

How Do You Love Me? Let Me Count The Ways.

Psalm 103 February 7, 2024

In 1850, Elizabeth Barrett Browning published Sonnet 43: *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways*. The poem was an exploration of the love she felt for her husband, Robert. Lizzie's father did not approve, and so she and Bob not only courted but also *married* in secret. After the ceremony, they fled to Italy, where Elizabeth wrote her sonnets and the couple lived for 15 years.¹

Is Psalm 103, David writes a song that could be tilted *How Do YOU Love ME?* As the stanzas unfurl, we are reminded of the tender, unfailing, destiny-changing nature of God's love for us. This is no love expressed in secret - it has been on display for thousands of years for all the world to see. It is His great desire that people know about His love. The world keeps turning because God wants to shower us with His love and draw others into relationship with Him.

Psalm 103:1 - Of David. ¹My soul, bless the Lord, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

This song is directed inwardly. In it there are many Gospel truths and God is glorified - it's very worshipful - but David's message is to *himself*.

He speaks to his "soul." If you're like me, the soul seems like a ghostly thing. But in the Bible, the soul refers to your essential being.² It's your life, your mind, your will, your appetites, the things you yearn or thirst for.³ That which makes you *you*.

All of that, David says, should *bless* the Lord. Everything inside, all of my essence, every compartment of life. To bless means to praise, to kneel, to salute.⁴ David's desire is that the entirety of his being would be oriented toward praising the Lord and loving Him.

Who are we to bless? It's this Person Who loves us so well. Love has a name, and it's Yahweh. We can personally know Him because He has revealed Himself in His Word.

Psalm 103:2 - ²My soul, bless the Lord, and do not forget all his benefits.

Another way to read that last phrase is, "Do not ignore all His dealings."⁵ Derek Kidner says it seems David needed to rouse himself out of some sort of apathy or gloom.⁶ The best way to do that is to remember Who God is and what He has done. Remember His accomplishments.

¹ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/elizabeth-barrett-and-robert-browning-elope>

² Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

³ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ John Goldingay *Psalms Volume 3 (Psalm 90-150)*

⁶ Derek Kinder *Psalms 73-150*

We're prone to forget the Lord's dealings. There are warnings of God's people *forgetting* the Lord in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Hosea, 2 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation. When we forget, we slide into discontent, discouragement, resentment, frustration, doubt. The Biblical antidote is to remember what God has done, how He deals with His people, and to remember the *benefits* of salvation.

Psalm 103:3-5 - ³He forgives all your iniquity; he heals all your diseases. ⁴He redeems your life from the Pit; he crowns you with faithful love and compassion. ⁵He satisfies you with good things; your youth is renewed like the eagle.

How does He love me? Let me count the ways: He forgives, He heals, He redeems, He crowns, He satisfies, He renews. *What a list!*

Now, someone might say, "Wait just a minute. *I'm* diseased. *I'm* old and tired. The promises here don't ring true." How are we to deal with a phrase like, "He heals all your diseases?"

First of all, we see that phrase paired with "He forgives all your iniquity." Biblical poetry often uses a literary method called parallelism which connects one line with another. In this couplet, David would have us think about *spiritual* and *moral* disease in our hearts resulting from sin. God heals those diseases. He heals the inner man. He takes a killer like Saul and transforms him into a hero like Paul. Paul was cured of his hatred, his violence, his self-righteousness.

Of course - *in the end* - all our physical diseases *will* be healed. The effects of sin *will* be undone in the Kingdom. That counts! We want healing now, and that's ok, but we most definitely will be healed in eternity.

We're not surprised when an old Christian dies, right? None of us think, "Well, I'm a Christian, so I'll never get old and die." Neither should a Christian be surprised when our bodies get sick.

That's not to say God doesn't still heal today. He *absolutely* does. Just yesterday I was talking to a friend of mine from out of town. He told me that about a week ago doctors found a very scary lump in his wife. They prayed about it for a week. They went back to the doctor yesterday morning and the lump is just gone! That's not a coincidence and it's not because my friend has more spiritual power than someone else. God decided to heal in that situation.

But not every sickness is healed in the here and now. That same friend has a very difficult, chronic illness that has *not* been healed. But in the end, we will be raised incorruptible, unsick, full of glory and vigor. That's what God will do for us. And there we'll be crowned with love and compassion.

The Lord crowns us with *His* attributes. *He* is the King of love. *He* is compassionate. And *that's* what we're going to look like in the end. It makes sense that we should look more and more like that as we walk with Him. Christians are being conformed into *this* image.

Meanwhile, the Lord promises to satisfy us, not with *worldly* things, but with *good* things. "No one is good but God alone." Satisfaction in the Christian life comes from Godliness.

**Psalm 103:6-7 - ⁶The Lord executes acts of righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.
⁷He revealed his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel.**

God's active love is applied personally, nationally, and globally. We're told that He "executes acts of righteousness." He performs it and advances it and manufactures it and accomplishes it.⁷ He is always right and always righteous.

People see suffering or injustice in the world and some react by saying, "How could a God love," or "Why doesn't God." Those are hard questions, but those questions misunderstand the problem. *God* is always righteous. God is gracious even to the guilty. It is *man* who has fouled the earth.

Now God works tirelessly to save us from our own destruction. And He does not hide behind the scenes. He *reveals* and *demonstrates* His power and His truth. There He is, throughout all human history, accomplishing what He *said* He was going to do and telling us about it along the way.

People are intrigued with what billionaires do - the islands they buy, the places they go. The media always wants to know *why* did Elon Musk do this thing over here, or, what is Mark Zuckerberg building over there? They are enigmatic figures that we guess about.

We *know* Who God is. We *know* why God does things. He has revealed His ways and His deeds. We can go to the record right now and discover His plan, His principles, His character, His heart.

One of His righteous purposes is to execute justice for the oppressed. We want to be on His side of those issues. In the mid 1800s, there were some so-called Christians who tried to use the Bible to defend American slavery.⁸ What could be more unjust? I suppose those so-called Christians who try to defend abortion might take the cake.⁹

God is a God of justice for the oppressed. He not only saves, He pours *vengeance* out on His enemies. He is keeping score and the score *will* be settled one day.

These references to justice in the Bible have propelled some churches into what is called the Social Gospel, where the focus ultimately shifts away from the spiritual onto the physical. The emphasis tends to become using human means and worldly structures to temporally benefit those who are oppressed or disadvantaged. Not all of those efforts are wrong, but what *is* wrong is pouring all of our activity into *earthly* programs, which will inevitably fail or become corrupted themselves.

⁷ *A Concise Dictionary Of The Words In The Greek Testament And The Hebrew Bible*

⁸ <https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/>

⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/05/progressive-christians-abortion-jes-kast/590293/>

Our hope can't be in human programs, governmental systems, human leadership. I saw a flag outside a house the other day that said, "Jesus 2024: Our only hope." That's a good reminder of our spiritual reality. *We should* be as civically involved as the Lord leads us, *we should* seek to alleviate suffering, but the final *answer* isn't a law or a leader or a poverty plan. It is God's righteousness operating in many individual hearts that changes lives and exalts a nation.

Psalm 103:8-10 - ⁸The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love. ⁹He will not always accuse us or be angry forever. ¹⁰He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve or repaid us according to our iniquities.

God is so gracious, so faithful, so compassionate that *even Israel* is not abandoned by Him. God cannot and will not forsake Israel. Thank goodness, because we're no more deserving of His mercy.

Back in Exodus, after the incident with the golden calf, the Lord came, dealt with that situation, and then identified Himself with the quote David uses here: Slow to anger. Abounding in love.

Late in Jeremiah, after all the pronouncements of judgment, God says, "No matter what, there is no way I would reject Israel."¹⁰

That doesn't mean God doesn't care about sin. Look at the history of Israel and the disciplines they endured. David would be the first one to tell you that sin has terrible consequences. But, in wrath God remembers mercy. Even when His anger must break out against sin, He is compassionate.

Kidner writes, "God, infinitely wronged, not only tempers [His] wrath, but tempers justice - though at what cost to Himself, only the New Testament would reveal."¹¹

Our sin *demand*s death and wrath. But God said, "I'll pay the bill. I'll send My own Son to die so that I don't have to give these people what they deserve." And even though *we still go on sinning*, He still relates to us in loving, merciful compassion.

Psalm 103:11-13 - ¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his faithful love toward those who fear him. ¹²As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. ¹³As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.

David uses three pictures here: One spacial, one theoretical, one familial, all to illustrate the fact that God's love for you cannot be bounded. You can't hit the edge. There isn't an end.

Scientists recently discovered a new galaxy that is "baffling" astronomers. According to current space science theories it shouldn't be able to exist.¹² That galaxy is 300 million light years away. To

¹⁰ Jeremiah 31:35-37

¹¹ Kidner

¹² https://www.livescience.com/space/cosmology/we-do-not-understand-how-it-can-exist-astronomers-baffled-by-almost-invisible-dwarf-galaxy-that-upends-a-dark-matter-theory?utm_source=pocket_saves

give you some perspective, the space shuttle *Discovery* traveled at 5 miles a second. It would take the *Discovery* more than 37,000 years to travel *one* light-year.

