

**Psalm 103 (DHT)**

<sup>1</sup> Of David

Bless YHWH, my soul  
And his holy name, all that is within me;

<sup>2</sup> Bless YHWH, my soul;

And forget not all his payments;

<sup>3</sup> Who forgives all your iniquities;

Who heals all your diseases;

<sup>4</sup> Who redeems your life from the pit;

Who crowns you with covenant-faithfulness and compassion;

<sup>5</sup> Who satisfies with good ornaments;

Your youth renewed like an eagle

<sup>6</sup> YHWH does righteousness and justice for all the oppressed

<sup>7</sup> He made his ways known to Moses

His deeds to the Sons of Israel

<sup>8</sup> YHWH is compassionate and gracious

Long nostriled and abounding in covenant-faithfulness

<sup>9</sup> He will not always contend;

Nor will he take care of his anger forever

<sup>10</sup> He has neither done to us according to our sins;

Nor repaid according to our iniquities.

<sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth;

His covenant-faithfulness abounds to those who fear him

<sup>12</sup> As far as the east is from the west;

So far has he taken our transgressions from us

<sup>13</sup> As a father has compassion on children;

So YHWH has compassion on those who fear him

<sup>14</sup> For he knows our intentions;

He remembers that we are dust

<sup>15</sup> The days of a man are like grass

As a flower of the field, he so flourishes

- <sup>16</sup> For the Spirit passes over and it is gone;  
    And its place remembers is no more
- <sup>17</sup> But the covenant-faithfulness of YHWH is from ever till ever  
    His righteousness on those who fear him  
    And their children’s children
- <sup>18</sup> To those who keep his covenant;  
    To those who remember to do his precepts;
- <sup>19</sup> YHWH has prepared his throne in heaven;  
    And his kingdom rules over all
- <sup>20</sup> Bless YHWH, you his angels,  
    Who are mighty in strength who do his word  
    Who listen to the sound of his word
- <sup>21</sup> Bless YHWH all his hosts;  
    His ministers who do his will
- <sup>22</sup> Bless YHWH, all his works  
    In all places of his dominion, bless YHWH my soul.

### **Why doesn’t God just forgive us?<sup>1</sup>**

Why did God need Jesus to forgive us? Psalm 103 is a theological landmine. One prominent pastor has even called Psalm 103 the OT basis for the entire book of Romans.<sup>2</sup> Psalm 103 is one of the great psalms of praise for the work of God, namely God’s work of salvation; a work that in vs. 7 flows directly from his covenant-character revealed to Moses. This and the verses that follow quote from Exodus 34, one of the most important and most quoted chapters in the whole Bible, where God himself reveals to us who he is.<sup>3</sup>

In the leadup to Exodus 34, Israel committed one of the gravest sins in their history; an incident recalled in the great summary statements of Israel; when they bowed down to worship the golden calf. God was ready to return to the old school of doing things; to go back like in the days of Noah and start over. But Moses interceded for Israel and God relented of what he had threatened

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<sup>1</sup> The structure I’m using in this and part of the next section flows from the film “American Gospel: Christ Crucified.”

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur’s sermon on Psalm 103, “Remembering All His Benefits.”

<sup>3</sup> See my message, “The Sanctity of God’s Name.”

to do to Israel. After this, in Exo. 34:6-7, God revealed himself to Moses, saying: *YHWH of YHWHs is a merciful and gracious God; slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness; keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation; forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...*

God forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin—these are the three primary words for any form of wrongdoing... God forgives them all; fantastic news, right? God forgives sin, but he will not clear the guilty... How can God forgive sins but not clear the guilty? Doesn't the Bible say all of us are guilty? So who exactly is God forgiving if he doesn't clear the guilty? 'God forgives sins' and 'God will not clear the guilty'—how do these two things go together? Prov. 17:15 says those who justify the wicked are an abomination to the Lord, yet in Rom. 4:5 Paul says that God justifies the wicked, and then a few verses later in Rom. 4:7-8 Paul quotes from Ps. 32, saying, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” How then is God not guilty of abomination by justifying the wicked? To ask the question another way, if God is righteous, then how can he forgive wicked sinners without forfeiting his righteousness? How can God forgive, yet also by no means clear the guilty? Theologians sometimes call this the “riddle of the Old Testament.”<sup>4</sup>

