
God's Immeasurable Love

"The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. . . . For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him" (Psalm 103:8–13).

When we think of the great passages of the Old Testament, we normally mention such passages as Genesis 1, Deuteronomy 6:5, Psalm 23, and Isaiah 53. One text that ranks with the greatest paragraphs of the Holy Scriptures but is seldom listed among them is Psalm 103:8–13. It is one of the most meaningful and beautiful exposés of God's gracious, compassionate love in the Bible. One cannot read it without observing the multicolored hues of the rainbow of His immeasurable love.

We are told that His love is remedial. Psalm 103:8 begins, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious." An old definition of the word "grace" says that God's grace is seen when He gives us what we need, not what we deserve. "Compassion" is similar to "mercy"; it is befriending and ministering to those who are in need of our help. It is mercy in action. We would like to say that we are totally faithful, have no sin, and do not need any help, but all of us know that we cannot make such a statement. When we come before our God, we must have the attitude of the publican in Luke 18:13, who beat on his chest and cried, "Be merciful to me, the sinner!" The good news of this passage is that God reaches out in grace to all who come to Him with this attitude and begins to remake them into His image.

This passage also says that His is a patient love: "The LORD is . . . slow to anger." God's nature prevents Him from quickly giving up on us. His compassion might also be defined as "enduring patience." Peter left us a reminder of this truth: "The Lord is not slow about His promise,

as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). If God were not longsuffering, He would have destroyed the human race long ago. God, in love, waits on us while we learn, repent, and begin taking His Word seriously.

This passage tells us that His is an overflowing love: "The LORD is compassionate and gracious . . . and abounding in lovingkindness." The word "abounding" is from a Hebrew word that can be translated with such words as "abundant," "plentiful," and "full." As God continually manifests His grace, it flows out of His nature as water flows from a spring.

"Lovingkindness" is one of the most beautiful words in the Old Testament. It stresses God's covenant loyalty. He will always be full of steadfast love toward us. He will never forget His promises. He will run to meet us when we come to Him. He does not love us with His compassionate, gracious lovingkindness only on certain occasions; He pours this type of love upon us every day!

At its heart, this passage implies that God's love is a sacrificial love. Verse 9 says, "He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever." To "strive" means "to contend." In other words, He will not always reprimand, rebuke, or manifest His anger. No, for He will allow His anger to be appeased. He is righteous and cannot condone our sin. He cannot withhold His wrath from sin; but when that wrath is appeased, it will give way to forgiveness.

On a much higher level, the writer, through the Holy Spirit, may have been including in this thought the ultimate appeasement, the judgment and forgiveness of sin at the cross. For God to extend such amazing love to us, a price of divine proportions had to be paid. Redemptive love is not cheap; it comes through the high cost of Jesus' death on the cross.

Consistently, God has responded to us with His mercy, not with His wrath. "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (v. 10). God is a forgiving God. When people trust and obey Him, He does not exact the penalty that their sins have merited. He forgives through what Jesus has done for us at the cross!

In the highest of figures, this passage says that God's love is immeasurable: "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (vv. 11, 12). His grace is as great as the distance between the heavens and the earth. The psalmist considered God's love to be beyond our comprehension. He illustrated forgiveness in terms of God's removal of sin as far from us as the east is from the west! God carries our guilt away from us.

His love can also be compared to a father's love for his children: "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him" (v. 13). A father has sympathy for his children, and those who fear God can expect Him to have the same type of compassion toward them. When children make mistakes, the father does not cast them aside. Rather, he lovingly helps to correct each mistake. When a child goes away into the far country of sin, the father patiently awaits his return and runs to meet him.

At the same time, this passage includes the

conditionality of God's love. He bestows forgiveness upon "those who fear Him" (see v. 13b). Who can claim the promises of His love? Not just anyone can. God's love is extended only to those who have a reverential fear that trusts and obeys His kind heart. It is true that His love has a universal aspect: It reaches out to everyone on earth (John 3:16). However, God can only bestow His lovingkindness, in its redemptive fullness, upon one who comes to Him in faith and walks with Him in reverence and love.

The beautiful words of this psalm make us think about the kind of love God has for us. The psalmist said, in effect, "Just look at the love of the Lord. Consider that it is remedial, patient, overflowing, sacrificial, immeasurable, and yet conditional." No words can truly express His love. No song can contain it, and no heart can comprehend it. All we can do is receive it, rejoice in it, and reach out to others with it.

Eddie Cloer



*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made;
Were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill,
And ev'ry man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
[Though] stretched from sky to sky.*

*Oh, love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall for evermore endure
The saints' and angels' song.*

F. M. Lehman¹

¹F. M. Lehman, "The Love of God," *Songs of Faith and Praise*, comp. and ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).