

Psalm 103
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
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Grace That Covers It All

It was the second inning of a game between the Detroit Tigers and the Oakland Athletics. I turned to my friend and said, “Tell me about your divorce, Dave.”

I had spent hours and hours with him before, hoping one day he might open up. That night, in the cheap seats of a ballpark, he finally did. By the eighth inning, the story had poured out of him. Tears everywhere.

Dave had been raised in a strict fundamentalist home where guilt ruled everything. When his marriage ended as a young man, he saw it as an unforgivable failure. Getting a divorce doesn’t need forgiveness — it’s sometimes the most honest and faithful step a person can take. But Dave couldn’t see it that way. In his mind, divorce was the ultimate sin, and he carried that weight like a stone in his chest for the rest of his life.

I wish I could tell you that night at the ballpark I helped him lay it down, that quoting Psalm 103 — “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us”^{*} — broke something free in him. I prayed it would. But Dave drank himself to death.

I think about Dave often. Because his story isn’t rare. Many of us are carrying guilt we don’t know how to release. Many of us are still waiting to believe that God’s mercy is really bigger than our shame.

Dave’s story is heartbreaking because he carried guilt for something that didn’t even require forgiveness. But in his world, shame was stronger than grace. And maybe you’ve carried something like that too. That’s why Psalm 103 matters.

It’s a psalm that begins in doxology — *Bless the Lord* — and ends in the same key: *Bless the Lord, all you works of his, bless the Lord, O my soul*. But what lies in the middle is a story about grace that heals, grace that restores, grace that removes our shame “as far as the east is from the west.”

Ephesians 1:3–8 echoes this very song in Paul’s voice. He begins his letter not with rules or rebuke but with blessing:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing ... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.”

Paul proclaims that mercy has a name and a face: Jesus Christ. Both of these readings come with an invitation: *You don't need to hide anymore.*

When we hide our guilt or shame, we're building a defended front to mask a fragile soul.

All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. ... If we strengthen our backs ... then we can risk having a front that's soft and open.

– Roshi Joan Halifax, Buddhist teacher and founder of the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe

What she's saying: We may present a shielded, composed exterior, all while carrying shame, guilt, or fear beneath the surface. Roshi Halifax's invitation is to cultivate inner resilience (a strong back) and allow for vulnerability (a soft front). That's where genuine connection, and healing, begin.

Part I: Why We Hide

Let's be honest. Most of us have learned to hide.

We hide from other people. We hide from ourselves. We hide from God.

Maybe you've carried guilt for years about a choice you made, a relationship you broke, a word you can't take back. Or maybe your shame isn't about what you did, but what was done to you, and you wonder if healing is really possible.

From the very beginning of Scripture, human beings have been hiding. Genesis 3 paints the picture: Adam and Eve eat from the tree, and the first thing they do is run and cover themselves with fig leaves. They hide among the trees when they hear God walking in the garden. And when God asks, “Where are you?” it's not that God can't find them; it's that they can't find themselves anymore.

Shame makes us forget who we are. And so we hide.

Some of us hide in perfectionism. If I just do everything right, then no one will see how broken I am. Some of us hide in work. If I stay busy enough, I won't have to face myself.

Some of us hide in cynicism. If I laugh at everything, no one will know how much I'm hurting.

Psalm 103 breaks into our hiding places with good news: *God already knows. And God still forgives. God still heals. God still crowns you with steadfast love.*

Part II: The God Who Knows

And when I say, "God already knows," this is what I'm talking about: "For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust."

In other words, God isn't surprised by our weakness. God isn't scandalized by our limits. God knows the clay we're made of. This is why the writer of Hebrews says Jesus is a high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses.

We live in a world that prizes strength, accomplishment, productivity. We're supposed to be shiny, competent, and endlessly capable. But the psalmist says: God remembers we are dust. God isn't shocked by our frailty. God has factored in our humanity from the start.

And here's the miracle: this God of infinite holiness chooses mercy. "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Part III: As Far as the East Is from the West

Verse 12 puts a fine point on it: "As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us."

The psalmist could have said north and south, but east and west is even better, because you can travel north and eventually you start going south. But travel east and you'll never reach west. That distance is infinite.

That's how far God removes our shame.

We tend to keep score. We keep a record of wrongs — both our own and those of others. We rehearse our failures. We replay our regrets. We nurse our resentments. We carry them like luggage.

But God says: *Let it go. I've already carried it away. It's gone farther than you can imagine.*

Let me be clear: this isn't an invitation to pretend the wrong didn't happen. The psalmist isn't minimizing harm. The psalmist is proclaiming that God's mercy is greater. Grace has the last word.

And it's not just personal: "The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed..." God's mercy is not just personal. It's social. It breaks chains. It heals communities. It restores relationships.

If God's grace only covers what I find forgivable, it isn't really grace.

I think of Bryan Stevenson, the lawyer who founded the Equal Justice Initiative, who says: "*Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.*" That's Psalm 103 in contemporary language. Grace covers us. Grace tells us we are more.

What happens if we really believe Psalm 103?

Do we have to keep hiding? Do we still need the fig leaves of perfectionism or cynicism, or can we finally risk being honest, knowing we are already forgiven and loved?

And if God's mercy has truly reached us, what does that mean for the way we treat others? Can we keep holding grudges? Or does the prayer Jesus taught us — "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" — push us to release the grip of revenge, trusting God's mercy to do what we cannot?

And what about joy? If grace really covers it all, don't we get to laugh again, sing again, celebrate again? Isn't that why the psalm both begins and ends with *Bless the Lord, O my soul*, because the natural response to grace is gratitude?

Friends, Whatever shame you're carrying, God's grace is bigger. Whatever wound you're nursing, God's mercy is deeper. Whatever failure you're rehearsing, God's love is stronger.

This is why every Sunday is Easter. The resurrection announces that grace has the final word because the love that lifted Jesus from the grave is the same love that lifts you today.

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

You don't need to hide anymore. Grace has already found you. And that grace covers it all.

Amen.