

Psalm 103:11-12 - God's immeasurable love & forgiveness

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[0 : 00] Our reading is from Psalm 103. It's page 605 in your Bible.! Praise the Lord my soul, all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies you, your desires with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagles. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel. The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass. They flourish like a flower of the field. The wind blows over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting, the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with the children's children, with those who keep his covenant, and remember to obey his precepts. The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.

Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. Praise the Lord, all his works, everyone in his, everywhere in his dominion. Praise the Lord, my soul. Amen.

Thanks so much for reading, Lucia. Let's pray as we come to God's word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do ask for your help this morning. Maybe many of us are anticipating going back to work tomorrow. Maybe we're still pondering on the things that have happened over the last week as we've celebrated with friends and family.

Lord, we want to quieten our hearts. We want to listen to what you say to us in your word. We want to not be those who look at your word and just go away and are unchanged and unmoved by what you say.

[3 : 20] We want, Lord, to pay attention. We want, Lord, you to work. We want you to be glorified. We want to be changed and transformed. And Lord, we know that these extraordinary things that you do come to us through the ordinary means of looking at your word together. And so we pray that you would be at work. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. It's sometimes difficult to know what to do on the first Sunday of a new year. And so we're doing just a one-off on just a couple of verses from Psalm 103.

And so we're going to zoom in on just verses 11 and 12 of the psalm that Lucia read for us. And maybe we can begin by reading these verses aloud together.

I have a sort of side quest this morning, which is that you might learn verses 11 and 12 of Psalm 103. And that if you forget anything that I have said or everything that I have said, you might remember these words from Psalm 103. So let's read them aloud together.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

[4 : 43] Now, so committed am I to that side quest of you learning them. We're going to say those verses a few times on the way through, and we're going to sing them in a song that you might remember because it was quite popular quite a long time ago.

We're going to sing those at the end. What I want you to see, though, as we start is that as David, who writes these words, as he writes them, he wants you and I to have a very specific response to these words as we hear them.

What I mean by that is that the very hearing of these words is meant to engender a certain response in your heart. You're meant to do something.

What is it that you're supposed to do? Well, somewhere deep inside, you're meant to go, wow, God is amazing. God is incredible. Now, you can see that that's what David wants you to do in response because that's how his psalm starts.

He starts with, praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, my soul, and all my inmost being. Praise his holy name. Literally, he says, adore God. Fall on your knees.

[5 : 46] Worship him with everything that you are, all that is inside of you, because he is amazing. We'll return to that purpose in a moment.

But before we do that, let's spend some time on the content of verses 11 and 12. Because verses 11 and 12 make you say, wow, God is amazing, by showing you two immeasurable distances.

One up and down, and one right to left. Read the verses again with me, and it will come out. Ready? For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

As far as the east is from the west, so far he has removed our transgressions from us. They're the two immeasurable distances, up and down, and right and left.

Firstly, an immeasurable distance to explain the scale of God's love for us. And secondly, an immeasurable distance to indicate the scale of God's forgiving power.

[6 : 46] In other words, God's love is so immeasurably great. And God's forgiving power is also immeasurably great. We can say more again on the content of those, but just think about how those immeasurable distances make you adore God.

The psalmist's point is that you cannot get into your head the scale of God's love for you. If you think you have arrived at the edges or the perimeter or the boundaries of God's love for you, you haven't understood it.

If you think you've run to the end of God's love, you are by definition wrong because his love is immeasurable. It is beyond your imagination of greatness.

That is how great God's love is. It's the same with his forgiving power. If you still can't see past your past sins, if you imagine that God has not taken away your past sins or dealt with them, you are wrong.

His forgiving power is so great that your sin is immeasurably far away from you. It's gone. You know, you have more chance of tracking the perimeters of the universe than you do of finding your past sins in the mind of God.

[8 : 10] Isn't that incredible? They're gone. They're forgotten. They're put away. And as you ponder on that, on those immeasurable distances, you're meant to go, wow, God is amazing.

So let's think a little bit more about immeasurable love, verse 11. Now, we need to be careful here and make sure that we understand what David is saying about God's love. It's easy just to see the word love and go, oh, we use that word.

We assume we know what he means. And anyone could tell you that God is love, right? Even a three-year-old who's very rarely been to church could tell you that. But David has a very specific point about God's immeasurable love that he wants us to see.

So let me just show you two things about this love. The first is regards to its nature, and the second is regards to its direction. So firstly, regards to its nature. What is this love like? What is the nature of this love?

What is it made of? What is it like? You've got a different Bible translation. The word steadfast or faithful might have been inserted before the word love in verse 11.

