



DIGGING DEEPER

Psalm 103 Scripture Interpretation

Genre:

The genre of Psalms is poetry, and more specifically, Psalm 103 is a personal hymn (song of praise).

Generic Conception:

Psalm 103 is the first of the four praise Psalms that close Book Four, and is specifically focused on praising God for his benefits and mercy to David and the nation Israel.

Observations:

- 1) Historic/Cultural.
 - a. Psalm 103 is a hymn written by David.
 - b. David's use of the eagle in verse 5 is an interesting choice. The lion was king of the animals in Jewish culture but the eagle was the king of the birds. The eagle was renowned for its long-life, ability to survive difficulties (drought/famine) and its enduring strength. It was considered a sign of divine protection. Eagle designs were incorporated into many aspects of Jewish culture such as breastplates, holy arks, ceilings, and doorposts of synagogues.
- 2) Literary (& Poetic Devices).
 - a. Psalm 103 contains numerous examples of parallelism:
 - i. V1, V3, V7. Synonymous (second line repeats ideas of first line).
 - ii. V8, V13. Synthetic (second line completes or advances the first).
 - iii. V11-12. Alternating ABAB (first clause parallel with third, second clause parallel with fourth).
 - iv. V15. Incomplete (some, but not all words, are repeated in second clause).
 - b. There are several uses of figurative language: v5 "your youth is renewed like the eagle's," v11 "as high as the heavens," "as far as east is from the west," v15 "as for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field," and v16 "for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, its place knows it no more."
- 3) Grammatical.
 - a. The use of the word "all" occurs nine times in this one Psalm: v1 "*all* that is within me," v2 "forget not *all* his benefits," v3 "who forgive *all* your iniquities, who heals *all* your diseases," v6 "justice for *all* who are oppressed," v19 "his kingdom rules over *all*," v21 "*all* his hosts," and v22 "*all* his ministers, in *all* places of his dominion."
 - b. David refers to God's "steadfast love" four times: v4 "crowns you with *steadfast love*," v8 "abounding in *steadfast love*," v11 "so great is his *steadfast love*," and v17 "but the *steadfast love* is from everlasting."

Interpretations:

Psalm 103 is a magnificent tender-hearted song of praise to God with rich poetic and figurative language. It can be divided into three sections: David's personal praise to God (vv1-5), his national praise to God (vv6-18), and his universal praise to God (vv19-22).

David's Personal Praise to God. Within the first verses, David calls out to himself blessing the Lord. He implores himself not to forget the benefits of the Lord, recognizing the personal mercies he had received: forgiveness, healing, redemption, love, satisfaction, and renewal. He is aware that he must remember *all* the Lord's benefits – not just some of them, but to be mindful and appreciative of all of them. He recognizes that God forgives *all* his iniquity (sin) and *all* his diseases (not that God heals all diseases, but that all disease is healed by God). David sees God as his redeemer who rescues him from the pit (salvation) through his steadfast love and mercy. In verse 5 David recognizes that God's good will satisfy and keep him strong, if not physically, certainly in spirit.

David's National Praise to God. In this section David shifts from personal praise of God to praise God for the people of the nation of Israel. He begins with a reference to Israel in the past (vv6-9), moves to references of Israel in the present (vv10-14), and concludes with references to humanity (vv15-18). He recounts God's righteousness and justice for the oppressed (v6), and God's consistent presence and guidance (v7). In verses 8-12 David recounts what Moses learned of God; that he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger abounding in love (v8), he will not chide us nor keep his anger forever (v9), he does not deal with us according to our sins because of his love for those who fear him (vv10-11), and he will remove our sins (v12). The use of the figurative language "high as the heavens" and "as far as from east is to west" would be telling for the people as they would have understood these terms as the furthest they could imagine—much like we would think of infinity. David continues comparing the compassion of a father to a child as like the compassion of God to those who fear him (v13). Verses 15 and 16 taken together paint a picture of man who is like grass that stays green for a short time or a flower that blooms then dies when a wind comes along. This is contrasted with the eternity of God in verse 17 "from everlasting to everlasting." This section closes with the reminder that all these attributes of God; his love, mercy, graciousness, judgment, righteousness are for those who fear him, keep his covenant and do his commandments (v18).

David's Universal Praise to God. When we worship God we worship the God of the universe. David says God's throne is in heaven and his kingdom rules over all (v19). David closes the Psalm (vv20-22) with the same worship "Bless the Lord" used in verse 1-2. In this tricolon David recognizes God's angels, all his hosts, and his ministers who do his work in all places of his dominion.

Applications:

Unlike many of David's Psalms, this one includes no requests, only praise for God. David praises God for his mercies, his righteousness and justice, his compassion, and for salvation. However, there is a covenant in this relationship; God love is for those who fear him, who keep the covenant, and do his commandments. It is not enough to know the commandments – one must do them. David illustrates through the progression of the Psalm from speaking of himself, to the nation of Israel, to all mankind that the significance of an individual lies in their contribution to the community, the nation. This provides us a unique perspective on our roles as Christians today. We are not called to only be individuals contending for the faith, but also to be members of the larger body of Christ, and that is to be reflected in our churches, communities, and country.