Theologically weak answers to this riddle pit God's love against God's justice. And this is where we get the angry God of the OT and the loving God of the NT. It's often been said, and I've even said this, that our sin is the biggest problem we face. Bigger than even our sin, though, is *who* we've sinned against. Because of the absolute holiness of God, God's justice requires death to pay the debt for sin. I have sinned against the holiness of God and the only just penalty for doing so is my death. In the OT *cultus*,<sup>5</sup> the death was borne by an animal whose shed blood temporarily covered their sins, until the event toward which these animal sacrifices pointed came to fruition in the death of Jesus Christ. This has raised a theological quandary among atheists and those in the progressive Christian movement. Why couldn't God have just forgiven us like he commands us to just forgive one another? One of the leading atheists of our day, Richard Dawkins, says it like this: “Why didn't he just forgive them? Why was it necessary to have a human sacrifice? To have his

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Dever calls it this in “Christ Crucified,” and John MacArthur calls it this in his sermon referenced above.

<sup>5</sup> I'm using the term *cultus* in the technical sense.

son tortured and executed in order that the sins of mankind should be absolved, isn't that the most disgusting argument you've ever heard?"<sup>6</sup>

Without Dawkins' disdain for Christ's substitutionary sacrifice, his question is raised from other more sympathetic voices. God tells us to just forgive one another. Why can't God just forgive us like he tells us to just forgive one another? To ask it another way: why doesn't God just clear the guilty? Part of the problem with answering this question is it relies on a faulty premise: "God tells us to just forgive one another." What does forgiveness even mean? From a worldly perspective, forgiveness simply means to forget or to act as if it never happened. I fear many well-meaning Christians may define forgiveness like this; I know I certainly did for a long time. But that's not what biblical forgiveness is. Biblical forgiveness is not forgetfulness. Part of the confusion comes from Isa. 43:25, which does say that YHWH will not remember our sins. It's an understandable misunderstanding, because to us, not remembering something means forgetting. But a closer look at the word shows it has the connotation of refraining from holding something against us legally. When God promises to not remember our sins, he's promising not to hold our sins against us. The Bible doesn't say our sins poof into nonexistence. An unbiblical view of forgiveness equates forgiveness with forgetfulness or with pretending nothing happened. If this is what forgiveness is, then yes: why did God need Jesus to forgive us?

### ***Lex Talionis* and God's Forgiveness on the Cross**

There are two components to a biblical understanding of forgiveness. The first is the OT law that is commonly called *lex talionis*. Every ANE culture had their own version of *lex talionis*, including Israel. If you're interested in digging into the Bible's version of *lex talionis*, I wrote a paper a couple years ago titled, "The Enduring Law of Deuteronomy 19," which you can read on my website. *Lex talionis* is the technical term for what is popularly known as an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and of course, a life for a life. The *lex talionis* was never intended to actually require someone to lose their body parts; it was intended for judges to assign monetary values to repay someone who has been wronged in accordance with the actual wrong. In our day, if your finger gets chopped off on the job, this doesn't mean your boss loses their finger also; it means you are paid for what the finger is worth. How much you get depends on which finger it is. *Lex talionis* did not institute mutilation as an acceptable form of judgment; it mandated proportional

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<sup>6</sup> The clip of Dawkins appears in "Christ Crucified."

valuation as assessed by a judicial representative.<sup>7</sup> God commanded proportional retribution of his people because God knows we love to seek vengeance; God knows we love to pay people back for what they did to us; and God knows that when we do so it is in our sinful nature to go beyond a proportional response. If someone wrongs me, *lex talionis* dictates their punishment should fit the crime.