[9 : 14] That is because the word there is the word heses, which is a technical Bible word which carries a particular meaning and significance. And it's the significance that is explained by Exodus 34.

So in your church Bible, turn to Exodus 34. It is on page 93. And while you sort of try and find your way there, let me try and explain some of the details of it to you.

In case you're not familiar, Moses, the great Old Testament prophet, has led God's people out of captivity in Egypt. He has brought them through the Red Sea and brought them to Mount Sinai.

Now on Mount Sinai, God has spoken to the people and given them the Ten Commandments. That the people hear the voice of God giving the Ten Commandments and they are utterly terrified by it.

They are so terrified. They say to Moses, listen, Moses, please don't let this happen again. Please will you go and listen to God and come and tell us what he says?

[10 : 18] Because we don't want to listen. We are so afraid of the voice of God. And so Moses goes up onto the mountain and receives from God further instructions on how God is to be worshipped and what it means to be his people.

But while Moses is up on the mountain listening to God and receiving those instructions, the people down at the foot of the mountain are, well, they're wandering away from God.

They ask Aaron, who is Moses' brother, to say, listen, Moses has been gone an awfully long time. We don't know what's happened to him. We don't know where he is.

Would you make for us some representations of this God who's brought us out of slavery in Egypt? And so Aaron makes for them a golden calf and they worship the golden calf, saying to the golden calf, you are the God that brought us out of Egypt.

Now, if you read the account, you'll know that what happens next, which is perhaps unsurprising, is that both God and Moses are very angry that the people are worshipping this golden calf.

[11 : 23] So Moses comes down from the mountain, smashes the two stone tablets that God has written the Ten Commandments on, and he grinds the golden calf to dust, sprinkles it on the water, and makes the people drink the water.

Now, we're nearly in Exodus 34, but one more thing to get straight before we get there. In Exodus 33, just as all of this has happened and just before Moses goes back to listen to God, in Exodus 33, the people are commanded by God to leave the mountain, and God says, I'm not planning to come with you.

You go, but if I go with you, I will consume you. But Moses won't leave it there with God, and he pleads with God, please don't leave us, please don't abandon us, please come with us, please send your presence.

Ask that God then might show himself to him, that he might see and know what God is like and know him even better. God amazingly listens to Moses' prayer, and he answers him and says, listen, you hide yourself in this cave and I will pass by.

So Moses goes back up Mount Sinai with two more tablets to be written on, hides in a gap in the rock, and then Exodus 34, verse 4, right, we're there. This is what happens.

[12 : 38] Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning as the Lord had commanded him. He carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord.

And he passed in front of Moses proclaiming, the Lord, the Lord, the gracious, sorry, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.

Lord, he said, if I found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff neck people, forgive our wickedness and our sin and take us as your inheritance.

Now, bring all of that back to Psalm 103, because that's what David is reflecting on in Psalm 103. And it's not difficult to see that.

[13 : 44] Verses 7, 8 and 9 of Psalm 103, David quotes those events directly. And then he comes to this word love, steadfast love, which has been explained by Exodus 34.

And steadfast love then is not God's drippy affection towards his people. God doesn't feel about humanity the way that children feel about cute puppies. That is not God's love.

God's steadfast love, Exodus 34, God's steadfast love is his voluntary and solid commitment not to treat people according to their sin, but instead to go with them and be their God.

His steadfast love is his covenant, his promised affection. Which will not give up on his people. He will hold fast to them, show them mercy and loving kindness.

So steadfast love finds its root in the unchanging character of God to keep his word and do what he has promised. God's love is explained by who God is, not by who you are, right?

[14 : 51] When God says he loves you, it's not saying you are lovely and adorable. He is saying, I am a God who is lovingly committed to you and your salvation. I will be your God.

I will go with you. David also tells us not only the nature of God's love, he tells us the direction of God's love. In other words, who is it for?

Who is it for? Look again at verse 11. Notice that it is directed towards those who fear him. So great is his love for those who fear him.

In other words, this immeasurable, steadfast, covenant, promise, commitment of God, love for his people, is for those who fear him. It's not for perfect people who deserve that love.

That would make no sense given what we've already seen and what's coming in verse 12. Rather, it is for those people who are in a relationship with him. Who hold God in the right place.

[15 : 49] It's for those people who know that God is God, trust him as Lord, fear him, worship him, belong to him. In other words, this immeasurable, steadfast love is not only, it's not a kind of soppy affection based on the cuteness of humanity, nor is it a blanket love that covers everybody all the same.

I think this is perhaps more surprising. Psalm 103 is not saying God loves everybody all the same. It's actually saying the opposite of that, isn't it?

