



UNLOCKING THE POWER OF

PSALM 103

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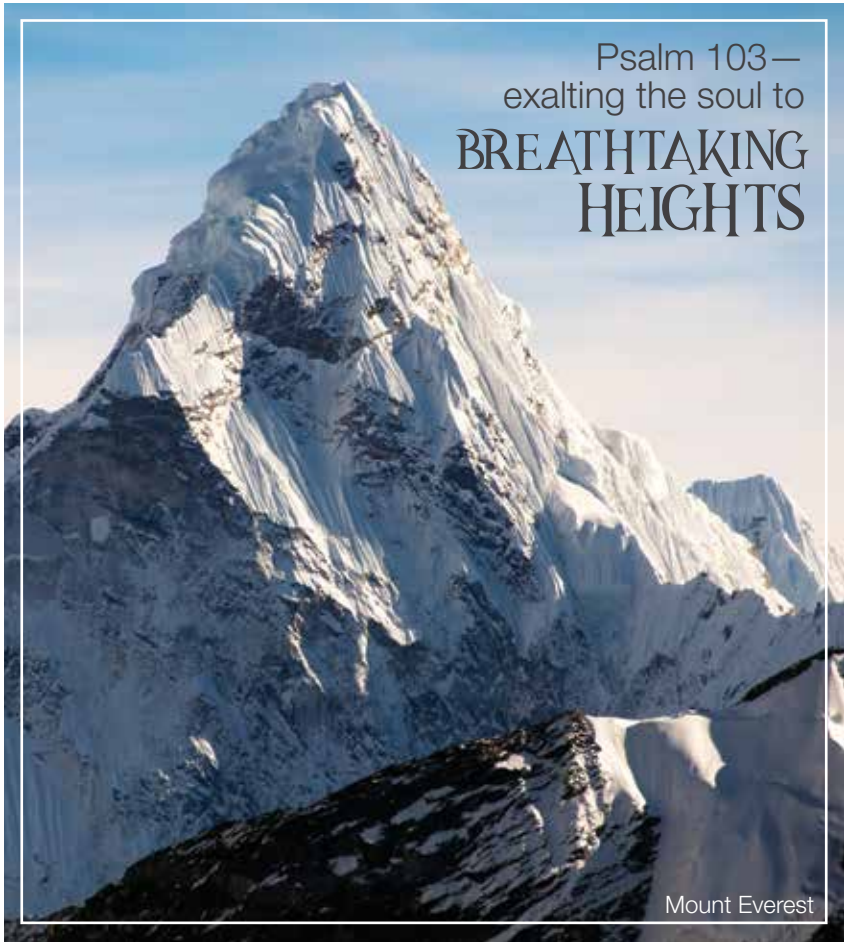
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PSALM 103

a Psalm of David



- 1 Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me,
bless His holy name!
- 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:
- 3 Who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases,
- 4 Who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with
lovingkindness and tender mercies,
- 5 Who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth
is renewed like the eagle's.
- 6 The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all
who are oppressed.
- 7 He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel.
- 8 The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding
in mercy.
- 9 He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever.
- 10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us
according to our iniquities.
- 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy
toward those who fear Him;
- 12 As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our
transgressions from us.
- 13 As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him.
- 14 For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.
- 15 As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field,
so he flourishes.
- 16 For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers
it no more.
- 17 But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those
who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children,
- 18 To such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His
commandments to do them.
- 19 The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom
rules over all.
- 20 Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength,
who do His word, heeding the voice of His word.
- 21 Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, you ministers of His,
who do His pleasure.
- 22 Bless the LORD, all His works, in all places of His dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!



HOW OFTEN IN THE SCRIPTURES do we find exactly the answers we are looking for, the encouragement we need, the direction we have lacked? The pages of God’s Book are filled with balm for our pain and delightful refreshment for our thirsty souls. Those verses that cause us to lift our eyes heavenward are often the very thing we need to refocus our attention from our own morass to the glory and majesty of our King.