But then this Jesus guy came on the scene and preached this incredible sermon on a mount, and in Matt. 5:38-39 he says this: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you: Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Jesus, here, does not revoke the *lex talionis*; he redirects the retaliatory payment. If someone wrongs me, instead of seeking fair compensation, I am to make the conscious choice *not* to seek compensation, thus *absorbing* the blow of whatever wrong was committed against me. And Jesus says we should seek out absorbing the wrongs committed against us with the same vigor with which we would otherwise seek retaliation. *Do not resist the one who is evil*. God knows we love vengeance; we love pay back, and God limits us; we aren’t to go beyond a proportional response; but then Jesus tells us to take a step even further. Rather than seek *fair* retaliation, we are to forgive those who wrong us by *absorbing* the blow ourselves, by not seeking retaliation at all.

*Absorption* is the second component to a biblical understanding of forgiveness. This idea of absorption shouldn’t be hard for us to grasp. A rally cry of the political left is to just forgive student loans—and as someone up to my neck in those I would certainly benefit if the Court permits—but the political right pushes back and the question has merit: if my student debt is forgiven, who’s going to pay it. For the government to forgive my seminary debt is not to pretend like the debt never existed; rather, it’s to transfer my debt to the government. The government takes on my debt; the government *absorbs* my debt. Unpaid, forgiven debt doesn’t just disappear; it’s taken by someone else.

We get several parables from Jesus about forgiveness, and they have to do with the payment of one’s debt. When the king forgives the ungrateful servant, the king takes upon himself the servant’s insurmountably high debt. This is why the king is so angry with him for not doing the same to one of his fellows of a substantially lower amount. The king expected this servant to forgive others the same way he the king had forgiven—namely, through *absorbing* the debt

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<sup>7</sup> This is a key summative point of my above referenced paper.

himself. If the king could do that for him at such a large amount, why was he so cold toward a peer at such a low amount? When the prodigal son returned, his father welcomed him back to the fullest extent possible. This famous parable is often the example provided by those who ask: why can't God just forgive us the way he tells us to forgive one another—with 'forgiveness' implied to mean 'forget'? The Father just welcomes him back, they say. The fault here is that the son took the inheritance and squandered it so that not a single penny remained. The son owed a debt to his father and he was unable to pay his father back. And so in this parable the father bears the financial losses of his son. When what was lost couldn't be paid back, an exchange was made: the son was relationally reunited with his father and for this to happen, the father *absorbed* the son's losses. Understandably frustrated, the other brother rebuked his father—how could you do this; and the father's response boiled down to the simple truth that the relationship is worth the cost.

Whereas a wrong view of forgiveness equates forgiveness with forgetfulness; a biblical view of forgiveness is to understand that *the debt is real* and that *the debt is absorbed* by the one to whom it is owed. When someone wrongs me, to forgive them is not to pretend it never happened. Even if it's proportional; even if it would be just to do so, forgiveness is to willingly and sacrificially forfeit my right to retaliation. God tells us to forgive one another by *absorbing* the blow; by *absorbing* the debt; by absorbing the emotional hurt for the sake of relational restoration. With this understanding, we can see that God actually *does* forgive us the way he tells us to forgive one another.

There is no contradiction between the love and justice of God. God forgives all of our sins and God will by no means clear the guilty. Because God will by no means clear the guilty, the debt of death that we incur because of our sin is real; it doesn't get swept under the rug; God doesn't pretend we never sinned; God's wrath is due because of our debt. Because God forgives sinners, the wrath reserved for us because of our sin is *absorbed* by God himself. God takes upon himself in the person of Jesus Christ the debt of our sin. Instead of seeking retaliation against us for wronging him; God turns the other cheek; God *absorbs* the blow—and he does this by dying in our place on a cross.

