

**GOD OUR FATHER**  
**Psalm 103:8-18**  
**Baraca and Morningside**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

The first picture we have of God in the Bible is as Creator. The very first words of Genesis tell us, “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*”

We have many names for God in both testaments.

God is *Adonai*, which means Lord or Master.

God is our Banner who flies over us in our difficulty (Exodus 17:15)

God is our Shepherd (Psalm 23)

God is our Refuge and Strength (Psalm 46)

God is the Most High One (Genesis 14:18)

God is our Healer (Exodus 15:26)

God is the Ancient of Days (Genesis 21:33)

God is our Counselor (Isaiah 9:6)

God is our Dwelling Place (Psalm 90:1)

God is the Eternal One (Deuteronomy 33:27)

God is our Fountain of Living Water (Jeremiah 2:13)

But one of the best-known and best-loved names of God is our Father.

**TRANSITION**

We’re all familiar with some of the comparisons the Bible makes between human fathers and God. Both the Jewish Scriptures and the Christian New Testament compare God with the ideal earthly father. Our passage this morning from the Psalm 103 makes a specific comparison:

*As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him.*

That statement is the culmination of the passage, but before the psalmist gets to that direct comparison, he includes a number of characteristics of God which we like to think the model father in the human family would have as well.

Let me re-read verses 8-10 which we heard a while ago. God is seen here as full of mercy and grace. The word *patient* is not in these verses, but the *sense of patience* runs throughout the passage:

*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities.*

Most of that passage probably needs little elaboration. But verse 9 may need some comment: *He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever.*

I used to misread that statement. I thought it meant God would not hold back His anger forever. In my reading, it sounded like, one of these days, God’s anger will explode, and woe be unto those who get the fallout from that explosion!

My Daddy loved his children. Growing up, I didn’t doubt that. Most of the time. But Daddy’s temper had a short fuse. When he got mad, if you were smart, you stayed out of his way. I felt his wrath, physically, many times as a little boy. I remember one morning when I was seven or eight. We were eating breakfast, and I was sitting next to him, close to the outside door. I expressed an opinion Daddy disagreed with, so he said to me, “I don’t care what you think.” I replied, “Well, I don’t care what *you* think either.” Before I could think any further, Daddy jerked me up from the table and had me out in the back yard where he warmed my overalls and the contents thereof. I’m sure that was the last time I ever told Daddy I didn’t care what he thought about anything.

Daddy could get angry, and when he unleashed that anger, a little boy didn’t stand much of a chance of escape. So when I first started reading Psalm 103, I thought verse 9 meant God wouldn’t hold back His anger forever. But my reading was entirely wrong.

When the verse says, *He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever*, it means the exact opposite of what I thought. It means God will not continue to chide us. He will not stay angry with us.

I came to realize that was true of Daddy. He could get very angry. Not always a holy wrath. But when his anger was over, it was over. He didn't hold his anger against me forever.

Parenthood is not always pretty. Being a father or a mother is not always easy. Carl Sandburg wrote a poem about a disillusioned husband and father. Ask yourself whether you've ever felt this way about the person you married or about your children:

I WISH to God I never saw you, Mag.  
I wish you never quit your job and came along with me.  
I wish we never bought a license and a white dress  
For you to get married in the day we ran off to a minister  
And told him we would love each other and take care of each other  
Always and always long as the sun and the rain lasts anywhere.  
Yes, I'm wishing now you lived somewhere away from here  
And I was a bum on the bumpers a thousand miles away dead broke.  
I wish the kids had never come  
And rent and coal and clothes to pay for  
And a grocery man calling for cash,  
Every day cash for beans and prunes.  
I wish to God I never saw you, Mag.  
I wish to God the kids had never come.

Sandburg didn't make up the story of Mag and her husband out of thin air. You read in the paper about abusive men who do physical and emotional harm to the women they live with and to defenseless children.

But God . . .

But God . . .

But God is not like that.

God is not a man, subject to fits of anger when people do things which displease.

Verses 11-12 in Psalm 103 compare God's love and forgiveness with the vastness of the heavens and with the breadth of the earth:

*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

The heart of those verses was expressed in a gospel chorus I learned as a child:

Wide, wide as the ocean / High as the heavens above  
Deep, deep as the deepest sea / Is my Savior's love.  
I, though so unworthy, / Still am a child of His care,  
For His Word teaches me / That His love reaches me everywhere (FBC, Las Cruces).

