted this back to God in his prayer for Israel. “You said you forgive iniquity, transgressions, and sin, Lord, so here’s where You prove it!” (My version of Numbers 14:17ff).

Moses prayed this. Nehemiah sang it (Neh. 9:17). David sang it (Psalm 86:5,15; Psalm 145:8, and of course Psalm 103). Joel preached it (Joel 2:13). Snippets of it are found throughout

Jeremiah. And when Jonah was complaining because God had not wiped out Nineveh as he had preached and hoped, he said, "This is why I didn't want to come in the first place. Because I knew you were a compassionate God" and he quotes from Exodus 34:6-7 (Jonah 4:2).

It's worth noting that no one quoted the full text of the Exodus passage. For one thing, we can assume they did not have what I do: a Bible spread out beside them to which they could refer. They were going from memory. Let this be a reminder to us not to be slaves to the exact text when we are preaching something, but always to stay with the spirit of the written word. "The letter of the law killeth; the Spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Seven. Psalm 103 gives us four statements on the dimensions of God's love.

1. "As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness (the Hebrew is *chesdh*, a concept which includes grace and mercy) toward those who fear Him" (103:11). You and I are part of the first generation to send our eyesight into outer space and learn just a smidgen of the size of this universe. If that is the measure of God's love for us, we must conclude, then it is infinite and inexhaustible. (Remind you of Romans 8:35-39?)
2. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (103:12). And how far is that? It's infinite also. (Had this said 'as far as the north is from the south,' we might be in trouble. You can walk north and eventually come to a place where the next step will start you walking south. But you can walk east forever and never come to a place where you are now walking west.) We are reminded of all the places in Scripture telling us what God does with forgiven sin: Buries it in the deepest ocean (Micah 7:19), remembers it no more (Hebrews 10:17 among other places), and nails it to the cross (Colossians 2:14).
3. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him (103:13). The idols of nations around Israel were harsh, cruel, or apathetic. But God is like a father. A Father, which Jesus taught us to call Him (see Matthew 6).
4. But the mercy (lovingkindness) of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting to those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep his commandments.... (103:17) This was "Papa's favorite verse." And well might it be mine, since I am mentioned here. "Children's children" would refer to Grandpa's daughter Bessie, then to her firstborn Carl (my father), and then to his seven children. Of those seven offspring of Carl and Lois Kilgore McKeever, two of them—Ronald and Joe—have been preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ for a combined total of 113 years (and still counting!). God is so good.

Eight. In the middle of these exclamations of God's infinite love, we have the contrast with humans. Poor, pitiful, wonderfully made, and exquisitely designed man.

"For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are but dust. As for man, his days are as dust...."

God is under no illusion about you and me, friend. The One who created us knows we were made with humble stuff. He knew He was getting no bargain when He saved us. When we fail Him, the only one surprised is us. That's why from the beginning, God built forgiveness into the system.

All through the Old Testament, for instance, we have examples of God's forgiveness, always involving sacrifice on altars. The 20th chapter of Exodus, which gives the first listing of what we refer to as the Ten Commandments, ends with provision for forgiveness at an altar. "An altar of earth you shall make for me, and you shall sacrifice on it..." (20:24).

This is the answer to anyone claiming that the Ten Commandments are sufficient for our salvation. If that were so, why did God give provisions for an altar in the very same chapter? He knew—did He ever!—that while His standard was what it was and unchanging, man would not be able to keep it. "He remembers we are but dust." So, from the beginning, He provided a way home. A path by which we may return into His presence. How wonderful He is!

Nine. We are constantly reminded to fear God. What does this mean?

Answer: Not a dread or phobia, although those who are living against Him and leading others astray should indeed be in fear. "It is a fearsome thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

This is the good kind of fear, which we would call a respect and devotion. I've gone outside at night at our farm in Alabama where I was raised. Since we lived 60 miles from a big city, there was no light pollution and the sky could be as black as...well, midnight. But the heavens were ablaze with the light of a million stars, and I would stand there in awe, overcome by all I was taking in. I was speechless. Psalm 8 comes to mind.

This is the fear which God wants.

We remember the line from Narnia about Aslan, the lion king who represents God. The child Susan grows anxious at the thought of meeting a great lion. "Is he quite safe?" The answer comes: "Safe? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

(We recommend Mark Buchanan's book "Your God is Too Safe: Rediscovering the Wonder of a God You Can't Control.")

Ten. We praise God for His sovereignty.

"The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty reigns over all" (103:19).

The throneroom of Heaven is the control room of the universe. The center of everything. Want to see what it looks like? Turn to Revelation 4. After John passes along the Lord's letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, he is then led upward through a door leading into Heaven itself. And there he beholds the center of the universe. And—don't miss this—it's just exactly the way we would have anticipated it, while at the same time, like nothing we could have anticipated!

And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning... Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal....

The center of the universe is scary. It's power. It's heart-stopping.

You are in the very presence of the living God. Pull off your shoes. This is holy ground and you are a puny human.

No wonder Psalm 103 ends on the high note of a call to all beings everywhere to stop and praise God.

–Bless the Lord, all you His angels.

–Bless the Lord, all you His hosts. This might include seraphim, cherubim, and other creatures which are neither human nor angels.

–Bless the Lord all you works of His in all places of His dominion. This means everyone, everything, everywhere.

This final admonition reminds us of the scene in Revelation 5. At first, it's an ensemble made up of four "living creatures" and the 24 elders who sing. They are praising the One who is "worthy to take the scrolls....for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood..."

Next, the ensemble is enlarged. "I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders. And the number of them was 10,000 times 10,000 and millions. And they are singing, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power...."

And then, if that wasn't enough, this heavenly choir is joined by "every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea and all that are in them." He leaves no one and nothing out as they sing "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne. And to the Lamb, forever and ever!"

Amen.

Don't you love Psalm 103? It fits right in with all the other glorious passages of God's word.

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4 THOUGHTS ON "THE OLD TESTAMENT'S "LOVE CHAPTER": PSALM 103"



Patti Bunham

on **February 19, 2019 at 10:19 am** said:

This blessed me greatly! Thank you!



Patrick

on **February 19, 2019 at 10:52 am** said:

Sir, Joe, I salute you. Though its my first time meet your teachings, i get inspired and enlightened. May God bless you. Count me following you Man of God. I know nothing still need people like you to teach me



Richard Beal

on **February 19, 2019 at 3:01 pm** said:

This year Psalms 103:1-2 is our benediction for each service. For an Hispanic church, it has special meaning in this day and time.



Joe

on **February 20, 2019 at 9:13 am** said:

Richard, that's great. Now, do not stand before the congregation and READ those verses. Recite them from memory.

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