

## THE 'HESED' OF GOD

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*Psalm 103 and Exodus 34:1-9*

This summer we are preaching a series of sermons on the Psalms. I'm not sure this was intentionally one of the reasons for Aaron deciding to preach on the psalms, but it is in keeping with our celebrating this year the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the Father of the Reformed Tradition. Calvin was a great advocate not only of believers praying the psalms but in making them a central part of Reformed worship. He compared the psalms to an anatomy textbook of the soul, in which everything we think and feel is brought to God in prayer, holding back nothing in fear or shame.<sup>1</sup>

Today, I invite you to consider with me Psalm 103, a jubilant song of praise which one commentator has declared to be "*one of the finest blossoms on the tree of biblical faith.*"<sup>2</sup> In this beautiful and eloquent psalm, the psalmist, based on personal experience and with an eye to Israel's salvation history, looks into the very heart and character of God and what he finds there first and foremost is the immeasurable reality of God's grace.

*[Read Psalm]*

Our second text is from Exodus 34. God with a mighty hand has delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and has guided them to Mount Sinai to renew the Covenant Relationship. But while Moses has been up on the mountain to receive from God the Ten Commandments, the people, down on the plain, unsure of the status of Moses, have persuaded Aaron to mold for them The Golden Calf, which they have begun to bow down before and to worship as their god. This abominable sin has hotly angered both God and Moses and led Moses to destroy the first set of tablets. Exodus 34 picks up the story with Moses once again in the company of God on Mount Sinai, receiving not only new tablets, but new insight into the fundamental character of God.

*[Read Exodus 34:1-9]*

***"The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love"***

A man was fishing off a community fishing pier. Whether through carelessness or by accident, he suddenly finds himself falling off the pier and into the water. Weighed down by his clothes and fishing gear, he begins to struggle to stay afloat. And so he lets out a cry for help. A fellow fisherman down the pier hears his cry and seeing his plight, rushes to the end of the pier and asks the fisherman what he can do to be of help. The struggling man in the water shouts back, "*Give me something to hold onto.*"<sup>3</sup>

In life, we all at times seek something solid, something trustworthy, something steadfast to hold on to. For the psalmist of Psalm 103, that trustworthy thing is the "**hesed**" of God, translated in our text today as **steadfast love**. Four times in this beautiful gem of a psalm, the psalmist uses this word "*hesed*" or "*steadfast love*" to describe and define God's character, and each time he lifts up this word it moves him to an even deeper and more profound praise of God. He is moved to bless God with all his soul (his whole being.)

The psalms, like the rest of scripture, were not written in a vacuum. They are not the composition of some Hebrew scholars or theologians alone in their ivory towers trying to fathom and describe the character of God. The psalms came from the grist of human experience. They were inspired in the vicissitudes of everyday life. They are words born of blood, sweat, and tears. Hence, though written centuries ago, they continue to speak with incredible power and meaning to our hearts and souls today. And so we are led to ask ourselves, what occasion or occasions inspired the psalmist to write this psalm?

The psalm is ascribed to David, Israel's greatest king, which has led J. Ellsworth Kalas, whose book, Old Testament Stories From the Back Side is serving as our text for our Sunday morning Bible class this summer, to hypothesize that Psalm 103 is a sequel to Psalm 51<sup>4</sup>.

Psalm 51 is that great penitential psalm, where David, convicted by the prophet Nathan, of his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and of arranging Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to die by the sword in battle, openly acknowledges his sin before God and prays for divine forgiveness. But as Kalas points out, seeking forgiveness and experiencing the life transforming power of forgiveness received can be two very different things. Here in Psalm 103 David has tasted the blessed fruits of forgiveness realized and so pours forth his soul to God in adoration and thanksgiving.

Modern scholars tend to question David's authorship, arguing that the psalmist is more likely an Israelite who has recovered from a life threatening disease which he has associated with sin and has experienced first hand the blessed 'hesed' of God in his restoration to health. Other scholars see this psalm's creation on a much broader scale, arguing that it is a post-exilic writing, a psalm in which the psalmist calls upon a redeemed people to place their trust and their hope for the future in the dependable love of God.