Such are the verses found in Psalm 103. It has been called the Mount Everest of psalms, exalting the soul to breathtaking heights. Charles Spurgeon said, “It is as the apple tree among the trees of the wood, and its golden fruit has a flavor such as no fruit ever bears unless it has been ripened in the full sunshine of mercy.” Although it does not appear in its entirety in Jewish liturgy, Jewish prayer is peppered with verses and phrases from Psalm 103, and the rabbis have called it a masterpiece of biblical literature. Further, scholars believe it is the psalm most often turned to by Christian Bible readers.

A PSALM OF DAVID

We are told it is a psalm of David, and his heart of love for his creator is visible from beginning to end. Scholars believe it was written in the latter years of his life, perhaps after he had passed through a great crisis or as he struggled with illness toward the end of his life. Clearly, David is remembering, encouraging his own heart to look back on his life and recall the countless times that God had proven Himself to be his most faithful friend, deliverer and protector. As a young man and later as the king of Israel, David faced danger, treachery and death countless times and God never failed him. Recognizing his absolute dependence on the Lord filled his heart with gratitude, and he sang of the God to whom he entrusted his entire being.

Psalm 103 is indeed a masterpiece, filled with beautiful imagery, poetry and humility. However, I believe the underlying message of this gentle and encouraging hymn is actually one of power. As David sings of God's character and remembers the benefits He bestows on those that love Him, a picture emerges of a God who not only generously exercises His power on behalf of His children, but imparts power to them to live the righteous lives that please Him. Perhaps the best place to start as we take a closer look at Psalm 103 is where David started, by exercising the power of memory.



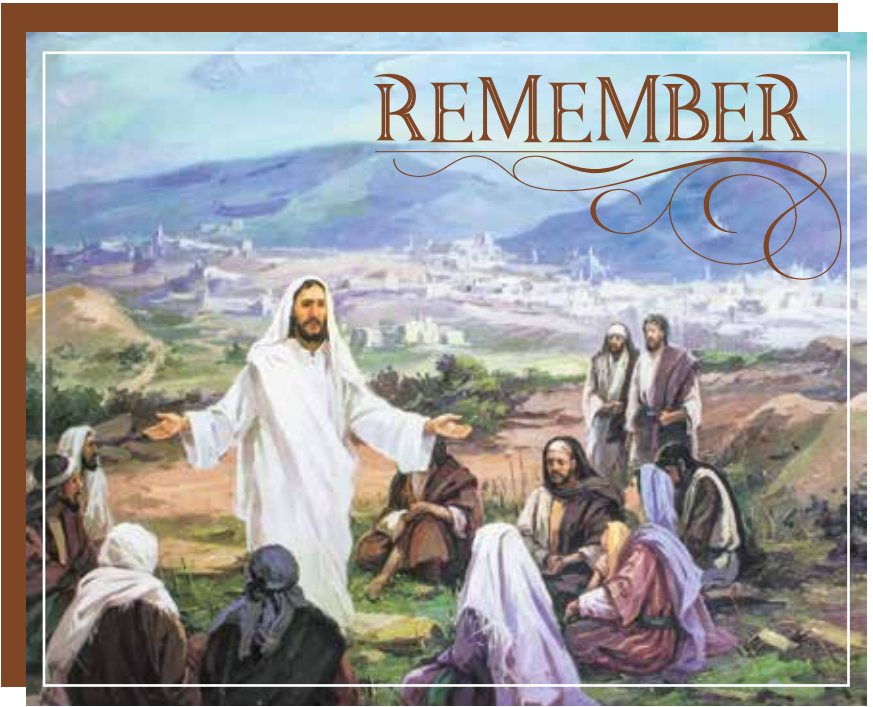
FORGET NOT...

The admonition to remember, or conversely to forget not, occurs over 200 times in the King James Bible. It is a constant thread throughout the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) and the rest of the *Tanakh* (Gen.–Mal.) and is given equal importance in the Writings of the Apostles (Matt.–Rev.). It seems that the human heart is forgetful, or at least quick to engage in selective memory. And sometimes, the memory plays tricks on people through an unintentional historical revisionism:

“And the children of Israel said to them, ‘Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full!’” (Exod. 16:3).

