

BREAKTHROUGH

SERIES: SONGS OF THE SOUL



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Psalm 103
Ninth Message
Dan Westman
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Psalm 103

This morning is the last week of our summer series in the Psalms called “Songs of the Soul.” I wonder how many of us this morning have ever felt stuck. Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of performing a wedding for a couple from PBC. The wedding was in Livermore, so I drove from Palo Alto to Livermore on Thursday afternoon and Friday afternoon. That drive is 38 miles. In most parts of the country, 38 miles take 38 minutes. Not the drive from Palo Alto to Livermore! I spent a good amount of time feeling stuck that weekend.

Traffic isn't the only time in life that we feel stuck, though, is it? I've learned in my four years at PBC working with young adults that there is one question that you never want to ask a grad student: “How much longer do you have left in your program?” Some grad students apparently feel a bit stuck at times.

But we feel a bit stuck sometimes, don't we? We feel stuck in our jobs. We feel stuck in our relationships. We feel stuck in all sorts of ways.

And, for many of us, we feel this in our spiritual lives. For some of you here today, this might be your first time to church in a while, or ever, and you came because you were feeling stuck in life and thought maybe God could help. For others of you, you've been following Jesus for years, and yet you don't feel as close to him as you'd like. Some of you are struggling with addiction and nobody else knows it, but you know you are stuck, and you need help.

We all feel stuck sometimes. We find ourselves longing for a breakthrough — something to get us unstuck, out of the traffic jam that has left us feeling stalled, alone, and maybe even questioning faith or God himself.

This morning, I believe with all my heart that God wants to give you a breakthrough. He wants to break you out of that rut. He wants you to draw close to him. Together, as a church, he wants to propel us forward in faith and send us out into a new kind of kingdom living.

Our text for this morning is Psalm 103. This is the psalm that God used in my life this summer to give me a breakthrough. My prayer is that he might do the same for you and that journey might start today.

Psalm 103:

**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 iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,**

**4 who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and
mercy,**

**5 who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.**

**6 The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.**

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

**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.**

**10 He does not deal with us according
to our sins, nor repay us according to our
iniquities.**

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

**12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions
from us.**

**13 As a father shows compassion to his
children, so the Lord shows compassion to
those who hear him.**

**14 For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.**

**15 As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;**

**16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.**

**17 But the steadfast love of the Lord is
from everlasting to everlasting on those
who fear him, and his righteousness to
children's children,**

**18 to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.**

**19 The Lord has established his throne in
the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.**

**20 Bless the Lord, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!**

**21 Bless the Lord, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!**

**22 Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.**

Bless the Lord, O my soul!

In April, Paul Taylor, on behalf of the elders, first asked me to preach as a part of this series in the Psalms. Of course, I was eager to do that, so I started spending time in the Psalms. I read through several psalms, some that I was familiar with and some that were newer to me. I considered a number of them and eventually settled on Psalm 103. I put it in our planning spreadsheet: August 18. Psalm 103. Dan Westman.

A few weeks later, I heard Paul talking with someone else about the series. He explained how they had asked a number of preachers to pick a psalm that was of particular personal or spiritual significance to them. When I heard that, I thought oops! That's not what I did. I liked

Psalm 103. It's a good Psalm, but it didn't really have any personal or spiritual significance to me.

I thought about choosing another psalm. I revisited several psalms that have been significant for me over the year, but at the end of the day, nothing felt quite right. So I came back to Psalm 103 and thought, I guess this will do.

I started reading Psalm 103 over and over again. I started to meditate on it. Eventually, I decided to memorize it. For the past four months, this psalm has been playing over and over in my mind. As I spent

time in this psalm, it truly became the song of my soul this summer. The Lord met me in the middle of Psalm 103. He ministered to me deeply through this psalm. It is no longer the case that Psalm 103 has no real personal, spiritual significance to me. This psalm has been incredibly significant to me. This psalm wrecked me. Brothers and sisters, it's been an exciting, emotional journey.

Two months ago, I didn't even know that I needed it, but this psalm has given me a breakthrough in my relationship with God. My prayer this morning is that it might do the same thing for you.

Observations

I want to bring us into Psalm 103 with a couple of broad observations to help us see what's happening in this psalm. First, this is a psalm of worship. The psalm begins and ends with exclamations of praise.

Psalm 103:1-2:

**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,**

The word bless simply means praise. Praise the Lord, oh my soul. All that is within me praise his holy name! This is whole-hearted, all-encompassing, hold-nothing-back worship. The worship of the Lord, in this psalm, is based on the benefits that David (the writer of this psalm) has received from the Lord. David is praising God because of what God has done for him.

The next four verse list some those benefits, those blessings, from the Lord. We will look at those in a moment. But first, look at the end of the psalm. It ends with more exclamations of praise.