The psalmist says God has removed our transgressions *as far as the east is from the west*.

That calls to mind a love song from the 1970s called "The Twelfth of Never."

The singer answers the question of how long his love will endure:

**I'll love you 'til the bluebells forget to bloom.  
I'll love you 'til the clover has lost its perfume.  
I'll love you 'til the poets run out of rhyme  
Until the Twelfth of Never and that's a long, long time  
(Livingston and Webster)**

That song is written to express love between a man and a woman. But it can also express the love of a parent. With our theme for today, we'll say it expresses the love of a father. But let's not forget, that everlasting quality also expresses the Ultimate Love from our Heavenly Father.

## **MAME**

When we think of the love a parent has for a child, we know this love can bring sorrow. Children sometimes turn their backs on the love of a parent.

In the Broadway musical show, *Mame*, the title character adopts her orphaned nephew. She takes care of Patrick from grade school until he's out of college. The play is set in the 1920s. Mame is a free spirit, a "liberated woman," before that term was invented. It's not unusual for young people to rebel against the way they were raised. Mame's nephew rebels. Given Mame's lifestyle, we might feel Patrick is justified in rejecting his foster mother. But as she reflects on her loss of the boy she raised as her own, Mame sings a song anyone who has raised a child or grandchild probably can identify with at times. She wonders out loud about the good things she tried to do and the things which maybe she shouldn't have done.

Did he need a stronger hand?  
Did he need a lighter touch?  
Was I soft or was I tough?  
Did I give enough?  
Did I give too much?  
At the moment when he needed me,  
Did I ever turn away?  
Would I be there when he called,  
If he walked into my life today. . . .

And there must have been a million things.  
That my heart forgot to say.  
Would I think of one or two,  
If he walked into my life today.  
Should I blame the times I pampered him,  
Or blame the times I bossed him;  
What a shame!  
I never really found the boy,  
Before I lost him. . . .

Though I'll ask myself my whole life long,  
What went wrong along the way;  
Would I make the same mistakes  
If he walked into my life today? (Herman)

God is presented in Psalm 103 as the loving, ever-patient Creator and Redeemer. But there's another side of God in the story of Noah and the flood. Genesis 6 describes God as repenting or regretting -- being sorry -- that He ever made the human race. By and large, these folks He created just haven't followed the path He had in mind.

*The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."*

God is presented in a different light there. But the overwhelming testimony of Scripture is consistent with what we've seen in Psalm 103, specifically the comparison in verse 13 of God with a human father: *As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him.*

We need to examine that word *pities*. If we *pity* someone, there may be an element of judgment, of looking down on the person. Or, at best, feeling sorry for the person. "Boy, I pity that guy! I'm glad I'm not in his shoes." But the Hebrew word is better translated as loving deeply, having mercy, being compassionate, having tender affection, having compassion (Blue Letter Bible online). That's how a father looks at his children. That's how God our Heavenly Father looks at us.

Jim Wallis heads up the Sojourners Christian social concern organization. On a D-V-D, Wallis told his audience, "God knows everything about everyone in this room, and He loves us anyway."

Psalm 103 goes on to say God knows us for what we are and for what we are not. Verses 14-16 compare us with dust and with grass.

For he knows our frame [He knows what we are made of]; he remembers that we are dust. This is a reference to the poetic description in Genesis 2 in which God makes Adam from a handful of dust.

As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

Thomas Gray describes the fleetingness of this life in his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” Gray envisions comments about someone who has died recently:

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,  
"Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn  
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away,  
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn (Gray)

The man is then described as stopping at noon to stretch out and rest by a stream:

"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech  
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,  
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,  
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

The neighbor had followed the daily pattern of this man. But, then, he says this about the man:

"One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,  
Along the heath, and near his favourite tree;  
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

So the man who has been part of the familiar daily scene is gone, and another man comes along to claim the land where the other man had worked. But the new man has his own pattern, and the ways of the other man will soon be forgotten.

We are like the dust of the earth. We are like the grass of the field. But the psalm says that's not the whole story. We don't last long, it's true . . .

*But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.*

As we think of the shortness of human life, our challenge as fathers -- or to honor the memory of our fathers -- is to make the most of each passing day. Another poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, wrote his own psalm. He called it “The Psalm of Life.” Here's part of his challenge many school children in past generations had to learn “by heart”:

Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time;  
Footprints, that perhaps another,  
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,  
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again.