It's saying that God's steadfast, committed love is for a particular group of people. So there is a sense in the Bible which God loves everyone.

God loves the world that he's made and everything in it. But this covenant promise, loving kindness that the psalmist is talking about, this is for his people, he says. Directed towards them.

Let me try and illustrate these two aspects of God's steadfast love if I can. Imagine for a moment that you're walking down a street and you see a 10-year-old child deliberately scratching a car.

[17:01] They're running a stone down the side of a car. And as you walk down the road and you get closer to it, you notice that this car that they're scratching is not just any car, but it's your car they're scratching.

And as you get even closer, you realize that this 10-year-old child who is deliberately scratching your car is not just any child, but it's your child.

Now, as you walk towards them, how is it that you are feeling towards that person, towards that child? I am guessing that there is going to be some anger.

You are going to be angry. This is mindless vandalism. You are ruining my car. But because it's your child, it doesn't mean you're any less angry at the mindless vandalism.

But there's something else going on, isn't there? You're in a relationship with this child. You are his father. You have a covenant commitment to care for them, to train them in the way they should go. You have steadfast love towards this boy.

[18:02] Certainly not on the basis of his loveliness, because at that moment there's almost no loveliness at all. They're scratching your car. Rather, it comes flowing from who you are in relationship to them, specifically because they are your son.

And that's it here. God's steadfast love is a function of God's character, not our loveliness. And we receive it, even though we don't deserve it, because of our relationship with him.

We're his people. He's our heavenly father. And he loves us, even though we're rebellious and undeserving. Listen, perhaps I can speak. Maybe you're not a Christian this morning. I'm so glad you're here this morning.

It's really brilliant to have you. You're welcome every week. But it may be that you're slightly offended at the idea that you seem to hear me saying that God doesn't love you in the same way as he loves a Christian.

I get that. That is offensive. And it is difficult to accept, but it makes total sense when you think about it. It's not right to read the Bible and assume that God's love and forgiveness is automatic.

[19:00] To assume that God loves everyone and forgives everyone, even while they remain totally passive and disengaged. It's not that love is deserved by God.

It's not earned by being nice. It's that God's love has to be received by us. You're not barred from receiving steadfast love because you're too bad or you're too wicked or you're too undeserving.

David was an adulterer and a murderer who wrote Psalm 103. The point is it has to be received. In other words, to benefit from this love, to know this love, for this love to be for you, to experience the power of this immeasurable love, you must enter into a relationship with the lover, God.

It's obvious, isn't it? You cannot receive parental love without first being adopted as a child. You cannot receive friendship love without first becoming a friend.

You cannot receive God's steadfast love without first receiving him as God, becoming his child. Turning around from living for yourself, stopping believing that you're master of your own destiny, ruler of your own ship, and fearing him instead.

[20 : 14] Giving up yourself to the Lord Jesus and saying to the Lord Jesus, Lord, I'm sorry that I've put myself first. I know that I should fear you.

I want to be in a relationship with you that I might receive from you your steadfast, undeserved love. Now, if you're a Christian this morning, then these verses are here to remind you that you are a beneficiary of this immeasurable love.

And that's really exciting, right? It means you're safe. It means you're secure. It means that whatever happens to you this year, it means whatever happened last year, whatever it is that you're anxious about, whatever concerns you have, you can know that God is committed to loving you with a promise-keeping loving kindness that will not let you go.

He will not turn back from you. He will show you mercy when you fail. He will keep you through all things. He will take you home to glory for eternity. Why? Because of who he is and what he's like.

And his love is immeasurably great. And you will not and you cannot ever get to the end of it. Immeasurable love. Secondly, immeasurable forgiveness. Immeasurable forgiveness.

[21 : 29] Let's read the verses again. For as high as the heavens... Oh, yeah, okay, right, let's start again. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Now, what you need to notice is there's no gap between these verses.

These two things are connected. David doesn't want you to think of God's steadfast love without seeing how it goes in tandem with the removal of our sin. Why? Well, if you think about it logically, it's because the thing that prevents us from receiving his steadfast love is the break in our relationship.

What causes the break in our relationship with God? It is our sin, our rebellion against him. The problem between God and I, the relational rupture which prevents me from receiving his steadfast love, is my rebellion against him.

My sin. Sin here is called transgressions. Literally, breaking the law. In other words, this is the fact that in a moral universe, ruled by a moral God, I live disobeying his moral law, even though that law is written on my conscience.

[22 : 45] You know, you don't have to teach people to feel guilty, do you? They know it instinctively. Why? Well, because my personal guilt is just an echo of the fact that I live in a moral universe, ruled by a moral God, who will hold me morally responsible at the end of my days.

