

Psalm 103

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
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
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like the grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.
The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.

Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,

obeying the voice of his word!
Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!
Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

What a rich psalm! I'm going to zoom in on one particular aspect today - the steadfast love of the LORD, which this psalm mentions 4 times. Psalm 107:43 says, "Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love of the LORD." So let's pursue wisdom together by considering the steadfast love of the Lord.

Let's start with a definition. "Steadfast love" is our English translation of *hesed*, a Hebrew word used 242 times in the Old Testament. It's primarily used to describe God's love toward us, but it is also used to describe our love for each other. *Hesed* is a word unique to Hebrew that combines "love" and "loyalty" (Paul Miller, *A Loving Life*, 24). It has also historically been translated as "loving-kindness" or "mercy."

It's hard to capture the full meaning of *hesed* in English, but if we combine the all those translations, we can come close. "Steadfast" means resolutely firm and unwavering; firmly fixed in place; not subject to change. "Kindness" means favor, affection, or the state of being sympathetic, helpful, and forbearing; "kindness" also implies deeds (you "do someone a kindness"). "Mercy" means compassion or forbearance; a blessing that is an act of divine favor. And "love," according to Merriam Webster, is "a strong affection for another arising out of personal ties; a warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion; unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another." So *hesed* is an unwavering, unchanging, sympathetic, forbearing, devoted affection, worked out in deeds.

With that definition in mind, let's read Psalm 103:6-8. These three verses refer to a very specific point in Biblical history, recorded in Exodus. Flip with me to Exodus 19, and listen for echoes of Psalm 103 as I read. (Read vv. 1-9, 16-20). So here are the Israelites, camped out at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain into the Lord's actual presence, but the people at the base can still see and hear this mighty display. Up until this point, God has been showing his steadfast love. He's been faithfully keeping his promises to some pretty unfaithful people. Despite the unbelief of Abraham, the treachery of Jacob, the boasting and subsequent suffering of Joseph, God has not stopped loving this family that he has claimed as his treasured possession. And he's made them a great tribe, like he promised. But they're not in the promised land; they've been enslaved in Egypt. So God shows his steadfast love again; he raises up Moses, and he uses plagues, and the Passover, and the parting of the Red Sea, and his own presence in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night to miraculously deliver his people. They're in the wilderness, but they're on their way to the promised land. At this moment, after he has redeemed the Israelites from the pit of slavery, when he has worked justice for them in their oppression, God chooses to renew and expand his

covenant with them. He speaks the Ten Commandments to Moses, but in the hearing of all the people. And here, for the first time, Scripture records God declaring his steadfast love. In the third commandment — forbidding idols — he says, “You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Ex. 20:5-6).

This commandment is a mini-covenant in itself. It reveals God’s character, and it makes a promise. He is a jealous God. And isn’t it right that a God who loves with an unwavering, unchanging devotion should be jealous, should forbid bowing down to, serving idols - should forbid casting our affections at the feet of created things that will never show us true *hesed* love? So because of who he is, he promises to justly punish those who hate him, those who reject his loyal devotion, but - amazingly - to show steadfast love to thousands of those who love him and keep his commandments. So there’s a call here to the Israelites, and to us, to keep our side of the covenant - to love him and to obey him.

After God finishes speaking the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel seem ready to keep this covenant. They fear God, so much so that they ask Moses to speak to him alone; they’re afraid to have God speak to them any more (see Ex. 20:18-21). So now, as Ps. 103:7 describes, the people get to see God’s acts - they see the cloud of God on the mountain, they see the lightning, they hear the thunder and the trumpets heralding God’s presence - but only Moses draws near to where God is, only Moses gets to hear God’s voice, as God makes his ways known to Moses. Exodus 21-31 record all the specific revelations God makes to Moses. Meanwhile, the people who were rightly fearing God, who pledged that “All that the Lord has spoken we will do,” - well, it turns out they’re not very steadfast. In Exodus 32, we learn that while Moses is meeting with God, the people get impatient and anxious. They decide to make their own gods, and they melt down all of their gold earrings to make a golden calf to worship. I mean, how ridiculous does this seem? God is right there in the dark cloud on the mountain; lightning and thunder and trumpets are right there. And God has *just* told them that he is jealous, that he forbids idols, and that his steadfast love is for those who love him and obey him. And now they’re making an idol, out of their earrings! Really??! But how often do we actually do this. We encounter God - we have that awesome quiet time where God’s word seems so clear and apt, or we feel like the words in that worship song are God’s Spirit speaking right to us, or we go to that conference and we pledge “All that you say I will do!” But then - even though God’s still *right there* - we get worried by daily life, or we get impatient for God’s next action, next revelation, and our right love of God just fades away. Then we disobey. We take the things we use to adorn ourselves - our accomplishments, our looks, our relationships - and we turn them into the things we worship.

