

# ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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## Unlocking the Power of Psalm 103

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**How often in the Scriptures** do we find exactly the answers we are looking for, the encouragement we need, the direction we have lacked? Verses that cause us to lift our eyes heavenward are often the very thing we need to refocus our attention from our own morass to the glory and majesty of our King.



## Psalm 103

The Mount Everest  
of psalms

Such are the verses found in Psalm 103. It has been called the Mount Everest of psalms, exalting the soul to breathtaking heights. Although it does not appear in its entirety in Jewish liturgy, Jewish prayer is peppered with verses and phrases from Psalm 103 and the rabbis have called it a masterpiece of biblical literature.

## A Psalm of David

We are told it is a psalm of David, and his heart of love for his Creator is visible from beginning to end. Scholars believe it was written in the latter years of his life, perhaps after he had passed through a great crisis or as he struggled with illness. David is encouraging his own heart to look back on his life and recall the countless times that God had proven Himself to be his most faithful friend, deliverer and protector.

I believe the underlying message of this gentle and encouraging psalm is actually one of power. Perhaps the best place to start as we take a closer look at Psalm 103 is where David started, by exercising the power of memory.

## Forget Not...

The admonition to remember, or conversely to forget not, occurs over 200 times in the King James Bible. It is a constant thread throughout the *Tanakh* (Gen.–Mal.) and is given equal importance in the New Testament. It seems that the human heart is forgetful, or at least quick to engage in selective memory. And sometimes, memory plays tricks on people:

*“And the children of Israel said to them, “Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full!” Exodus 16:3*

How quickly the Israelites had forgotten the truth of their experience in Egypt. God sent Moses as their deliverer in response to their own groaning as they cried out to Him. Yet, just a few short years later, they somehow remembered their collective past as one of relative comfort.

Again the Lord cautions the Israelites through Moses, *“Beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of Egypt from the house of bondage”* (Deut. 6:12). According to *Vine’s Expository Dictionary*, the Hebrew word translated “forget” in this passage means to be oblivious of, for want of attention. It wasn’t that the Israelites would make a conscious decision to leave God out of their lives. But as they became established and successful, they would become increasingly self-sufficient. Their memories of God and all He had done for them would slowly fade and be replaced with a prideful confidence in themselves.

Today, psychologists confirm what God made clear millennia ago: that it is human nature to forget, or for our minds to tweak the facts and create a false memory that helps us deal with a difficult past. Worse yet, they tell us, most people have a tendency to remember the bad and forget the good.

Lest we think we are somehow above the mistakes that the Israelites made, consider how often we forget God and attribute His benefits to our own ingenuity. How easy it is for us to trust in our employer, our salary, our insurance policy, our retirement plan, our doctors...and on and on the list goes.

David understood the power of memory. *“Forget not all His benefits”* (Ps. 103:3), he said to his soul and with each remembrance of deliverance, his faith was strengthened. Knowing what God had done in the past gave him the courage and strength to carry on. It is the power of memory that will put gratitude in our hearts and praise on our lips.



**Don't Forget  
God**  
by trusting in  
something else

## The Power of Forgiveness

“Remember, He forgives ALL of our sins,” David told his soul (Ps. 103:3). His life was rife with mistakes, from the insignificant to the pinnacle of evil when he arranged the death of a fellow Israelite because of his lustful adulterous heart. Yet he reminded himself that no sin was beyond real repentance and real forgiveness. The New Testament carries a similar message. The Lord has the power to cleanse us from ALL unrighteousness, we are told in 1 John 1:9.

What an incredible thought...that the God of all Righteousness embraces our sin-laden hearts and washes them whiter than snow! He is merciful, the psalmist says, gracious, abounding in loving-kindness and slow to anger, filled with patience. He remembers that He formed us from the dust of the earth and without Him we are doomed. And so, David says, He doesn't deal with us as we deserve nor does He punish us according to our iniquities. As He forgives our sins, they are erased, never to be seen again.

The Hebrew word used for forgiveness in Psalm 103 comes from a root that means to take lightly, or to toss aside. It means to remove or to pardon. You may have seen a movie or two about the innocent man on death row about to be executed. At the last minute, the proof of his innocence is found and he is pardoned; the execution is canceled and he is set free.

When we read Psalm 103:3-4, we can almost hear David's heart sing, “Our chains are gone,” as he shouts to his soul: “We've been set free!” And with that freedom comes remarkable power. It imparts the authority to stand against sin, to walk in righteousness, to be merciful as God is merciful and to forgive others as He has forgiven us.

