ALL STAND!

While teaching a class on The Everlasting Covenant at an evangelism school, one student, unable to sit for more than a few minutes at a time, had situated a “bed.” I flashed my next slide on the screen and began to read—Psalm 103. Suddenly I noticed a stirring on my front left. She was struggling to pull herself up. I stopped reading.

“It’s OK, you don’t have to get up,” I assured her.

“No, sir,” she responded, “if God is really like this, I have to stand,” which she did until I finished reading the passage three slides later. During the next break, she couldn’t stop talking about it: “Is it really true,” she kept repeating, “is God really like this? I never knew this!”

Psalm 103 is an Old Testament believer’s theology of the Mosaic/Sinaitic/old covenant (the main section is bracketed between direct references to “Moses” and the “covenant” in v. 7, 18). However, many modern scholars attempt to pit the “law of Moses” (the Mosaic covenant) against the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). They describe the Mosaic covenant as primarily bondage-generating rules and regulations that were to be externally obeyed, by rote, in contrast to the new covenant’s law of love to be obeyed from the heart.

Written by David, Psalm 103 was adopted into Israel’s national hymnal (the book of Psalms) by believers who actually lived under that covenant and wrote of it, “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97, NKJV). What my student heard during the reading of Psalm 103 in class that day is what the people of Israel heard several millennia earlier. No wonder she felt the need to stand!

Welcome to “The Gospel of Moses According to David.”
Write out Psalm 103:1–22 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Psalm 103:10–14. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
Decoding the Covenants

THE COVENANT’S BENEFIT PACKAGE

If someone had read the New Testament first and subsequently read Psalm 103 for the first time, it would be easy to overlook their misunderstanding if they concluded that the New Testament had been written first. In the psalm, the dominant themes of the New Testament gospel stand out boldly. To appreciate what Psalm 103 conveys, one almost has to be reminded that at the time it was written, Yahweh would not yet become incarnate for another thousand years!

The psalm builds expectation from its opening words: “Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name” (v. 1, NKJV). “All that is within me” says something good is coming. It repeats, “Bless the LORD, O my soul,” adding, “and forget not all his benefits” (v. 2, NKJV).

“Benefits” is a concept every generation can comprehend, our own not excluded. Some of us can relate to a work-related “benefit package.” Something of value is about to come our way. Israel would immediately recognize the covenant language here. Yahweh, their covenant God, is about to remind them of His covenantal love toward them, expressed in very concrete terms. The Psalmist then lists the benefits one after another without commentary. Don’t be in a hurry here. Let each “benefit” soak in as you read it.

1. He “forbids all your iniquities” (v. 3a, NKJV).
2. He “heals all your diseases” (v. 3b, NKJV). (Don’t get hung up for the moment on the sicknesses that do not get healed even with prayer. Nobody has that all figured out. When healing occurs, God is involved, sometimes miraculously, beyond human intervention.)
3. He “redeems your life from destruction” (v. 4a, NKJV).
4. He “crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies” (v. 4b, NKJV).
5. He “satisfies your mouth with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (v. 5, NKJV).

He sums up the list with one that applies to all of the above: “The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed” (v. 6, NKJV). Every one of the five benefits listed above responds to some specific situation that involves human oppression and cries out for divine righteousness and justice for redress. The blood of martyrs who did not receive that intervention temporally calls for patience on the part of those who follow in their steps. At the crafting of Psalm 103 they did not know that it would require His own “blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb. 13:20, NKJV) to guarantee ultimate “righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed” (Ps. 103:6, NKJV). D-Day has now been accomplished; the Day of the Second Coming is on the way.

Number three in the list above conveys the gospel as succinctly as any in Scripture: He “redeems your life from the pit” (NIV). Although NKJV translates it as “redeems your life from destruction,” “the pit” seems the preferred translation among modern versions.