Psalm 103:20-22:

**Bless the Lord, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!
21 Bless the Lord, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!
22 Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the Lord, O my soul!**

Here, we see that the worship of God has extended beyond the personal experience of the psalmist himself and to the angels and even all of creation! I am reminded here of our recent study in the book of Revelation, where we get a picture into the constant and eternal worship of God that reverberates throughout all of heaven and earth. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Revelation 4:8). This psalm echoes that song and calls forth that song from our hearts.

There is a very specific focus to the content of the worship in Psalm 103. This focus is introduced in the first few verses. Let’s go back to verse 2.

Psalm 103:2:

**Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,**

David is praising God for the benefits that he has received from the Lord—for the good things that the Lord has done for him.

Psalm 103:3–5:

**who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
4 who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and
mercy,
5 who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.**

Throughout the rest of the psalm, two of these ideas take center stage: God’s forgiveness and his steadfast love. Specifically, we will see, this psalm is praising God for forgiving our sins because of his steadfast love for us.

This word “steadfast love” shows up four times in the psalm. This is the Hebrew word *hesed*. God’s loyal love. His covenant love. His constant, unfailing, never-ending, impossible-to-truly comprehend love towards his people. To those who keep his covenant. To those who fear the

Lord. This psalm is an overflow of worship from a heart that has been transformed by the steadfast love of the Lord.

Learning from the past

As we continue in the psalm, we see that David is not merely reflecting on the way that he has personally experienced the love of the Lord. Rather, he is reflecting on the way that God has shown his steadfast love to his people from generations! Specifically, he is reflecting on the events that surrounded the giving of the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

Psalm 103:7–8:

**He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
8 The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast
love.**

Verse 8 is a direct quote from Exodus 34. In order to understand the depth of what is happening in Psalm 103, we have to do a little review of the Exodus.

At one point in Israel’s history, they found themselves as a nation enslaved to the people of Egypt. God raised up Moses to lead the people out of Egypt, out of slavery. And he did it by parting the Red Sea, saving his people with a miraculous display of his power.

After the people cross the Red Sea, the first thing they do is have a worship service. They sing!

“I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously!” (Exodus 15:1). They sing their song, have their worship service, and eventually God brings them through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai. There, he makes a covenant with his people. Here’s what the Lord says:

Exodus 19:4-6:

‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

God’s covenant always starts with God’s prior grace. I saved you. I brought you out of Egypt, now obey my voice. Keep my covenant. Then you will be my

treasured possession. The demand of obedience is always sandwiched in God's grace.

How do the people respond to this? "All that the Lord has commanded, we will do" (Exodus 19:8) Then God gives them the details. He gives them the 10 Commandments. He gives them the law. He gives them all the details. And they respond two more times, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" (Exodus 24:3, 7). These people have received the grace of the Lord. They have been saved by the hand of the Lord. And they are ready to respond in worship and obedience!

Then Moses goes up the mountain to meet with God. He receives the stone tablets where the law has been written with the finger of God. For forty days and forty nights, he meets with God.

Forgetting the Lord

While Moses was gone, the people do the unimaginable. They turn from worshiping God to worshiping an idol, a golden calf. In Exodus 32:4, Aaron says of this calf, "These are your gods, oh Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

Are you serious! It's been like two minutes since God brought you up out of Egypt and parted the Red Sea. And you have already forgotten the Lord.

The people still knew in their minds that it was God who saved them. They didn't forget the facts. But they stopped living as if it were true. Their lives stopped reflecting the fact that it was God who saved them.

And you know the first place that this showed up? Their worship.

"Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all his benefits!" Don't forget the Lord! Don't forget his benefits! Don't forget that he is the one that saved you! He forgave you. He redeemed you. Don't forget the Lord.

This is a huge part of why we gather together to worship. This is why we sing together. As we sing, we declare things that are true of God—who he is and what he has done for us. The benefits that he has given to us.

A few weeks ago, as I was in the worship service, we started singing a song called "King of My Heart." As

we got to the chorus (You are good, good, oh. You are good, good, oh.), I realized that there were a few things going on in my life that had caused me to forget the goodness of the Lord; not in my head, but in my heart. I had stopped living my life as if I really believed that God was good. But as we sang that song, I listened to the people around me, and I listened to my wife, Linzy, and the worship team as they sang, and I myself began to sing these words, and I remembered that it was true. The truth of those words sunk deep into my soul. I was overwhelmed with the goodness of the Lord. Corporate worship is absolutely essential to keep us from forgetting the Lord.

Maybe you showed up today and you don't know the Lord, or you're not sure you really believe anything that we sing. Just try. Try to sing and see what the Lord might do.