At some places, the Bible also looks at God as Mother. And as we think of a loving, helping, sustaining Parent — mother or father — I want to tell you about Janie Pruitt's funeral which was last Thursday. I had a part in her service along with Marshall Fant the Third, who grew up next door to Janie. Marshall told about something from when he was in the first grade. He went to school one day barefooted. His mother took him to school, but he and Janie's son walked home together. Marshall had no shoes on, but Janie's son did have shoes. The route they chose to get home was through a grassy pasture. But that grassy pasture had lots of stickers. And lots of those stickers got stuck in Marshall's feet. He got so many stickers that he didn't think he could walk. He got Janie's son to go tell about his predicament. Marshall's mother wasn't home, but Janie was. So her son told her about Marshall in the brier patch. So she walked to the brier patch, picked up poor little Marshall in her arms, carried him home, and got the stickers out.

Preacher Marshall recalled that as unforgettable from Janie Pruitt and also a parable about how God rescues all His children from sticky, stickers places.

To all fathers and mothers and sons and daughters and brothers and sisters — our challenge, is to acknowledge the greatness of our Heavenly Father. Believe His promise that He has removed our sin from us, *as far as the east is from the west*. Live in the awareness of that forgiving love.

Those of us who are fathers and grandfathers face the challenge of being the best fathers and grandfathers we can be, with the daily and hourly strength that comes from the Eternal Father.

Every one of us faces the call to be true to the examples set by our earthly father, to whatever extent he reflected the love and patience and forgiveness of God.

*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide [or complain against us], nor will he keep his anger [against us] for ever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.*

Pastor Richard Fairchild tells a story that appeared years ago in the *Christian Reader*: A story about a father who touched his child's life in an unexpected way. Two young boys were in the living room. The older boy Charlie noticed his younger brother, John, seemed frightened as their father came into the room. Charlie sensed that John had done something wrong. Then he saw: John had opened his father's brand new hymnal and scribbled all over the first page with a pen.

Both boys stared at their minister father, waiting for John's punishment. Their father picked up his prized hymnal, looked at it carefully and then sat down, without saying a word. Books were precious to him. For him, books were knowledge. What he did next was remarkable.

Instead of punishing the lad who had scribbled in the song book, instead of scolding, or yelling, the father took the pen from the little boy's hand, and then wrote in the book himself, alongside the scribbles John had made. Here is what that father wrote:

"John's work, 1959, age 2. How many times have I looked into your beautiful face and into your warm, alert eyes looking up at me and thanked God for the one who has now scribbled in my new hymnal. You have made the book sacred, as have your brother and sister to so much of my life."

That hymnal became a treasured family possession -- tangible proof that their father loved them -- the lesson that what really matters is people, not objects; patience, not judgment; love, not anger.

If that hymnbook incident happened in 1959, baby John is a man nearly sixty — probably a father and grandfather — himself by now. What an example the father of those boys set for his family! (Fairchild)

As we think of that kind of father, our thoughts turn again to God our Father., I think of a song called "If I Didn't Have You." It's been sung in an animated monster movie between two unlikely friends. It's been sung as a love song by a man for his wife. But the middle part of the song also can remind us of how helpless we would be without God: "If I Didn't Have You."

If I didn't have you,  
I'd long ago been left in the dark out in the cold,  
Blowing around from town to town,  
Like a feather in the wind.  
If I didn't have you I know I'd be,  
Floundering around like a ship at sea,  
Lost in the rain on a hurricane and that's where I'd have been,  
But I didn't get lost cause I saw your light,  
Shining like a beacon on a cold dark night.  
And the sun came up and the skies turned blue,  
No, I wouldn't have nothing if I didn't have you (Randy Newman).

## **PRAYER FOR FATHERS**

Our associate pastor, Josh Hunt, who soon will be our lead pastor, gave me an inclusive kind of Prayer for Fathers that I find quite moving. Let me share that with you as we think about fathers and

our need to be more like our Father God:

Holy God, whom we call Father, we give you thanks for the people who have been our earthly fathers in this life, and we pray for all sorts and conditions of fathers.

For fathers who have striven to balance the demands of work, marriage, and children with an honest awareness of both joy and sacrifice.

For fathers who, lacking a good model, have worked to become a good father.

For fathers who by their own account were not always there for their children, but who continue to offer those children, now grown, their love and support.

For fathers who have been wounded by the neglect and hostility of their children.

For fathers who, despite divorce, have remained in their children's lives.

For fathers whose children are adopted, and whose love and support has offered healing.

