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Praise the Lord As His Pictures of Forgiveness Soak In Psalm 103:1-22

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The word from God through which the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith in Jesus is Psalm 103

Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O 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 your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. 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. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes 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 their 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 everywhere in his dominion. Praise the Lord, O my soul. (Psalm 103:1-22 NIV84)

Dear friends in Christ, fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our risen Savior:

To my wife's disappoint, I do not frequent jewelry stores. However, this summer a member mentioned to me a new fad in jewelry: the sideways cross. Instead of hanging like a regular cross, the chain is attached to the top and the bottom so that it looks like it's lying on its side.

I've heard several different interpretations of what that symbol means. Some say it refers to the Scandinavian cross, such as you see on the Norwegian and Swedish flags. Some give it an anti-Christian twist referring to it as a fallen cross symbolizing the decline of Christianity. Some say it's a cross ready to be picked up to remind us of Jesus' words to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. But I think the best explanation I like is what Bonnie Hausmann shared with me. Rather than a sideways

cross, calling it an east-west cross, a reminder that on the cross Jesus removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. What a picture of God's forgiveness, a picture from Psalm 103.

Psalm 103 has several more pictures of forgiveness, pictures with which to fill our souls so that all that's within us overflows in praise to the Lord our God. As we contemplate this Psalm, may the Holy Spirit move each of us to praise the Lord for his forgiveness. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Yes, praise him as his pictures of forgiveness soak in. That's the theme today.

A. How great our need to ponder his forgiveness!

It does not take deep insight to understand the pictures of forgiveness in the Psalm. But to actually let them soak deep into our souls, now that even a life time of pondering cannot fully achieve. That's why the Lord brings his message of forgiveness to us in so many different ways. How earnestly he wants to assure you! How determined he is to bring the living water of his forgiveness deep into your soul! Soak up his pictures of forgiveness. Ponder them.

A roof with a long overhang may keep the rain away from the house, but nothing can grow in the dry soil underneath it, because it gets no moisture. Doubt and despair are like that roof directing the living water of God's forgiving promises away from our souls until faith dries up and dies. How deadly doubt and despair are! They whisper, "See how God rains down his forgiveness on others, but he doesn't really forgive someone like you. Look at how healthy and green their faith is, not like you. God couldn't really forgive what you've done."

Don't listen. Shut your ears to those deadly words. Rather, soak up God's pictures of forgiveness. Ponder them. His promises are certainly for you. Look at how he sends the rain on the good and the bad. His promises are for you. Believe them. No matter how great your sin, no matter how many sins, his forgiveness is greater. His forgiveness covers all. So listen and soak up his picture of forgiveness.

We will get to those pictures in a moment. But first there's another danger we must guard against. We abuse how abundant and gracious God's forgiveness is when we figure we don't really need to let this particular shower soak in today. There will also be another, we figure. "When I really need it, that's when I'll let it soak in. That's when I'll take time to ponder it."

Do you see how ignorant that is? There's never a day or a moment when we don't really need it. We may not always feel the need for forgiveness, but that's part of the problem. The need is truly there, whether we feel it or not. And when we don't feel the need for it, we don't let his forgiveness soak in. It doesn't soak deep into our souls changing us from the inside out. When his forgiveness soaks deep into our souls, we feel a horror about sin. Why would I want to keep on sinning? Why wouldn't I fight against it with all my strength? And when his forgiveness fills us, we feel a longing, a deep desire, to love what God loves and to do as he commands. When we easily give in to sin and fall short in our love, the problem isn't too much forgiveness. The problem is we haven't let his forgiveness soak deep into our souls.

So, dear friends, contemplate Psalm 103. Let these pictures of forgiveness soak

deep into your soul. For that is how the praise of the Lord begins.

B. How wonderful his pictures are!

“Praise the LORD, O my soul, all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:1, 2 NIV84). Why? Because he is the Forgiver, the Healer, the Redeemer, and the Crowner. What pictures are in those words!