How quickly the Israelites had forgotten the truth of their experience in Egypt. God sent Moses as their deliverer in response to their own groaning as they cried out to Him because of the pain of their bondage. Yet just a few short years later, they somehow remembered their collective past as one of relative comfort.

REMEMBER



Again the Lord cautions the Israelites through Moses, *“Beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of Egypt from the house of bondage”* (Deut. 6:12). Once their wanderings were over and their stomachs full, the Lord knew they would be assailed by the temptation to forget that He alone had made their redemptive journey possible and brought them into a Land that contained everything they needed for a successful future. According to *Vine’s Expository Dictionary*, the Hebrew word translated “forget” in this passage means to be oblivious of, for want of attention. It wasn’t that the Israelites would make a conscious decision to leave God out of their lives. But as they became established and successful, they would become increasingly self-sufficient. Their memories of God and all He had done for them would slowly fade and be replaced with a prideful confidence in themselves.

In the Gospels, Yeshua (Jesus) frequently enjoins His disciples to remember. They are to remember the things He taught them, the examples He set before them, the miracles He did and the covenant relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that remained a part of their heritage. Yeshua knew the time would soon come when the future of what would become known as Christianity would rest in the hands of these twelve men. How important that their memories were keen, taking with them all that He had taught as they faced persecution and dispersion. When the Apostle Paul arrived on the scene, carrying the message of Yeshua to the Gentiles, he also constantly reminded his followers to remember.

Today, psychologists confirm what God made clear millennia ago: that it is human nature to forget, or for our minds to tweak the facts and create a false memory that helps us deal with a difficult past. Worse yet, they tell us, most people have a tendency to remember the bad and forget the good. No wonder God tried so hard to inculcate in His people the importance of remembering things as they really were. How quickly their story could have become one of an abandoned people wandering helplessly in the desert, thirsty and without food, while the reality of God's tender leading and care for them was lost in the abyss of the forgotten.

Lest we think we are somehow above the mistakes that the Israelites made, consider how often we forget God and attribute His benefits to our own ingenuity. How easy it is for us to trust in our employer, our salary, our insurance policy, our retirement plan, our doctors...and on and on the list goes.

But David understood the power of memory. "Forget not all His benefits," he said to his soul. And with each remembrance of deliverance from death, miraculous intervention, healing, or supernatural direction, his faith was strengthened. In remembering, he found the power to face the future. Knowing what God had done in the past gave him the courage and strength to carry on. It is the power of memory that will put gratitude in our hearts and praise on our lips.

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

"Remember, He forgives ALL of our sins," David told his soul. His life was rife with mistakes, from the insignificant to the pinnacle of evil when he arranged the death of a fellow Israelite because of his lustful adulterous heart.





Yet he reminded himself that no sin was beyond real repentance and real forgiveness. The Writings of the Apostles carry a similar message. The Lord has the power to cleanse us from ALL unrighteousness, we are told in 1 John 1:9.

What an incredible thought...that the God of all Righteousness embraces our foul and sin-laden hearts and washes them whiter than snow! And it is only because of who He is that that forgiveness is ours. He is merciful, the psalmist says, gracious, abounding in loving-kindness and slow to anger, filled with patience. He remembers that He formed us from the dust of the earth and without Him we are doomed. And so, David says, He doesn't deal with us as we deserve nor does He punish us according to our iniquities. He removes our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west. If you have ever set out to trace a route to the east on a world globe, you know that you will never end up going west. In other words, as He forgives our sins, they are erased, never to be seen again. The prophet Micah says He will cast them into the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19).

The Hebrew word used for forgiveness in Psalm 103 comes from a root that means to take lightly, or to toss aside. It means to remove or to pardon. You may have seen a movie or two about the innocent man on death row about to be executed. He waits for proof that he is not guilty, and at the last minute, the proof of his innocence is found and he is pardoned; the charges are dropped, the execution is cancelled and he is set free from the penalty of death.

To pardon means to propitiate or make peace with, to expiate or atone for, to cancel, to erase. When David's heart sings, **"Our chains are gone,"** we can almost hear him shout to his soul: **"We've been set free!"** And with that freedom comes remarkable power. It imparts the authority to stand against sin, to walk in righteousness, to be merciful as God is merciful and to forgive others as He has forgiven us.