Maybe you do believe, but you've forgotten, or you've stopped living as if you believe. Listen to your brothers and sisters around you, borrow their faith, and then sing. See what the Lord might do.

Maybe you believe in your head and your heart, but you just think singing is not really your thing. There are people around you who need you to sing. I need you to sing! "Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name."

God's patience

Let's jump back to our story in Exodus. The people forget the Lord, Aaron makes a golden calf, and the people begin to worship this idol.

As you might imagine, the Lord is not pleased. In fact, he is furious. He says to Moses, who is still up on the mountain, "Stay back, Moses. I'm going to consume them in my wrath."

But Moses steps in to intercede for the people. Please Lord, have mercy. Stay your anger. Hold back your wrath." And God listens. He responds to Moses. He shows mercy and chooses not to destroy his people. This is amazing!

Moses goes down from the mountain to confront the people. But when he gets down and sees with his own eyes how the people are singing and dancing in worship to this golden calf, he is enraged! He shatters the tablets. He destroys the calf. He is so distraught by what he sees that he goes back to the Lord and begs for mercy again.

So often, we wonder how a good God could ever punish anyone. But after spending 40 days on the mountain with God, Moses cannot comprehend how a holy God could not destroy his people for their sin. Oh, that we could have that understanding of the Lord.

God calls Moses back up to the mountain. He makes new tablets of stone to replace the ones that Moses shattered in his anger. And then the Lord says, Moses, I want you to know me. To really know me. I need to tell you who I am. I mean, really, at my core, who I am.

Exodus 34:6-8:

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” 8 And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

At his very core, the center of God’s character, the defining attribute that God wants us to know about him: “The Lord, the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” The steadfast love of the Lord given to his people at the depth of our sinfulness. The grace of the Lord shown to us at our very worst.

If you feel stuck in your relationship with God, getting unstuck has to start here, at your very worst. You have to acknowledge the depth of your sinfulness, the reality of your idolatry. And then, in that place, at that point when you feel the least deserving of God’s love, at that point when you feel the most distant from God, you must let God’s love break through. When you are feeling like a failure, when you are feeling ashamed, when you are feeling like no one could love you because of how terrible you are, you must let the love of God break through your heart, break through your soul, break through into the deepest parts of you. Before you experience a breakthrough in your relationship with God, you need to let God’s love break through.

Experiencing anger, appreciating love

Over the past few months, the love of God has broken into my life in ways that have transformed me and my relationship with God. This growth started with

something quite painful, with the reality of my own sinfulness.

Specifically, I have been confronted with the reality of my own anger. I never thought that I was an angry person. I am calm. I am peaceful.

Over the past few months, I’ve been humbled, surprised, and even terrified as I have been faced with the reality of my own anger. My 2-year-old son has been the catalyst for this realization, which may come as no surprise to anyone who has ever had a 2-year-old!

As 2-year-olds do, he has put my patience to the test. One occasion stands out. The day before had been a tough one. It seemed like every interaction with my son had been a battle. I went to bed, frustrated and feeling defeated. The next morning—it was a Sunday morning—I woke up and the battle started all over again. Obstinance, attitude, and fighting.

As the morning continued, I was in a hurry trying to get us all ready. It came time to brush his teeth. He refused. I tried to stay calm. He was melting in a puddle on the floor. This went on for 10 minutes. My blood was boiling. Three times I physically removed myself from the room so that I didn’t explode in anger. Eventually, I lost it. I yelled at him. I picked him up with more force than necessary and carried him into his room and set him on his bed. As my volume escalated, his did as well. I became more and more angry, and he became more and more hysterical.

Eventually, I left the room again, somehow got ahold of myself, calmed down, and tried again. Eventually, we made it out the door with his teeth brushed. But I felt like an absolute failure of a dad.

Two days later, nearly the exact same situation played out again. As I was driving to work that day, I just lost it. I started crying. I was disgusted at myself, at the way I had treated my son. I was scared; scared of this anger that I didn’t even know was in me and now felt like it controlled me. I was so ashamed.

It’s painful to be confronted with the reality of our own sin, isn’t it?

About a week later, I went to meet with my spiritual director. A spiritual director is like a counselor for the soul — someone who is trained to come alongside people and help them process the work of God in their life. I meet with my spiritual director once a month.

As I met with him that month, I was talking with him about these episodes of anger. As I recounted one particular explosion of anger, he asked me, “How did you experience God in that moment?”

Experience God in the moment of my anger? In the depth of my sin? I had never thought about that before. So I thought for a while. As I considered that question and thought back to that moment, the word that came to mind was gentle. As I was exploding in anger at my son, it was like God was sitting next to me with his arm around me, saying, Dan, I still love you even here. There wasn't a stern rebuke. There wasn't a condemning glare. Just love. Gentle, compassionate, tender, steadfast love.