So how’s God going to respond to this idolatry? What’s he going to do to these people who just spit at his steadfast love? This matters, right? Because we need to know how the God of steadfast love responds to *us* when we aren’t steadfast. God has a

righteous, just wrath against these people who have hated him, who have (as God himself puts it in Ex. 32:8) “turned aside quickly out of the way that [he] commanded them.” But Moses implores the Lord, “reminds” him of his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, this covenant of steadfast love. And God agrees; he “relents.” (Ex. 32:11-14) Then Moses makes a startling, audacious request. Moses, who has already been talking with directly with God, who has just had to ask forgiveness on behalf of the idolatrous Israelites, begs God to make an even deeper revelation of himself. “If I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways” (Ex. 33:13). “Please show me your glory” (Ex. 33:18). And God agrees! Look at those astonishing words in v. 17: “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Now God is too glorious, too holy, for Moses to look directly at him and live, so God protects Moses in a cleft of the rock as he reveals himself. Recall, this is not the first time God has proclaimed his name to Moses. From the burning bush, he told Moses, “I AM”, which becomes the Hebrew name for God, “Yahweh.” Anytime you see the LORD in capital letters in our English Bible, that’s a translation of the Hebrew Yahweh, I AM. So now at Moses’ request, God again makes a special proclamation of who he is. Look at Ex. 34:5-7. “The Lord, the Lord, [I AM, I AM,] 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, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” The declaration God made in the third commandment is now revealed to be his proclaimed name, his most glorious, holy identity. Moses quickly bows his head in worship. Or as Psalm 103 puts it, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!”

Maybe you’re thinking, that steadfast love stuff sounds great, but what about that “visiting iniquity on the third and fourth generation” stuff? Let’s turn back to Ps. 103:8-12. In Scripture, God’s steadfast love is tied to his holiness. Consider as a small sample some of the other Psalms we’ve studied this year. Ps. 33:4-5 “For the word of the LORD is *upright*, and all his work is done in *faithfulness*. He loves *righteousness* and *justice*; the earth is full of the *steadfast love* of the LORD.” Ps. 98:2-3 “The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his *righteousness* in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his *steadfast love* and *faithfulness* to the house of Israel.” God is righteous, just, and holy. God is also full of steadfast love and faithfulness. That’s why God is also merciful and gracious and slow to anger. He loves us, and he loves us perfectly, despite the fact that we fail to keep our part of the bargain. We turn aside quickly from God, but he never turns away from us. One biblical scholar says that “The [wide] meaning of the Hebrew *chesed* ...is due to the history of God’s dealings with his covenant people. The continual waywardness of Israel has made it inevitable that, if God is never going to let Israel go, then his relation to his people must in the main be one of loving-kindness, mercy, and goodness, all of it entirely undeserved. ... when we try to estimate the depth and the persistence of God’s loving-kindness and mercy. We must first remember his passion for righteousness. His passion for righteousness is so strong that he could not be more insistent in his demand for it, but God’s persistent love for his people is more insistent still” (Snaith, “Loving-Kindness” in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, 137).

So we see in verse 10 that “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” Why? Because he is *abounding* in steadfast love. Because as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love... And as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. So I was an English major; I love poetry. And the similes here are just beautiful. Imagine you’re standing at some point on earth with an unobstructed view. Maybe a mountain, but we live in the Midwest, so I’m going to go with a prairie. I’ve been reading the Little House books with my kids, and I’ve been trying to picture how the real prairie used to look. No hills, no trees, no buildings, for miles and miles. You look up, and there’s nothing but open sky above you - forever. That endless distance between you and the sky - that’s God’s steadfast love. Now you look east and you look west, and all you see are waving grasses all around you as far as the eye can see. That vast spread from horizon to horizon - that’s God’s forgiveness. His love is infinitely high, and his forgiveness is infinitely wide. And we have the privilege of knowing what the psalmist glimpsed in part - that the height of love and the breadth of forgiveness meet in the cross of Jesus Christ. As one author put it, “At the cross, God by no means clears the guilty, but, by visiting the iniquity of the fathers on his only Son, he displays his abounding *hesed*.” (Will Keynes, “God’s Grace in the Old Testament: Considering the *Hesed* of the Lord”). Our holy, righteous, just God is so determined to show his unwavering, unchanging, sympathetic, forbearing, devoted affection that he pays the greatest price to forgive us.

But it gets even better! God’s love is infinitely high and wide, and it’s also infinitely enduring. Look at Psalm 103:17. “But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting...” This unwavering, unchanging, sympathetic, forbearing, devoted affection NEVER STOPS. This is in direct contrast to us. We’re finite; we stop. In the preceding verses, God (through the psalmist) just compared us to grass, and to wildflowers. This may sound kind of flattering at first - pretty, green things! But it’s really not. It’s a comparison to show how fleeting we are. The wind blows and - poof! - we’re gone. Forgotten. God is the eternal I AM; we live very short lives in comparison to that. But even though this is an unflattering comparison, it’s not a gloomy one. Instead, it’s hope-giving. We feel how fleeting we are, right? We count those gray hairs, notice the creep of wrinkles. We’re very aware that we don’t have enough time in our lives to accomplish all that we want. When we’re honest, we know that we probably won’t be remembered for very long after we die. We know that we’re very, very finite. Yet the eternal, unchanging God sets his eternal, unchanging love on us!