Proverbs 17:15 says it's an abomination to justify the wicked. This is true, because those who are wicked are not wicked against us; they are wicked against God. It's an abomination for *us* to tell wicked people that their wickedness is acceptable before God as if we are in any position to clear the guilty. Because our sins are against God; because God is the only one to whom anything

is owed, only God *can* forgive us. But because God has sworn not to clear the guilty, God does not forgive us not by telling us our sins are good—rather, he forgives us by requiring justice and absorbing his justice himself instead of deservedly from us.<sup>8</sup> God doesn’t pay us back what we deserve; he *absorbs* the justice to bring about relational restoration, which the Bible calls reconciliation.

God forgives all of our sins *and* God will by no means clear the guilty. The dual realities that lie in tension with one another throughout the OT both converge at the Cross of Jesus Christ. This convergence at the cross; the great exchange of the Cross is no better summarized than by Paul in 2 Cor. 5:21 that for our sake, speaking of Jesus, God made him who knew no sin to *be* our sin, so that we who know no righteousness would *be* his righteousness.<sup>9</sup> Just as Christ *absorbs* our sin-debt of death under the just wrath of God, so also do we *absorb* his righteous standing, which enables us to be relationally restored to God. Though we are guilty of sinning against God, if our sins have been forgiven then we are no longer viewed as guilty of sin *because* our penalty was *absorbed* by God on the cross. Those who rebel against God; those whose sins are not forgiven remain guilty; they will be held accountable, and deservedly so.

If you’re here this morning and you are unsure whether your sins have been forgiven, I encourage you to put your faith in Jesus Christ today. The *absorption* of sins on the cross is not something that happens every time a sinner puts their faith in Christ; the death of Christ was a one-time event of the past for all the sins of all God’s people throughout all the world for all of time. There’s nothing I did to merit God sending his son to die for me nearly 2,000 years ago; it is entirely an act of grace. And the same is true for you. How can God forgive my sins? Nobody knows how sinful I am but me. Respectfully, none of us know how sinful we actually are; there are sinful attitudes and behaviors in us we don’t even recognize as sinful because sin has so tarred our ability to see ourselves as we truly are. But God sees how truly sinful you are. Your sins disgust God so much that he went out of his way to remove your sins as far away as cosmically possible, so that instead of disgust, God would look at you with delight; delight in a sinner transformed by the power of his love.

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<sup>8</sup> That forgiveness is equated with absorption means God *does* forgive us how he tells us to forgive one another, and this is a heavy word. That means this is *also* how we are to forgive one another. By not seeking revenge; by not seeking retaliation; by not seeking even what is due to us; but instead, by sacrificially giving it up and absorbing the hurt so that there may be relational reunification between us and them.

<sup>9</sup> Though we are the ones who committed the sins, God sees our sins crucified on the Cross. Though Jesus is the one who lived a perfectly righteous life, God sees his righteousness in us.

The Bible says that the transforming power of God’s love was showcased for all to see in the simple fact that Jesus Christ died not just for friendly faces, but for sinful and wicked enemies of God. How can God forgive my sins? Nobody knows how sinful I am but me. If this is how you see yourself, let me just encourage you that you are among the sinful and wicked enemies of God for whom Christ died to forgive. Rom. 4:25 says Jesus died to forgive your sins and was raised to life to justify us, or to make us relationally right with God. The very next verse tells us we are justified by faith... faith in the resurrection. A few verses later, Scripture says that by the death and resurrection of Christ have we been reconciled to God. A few chapters later, Scripture tells us point blank: *if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Rom. 10:9). If you’re here this morning and you are unsure whether your sins have been forgiven, I encourage you to put your faith in Jesus Christ today: believe in his resurrection and commit to make him the center of your life. That’s all it takes for you to receive this astounding grace of God. Believe in the resurrection and commit to make Jesus Christ the center of your life.