OUR REDEEMER



David was also moved to remember the countless times that God had redeemed his life from destruction or in some translations, the pit. Here the psalmist uses the verb *ga'al* which means to redeem, deliver or avenge, acting as a kinsman. The *go'el*, or kinsman-redeemer, was the person who, as the nearest relative of another, was charged with the duty of restoring that relative's rights and avenging his wrongs. When *go'el* is used in the context of revenge for wrongful death, most translations of the Bible refer to him as an "avenger of blood."

Wikipedia tells us that the obligations of the *go'el* included the duty to redeem the relative from slavery, if the latter had been obliged to sell himself into serfdom (Lev. 25: 48–49); to repurchase the property of a relative who had been forced to sell it because of poverty; to avenge the blood of his relative; to marry his brother's widow in order to have a son for his brother, if the brother had produced no male heirs (Deut. 25:5–6) and to receive restitution if the injured relative had died (Num. 5:8). *Vine's Expository Dictionary* puts it this way:

The kinsman-redeemer was responsible for preserving the integrity, life, property and family name of his close relative or for executing justice upon his murderer. Such a tradition was still widely practiced during David's lifetime.

There is disagreement among some Christian commentators as to whether David was speaking of actual physical death in verse four, or if he was referring to spiritual death, *i.e.* the pit of hell. Most Jewish commentators believe that the verse was actually written to indicate both. David used a literary construct called synonymous parallelism, wherein the second line of a two-line poetic phrase repeats the first in different terms, emphasizing the overall meaning.

Verse 4

*"Who redeems your life from destruction,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,"*

God is our kinsman-redeemer, David says, redeeming our lives from destruction and crowning us with the glories of spiritual redemption as well. Throughout David's life, he had repeatedly faced destruction on a physical level, but he was also no stranger to the fear of spiritual death as he cried out to God, "*Do not take your Holy Spirit from me!*" (Ps. 51:11). In every instance, his kinsman-redeemer proved faithful.

How astonishing to consider the God of the Universe as our nearest relative, closer even than mother, father, sister, brother and even spouse; and even more amazing, to realize that He is bound by His own law to redeem the lives of those who are His! He has brought to bear the incomprehensible power that created all things in order to buy back His children from the grasp of enemies on every level.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

One of the most amazing and beautiful gifts God bestowed on humankind when He breathed life into Adam was the ability to speak. For centuries, scientists have studied that ability to determine if it is, in fact, the singularly most profound difference between humans and animals. Most now believe man is distinguished from his four-legged friends by the ability to communicate complex thoughts. Unlike the animal kingdom, language is the primary means by which humans exchange ideas. We talk to each other about the past and make plans for the future. We read and tell each other what is on our minds. We reason and solve problems collectively. We build social narratives that explain the world around us. We teach, and we learn from each other. And we argue about what is right and what is wrong.



According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, we use language to describe, communicate, categorize and explain. Language in this sense is a kind of translation of the world around us. But we also use language in a different way—not to describe what is, but to commit ourselves to some form of behavior in the future. When a bride and groom pledge themselves to each other on their wedding day, for example, they are not describing a marriage, but are binding themselves to a future.

It is this use of language, Rabbi Sacks says, not to describe something already in existence but to create something that didn't exist before, that links us to God. Just as He used words to bring the *natural* universe into being, we use language to create within our *social* universe, build relationships and change our thoughts and attitudes. Words have the power to create, the rabbi says, and that means words are holy. Perhaps that is why there are over 60 verses in the Bible admonishing us to guard our tongues and use wisdom in our speech.

A study done among primitive tribal people groups revealed that language even shapes cognitive ability. If the language had no word for blue, as is true of the

Himba of Namibia, the people were unable to distinguish blue from any other color. Without a name, they were simply unable to see it. Perhaps this explains the ancient custom of naming children with words of power, authority or certain talents or gifts. And perhaps a rose by any other name would not, in fact, smell as sweet.