Clearly this psalm does not stop with personal experience. Having received first hand God's hesed, the psalmist looks back on the history of his people and vividly sees God's loving and providential care displayed in the life of Moses, in God's deliverance of his people from Egypt, and of God's guidance and care for them in the wilderness. And so the post exilic interpretation has some merit, as other Old Testament writers have looked upon the return from exile as a second Exodus. Marveling at how God can keep his covenant loyalty to such a stubborn, stiff-necked and rebellious people, the psalmist centers his praise of God on verse 8, which looks back to Exodus 34:6

***“The Lord is merciful and gracious  
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The biblical context is Moses receiving for a second time the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments. This has become necessary because Moses in righteous anger, threw down and broke the first tablets, as he witnessed the grievous sin of God's people worshipping the Golden Calf, while he was visiting God up on Mount Sinai. Moses is not alone in such righteous anger, however. God's wrath also burns exceedingly hot at his stiff-necked, short-term thankful people, but through the intercession of Moses, God's true character of love prevails. For God is first and foremost a God of 'hesed' - a God of steadfast love.

Would you concur? Does such an assessment jibe with reality? Does not God's anger at times seem insatiable? Does not God at times seem profoundly aloof and silent? Where, at such times we might ask, is the steadfast love of God?

In this regard I am reminded of the story of the devout elderly woman who returning home from church, discovers an intruder in her home seeking to rob her of her treasured valuables. She yells at the burglar, “Stop! (Acts 2:38) (*“Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may*

*be forgiven.*) Hearing these words, the burglar stops in his tracks and meekly allows the woman to call the police who come and arrest him. As he officer cuffs the burglar, he asks in wonderment, “*Why did you just sit there. All the old lady did was yell scripture at you.*” “*Scripture*”, the burglar replied, “*she said she had an ax and two 38’s!*”<sup>5</sup>

I am also reminded in this regard of your experiences in the “Year of the Bible” program on two previous occasions. Starting this January, the Adult Education Committee and Spiritual Growth Council are going to invite you to participate again in this program, in which together we seek to read through the entire Bible in one year. As many of you have read through the pages of the Old Testament the past two times, rather than confronting God as the loving father depicted in this psalm, rather than a God who is “*slow to anger*”, you have seemingly met on its pages a jealous God, a hot tempered god, a vengeful god, a god of swift and harsh punishment. This God of grace seems sadly absent. But are we hearing correctly?

For this word “*hesed*” is the central word used in the Old Testament, and particularly in the psalms, to describe God. You find this word over 240 times in the Old Testament, translated as mercy, compassion, loving kindness, or steadfast love.<sup>6</sup> It is used time and time again to describe the unfailing love of God; to describe a supreme being who is rich in mercy and who delights in blessing his people; to define a benevolent god whose “*steadfast love*” is so much greater, and so much more long lasting than his wrath and anger.

This “*hesed*” of God the psalmist extols in the most glorious of ways. He compares God’s compassionate love to that of a father. Now this fatherly image is more significant than we might grasp at our first reading. “*Father*” was not in the Old Testament a common name for God (perhaps this is why Jesus shocked the religious establishment of his day in referring to God as *Abba*, or daddy). “*God*” in the Old Testament is predominantly referred to as Creator, King, Lord, the Almighty, or *Yahweh*. But here the psalmist uses father for he wants to denote that intense, deeply personal love of a committed father for a wayward child (Like the father in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son)... a fatherly love that refuses to give up on the disobedient child but willingly stands by the child and with a gentle hand and in forgiving love seeks to guide and nurture him or her in the right ways<sup>7</sup>.

The psalmist also describes God’s “*hesed*” as high as the heavens are above the earth. We 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, so used to our high tech and highly advanced space program, have become somewhat blasé about space, and yet, did you not marvel with me this week as we celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first lunar landing and saw once again those almost magical black and white pictures of Neil Armstrong’s first historic steps on the moon. For this psalmist, the heavens are the grandest metaphor he can think of to describe God’s love. And God’s forgiveness is as “*far as the east is from the west*” - again, the most generous image the psalmist can conceive to describe the breath and expansiveness of God’s mercy and grace. And this “*hesed*” is “*from everlasting to everlasting.*” God’s love is not fickle. It is not temporal. It is not like the fireworks many of us witnessed and oohed and aaahed at on July 4<sup>th</sup>, glorious and spectacular in the night sky, yet each lasting only an instant, and the whole show, if lucky, some thirty minutes. God’s steadfast love is eternal. It lasts forever.

