

Abounding in steadfast love

Psalm 103

A sermon for the Season of Lent

Today our text is Psalm 103. We will deal with the first 13 verses. It begins:

¹“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!”

That “bless” really means “praise” and “O my soul” means with my whole person, as it goes on: “and all that is within me bless his holy name!”

²⁻³“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity [sins], and who heals all your diseases. . . .”

Note it is three times “**all**” – **all** his benefits, **all** your iniquity, **all** your diseases.

⁴⁻⁵“ . . . who redeems your life from the Pit, and crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagles.”

“The Pit” is death and the grave. We remember Isaiah 40:31: “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles.” And also Deuteronomy 33:27: “Underneath are the everlasting arms.”

⁶“The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.”

He is on the side of the downtrodden.

⁷“He made his ways known to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.”

He has acted in his covenant with Moses.

⁸“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

⁹“He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.”

He doesn’t bear grudges.

¹⁰“He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities [our wickedness, our sin].”

If he did, who could stand?

¹¹“For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.”

This phrase “the heavens are high above the earth,” reflects their thinking that there were two, three, or even seven heavens. They had the idea of the vastness of the whole cosmos.

¹²⁻¹³“As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions [sins] from us. As a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him.”

We see a certain kind of repetitiveness. The Psalm really repeats about twelve times the same thing. In Hebrew poetry, as we have noted before, there is parallelism. There is a similar kind of repetition in many of the hymns we sing. Our hymns often have refrains and phrases with slight alterations in verses that repeat. We can anticipate what follows. The psalms are like hymns. Here is this repetitive music, song, prayer, prayed by one person, nevertheless in the temple, a praise to the Lord for what he has done.

Of utmost importance in the Psalm is “steadfast love.” The Hebrew word for steadfast love is found in verses 4, 8, 11, and 17, and because of parallelism in the Psalm, we can say that basic point is made twelve times over. What does “steadfast” mean? We don’t use the word today so much, but if we go back to the Seventeenth Century, we find in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* that there was Mr. Steadfast. What is this about?

We can describe steadfast love in terms of three larger frameworks. **First, there’s the difference between a one-sided covenant and a two-sided covenant.** This is what Paul is describing in the third chapter of Galatians. We usually think that a covenant, which is an agreement, has two sides. The way we know of it and think of it is in Exodus 20:2 and following. There the Lord says to Moses: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Therefore you shall have no other gods before me.” It goes on with the Ten Commandments. He is the Lord who has done this, and this is the way you will act. That’s a two-sided covenant, but that is not the covenant that is meant in Psalm 103. This is the covenant with Abraham. Gen 12:1-6 states (paraphrase): “The Lord came to Abraham out of nowhere and said: ‘I have chosen you. I am going to make you the father of a great nation and in you and them all will be blessed.’” That is a one-sided covenant. That doesn’t say what you have to do. Nor is it conditional: “If you do this, then I will do that.” It simply says: That’s what I’m doing.

As we look at the history of Israel, we see the people fall away all the time. They know the covenant with Moses, but they fall away. In the Book of Judges there is some discussion whether it's fifteen or eighteen times that there's a judge, but after a while the people were tempted into idolatry and are taken away by some oppressor. Then the Lord sends another judge to rescue them. They don't seem to learn. It happens over and over. The history of Israel after that is the same.

The most daring statement of this, which is not mentioned in the Psalms at all, and is very cautiously avoided, is what happens in Hosea. He was not an obscure prophet. The prophets, including Hosea, not only spoke, they also did symbolic acts. Hosea 1:2 states: "The Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord.'" And Hosea actually did that. It goes on in that way for three chapters. It's a symbolic act, a way of saying: The Abrahamic covenant, the one-sided one: "In spite of who you are, I am in covenant relationship with you. I am sticking through in spite of you." It is the most astounding and daring image, one that we usually avoid. That's the covenant, the steadfast love that God expressed in the one-sided covenant.

The second image is fatherhood (Psalm 103:13). In the Old Testament there are only about seven times that God is called Father. Why so few? They were in a culture dominated by fertility cults in which there were all kinds of father and mother gods that had children on earth.

The Israelites wanted to make sure that no one confused what God was doing with that. Nevertheless, about seven times and in a remarkable way, the ancient Hebrews state that God is like this Father. One key place is Psalm 89:26: "He shall cry to me, 'Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.'" And Jeremiah 31:20. But again we come to Hosea. In this striking way in the eleventh chapter of Hosea it says, and this is the Lord speaking: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1). It goes on in Hosea 11:8: "How can I give you up?" "How can I destroy you?" And then in Hosea 11:9: "I will not execute my fierce anger . . . for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." That's that steadfast love that is the fatherly love of the Lord himself.

Many times in the Old Testament steadfast love and faithfulness are yoked together. You know this word in Hebrew for faithfulness, because you use it all the time. It's "Amen." Amen means: It's sure. It's set. It's certain. It's true. The steadfast

love of the Lord and his faithfulness, his amen, are the same thing and are yoked together and that's what is stated in Hosea 11.

There is another place in the Old Testament that we don't go to often, and it's Micah 7. The way that the book of Micah ends is very much like Psalm 103. The last verse, Micah 7:20, says this: "Thou wilt show faithfulness [that's Amen] to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham as thou hast sworn to our fathers from the days of old." There is that Fatherhood and that faithfulness.

In the third place, "steadfast love" has to do with east and west. Psalm 103:12 states: "As far as the east is from the west, so far will I remove your sins from you." We know Kipling's line: "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." Although he was contrasting Asian and American/European cultures, he may also have been echoing Psalm 103. That is just a guess.

If we think of east and west simply in terms of geography, consider this: If you were to go north to the North Pole, everything from that point would be south. But if you are on the Equator and go west, you never reach east. Or if you go east, you never reach west. "As far as the east is from the west." The Lord is Lord of everything.

In this same passage in Micah 7, just before the final verse, it says: "Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." That's basic. That is what Psalm 103 is saying twelve times over, especially in the last six verses.

What is it about? As we see what is in Psalm 103, and Hosea, Jeremiah, and Micah, we might rightly feel embarrassed. How slothful we are! We don't see the edges. We read about this: Yes, God is good, God is great. And so, what else? Ho hum.

Here is this remarkable statement of the all-ness that the Lord is over all, and he takes care of all, and that is part of this steadfast love.

And second there is the certainty, the fixedness, and that's this linking of faithfulness and steadfast love. "I'll never let you go, through thick and thin. You are mine. I have done this."

We learn in confirmation and seminary that the qualities of God are such and such, and that sort of dictionary knowledge is a mistake. It's not a static thing, but it is this active, steadfast love. It's like the Twenty-Third Psalm: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." And then, of course, it's forever, just as here it is that God who will not forever reckon our sins to us. Finally, it is this

incomprehensible, magnificent, superb grace, mercy, and love, all together, that is stated in these 13 verses. Amen