In Romans 3:10–19, Paul cites the Old Testament to describe the unfathomable depths and inescapability of the pit—we cannot even seek God on our own, let alone shed our mortality without Him. The psalm responds, He “redeems your life from the pit,” and not only so, but He also “crows you with lovingkindness and tender mercies” (v. 4, NKJV)—from the lowest depths to the highest heights. Paul’s echo, “Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (Rom. 5:20, NKJV), was richer only because by his day, Jesus’ ratification of the covenant with His own “blood of the everlasting covenant” was history.

The Mosaic covenant, seen through the eyes of Psalm 103, is not only gospel but superlative gospel.
NEW-COVENANT GRACE IN THE OLD COVENANT

W. Robert Godfrey writes of Psalm 103: “The central verses of this psalm (vv. 7–18) are one of the greatest reflections on the love and grace of God that we find anywhere in the Bible” (Learning to Love the Psalms, 181, 182). In the entire Bible? Seriously?

At the beginning and end of this passage, the psalmist reminds his readers that he has come by his profound insights into the heart of God toward His children from meditating on His “covenant” given to “Moses” for “Israel” (vv. 7, 18). It is not only the “benefits” of the covenant that he extols, but the character, compassion, and love of the covenant Maker (vs. 8). Commentators do not always portray the Old Testament God in this light, but His covenant did, and Jesus did when He summed up the entire law and prophets with the “golden rule,” which was first a characteristic of God before it was formulated as a moral standard for humanity (Matt. 7:9–12).

It may concern some that this idyllic psalm acknowledges God’s anger, though it is restrained (Ps. 103:8, 9) and targeted (primarily in favor of the “oppressed,” v. 6). Jesus Himself exhibited such anger in situations where the character of His covenant commitment to people, and the genuine new covenant experience He seeks from them, were misrepresented by those who claimed to represent both (Matt. 21:12–16; 23:1–38). The gods of the other nations were capricious and cruel; one never knew what would offend them or how severe the punishment for the unwitting offense might be. Life in those cultures and life in Yahweh’s covenant of love were separate universes.

“He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities” (Ps. 103:10, NIV). Every covenant member who sang those lyrics had numerous, confirming personal testimonies of that truth, as do many of us who read it these several millenniums later. To help his congregation better understand forgiveness, David attempts an extreme spatial description: “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for 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, NIV). He knows no greater distances; perhaps they will help to visualize the utter removal of our sins.

To make the point more visceral, he plays the family card. Any parent could choke up while singing the line, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (vv. 13, 14). The picture is of deep parental love for a child born severely disabled. It was not the child’s fault. There is a parallel. None of us chose to be born with a sinful nature, born in the Pit through no fault of our own (Rom 5:12). We are not held accountable for our potentially fatal handicap, but only for our response to the covenantal promises that are a 100% cure for the disability, promises that have a drawing power that we have to intentionally, stubbornly, persistently resist or we will be drawn to the Covenant Maker and cured.

The psalmist then acknowledges our temporal reality, our transience: “our days” on this earth are “like a flower” that flourishes till “the wind blows over it and it is gone” (vv. 15, 16). He counters with something from “everlasting to everlasting”—“the LORD’s love . . . and his righteousness” (v. 17).

That there might be a God in this universe at all is hopeful. That He might be a God of love who is committed to the eternal welfare and happiness of His creation, from the least of them to the greatest, is almost too much to hope for. And yet, the covenant attests to the existence of just such a God.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Exodus 34:27
Ezekiel 18:1–32
Micah 7:7:18, 19
Psalm 63:1–8
Galatians 1:6–9
Hebrews 3:16–4:2
John 14:21
Colossians 1:21–23
Philippians 2:12, 13
Romans 3:10–19

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Psalm 103:1–22?

Review your memorized verse from Psalm 103:1–22.
NAIL IT DOWN: ONLY ONE GOSPEL—“THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST”

Those who attempt to pit the new covenant against the old covenant, or the law of Christ against the law of Moses, because they deem the latter gospel deficient, have not heard its salvation-song as David and the thousands of believers in Israel sang it (Ps. 103). Authors who characterize the old covenant as primarily or wholly law based and the new covenant as primarily or wholly grace based read the old covenant with blinded minds and veiled hearts (2 Cor. 3:12–15).

