

Reflections on Psalm 103

All the Psalms impart something precious to the soul of a believer. It may seem arbitrary to pick just this one to discuss as a Sunday School lesson. Yet, there's something about this one that goes to the core of biblical faith, to the center of who God is and how He relates to His beloved human creatures. It's this: God forgives sin.

You may be thinking to yourself, "Well, everybody who goes to church knows this. This isn't anything new." If you're thinking this, you need this lesson badly. Read on.

"Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. . . Who forgives all our sins . . . Who redeems our life . . . and crowns us with love and compassion . . . The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love . . . He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. 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. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him . . . From everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear Him . . . Praise the Lord, O my soul."

David, filled with the Holy Spirit, thought these thoughts for us. David knew what sin is. He knew how offensive sin is to God. We probably don't, though. To most of us, sin is a doctrine of the church that we accept as true. Yes, most of us realize that we commit sins every so often. Something inside of us erupts and we're aware it was wrong. If that's what sin is to us, we haven't really understood anything. I'd bet that to most of us, sin isn't the wicked, monstrous power that dwells within us and incessantly controls us in one hideous way or another.

We must understand this: Sin is an enslaving power; it controls our thinking, our loves, our will, our speech, our values and desires, indeed, the totality of our daily lives. It controls our entire person. We are, at the very core of our being, sinners. We sin because we can't *not* sin; we're sinners. We are helpless prisoners of our sin nature. We're all fundamentally at odds with our loving Creator and His holy will for us, worthy of nothing less than eternal condemnation. And so death reigns, because of sin, both in this existence and – unless God intervenes – in the next as well. And there's nothing we can do about it.

"All that is not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). "All!!" We're to love God supremely, with all our being, trusting Him and His will for everything. Anything less than that fails to glorify God, so is sin. Self-will, self-absorption, gossip, grumbling, worry, criticizing, lusts, and more, much more, it's all sin. Love of all that's not of God is sin. So the world of politics, of finance, of technology, of science, of *everything* . . . it's all sin. Failure to obey God, or the willful refusal to obey God or even to know what it is we're to obey, is sin. We can't understand forgiveness unless we first understand sin. It's our innate nature to sin.

Now let's recall what happened in the Garden. That first man willfully, knowingly, deceitfully disobeyed the clear command of His Creator. And what did God do? Annihilate them, as they deserved? No, he took an innocent animal, slew it, and made garments of the animal's skin to cover their nakedness. And so they lived on to not only have children and populate the earth, but to wonder at the mystery and goodness of God. Grace was on display in what seemed to be a very strange act. I suspect that all their lives (and they lived a very long time) that first couple never figured out what that act of God meant.

Grace was on display further on in Genesis, again and again, and continuing all thru Scripture. In all the books of the Bible, we are struck with the fact that God doesn't deal with His people as they deserve! Instead, He forgives them their sins.

Only a very, very great Being can forgive offenses. Lesser beings get revenge on those who offend them. Allah, the god of Islam, seeks revenge. The gods of the Gentile nations all get revenge on those who offend them. Satan always and only seeks vengeance. Humanity knows only vengeance. Only the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, forgives. That's because He is very, *very* Great. In fact, the most striking attribute of God is this very thing, He forgives. Only a very great God can rule His creation with total control yet allow sinners to have their way, even if they hate Him. Only a very great God can speak truth and expect some to acknowledge it as truth. Only a very great God can keep promises even though few people even know what they are or care. Only a very great God can be good – and only good – while practically the whole world practices only evil continually.

Only a very great God can trust people to love Him. Only a very great God can show grace, can sacrifice *Himself* to save sinners from condemnation. Only a very great God can love.

God's greatest glory is this, He forgives sinners. The story of the Bible is the story of a very great God who glorifies Himself by forgiving those who offend Him. The atoning work of Christ was necessary so that God would remain just while showing love in the form of forgiveness of sin. The cross was something God had to do because of His infinitely perfect Person. The cross was necessary for God. It was the resurrection and ascension of Christ that changes everything for us. It's the resurrection and ascension that imparts life to us instead of deserved death. It's the resurrection and ascension that allows the Holy Spirit to indwell us and empower us to put the sin nature to death, to overcome the control of sin, to release us from enslavement to sin so that we can live to the glory of God. All that God has in store for us in the future is because He is willing, first of all, to forgive us our sins.

Jesus spoke of His blood being poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). Peter pinpointed the forgiveness of sins as the essence of the Gospel (Acts 2:38 and again and again). In Paul's mind, redemption is the forgiveness of sins (see Ephesians 1:7 and Colossians 1:14). The author of Hebrews identifies the blood of Christ as that which obtains forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22 and 10:18). The forgiveness that David praised God for was made possible by the atoning work of Christ applied retroactively. (See Hebrews 11:40.) The forgiveness of sins offered in the Gospel turns (or *should* turn, anyway) our hearts toward God, resulting in repentance, gratitude, love and service to Christ. In Christ, we have not only the forgiveness of sins, but the promise of being made holy and fit to be in the very presence of God.

This is why David praises God. God is worthy of great and continuous praise, because love and all the ways that God's love expresses itself, is His glory. God glorified Himself at Creation. He glorified Himself in pronouncing judgment on sin. He glorified Himself in permitting His beloved human creatures (the people of Israel in the Old Testament and all the Gentile nations) to continue on the basis of a forgiveness that depended entirely on God Himself suffering humiliation and judgment. He glorifies Himself when we, forgiven sinners, forgive others their offenses. And He will glorify Himself in the future when we who understand and experience forgiveness are transformed into Christ's perfect, holy and beautiful image. May we live this present existence by careful obedience to the teachings and commands of Christ in anticipation of that glorious day when we're changed into the image of Christ!

God can forgive sin not only out of love. Other necessary attributes of God are revealed in the Galatians 5:22 verse on the fruit of the Spirit. God is long-suffering and self-controlled. Those essential attributes of God's wonderful Person make it possible for Him to forgive sin. Forgiveness isn't just pretending an offense didn't occur. It's not willfully forgetting an offense. No. Forgiveness is a deliberate, willful refusal to punish or retaliate for offenses. It purposely refuses to be resentful. It eschews acts of power and instead allows love to reign, seeking peace and harmony in a relationship. Forgiveness is God's glorious Person on full display.

There's more. Notice in Psalm 103 the many times that David refers to people needing to fear God. What's that all about? Commentators and preachers suppose that the "fear" of God means to reverence Him. Nonsense! God is dangerous. His moral perfection is like a blazing inferno. "Our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). The forgiveness He offers is to those who acknowledge that they've offended Him. **"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"** (1 John 1:9). We don't dare presume upon God or take Him (or His forgiveness) for granted. Not ever! We need to be continually meditating on God's Word to know how to please Him and how not to offend Him. This isn't legalism, by the way. It's essential to being in and maintaining a personal relationship. The forgiveness of sins by those who fear God is what makes possible fellowship with the eternal, living God – the goal of the Gospel.

"God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Romans 11:32). In sovereign goodness and wisdom, God has determined to display His greatness, His glory, by justly condemning all in sin, and showing forgiveness. If you've received the forgiveness of sins by trusting in Christ's Person and atoning work, give thanks to God and praise His holy Name. Continually.