He is the Forgiver of all your sins. The Hebrew word translated “forgive” is used only of God's forgiveness. His forgiveness is unlike any other. Even our best-intentioned, most heartfelt forgiveness still has some lingering reservations and hesitation. Not God's. His forgiveness means the sin never happened. He completely forgets it. Yes, the all-knowing God chooses not to remember it. Let that picture soak deep into your soul.

He is the Healer. We were dead in sin. Last week you witnessed the miracle of God making Colin Flaten alive in Christ through the water and word of Baptism. That is what he has done for each of us. Yet our sinful self still lingers in us like a malicious disease, so we don't do the good we want to do. For even the best that we do is still corrupted by our sinfulness. Only the Lord's forgiveness can heal our souls day after day. Soak in his forgiveness.

He is the Redeemer. We deserve the pit of hell, mired in unending suffering. But the Lord has redeemed you. In the Old Testament a family member would often redeem a relative who had become a slave. God the Son joined our family, became flesh and blood like us to redeem us. He paid the ransom price of his own life. The blood of Christ redeems you. That's why your sins are forgiven. He's the payment in your place. That's how he rescued you from the pit of eternal death in hell.

He is the Crowner. He redeemed us not to be his slaves but to reign with him. He crowns you with his love and compassion. For you see God's forgiveness comes because of who he is. His loving mercy reached out for us lost and condemned creatures. His compassion has brought us close to him. What pictures are in those words! He is the Forgiver, the Healer, the Redeemer, the Crowner.

Be sure and do not doubt his forgiveness. Be sure because of who he is. For he has made himself known and had Moses write it down so that we who live almost three and a half millenniums later can know it as well. The Psalm quotes the words the Lord God spoke to Moses in Exodus 34. “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8 NIV84). The Lord spoke those words after Israel had turned away from the Lord and worshiped the golden calf at Mount Sinai. How gracious and compassionate he is to us heart-broken sinners. Do not give in to doubt or despair. Rather let the pictures his forgiveness soak in. For his forgiveness is based on who he is. And he does not change, for he is the Lord.

And more pictures still! “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him” (Psalm 103:11 NIV84). How high are the heavens? Clouds are only a few miles up, but that's not where the sky ends. The atmosphere thins out after that, but the end the atmosphere is not the top of the sky. The closest star is about 25 million miles away, but that's just the beginning. They say the observable

universe is 46 billion light years which is almost a trillion trillion miles. But that's still not the heavens where God is. Nothing can measure his love. What a picture!

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12 NIV84). It doesn't say as far as the north is from the south. If we head north we will eventually come to the north pole where we can no longer go any farther north. But if you head east or west you can always keep going in that direction no matter how many times you go around the globe. For you see, there is no place where God stores away our sins ready to bring them out again. He removes them as far as the east is from the west. Why? Because of Jesus and his blood shed for you. Think of the sideways cross.

C. Our praise overflows as his forgiveness soaks in

There's more we could say about the pictures of forgiveness in Psalm 103, more for you to contemplate and ponder at home. But let these pictures we have talked about, soak deep into your heart, so that praise to the Lord wells up from your inmost being. Don't stop simply at an intellectual understanding of these pictures; rather, praise him with your inmost being. Praise him with your heart, soul, and mind, your thoughts and ideas, your emotions and sentiments, your will, desires, and aspirations. Praise the Lord as his pictures of forgiveness soak in.

For this living water drives out doubt and despair filling you with true peace and joy instead. For God's love brings forgiveness even to sinners, like you and me. Jesus is your Forgiver, Healer, Redeemer, and Crowner. We praise him by believing his promises of forgiveness, believing them because of his great love, higher than the heavens.

This living water empowers us to serve our God. Several times the Psalm refers to forgiven sinners as "those who fear God." This isn't the cowering terror of a slave cringing as he awaits the next spiteful blow from his master. Rather this is the child-like fear that holds our God in such high esteem and honor, for he has not treated us as our sins deserve. Rather he has had compassion on us, like a father who has compassion on his own children. Why would we go against such a loving Father? Why would we not hold his commands in highest regard, truly wanting to obey them? We praise our forgiving God by gladly obeying his commands. What a way for praise to overflow!

Soak in this living water of his forgiveness, so that your life praises your God.
Praise the Lord, O my soul!

Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.