Paul addressed such misrepresentations head on when he emphatically affirmed that there is only one gospel, “the gospel of Christ,” and that anyone, including Moses or even “an angel from heaven,” who taught a different gospel was to “be accursed” (Gal. 1:7, 8, NKJV). Paul, with other New Testament authors, taught that the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh, was Jesus (compare Joel 2:32 with Romans 10:9–13), the very One who progressively revealed His one and only true gospel through His successive covenants over the ages. The gospel according to Moses was “the gospel of Christ.” Hebrews affirms that indeed the gospel that Jesus revealed to “all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses” was the same gospel He gave to New Testament believers: “The gospel was preached to us [in the New Testament era] as well as to them [whom Moses led out of Egypt]” (3:16, 4:2). It is the “everlasting gospel” and has never changed (Rev. 14:6).

Some point to the 613 laws of the Mosaic covenant as evidence of the old covenant’s obsession with law and obedience in contrast to the New Testament’s emphasis on grace and faith, not taking into account that the Sinaitic covenant included all of the civil laws for the new nation and a detailed manual for priests and the entire ritual system. Old Testament believers loved Yahweh’s law (Ps. 119) because they loved Yahweh as their devoted Father who “knows our frame . . . [and] remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14); they accepted His instruction as His loving guidance to promote and protect their welfare and happiness (Ps. 63:1–8).

Some bristle at Psalm 103’s contingency: the covenant’s benefits apply to “those who fear Him” (vv. 11, 17), “keep His covenant,” and “remember His commandments to do them” (v. 18). Such critics must ignore the many such statements in the New Testament, including Jesus’ testimony that He and the Father love those who love them and keep His commandments (John 14:21); this does not negate His love for the world (John 3:16) but affirms that it matters how one responds to His covenant promises of salvation!

One simply cannot read Psalm 103 without a bias against the Mosaic covenant and not be overwhelmed with the length and depth and breadth of the love and grace of God for every human being. He understands and has deep sympathy for what we are up against. The psalm emotively expresses His uncompromising commitment, to the death if need be, to rescue us from the pit and to restore to us everything that was lost in Adam on our behalf. The overtone of Psalm 103 is Jesus’ intense longing to one day speak to us those welcoming words that we long one day to hear: “Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matt. 25:21)!
PERFECT RIGHTEOUSNESS

“The condition of eternal life is now just what it always has been,—just what it was in Paradise before the fall of our first parents,—perfect obedience to the law of God, perfect righteousness. If eternal life were granted on any condition short of this, then the happiness of the whole universe would be imperiled. The way would be open for sin, with all its train of woe and misery, to be immortalized.

“It was possible for Adam, before the fall, to form a righteous character by obedience to God’s law. But he failed to do this, and because of his sin our natures are fallen and we cannot make ourselves righteous. Since we are sinful, unholy, we cannot perfectly obey the holy law. We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God. But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth amid trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.

“More than this, Christ changes the heart. He abides in your heart by faith. You are to maintain this connection with Christ by faith and the continual surrender of your will to Him; and so long as you do this, He will work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. So you may say, ‘The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.’ Galatians 2:20. So Jesus said to His disciples, ‘It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you.’ Matthew 10:20. Then with Christ working in you, you will manifest the same spirit and do the same good works—works of righteousness, obedience.

“So we have nothing in ourselves of which to boast. We have no ground for self-exaltation. Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us.”

( Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ, 62, 63.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What is your gut reaction when hearing Mosaic, Sinaitic, and old covenant law?

What is the link between the gospel message of forgiveness and physical health?

Why can’t God’s benefits be separated from having a relationship with God?

How do superficial believers of God try to make this separation?

How do you explain the guarantee of justice and righteousness in the context of the second coming of Jesus?

How has Psalm 103 changed your view of the old and new covenants?

Why is it a problem to think of the Bible having two or more gospels?

How have you sought more of a Psalm 103 experience?