



Psalms Volume 1: Encountering God
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Requests for information should be addressed to:

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God Is ...

PSALM 103

When I visited Niagara Falls for the first time when I was in junior high school, I was not sure what to expect. Lots of water, I suppose. Driving up in our family car, my siblings and I tumbled out and ran over to the ledge and just stood there, our jaws hanging open. I had never seen anything like it before. The splendor of the Niagara Falls took my breath away. I was speechless. I thought to myself, *Nothing could top this!*

About ten years after my Niagara Falls experience I was on a plane in the middle of South America. We were somewhere over Brazil when the plane lost two of its four engines. We made an emergency landing and I discovered we were very close to Iguazu Falls. I had heard rumors that these falls were reported to be a hundred Niagara Falls. When I saw Iguazu Falls with my own eyes, I was in awe. I would have never dreamed it possible, but this experience trumped what I had seen ten years earlier. There I stood, feeling like a little kid again. My mouth was hanging open, and my eyes were big as saucers. I was amazed. Again I thought, *Nothing could top this!*

Now, years later, I still can't imagine more majestic waterfalls, but I know there is something even more amazing, more spectacular, and more awe-inspiring than any waterfall. It is God! We could stack up all the Seven Wonders of the Natural World and their splendor can't compare to the One who made every one of them.

A day will come when we will see God face-to-face and every wonder of this world will pale in comparison. We will fall on our knees and cry out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!" Until that day, we get glimpses and reminders of the greatness of the God we worship—and even a quick peek overwhelms us. This is what Psalm 103 does. It pulls back the veil of eternity and gives us a vision of the God we love.

Making the Connection

1. Describe a time you saw something amazing or awe-inspiring in creation.

How did what you saw give you a glimpse of God's creative power?

Knowing and Being Known

Read Psalm 103:1 – 22

2. In this psalm David tells us to “forget not all his benefits.” What is one of “his benefits” you see in this psalm and what helps you remember this benefit?

3. Take time as a group to review Psalm 103 and draw a composite sketch of who God is based on it.

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

God is ...

This list is not exhaustive, but it does give an awesome picture of the God we worship and follow. How have you experienced God as the one revealed in this psalm?

God Is Forgiving

God, by his very nature, is willing, even eager, to exonerate and pardon. When people repent of their sin with sincerity, God delights to forgive. This forgiveness is accomplished on the basis of who God is, not on our frantic efforts to prove ourselves worthy of his grace.

Sometimes we underestimate God's forgiving character. We keep punishing ourselves when we sin; we degrade ourselves; we heap penance on ourselves; we fixate on how unworthy we feel. The starting point of such behavior is the feeling that God does not want to forgive us and we must do something extraordinary to convince him to grant us grace.

God Is Compassionate and Loving

If I were pressed to limit my explanation of the character of God to one verse in the entire Bible, it would be Psalm 103:8. “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.” God is compassionate and loving by nature. He has a tender heart toward people, a sympathetic spirit, the ability to feel pity. Just as a loving parent has compassion on his children, so God has compassion on those who fear him.

One day, years ago, I was driving in the car with my daughter, Shauna, who was just a little girl at the time. We were listening to a radio program about an orphanage. She was playing around with the power windows, so I said, off the cuff, “Hey, if you don’t stop playing with those windows I will send you to that orphanage they’re talking about.” In retrospect, I’m confident that was not a top-ten moment in my parenting life, but we both knew I was just kidding. Her response was classic. She rolled her eyes and said, “If you dropped me off at the orphanage, you wouldn’t last ten minutes.” I said, “Yeah, you are probably right.” She felt so secure in my love she could declare it with confidence. Maybe we should feel more of that same bold confidence when it comes to how we understand God’s compassion and love for us as his children.

Read Psalm 103:4 – 5, 8, 11 – 18

6. One indicator of God’s compassion for us as his beloved children is that he is slow to anger. What are some of the ways you have witnessed God’s “slow to anger” heart of compassion?
 - Toward you personally?
 - Toward the church?
 - Toward our nation?

7. God has compassion on those who “fear him.” What does it mean to “fear the Lord” in a healthy, life-giving way?

8. Make a list of some ways healthy, loving parents look at and treat their child:

If God is truly a compassionate and loving Father, what implications does this have on how he views and wants to treat you?

God Is Sovereign

There is a throne in heaven, and God is sitting on it!

No matter what our eyes might see in this world, no matter how insecure we might feel, no matter what the news reports declare, God is on the throne and he still rules. He is in charge of this universe, sovereign over all kings, presidents, prime ministers, and even dictators. Don't ever be fooled into thinking that things are out of control. God's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Just because things don't make sense to us at times does not mean God has let the world slip out of his hands.

One day God will bring all of history to a close. He will crush Satan, separate himself from rebellious sinners, and embrace his children in his loving presence forever. In the meantime, we need to remember that he is sovereign. We can trust him.

Celebrating and Being Celebrated

Turn to the composite sketch you drew of God in question 3 (page 15). Using these attributes and characteristics, lift up prayers of praise and celebration for who God is and what this means for you as his follower.

Loving and Being Loved

One of the characteristics of God highlighted in this psalm is his forgiving nature. Jesus focused on this aspect of God's heart toward us and also called us to extend this same kind of grace to others. In the Lord's Prayer we read:

Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors. (Matthew 6:12)

As an act of love toward God, and toward others, identify a person who has wronged you and make a commitment to extend forgiveness to this person. It might take time, humility, honest conversations, and even tears, but it will be a gift to God, the person you forgive, and even to you.

Serving and Being Served

God is sovereign over all, including creation. In his rule over the world, God has given us responsibility. All the way back in the garden we read:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:27–28)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15)

Talk as a group about how you can serve God by caring for his creation. Identify steps you might take: as individuals, as a group, or as a church.