I thought back to the words of Psalm 103, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

When my son disobeyed me, disrespected me, refused to listen to me, I was quick to anger. And in that very moment of my anger, as I was disobeying my heavenly father, disrespecting him, refusing to listen to him, he was slow to anger. He was patient with me. He was gentle with me. His was abounding in steadfast, covenantal, loyal love.

In the days of Moses, when he met with God on the mountain, God was merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. In the days of David, as he wrote the words of Psalm 103, God was merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. As we sit here today and read these words, God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But those words today are so much deeper now than they ever were for Moses or David, because in Jesus, the mercy and grace of God took on flesh and became vulnerable. In Jesus, the mercy and grace of God hung out with outcasts and rejects. In Jesus, the mercy and grace of God suffered, bled and died on the cross. In Jesus, the mercy and grace of God absorbed the wrath of God himself that was meant for you and me.

When my heart was full of anger, God's anger was not absent. It was more present than ever. But it wasn't poured out on me. Instead, it was poured out on Jesus. As I poured out my anger on my son, God poured out his anger on his son so that I could live. So that I could be forgiven. So that I could know his love.

As I let the love of God break through the walls of my heart when I was at my very worst, I experienced a breakthrough in my relationship with God that has been rich. There are 3-4 times in my life that I regularly look back on as spiritually transformative times. I know without a doubt that this season will be another one of those.

What about you? Have you experienced the love of God when you are at your worst? Let the love of God meet you in those moments, and it will change you.

The overflow of worship

Where do we go from here? After we have reminded ourselves of the blessings that we have in Christ. After we have let the love of God meet us in the depth of our sin. Where do we go from here? What is our response?

“Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.”

We worship, with everything we have! We hold nothing back. We give it all. We give him all the praise. We give him all the glory. After we have let the love of God break through into our hearts, we breakthrough with worship.

We don't worship because we have to. We don't worship because God tells us to. We worship because we can't help it. Worship is the overflow of a heart that has been wrecked by the love of God.

If your heart and life are not overflowing with extravagant worship of God, then you have not experienced the depth of God's love for you. Let me say that again. If your heart and life are not overflowing with extravagant worship of God, then you have not experienced the depth of God's love for you.

There is a story in Luke 7 where Jesus is at a Pharisee's house for dinner. During dinner, a woman walks in. Everybody knew who this woman was. She was a prostitute, the worst kind of sinner (so they thought). Recognizing the depth of her sin was not a problem for her. Nobody let her forget it. But she had heard some things about this Jesus — this Jesus who healed the blind, who made the lame to walk, who loved sinners like her.

When this woman saw Jesus, she couldn't hold it back any more. She came up to Jesus, sobbing. Her tears poured onto his dusty feet and she washed them.

She took her hair and wiped his feet dry. Then she took out a bottle of expensive perfume and anointed his feet.

As people looked on, they were shocked. They were disgusted. What is a woman like this doing to a man like this in such a ridiculous fashion?!

But Jesus wasn't surprised. He wasn't thrown off. Instead, he said, The one who has been forgiven little loves little, but the one who has been forgiven much loves much. This is worship. This is what love looks like. She wasn't manufacturing some emotion because she likes to get in a groove. She wasn't going through some ritual because it's what she was taught to do. She couldn't help herself. She had experienced the love of God, and she broke out in extravagant worship.

If your heart and life are not overflowing with extravagant worship of God, then you have not experienced the depth of God's love for you.

An invitation

This is not a condemnation. This is an invitation. This is an invitation into a depth in your relationship with God that I know deep down you are longing for. Your soul is craving this. This is what you were created for.

As you sit here this morning, maybe you feel stuck in your relationship with God. He feels distant or you're not even sure if he's there at all. Give him a chance this morning. Talk to him; he is listening.

Maybe, as you sit here, you feel like you are doing great with the Lord. To be honest, that's how I felt at the beginning of the summer. I didn't think I needed a breakthrough. But God, in his grace, did it anyway. There is no limit to the amount of growth that we can experience. Maybe this morning could be the start of a breakthrough for you as well.

Reflection / Guided Prayer

1. Confession: Spend a few moments reflecting on your own sin and confession those sins to God. Confession is just the act of looking in and noticing your own sin and brokenness, and then acknowledging those things to God. Don't judge it. Just acknowledge it. Share your brokenness with him.

2. Forgiveness: Reflect on Jesus' love for you in the midst of that sin. Picture his arm around you. Picture the love in his face. Hear him say, I still love you even here.

3. Worship: Praise God for his steadfast love and forgiveness towards you that he has poured out in Jesus. In a few moments, we are going to sing again together, reminding ourselves of the benefits of the Lord and declaring his praises. Let your love for the Lord and his love for you overflow in worship of him.