What joy we  
have

We've been  
set free!





## Our Redeemer

David was also moved to remember the countless times that God had redeemed his life from destruction or in some translations, the pit. Here in verse four, the psalmist uses the verb *ga'al* which means to redeem, deliver or avenge, acting as a kinsman. The *go'el*, or kinsman-redeemer, was the person who, as the nearest relative of another,

### Remember the Times

God has saved you from destruction



was charged with the duty of restoring that relative's rights and avenging his wrongs. When *go'el* is used in the context of revenge for wrongful death, most translations of the Bible refer to him as an "avenger of blood."

*Vine's Expository Dictionary* puts it this way: "The kinsman-redeemer was responsible for preserving the integrity, life, property and family name of his close relative or for executing justice upon his murderer. Such a tradition was still widely practiced during David's lifetime."

There is disagreement among some Christian commentators as to whether David was speaking of actual physical death in verse four, or if he was referring to spiritual death, *i.e.* the pit of hell. Most Jewish commentators believe that the verse was actually written to indicate both.

God is our kinsman-redeemer, David says, redeeming our lives from destruction and crowning us with the glories of spiritual redemption as well. Throughout David's life, he had repeatedly faced destruction on a physical level, but he was also no stranger to the fear of spiritual death as he cried out to God, "*Do not take your Holy Spirit from me!*" (Ps. 51:11). In every instance, his kinsman-redeemer proved faithful.

How astonishing to consider the God of the Universe as our nearest relative, closer than mother, father, sister, brother and even spouse; and even more amazing, to realize that He is bound by His own law to redeem the lives of those who are His! He has brought to bear the incomprehensible power that created all things in order to buy back His children from the grasp of enemies on every level.

## The Power of Language

One of the most amazing and beautiful gifts God bestowed on humankind was the ability to speak. For centuries, scientists have studied that ability. Most now believe man is distinguished from his four-legged friends by the ability to communicate complex thoughts. Unlike the animal kingdom, language is the primary means by which humans exchange ideas. We teach and we learn from each other. And we argue about what is right and what is wrong.

According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, we use language to describe, communicate, categorize and explain. But we also use language in a different way—not to describe what is, but to commit ourselves to some form of behavior in the future. When a bride and groom pledge themselves to each other they are binding themselves to a future.

It is this use of language, Rabbi Sacks says, not to describe something already in existence but to create something that didn't exist before, that links us to God. Just as He used words to bring the *natural* universe into being, we use language to create within our *social* universe, build relationships and change our thoughts and attitudes. Words have the power to create, the rabbi says, and that means words are holy.

Of course, we know the negative power of language as well. As much as we can build ourselves and others up by the words we choose, we can as easily bring destruction. Many are familiar with the story of the rabbi who instructed the man that had unjustly accused him to scatter the feathers of a pillow throughout their village. After doing so, the rabbi instructed him to go and pick up each of



Spoken  
Words

Cannot be erased

the feathers, an impossible task and a vivid example of the power of words. Once they are spoken, they cannot be erased, and whatever damage they have done is irreversible. Everywhere a feather landed, someone's life was negatively impacted.

David understood the power of language. He knew it gave him the authority to direct his thoughts and change his attitude. It also brought with it the responsibility to speak with kindness, truthfulness and righteousness. The tongue needs taming and words are holy in that they have power to create, for good or ill. In Psalm 103, David gives us a beautiful example of how to use the power of language as God intended.

## The Power of Praise

Psalm 103 begins with an exuberant exclamation of praise that encompasses David's entire being. It is no coincidence that this enthusiastic outburst occurs as David remembers all that God has done for him. Gratitude fills his heart and he can respond with nothing but pure and passionate praise. Gratitude is what blessing is all about.

God cherishes our praises and through them, the power of praise enables us to bring light into darkness and put the enemy to flight; to refocus our attention from our problems to the One who is worthy of our praises; to refresh us when we are tired and strengthen us when we are weak and most of all, to bring us into His presence in intimate oneness.

## A Psalm of Power

I have sometimes heard it said that we should praise the Lord for who He is and not for what He has done for us. That is a noble thought, but if we are thinking hebraically, we will realize that the two cannot be separated. To remember what He does is to remember who He is and vice versa. And that is the key that unlocks all the power of Psalm 103. As we remember what He has done for us, we are remembering who He is, the Holy One of Israel, God of mercy and grace. And as gratitude overwhelms us, we can but shout,

*“Bless the LORD O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name!”* Psalm 103:1

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Scripture from the New King James Version

## TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT)—*Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Nevi'im* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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