There’s a bit of a caveat, though. Verses 11 and 17 both tell us that the steadfast love of the LORD is toward, or on, those who fear him. God’s love is infinitely high and everlasting, but it is not indiscriminate. Okay... So that means we want to fear God. But that can be a really confusing thing, can’t it? I want God to love me, so I’m supposed to be afraid of him? Actually, no. I’ve been reading Jen Wilkin’s book *None Like Him* (that’s a plug, by the way; this book is so good), and she has this extremely helpful explanation of the fear of the Lord. She says that Scripture “takes care to distinguish between the fear of God’s consuming wrath and the fear of God’s holiness. Both may cause us to

tremble, but only the second causes us to worship and repent. ... Worshipful reverence and awe, not cowering dread, define a right fear of the Lord. [This takes us right back to Mt. Sinai, doesn't it? The Israelites were cowering in dread at the base of the mountain, so they begged Moses to be their mediator; then, instead of worshiping God while Moses interceded for them, they starting unrepentantly worshipping an idol.] ... When we fear the Lord rightly, we do so not as those who are terrified of him. Christ, our Mediator, assures us that we may approach the throne of God with confidence. We do not tremble as the demons do; they rightly fear the wrath of God. Rather, we tremble as those who understand that God's wrath toward us is satisfied at the cross" (12). Ladies, the steadfast love of the Lord is on those who are awed by God, who tremble as those who understand that the cross is the place where the LORD is most holy *and* most merciful.

Back in our first look at the definition of steadfast love, we noted that *hesed* implies deeds, doing. God doesn't just declare his love; he *shows* his love. He shows his love by keeping his promises, even when his people don't keep theirs. He shows his love by rescuing his people out of slavery and oppression. He shows his love by forgiving us, even when we forsake him for idols of our own making again and again. He shows his love by dying for us on the cross. This is all more than enough. But there's this sweet, sweet extra demonstration of love that he makes. Look back at verses 2-4. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, 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...*" Now, I normally dislike princess language the way our American culture uses it today; it really grates on me when women prance around calling themselves princesses, as if that excuses all kinds of selfishness and vanity. But this verse makes me want to throw that baggage out and embrace what it means to be a true princess. Because God? He's the King. Verse 10 says, "The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." And this King of the universe? He has not just rescued us and forgiven us, but he has adopted us. He's made us co-heirs with Christ. Do you know what that makes us? That's right, ladies, that makes us princesses. Not vain, mincing princesses with sparkly tiaras, though. I picture that classic crown, with a thick gold circlet for the brow and matching gold bars that reach up to a cross at the top, with a thick velvet cap lining it all. Our Father King has given us a crown weighty with the precious metal of his steadfast love and velvety soft with his tender mercy, all topped with the cross of Christ.

As princesses, as beloved adopted daughters of the King of Kings, we have responsibilities.

Responsibility #1: We need to wear our crowns rightly. It does God no favors if we either indulge in false vanity or wallow in self-abasement. If you're feeling like you're good enough on your own merits, remember the Israelites quick fall from "All that the Lord says we will do!" to worshiping their own melted bangles. Stop worshiping the things you deck yourself out with, the things you think make you look so good, and look again at how awesome God is. On the other hand, if you're feeling like dust, like dirt, like a sinner who just can't get your act together - if you're feeling like, "Boy, my beauty, my

loveliness, my lovable-ness, it's just gone; poof, blown away in the wind" - remember that God is devoted to you because of who He is, not because of who you are or what you do. Because of Jesus, God says to you, just like he said to Moses, "you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

Responsibility #2: We need to fear God rightly, not cowering in terror but with reverent worship. He is holy and righteous and just. We are flawed and fleeting, but he sets his infinite, everlasting love on us. So let's bless his holy name with our whole selves! The Israelites trembled with terror at the foot of Mt. Sinai; let's tremble with gratitude at the foot of the cross. Let's sing and speak of who he is, the Lord merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He crowns us with steadfast love and mercy, so let's crown him with many crowns.

Responsibility #3: We need to love others rightly. God shows his steadfast love to us, and he wants us to imitate him by showing steadfast love to others. Remember, *hesed* love is not passive; it shows up in deeds, in actions. You don't feel *hesed*, you show *hesed*. Remembering how God showed his love to us, how he is faithful to us even when we are unfaithful, how he was loyal to us to the point of sacrificing himself to make us his treasured possession - go out and love those who can't or won't love you back. By God's grace and empowered by his Holy Spirit, love other flawed and fleeting people with an unwavering, unchanging, sympathetic, forbearing, devoted affection.

I'll close with this benediction from 2 Thessalonians 3:5 "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ."