

# The Lovingkindness of God

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Last week, a Facebook friend of mine posted as her status, “Sometimes, I don’t know why God doesn’t just strike me down where I stand.” It’s not the first time I’ve heard sentiments like that, but interestingly enough, they usually come from the most devout people I know. The hardened sinners out there aren’t terribly concerned about the offense their sins give to God, but people who actually make an effort to serve Him are often painfully aware of their own shortcomings.

The truth is that God would be justified in striking all of us down, from the best of us to the worst of us. As the Lord Himself said, no one is good but God alone, and in His perfect justice, He could easily find fault with every one of us. However, clearly we all are still here, and the mere fact of our existence reveals that there is more to God than wrath and judgment. Indeed, the Scripture never says of Him, “God is justice”. Instead, it says, “God is love”. Let’s turn our attention, then, to the lovingkindness of God.

## The Works of God

Our text through the first two-thirds of this lesson will be Psalm 103, and within that psalm, approximately the first half describes the works of God. It begins, though, with **A CALL TO BLESSING**. Read with me from Psalm 103:1. There are a couple of things to note here before we continue on. The first concerns a translation issue. Most of you, I suspect, are following along with Bibles that say, “Bless the LORD, O my soul,” instead of “Bless Jehovah, O my soul”. However, it is the latter that is the most literal rendering of the Hebrew text here. Here’s what’s going on. Back in Exodus 3, during God’s conversation with Moses at the burning bush, God announces His name to Moses. This name is spelled using four Hebrew characters, which in English would be YHWH. From that, we get “Yahweh” or “Jehovah”.

Those four letters, which are called the Tetragrammaton, are repeated hundreds of times in the Old Testament, in Psalm 103 among many other places. However, after the completion of the Old Testament, the Jews developed a belief that the name of God was too holy to be pronounced, so whenever the text said “Jehovah”, they substituted in “Lord” or “God”. For reasons that I don’t understand, pretty much every English translation, other than the old American Standard Version, adopted the Jewish practice.

The result is rather strange. I fuss a lot about how people treat “Christ” like Jesus’ last name, when it’s actually a title. This case is exactly the opposite. We look at all those small-caps “LORD’s” in our Bibles and think they’re a title, when they’re actually God’s name. The phrases “Jehovah God” and “Jesus Christ” are parallel, and I think the use of “Jehovah” in Psalm 103 makes the whole text more personal.

It is Jehovah God, then, whom this text is calling us to bless. We are not bestowing some benefit on Him, as He does when He blesses us. Instead, we are recognizing the blessedness that He already has, which is so complete that no one could add anything to it. This can’t be something that we recognize only with our minds, though certainly our minds are involved. Instead, this is also a blessing of the will and the emotions and the spirit, so that our entire being is bowed in awe at the magnificence of our Creator.

The psalmist then proceeds to **REMEMBER HIS BENEFITS**. Look at Psalm 103:2-5. This is quite a list, even if we only look at the verbs: God forgives. God heals. God redeems. God crowns. God satisfies. God renews. People in our society got from somewhere the wrong-headed idea that God in the Old Testament was really judgmental and wrathy, but God in the New Testament is all nice and loving.

Clearly, none of these people have ever read Psalm 103, which presents the lovingkindness of God in the same way that the New Testament does. God could have punished us for our iniquities. He could have abandoned us to physical and spiritual suffering. He could have left us to be destroyed. As we’ve already observed, He had every right to do so. However, He didn’t do that to His people under the Law of Moses, and He doesn’t do it to us today either.

Instead, when we needed help, even if it was a mess we’d gotten into ourselves, God was there to rescue us, save us, and bless us with a whole bunch of things we didn’t deserve. I think we all know that Americans have a proud, self-reliant streak, that people look around at their good situation in life and the good things they have and say, “I earned all this. I made all this. I’m entitled to it.” Friends, the only things to which we are entitled are punishment and misery, both in this life and in the life to come. Every good

thing we have, without exception, is a gift from God. Without Him, we would have nothing, and to deny this in word or deed is wretchedly ungrateful.

Next, the psalmist turns to consider **HIS PAST MERCIES**. Let's read together from Psalm 103:6-7. In this, he identifies two main expressions of mercy. The first expression is found in God's righteous work of delivering the oppressed. It's fascinating to me how the deliverance of God is a theme that runs throughout the entire Bible. In this particular case, the psalmist is referring to God's rescue of His people from bondage in Egypt. A little later in Jewish history, God will bring His people back from the Babylonian captivity. Jesus, of course, came to free us from our slavery to sin and death. Even in the book of Revelation, which I'm working through this quarter with the young-adult class, over and over again, we keep on encountering the same theme of God delivering His people from persecution in the first century.

This ought to be a source of tremendous encouragement to all of us. God does not change, God is faithful, and so it must be true that today, God still stands for freedom. Whether we face oppression from physical or spiritual enemies, God will deliver us from them, for that is His very nature.

Second, God showed His mercy to the Israelites by revealing Himself to them. This is something that we should give more thought to than we do. Just as God didn't have to create us, just as God didn't have to rescue us, God also didn't have to make Himself known to us. He could have been the aloof watchmaker God of the deists. However, that too would have been alien to His nature. He doesn't want us to be estranged from Him. He wants us to know Him, and indeed, the entire Bible is an invitation to a relationship with Him. In this life, there is no richer blessing than the opportunity to know God.

### The Nature of God

After this, the psalmist turns to a more global exploration of God's nature. He begins by discussing **HIS LOVINGKINDNESS**. This discussion appears in Psalm 103:8-12. Here, we once again encounter a word that is translated in different ways in different translations: the word "lovingkindness". The ESV and some other translations will have this as "steadfast love". Both of those translations capture at least some of the sense of the original Hebrew. Vine says that one of the best ways to understand lovingkindness is by looking at marriage. Marriage creates a legal relationship between two people. Spouses have certain obligations to one another, and it is a relationship that continues until death. However, even though marriage certainly involves loyalty and faithfulness, it is about more than those. It's about kindness, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice, not because of a sense of obligation, but because of one's love for one's spouse.

This, then, is what is meant by Jehovah's lovingkindness toward His covenant people. He is faithful and will certainly perform what He has promised, but He is also more than faithful. He is emotionally invested in us, and that emotional investment is the source of His mercy and His willingness to forgive. Unless we forsake Him completely, whatever we do, He will always take us back. It's humbling to think that the Creator of the universe loves us insects so much that He will unfailingly forgive us whenever we ask.

Nor is this forgiveness in some way incomplete. Forgiveness is one of those things that human beings struggle with. We like being forgiven, but we also love to cling to a sense of injury and self-righteousness when someone wrongs us, sometimes even after the words, "I forgive you" have passed our lips. Not so with God. When He forgives, He forgives utterly. How high are the heavens above the earth? How far is the east from the west? These infinite distances reflect His infinite mercy.

It is certainly baffling why God would regard us in this way, but the psalmist points us in the right direction with his presentation of **GOD'S PATERNAL PITY**. Look at Psalm 103:13-14. My father has been known to say that as "Jehovah" is God's covenant name under the old covenant, so "Father" is His covenant name under the new covenant, and it is certainly true that "Father" is the most prominent description of God in the writings of the New Testament. However, there are only a handful of passages in which God is called both "Jehovah" and "Father", and this is perhaps the most prominent of them. Why is Jehovah merciful to us when we sin? Because He is our Father, that's why.

This makes a great deal more sense to me now than it did before I had children. One of the oddest sensations of fatherhood has been recognizing myself in my children. Sometimes when I'm watching them, I know exactly what they're thinking because I recognize their behavior and expressions from myself. Because I do understand them, there are times when I sympathize with them and go easy on them when somebody else wouldn't. I know where they're coming from, and besides, they're my kids, and I love them.

My understanding of my children, though, pales before God's understanding of us. I passed on some of my traits to my children, but God made us out of the dirt. Sometimes, I know what my kids are thinking because they think like me, but God knows every one of our thoughts all the time. That's kind of an embarrassing thing; I'm glad that no human being knows what I'm thinking all the time! I think some pretty dumb and downright evil stuff. What might disgust us, though, moves God to compassion and pity. His perfect understanding, combined with His perfect love, creates His perfect mercy.

God's love is even more important because of **HIS ETERNAL DOMINION**. Consider Psalm 103:15-19. To me, this is a really neat part of the psalm. The psalmist has just told us that God is merciful toward us because of our humble, impermanent nature. Having introduced that concept, though, he goes on to explore its implications. Because we are made out of dust, we are just as transitory as the flowers of the field, and ultimately, that makes us unreliable. A few weeks ago, Zoë woke up screaming. She had a nightmare that both Lauren and I had died. She came running downstairs and jumped in my lap and said, "Promise me that you won't die!" All I could tell her was, "I'll do my best." I know that I'm as mortal as any other man, and it may well be that the day of my departure is much sooner than I would prefer. I often pray that God will allow me enough years to finish raising my children, but it is certainly not within my control.

Where we are transitory, though, God is eternal. He will always bless those who love Him, and He will always be around to bless those who love Him. There is nothing in this creation that we can count on. Even the creation itself will one day be destroyed. Through all these things, though, God is permanent. He will be with us all our days, with our children through all their days, and with our grandchildren through all of their days. Maybe I won't always be here for Zoë, but God will, and that's the important thing.

The psalm concludes with **ANOTHER CALL TO BLESSING**. It appears in Psalm 103:20-22. Once again, the transition here is really neat. The psalmist has just finished emphasizing the eternal nature of God by emphasizing the eternal nature of His kingdom. God is reliable because God will always be in control. Then, the psalmist takes that opportunity to remind us that God is not merely good, but great. Even though He is the God who forgives us and cares for us, He is also the mighty King of the universe.

In the days of Hezekiah, a single angel slew 185,000 Assyrian warriors, but all of the angels, as powerful as they are, give glory to God, because He is so much greater than they are. Likewise, the hosts of God and the servants of God, the cherubim, the seraphim, the thrones, the principalities, the powers, and maybe other beings whom the Scripture doesn't even mention, all of these, rank on rank, give Him the glory too, because of His surpassing power and excellence. All of the physical creation, from stars that are so far away that we can't even see them to the flowers under our feet, these also declare His greatness. Ultimately, though, praising God isn't about all of these other entities. It's about us, and so the psalmist concludes where he began: "Bless Jehovah, O my soul!"

### God's Love in His Son

We're going to conclude this morning by looking at the foremost application of everything we've studied so far: God's love expressed in His Son. From many possible passages, I've chosen to look at the middle part of 1 John 4. Within this context, John begins by recapitulating **GOD'S NATURE**. Consider 1 John 4:7-8. It strikes me that few texts in the Bible are as open to misinterpretation as this one, largely because of the vague and varied uses of the word "love" in English. Americans use "love" to describe all kinds of things, some good, some indifferent, and some downright sinful. Then, they triumphantly conclude that because they have described those things as loving, they must also somehow be godly.

That is, quite frankly, ridiculous. If we want this text to make sense, we have to use God's definitions, and in less than a chapter, John reveals that if we love God, we will keep His commandments. From this, it follows that sin can never be loving. Even if the teenage boy with his girlfriend in the back seat of his car tells her that he loves her, his conduct is an expression of selfishness and lust, not love. By his actions, he is showing his contempt for his Creator and endangering the soul of the very girl he claims to love. Likewise, if some non-Christian claims to love God, how come they haven't obeyed the gospel yet? That's a commandment; if you love God, then you're going to keep it.

The love under discussion here, then, is the self-sacrificing love of the disciple of Christ, particularly displayed in one's behavior toward one's brethren. Here, Christians can be just as guilty of talking the talk and not walking the walk as anybody else. Do we love our brethren enough to listen to them, to show

genuine interest and concern in their lives? When we're worn out, do we dig deep to find the reserves to express our love for others through service? Do we love them enough to make time in our schedules for them, even when we're very busy? Do we love them enough to give them financial assistance when they need help? It is when we do those things, which a worldling would never do, that the love of God shines in us.

The foremost example of this is the **LOVE MANIFESTED** in God sending His Son. John explains in 1 John 4:9-11. John does have a way of sticking the knife in, doesn't he? It's human nature, I think, for us to want to make excuses, to say, "Yeah, I know I should have done that, but . . ." John elegantly dispatches all of those excuses by reminding us that our standard for love is God surrendering His only Son to die because of the sins we committed. We absolutely did not deserve this. As John points out, our own conduct toward God does not display love. If our love for God were as perfect as His love for us, we would no longer sin. The record of our sin, then, is also the record of our lack of love for Him.

In the face of our selfishness, God chose to show mercy to us, even though it came at tremendous personal cost to Him. Who of us as parents could make the choice to send our son to die for somebody else who had earned death? Who of us could say, "Okay, you, out of the electric chair. Let me put my innocent child in your place to take your punishment?" And yet, that's what God did for us. That's love. When we consider how much God gave for us, how can we justify our failure to give comparatively little?

Next, John presents the working of **LOVE IN US**. Consider 1 John 4:12-16. The word that pops out to me in this context is "abide". In my translation, "abide" variants appear in these five verses half a dozen times. It reminds me of the definition for lovingkindness that we looked at a little while ago. Lovingkindness isn't just love. It's love plus loyalty, love plus an acknowledged obligation.

In the same way, our love for one another isn't supposed to be a flash-in-the-pan love. We're not supposed to say, "I did this one loving thing this year, so I'm good." That's not how it works. Instead, we are supposed to abide in love, particularly in our love for one another. Love can't be our vacation cabin. Love has to be our home. Our check in this is the revelation of God's Spirit through His word. If our love regularly passes muster according to the standard of the Scripture, we are indeed abiding in love.

Of course, the abiding doesn't end there. As a result of abiding love, God abides in us, and we in Him. This too is a lovingkindness thing. Over and over again, the psalmist in Psalm 103 reminded us that God's lovingkindness only applies to those who keep covenant with Him. When it comes to keeping God's covenant, the requirement to love is at the very top. If we get Biblical love right, everything else is going to be right too. If we are that kind of people, we allow God to have a relationship with us.

Finally, John describes **THE PERFECTION OF LOVE**. Let's read 1 John 4:17-19. If this is the purpose of our lives, if our goal through our days is to love God, to love our brother, and to love our neighbor, and we live generally in accordance with that goal, we will be the people God wants us to be. We don't have to be perfect; that's why God sent His Son for us, after all. We do, however, have to be godly and spend our lives in pursuit not of selfishness, but of selflessness. If we live in this way, devoted to love, perfected by God's love, we have absolutely nothing to fear on the day of judgment, and as our reward, we will get to share in the love of God and our love for one another through eternity.

Obviously, this gives us a great deal to reflect on before the Lord's Supper. Why, it's almost like I chose the text for that very purpose! Let's consider, then, the great love of God in giving His Son for us, the equally great love of Christ in willingly going to the cross, so that we could even have the opportunity to live for Him. Let's also ask ourselves, though, how we're doing in that. Is the love of God actually being perfected in us, or would it be more accurate to say that we're more like the selfish people around us, except that we happen to go to church once or twice a week? Let's reflect on these things as we partake.