That's why. That's why I feel guilty. And I cannot ignore it. And he cannot ignore my sin, because he is a good God. But here's the news of Psalm 103, verse 12.

God can deal with lawbreakers. Again, as before, this is for those who fear him. He removes our wickedness. He puts an immeasurable distance between it and us.

David, who wrote Psalm 103, writes before the time of Jesus's earthly ministry. And he's thinking here of the temple and how that demonstrates how God forgives sin in the sacrificial ministry in the temple as animals shed their blood in the place of people.

But all that points forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, who works that forgiveness and fulfills that work on the cross. As on the cross, Jesus Christ gives his life in the place of his people, shedding his blood in place of theirs, giving his righteousness to cover our wickedness.

[24 : 05] So that we might know that this work of putting our sin as far from us as the east is from the west is not some kind of legal fiction. This is not God just ignoring his moral code for a while or turning a blind eye to our transgressions.

Rather, it is God miraculously achieving what could not otherwise be achieved by coming in the person of the Son himself to die in our place on the cross.

Here's the reality. Let me try and say this slowly. If you're a Christian this morning, let this just sink in. If you're a Christian this morning, God has dealt with all your moral culpability before him.

God has dealt with your sin. He's removed it. I think sometimes we imagine that God might have locked our sins away in the kitchen cupboard somewhere for him to bring out at any given point where you let him down.

Say, well, listen, I have evidence to know that you would have done that, right? I know what you're like. People do that to us, don't they? You know, when they're crossed with you, they wheel out all the things that you've ever done to annoy them, even things you thought they'd long forgotten.

[25 : 13] That's not how God works. That's not how God forgives. He doesn't keep past sins within easy reach to throw back at you. Rather, he puts an immeasurable distance between you and them so they can never be returned.

God's forgiving power has no measure. Our sins are thrown away. Guilt, shame, reprimand is gone. Now, that doesn't mean, and we need to be careful there, don't we? It doesn't mean that we won't still face the consequences of our sin in this life.

We might still face broken relationships, lack of trust, particular temptations and weaknesses. David experienced all of that. But still, still, our sin is no longer a barrier to our relationship with God.

He has done away with our sin. You know, if this morning you're trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and you're fearing him, this is the reality that you live in. You and I might find it really easy to call to mind our past sins, you know, to peg ourselves with guilt and shame.

I'm the worst person in the room. I'm the worst Christian in this church. But God doesn't do that. He has made it so that he is unable to do that.

[26 : 23] Because through the cross, he has put our sins away so they cannot be found. So as we finish, just think how are we supposed to react as we understand these verses, as I ponder those two immeasurables.

I meant to say, aren't I? Wow. God, you are so amazing. Your love for me is beyond measure. Your forgiving power towards me is immeasurably great.

So I worship you. Now, for sure, that worship comes, doesn't it, as an emotional response at one level. You can't but be moved emotionally by the love that God has for you and the forgiving power that he has for you.

This is unlike any other relationship you have, yeah? Everybody else's love for you is conditional on what you're like. And everybody else's forgiveness is sort of like they haven't really forgotten it.

Not God's. So there is an emotional response. But actually, the wow is more than just an emotional response, isn't it? Look at verse 1 of Psalm 103 with me, just as we finish. How does verse 1 put it?

[27 : 29] Praise the Lord, my soul, all my inmost being. Praise the Lord. That's the psalmist's way of saying, I say wow with everything of who I am.

Everything about me is saying wow to God. God's immeasurable love and forgiving power calls out of me a response of worship which fills my emotions and my life and my activities and my actions and my desires and my hopes and my dreams.

I praise the Lord with all that I am. All my inmost being. Praise the Lord. I want to live for him. In 2026, I want to praise the Lord with all that I am because he loves me in a way that I cannot even begin to measure.

And he has put my sin away from me so that I cannot get it back. Wow, God. Praise the Lord, oh my soul. Let me pray for us.

Maybe I'll leave a moment of quiet. You can pray in your own heart. And then I'll lead us in a prayer. Thank you.

[29 : 12] Thank you so much. For what you've shown us in these verses. Maybe if we'd wrote them we'd be perhaps brave enough to write that your love is very big and your forgiving power is very great.

But you tell us that your love is immeasurably big. You tell us that your forgiving power is immeasurably great.

And Lord, that is so reassuring. Lord, we love you in a failing and frail way. But we offer all of ourselves in praise and worship of you this morning.

We pray that in 2026, we would live lives driven by, rooted in, growing out of this great love and forgiving power that you have for us in the Lord Jesus.

May we be resolved to think all about what he has done. That what we do might just pour out from that fountain, we pray.

[30 : 21] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.