Last week Nelson Ford preached on understanding God and spoke about the mystery of God. In my mind, there is perhaps a deeper mystery than even the existence of God. **It is the mystery of God’s grace.** Why does God delight in caring, forgiving, and loving such self-centered, stubborn, fickle, and sinful creatures as you and I? I think J. Ellsworth Kalas has hit the nail on the head in the answer he gives, **BECAUSE WE NEED IT.**<sup>8</sup>

If we as followers of Christ look deep within ourselves, look deep within our souls, we come with the psalmist to the realization that we are sinful creatures, creatures of dust who even on our best of days, and even in our most holy of efforts, sadly fall short of the perfection God wills for us. Our hope can

never be in meriting or earning God's love. If that were life's formula, life's ultimate test, we would all utterly fail. NO, our hope is in the indescribable, incalculable, indisputable, inexhaustible, incomprehensible, indispensable, and immeasurable love of God; a love that you and I see so dimly until we see it hanging on a cross. A cross where God willingly and in love sacrifices his own Son, his own self, that you and I might eternally have fellowship with God, and know deep within our hearts and souls that there are no pits so deep, no mountains too high, no sins so heinous, to block or frustrate the redeeming love of God.

And this is life's reality, how should we respond? Let me offer one suggestion, taking a cue from this psalm and from the pen of Barbara Brown Taylor. The psalmist begins this psalm with blessing God with all his soul. He concludes with calling upon all in the heavenly court and all in creation to bless the Lord with him. Barbara Brown Taylor, in the last chapter of her book, *An Altar in the World: A geography of faith* invites us to engage in the practice of pronouncing blessings<sup>9</sup>. She claims that the church has made a big mistake in conveying to parishioners that only the professional clergy can pronounce blessings. Anyone, she submits, can pronounce blessings: blessings for God's goodness, blessings for God's providential care, blessings for the gifts of creation and for other human beings.

She suggests the next time we are sitting at an airport gate, or at a meeting or gathering, we try to bless all the people with us at that gate or in that meeting, acknowledging them as precious to God and recognizing that each and every person is dealing with something significant in their lives, either good or bad. We bless, she insists, not to bestow holiness on others for the holiness of God is already there. We bless so that we can participate in the divine initiative. We bless, so that we, like this psalmist of Psalm 103, can see life from God's perspective - the perspective of steadfast love. And through glorifying in this steadfast love, our hearts and souls are drawn closer to the God we know in Jesus Christ, who is love itself.

I tried this during my vacation and in the weeks since I have returned home and while I cannot describe to you any earth shattering or profound life changing experience, I can unequivocally attest that I have felt closer to others, to God, and have been moved far more frequently to bless the Lord with all my soul. As the Nike commercial would remind us, "Just Do It" or as an old Life Cereal commercial, with a little boy name Mikey reminds us, "Try it, you'll like it." And God will too,

***"For the Lord is merciful and gracious  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."***

*Amen and Amen.*

Daniel C. Thomas, Jr.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Neal Hansen in article, *Advocate in Prayer*, *Presbyterians Today*, April 2009

<sup>2</sup> Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, A Commentary (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1962, p. 657

<sup>3</sup> Heard in a sermon by Marion Condit this summer at Camp Cleghorn, WI.

<sup>4</sup> J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Grace In a Tree Stump*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Phila. 2005), p. 119. I am indebted to Prof. Kalas for the inspiration and several insights for this sermon.

<sup>5</sup> A joke sent to me on the internet.

<sup>6</sup> Indebted to word studies on the word, "hesed" by Scott Crawford and Kevnn Maxey from the internet

<sup>7</sup> James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation*, (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Grace In A Tree Stump*, p. 123

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, Harper One, New York, 2009. Chapter on "The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings."

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2. The New Interpreter's Bible, Vouume IV, "*The Book of Psalms*" by J. Clinton McCann, Jr. (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996).
3. Interpretation, "*Psalms*", by James L. Mays, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994
4. Articles on the Internet:
  - a. "*Word Study: Mercy or Checed In Hebrew*" by Scott Crawford.
  - b. "*Solid Food: Hesed, God's Faithful Lovingkindness*" by Kevin Maxey