Of course, we know the negative power of language as well. As much as we can build ourselves and others up by the words we choose, we can as easily bring destruction. Many are familiar with the story of the rabbi who instructed the man that had unjustly accused him to scatter the feathers of a pillow throughout their village. After doing so, the rabbi instructed him to go and pick up each of the feathers, an impossible task and a vivid example of the power of words. Once they are spoken, they cannot be erased, and whatever damage they have done is irreversible. We often think of the rabbi when we hear this story, or of the man whose words had done the damage. It is also important to remember the unnamed people who were influenced by the man's words. Everywhere a feather landed, someone's life was negatively impacted.

David understood the power of language. He knew it gave him the authority to direct his thoughts and change his attitude. In so doing, he continually brought himself into alignment with the reality of a God whose goodness was not open for debate regardless of his feelings or circumstances. It also brought with it the responsibility to speak with kindness, truthfulness and righteousness. The tongue needs taming and words are holy in that they have power to create, for good or ill. That makes language a powerful and even dangerous tool. In Psalm 103 David gives us a beautiful example of how to use that power as God intended.



PRAISE

Unlock the power of praise—it is
THE POWER OF HIS PRESENCE

THE POWER OF PRAISE

Psalm 103 begins with an exuberant exclamation of praise that encompasses David's entire being. All that is within him, all that he is, every cell of his body is engaged in blessing the holy name of God. It is no coincidence that this enthusiastic outburst occurs as David remembers all that God has done for him, the miracles that He has wrought on David's behalf. Gratitude fills his heart and he can respond with nothing but pure and passionate praise. At rock bottom, gratitude is what blessing is all about.

Over 200 times in the book of Psalms alone, the voices of God's people are raised in praise to Him, and the Bible is rife with examples of the power that such praise unleashes. In the book of Acts, we find Paul and Silas chained together in a dark and ugly Philippian prison. But as they joined their voices in praise, the prison was shaken, their cell door thrown open and their shackles unlocked. Jehoshaphat, who was facing certain annihilation from far superior foreign forces, positioned worshipers at the front of his army. As they led the Israelite soldiers, they sang to the Lord and praised the beauty of holiness. As they began to sing, "*Give thanks to the Lord for He is good,*" their enemies rose up and destroyed one another. And who can forget the vivid example of such power witnessed by the citizens of Jericho as their impenetrable city walls crashed to the ground in response to the praises of the Israelites.

God cherishes our praises and through them, such power is ours: to bring light into darkness and put the enemy to flight; to refocus our attention from our problems to the One who is worthy of our praises; to refresh us when we are tired and strengthen us when we are weak; to bring us into His presence in intimate oneness. Psalm 22 tells us that God inhabits the praises of His people. The power of praise is the power of His presence, and it can calm storms, quench fires and move mountains. And the Lord longs to make it ours.

Rabbi Sacks would have us remember that it is not just praising God that is powerful, but words of praise to those around us can have incredible and lasting impact as well. He reminds us of two of Jacob's sons: Reuben and Joseph. Two brothers, both strong and gifted, yet Reuben grew up in the shadow of his mother Leah's humiliation. So much so that his mother gave him his name, not his father as was the custom. Joseph on the other hand, was the apple of his father's eye, blessed with a garment worn only by tribal chieftains and praised as the favored son. Joseph became second in authority to the leader of the greatest nation on earth at the time while Reuben's life was one of failure and disappointment, and Rabbi Sacks believes it was Jacob's indifference to the son of the wife he didn't love that made the difference. The rabbi would have us be generous with our praises, encouraging and empowering those around us. As we do, he says, we will become the sunlight that will help them grow.

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A PSALM OF POWER

I have sometimes heard it said that we should praise the Lord for who He is and not for what He has done for us. That is a noble thought, but if we are thinking Hebraically, we will realize that the two cannot be separated. To remember what He does is to remember who He is and vice versa. And that is the key that unlocks all the power of Psalm 103. As we remember what He has done for us, we are remembering who He is, the Holy One of Israel, God of mercy and grace. And as gratitude overwhelms us, we can but shout, “*Bless the LORD O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name!*”

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