The Lord wants you to know His *hesed* love for you is greater than the span of galaxies. *Hesed* is a word we're less familiar with than the New Testament *agape*, but it is just as important. God's *hesed* is not a *feelings-based* love. This is a love based on covenant loyalty. It is kind and steadfast and gracious, and *strong*. It is a love that is constantly shown in action and faithfulness.¹³ Just as east can never meet west, God's love for you cannot come to an end.

If you want to experience this love, there is a requirement: You must *fear* the Lord. David is going to say that *three times* in these verses. The Lord has compassion on those *who fear Him*.

Psalm 103:14-16 - ¹⁴ For he knows what we are made of, remembering that we are dust. ¹⁵ As for man, his days are like grass—he blooms like a flower of the field; ¹⁶ when the wind passes over it, it vanishes, and its place is no longer known.

We are nothing more than dust bunnies. Talk about a rags-to-riches story! Look at how frail, how fleeting a human life is in the grand scheme. And yet, we are the object of God's special attention.

I've vacuumed up a lot of dust bunnies. I can't say that I've ever felt any emotion for them. But look at the tenderness of God. Look at how mindful, how thoughtful, how caring He is toward us.

We would have *no place* unless God made a place for us, and that's *exactly* what He's done and *is doing* for us. The Lord has gone to prepare a place for His people - one that lasts forever.

Psalm 103:17-18 - ¹⁷ But from eternity to eternity the Lord's faithful love is toward those who fear him, and his righteousness toward the grandchildren ¹⁸ of those who keep his covenant, who remember to observe his precepts.

David shows what it means to *fear* the Lord - it means to keep His covenant and to observe His precepts. To be in right relationship with this God Who loves so much requires that we *understand* Him and *undertake* what He commands. This is why we need to study the Bible. Emotional religiosity isn't sufficient. It must be informed by the truth.

But we also should take to heart here that we will not be *automatically* spiritual, even if we study a lot. The Psalm opened with, "Don't forget." Here we see "those who remember to observe." The Christian life is a conscious choice day-by-day, not just in the mind, but with all the soul. In heaven, we'll be complete. We will have *perfect* free will. Obeying God will be then like breathing is now.

But on *this* side of eternity, it's a walk that takes purposeful steps. In fact, the prophet Micah said, "Other people are following their gods, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God."¹⁴

¹³ *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*

¹⁴ Micah 4:5

Sadly, we tend to be faithless at times - to backslide or stop progressing or wander off the path. Praise God that when we are faithless He is still faithful. He *keeps* His covenant.

Psalm 103:19 - ¹⁹The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.

Yesterday I saw a video of the mayor of Chicago complaining at a press conference because of his low approval numbers and he essentially said, "You're all expecting me to be mayor, but my kids have soccer games and I have other stuff to do in my personal life."

God isn't stressed out about His responsibilities. He's not strained to His limits. He invites us to pile all our cares onto Him. He is the Almighty. He is absolutely in charge and His ways are the answer. If we want a better life, a better family, a better society, then we should recognize that Christ is King and His Kingdom will never end and then orient our lives accordingly.

Psalm 103:20-22 - ²⁰Bless the Lord, all his angels of great strength, who do his word, obedient to his command. ²¹Bless the Lord, all his armies, his servants who do his will. ²²Bless the Lord, all his works in all the places where he rules. My soul, bless the Lord!

David the dust bunny commanded the angels to praise the Lord. It is an astonishing thing that we will judge the angels one day.¹⁵ That should humble us. That should inspire us to serve the Lord in heart, mind, and body right now. To conduct ourselves as His people in His purposes.

In all the places where God rules. I was thinking how remarkable it is: God rules *everywhere*, except one place: the human heart. He doesn't force us to open that territory to Him. Almighty God allows rebellion. He allows people to shut Him out *for a time* - not forever. One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

But for now, this wonderful Lord suffers long and He reveals Who He is, He reveals the power of His love and *invites* us to love Him in return.

Years before their marriage, Robert Browning had written a letter to Elizabeth Barrett. He had read some of her earlier poems and asked to meet her. She hesitated and resisted at first, but finally accepted the invitation. As a result, she discovered the great love of her life - her soul mate.

David took a look at these things and his response was, "My soul, bless the Lord!" Despite his earthly prominence, despite the mistakes he had made, despite the difficulties he faced, he realized the best thing he could do was receive God's love and take his position in *God's* Kingdom.

Psalm 116:12-13 - How can I repay the Lord for all the good he has done for me? ¹³I will take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:3