### **Psalm 103... Finally**

The justice of God and the forgiveness of God are sung in Psalm 103 without any suspicion of contradiction. Verse 10 says God does not deal with us as our sins deserve. If God just forgave us in the sense of forgetting our sins, then there would be no sins for him to deal with. The fact that our sins still deserve something shows that God doesn’t treat our sinfulness as nothing. Yet, no matter how sinful you are, his grace and mercy abound even more, Paul writes, alluding to the glorious words in vss. 11-12. *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love... as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our sins from us.* These verses use what in biblical poetry is called a merism [spell merism]. Merisms are rhetorical devices that use opposites to encapsulate everything in between. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. This doesn’t mean God created two realms of creation; it’s referring to *all* creation. In Col. 1, Paul writes that through Jesus all things in heaven and on earth were reconciled. This doesn’t mean creatures in heaven still need to be reconciled; it’s referring *all* creation. Psalm 103 says as high as the heavens are above the earth—this is telling us that there is no place in all of creation that is outside the reach of God’s love; there’s no place you can hide from God’s love; even if you go to the moon or Mars there’s no place you can be in all of the cosmic creation where

God’s love cannot find you. Psalm 103 says as far as the east is from the west. Again, this merism is using total opposites; you can’t get further away from something than how far the east is from the west. Despite the conceptual impossibility, that is how far God has removed your sins from you. In other words, the *absorption* of God’s forgiveness on the cross is *irreversible*. How will we escape the pit? *Only* by the costly forgiveness of our loving God.

Why does God do this? Because, as vs. 13-14 tell us, God knows we are dust. Instead of “we are dust,” the Hebrew almost requires we render the second half of vs. 14 as “he remembers that *dust we are*,” for it recalls God’s punishment against humanity in the garden: *dust you are... dust you shall return*. God knows that mere dust we are, yet he has compassion for us as a Father ought to have on his children. God forgives out of his compassion for us mere humans; he had compassion for us by taking on our human experience; suffering with us, suffering alongside us; dying the death our sins deserve; and rising to give us hope that one day we will join him in resurrection bodies to sing praises to our God for who he is and what he has done; to bless YHWH for 10,000 years and after that forevermore. How will we escape the pit? *Only* by the costly forgiveness of our *compassionate* God.

The bible does not see the love and wrath of God as mutually exclusive; the Bible is not afraid to affirm this tension. In the grand story of the Bible, vs. 3 gets picked up later by the prophet Isaiah who uses these same expressions to describe the substitutionary suffering and death of the messianic servant of YHWH, who we learn from the book of Daniel is YHWH himself. This messianic servant does this by taking our sins and sicknesses onto himself; by *absorbing* them from us and taking them to the depths of the earth. How will we escape the pit? *Only* by the costly forgiveness of our sovereign God.

Psalm 103 is a song of praise to God because of how he forgives us of our sins as an outpouring of who he is. The psalm begins with a twice-repeated and ends with a third “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” Verse 2 concludes that we bless the Lord by not forgetting all his benefits. I’m not a fan of translating this word as “benefits.” The word carries a strong connotation of payment. *Bless YHWH, my soul; and forget not all his payments*. Verses 3-5 all begin with the word “who,” indicating that these verses are describing the payments sung in vs. 2. Forget not all that YHWH paid to forgive our sins; forget not all that YHWH paid to heal our diseases; forget not all that YHWH paid to save us from being eternally abandoned to death; forget not all that YHWH paid to clothe us with his love and compassion; forget not all that YHWH paid to sovereignly take care

of all of our needs through the Holy Spirit who gradually transforms us with mature wings that outgrow our infantile wings until we are finally made new. Forget not that for all of these things to take place, a price was paid and it was paid by YHWH himself who absorbed the loss that we may be relationally restored to him. Put your faith in him today; receive by grace all the benefits he paid for; and render to the Lord—repay the Lord by simply praising his holy name. How will we escape the pit? *Only* by the costly forgiveness of our Holy God.

Let's pray—*YHWH, our God, we call upon your name to bless you and praise you for you are the Most High God, to whom our existence is owed. Though our days are short like flowers and grass under the heat of day, you take note of us. May you never cease to receive our praises; may we and your angels never cease to do your will; may your kingdom reign on earth as it does in heaven that all people in every place may bless you. In the name of Jesus, our Messiah, amen.*