For fathers who, as stepfathers, freely choose the obligation of fatherhood and earned their stepchildren's love and respect.

For fathers who have lost a child to death, and continue to hold the child in their heart[s].

For those men who have no children, but cherish the next generation as if they were their own.

For those men who have "fathered" us in their role as mentors and guides.

And for those fathers who have died, but live on in our memory and in the communion of your Saints, whose love continues to nurture us.

All this we ask in the name of your beloved Son, who taught us that we can call you our Heavenly Father. Amen [Adapted from Kirk Loadman-Copeland's prayer].

## **CONCLUSION**

As you live in the awareness of that kind of love and forgiveness and acceptance by our Father God, claim these promises this week:

God's love that will never let you go.

God's grace that is greater than all your sin.

God's peace that passes all understanding.

These are yours through faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**\*\*\* Initially given June 15, 2008**

Anonymous, "Wide, Wide as the Ocean." Quoted in Footprints, First Baptist Church, Las Cruces, New Mexico, February, 2007. [www.zianet.com/fbclc/FootPrints/Feb07.pdf](http://www.zianet.com/fbclc/FootPrints/Feb07.pdf)

Blue Letter Bible on Psalm 103:13. Blue Letter Bible. "Dictionary and Word Search for *racham* (Strong's 07355)". Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2008. 11 Jun 2008. < [http:// cf.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H07355&t=kjv](http://cf.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H07355&t=kjv) >

Richard Fairchild, "Priceless Scribbles," [illustrations@CLERGY.NET](mailto:illustrations@CLERGY.NET) adapted by King Duncan, June 10, 2008.

Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," A Blupete Poetry Pick. <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Poetry/Elegy.htm>

Where is that boy with the bugle?  
My little love was always my big romance;  
Where's that boy with the bugle?  
And why did I ever buy him those damn long pants?  
Did he need a stronger hand?  
Did he need a lighter touch?  
Was I soft or was I tough?  
Did I give enough?  
Did I give too much?  
At the moment when he needed me,  
Did I ever turn away?  
Would I be there when he called,  
If he walked into my life today.  
Were his days a little dull?  
Were his nights a little wild?  
Did I overstate my plan?  
Did I stress the man?  
And forget the child.  
And there must have been a million things.  
That my heart forgot to say.  
Would I think of one or two,  
If he walked into my life today.  
Should I blame the times I pampered him,  
Or blame the times I bossed him;  
What a shame!  
I never really found the boy,  
Before I lost him.  
Were the years a little fast?

### **GOD OUR FATHER---SOURCES---B**

Was his world a little free?  
Was there too much of a crowd?  
All too lush and loud and not enough for me.  
Though I'll ask myself my whole life long,  
What went wrong along the way;  
Would I make the same mistakes

If he walked into my life today?  
If that boy with the bugle,  
If he walked into my life today.  
(Jerry Herman "If He Walked Into My Life Today," *Mame*)

**JERRY LIVINGSTON, PAUL FRANCIS WEBSTER**

<http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-twelfth-of-never-lyrics-keith-urban.html>

You ask me how much I need you, must I explain? I need you, oh my darling, like roses need rain  
You ask how long I'll love you, I'll tell you true  
Until the Twelfth of Never, I'll still be loving you  
Hold me close, never let me go  
Hold me close, melt my heart like April snow  
I'll love you 'til the bluebells forget to bloom  
I'll love you 'til the clover has lost its perfume  
I'll love you 'til the poets run out of rhyme  
Until the Twelfth of Never and that's a long, long time  
Until the Twelfth of Never and that's a long, long time.

"A PSALM OF LIFE"

Tell me not in mournful numbers,  
"Life is but an empty dream!"  
For the soul is dead that slumbers,  
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!  
And the grave is not its goal;  
"Dust thou art, to dust returnest,"  
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,  
Is our destined end or way;  
But to act, that each to-morrow  
Find us further than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,  
And our hearts, though stout and brave,  
Still, like muffled drums, are beating  
Funeral marches to the grave.

**GOD OUR FATHER---SOURCES---C**

In the world's broad field of battle,  
In the bivouac of Life,  
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!  
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!  
Let the dead Past bury its dead!  
Act -- act in the living Present!  
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,



Sailing o'er life's solemn main,  
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,  
With a heart for any fate;  
Still achieving, still pursuing,  
Learn to labour and to wait,

By [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](#) (1807-1882). A Blupete Poetry Pick  
<http://www.blupete.com/index.htm>

Carl Sandburg, "Mag."