

EXTREME LOVE



BIG IDEA: Do you dislike being misunderstood? Do you feel hurt when someone doesn't forgive you, even when you say you're sorry? Do you sometimes feel empty and alone when it seems no one loves you?

This study will help your group grasp the truth that God's love is unconditional—not based on performance or acceptability. He loves, forgives and understands us.

Applying the truths of Psalm 103 will help your group realize in a new way that God is a safe harbor for them. He is the One to run to, not away from, when we sin.



DESIRED LIFE CHANGE: As a result of this study, your group should know, understand and experience God's unconditional love and forgiveness in a new way. Your students should have a fresh motivation to be honest with God about their sin because they realize that God loves them unconditionally.



AUDIENCE: This lesson is designed for students who are new in their relationship with God or have never had a deep personal walk with Him based on His love for them.



LEADER'S PREPARATION: Read through the entire leader's guide to get an overview. Then, carefully study Psalm 103 using the guidelines in the lesson. You may want to read the passage several times and underline and circle key phrases, as called for in the lesson. Be prepared to share your story related to this topic. Let your group see how these truths have changed your life.



AT A GLANCE

As your group interacts in this study, they will think . . .

This is my **WORLD:** At times I feel that God only loves me when I do everything right.

This is my **NEED:** I need to experience God's unconditional love and become confident of His nature.

This is my **ANSWER:** God's Word says that as His child I am completely forgiven of my sin.

This is the **DIFFERENCE:** I will know and experience God's unconditional love in a new and deeper way.

This is what I'll **DO:** I will be honest with God because I know He loves, understands and forgives me no matter what I do.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?



Healthy relationships are built on love, trust understanding, acceptance and communication. By saturating their minds and hearts with God's love, grace and compassion, your group members will deepen their relationships with God. A study of Psalm 103 will help them remember who God is and clarify any warped views they may have of God's love for them.

We can know intellectually that God loves us unconditionally yet still live our lives as if He is a policeman trying to catch us doing something wrong. The person with this attitude believes God is always trying to steal the fun out of life. Others see God as a judge compelled to punish them for sinning. A person with this view may feel that every negative circumstance is a punishment from God. Some may think God is a totally permissive grandfather who gives them

everything they want, whether it is good or bad. The person with this view cannot understand why everything in life doesn't go exactly right. When life gets difficult, the person wonders why this grandfather is not coming to the rescue.

Psalm 103 compels us to bask in the abounding love, grace and compassion of God and thank Him for all His benefits toward us. This passage shows the character of God, and how He has freely lavished His love on us. It is a reminder that though we certainly do sin, God forgives us, cleans the slate, and throws the slate away.

The person who understands God's love and character has a firm foundation to grow in Christ. A correct perspective of God's love is invigorating and life-changing. This truth will help them love, accept and forgive themselves. If they can love, accept and forgive themselves, then they can do the same for others.

CAPTURE THE INTEREST AND EXPOSE THE NEED

1 ASK: Who is the person (if any) in your life that you've felt the most unconditional love from? What were some of the actions or attitudes they displayed? How did their unconditional love make you feel?

2 READ

3 STATE: Let's define these words. Use Webster's Dictionary.

UNDERSTANDING: The quality or condition of one who understands; having or characterized by comprehension, discernment, compassion, and sympathy.

FORGIVE: To absolve from payment of; to grant pardon without harboring resentment.

LOVE: Tender and benevolent affection.

4 STATE: Since we all have these three intense needs, we are constantly seeking to fulfill them.


5 ASK: What are some things students . . .

LOVE: Most dating relationships are based on infatuation or self-gratification, not on love. Fantasies are false experiences which do not truly meet a need.

UNDERSTANDING: Talking longer and louder or defending yourself usually frustrates both you and the other person.

FORGIVENESS: Rationalization, withdrawal and denial give temporary emotional relief, but the deeper need for forgiveness on a heart level still remains. Repression of guilt results in bitterness, resentment and anxiety.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: Why do students do these things in order to experience love, understanding and forgiveness? What happens if these longings go unmet?


VERSION 3.1

EXTREME LOVE

THINK

Our three great longings:

- To be **loved**
- To be **understood**
- To be **forgiven**

UNDERSTANDING

FORGIVENESS

LOVE

DISCUSS

What are some things students do to try to experience . . .

Love?	date, have sex, fantasize, read romance novels
Understanding?	talk about themselves, defend their actions and attitudes
Forgiveness?	rationalize, hide, deny

Why is it so difficult to be loved, understood and forgiven?

IMAGINE

A human relationship in which you are:

- Loved unconditionally.
- Understood completely.
- Forgiven when you blow it.

TOOLBOX

- THINK
- OBSERVE
- CLOSE-UP
- WRITE
- DISCUSS
- FEELINGS
- BRAINSTORM
- REFERENCE
- PASSAGE
- ARTICLE
- BIG IDEA
- CROSSROAD

6 ASK

7 READ: Imagine a human relationship . . .

8 STATE: Psalm 103 describes this kind of relationship.

EXPLORE THE WORD

1 **READ**

2 **READ**

3 **STATE:** Let's brainstorm some definitions for each of the following key words and discuss what insight each brings to the meaning of this passage.

BENEFITS: *Insight:* We are to "forget not"—or remember—all of God's acts of kindness, or things He has done to promote our well being. The art of remembering all of His benefits puts our present circumstances in proper perspective. Our difficulties don't seem so insurmountable.

REDEEMS: *Insight:* God has bought us back out of the slave market of sin. We are doomed to suffer the consequences of sin unless He graciously pays the penalty for us.

SATISFIES: *Insight:* God knows our true needs and is excited to fulfill our desires and needs as He sees fit.

COMPASSIONATE: *Insight:* God is not only sympathetic and keenly aware of our needs to the point of deep empathy. He is capable of, and has the desire to, alleviate our distress.

GRACIOUS: *Insight:* God is constantly giving us what we do not deserve. He did it at a point in time at the Cross and He continuously extends His grace to us moment by moment.

4 **STATE:** In the Psalm 103 text, **underline** statements which reflect God's love, **circle** statements which reflect God's understanding, and **bracket** statements which reflect God's forgiveness. Some phrases in the text may deal with more than one theme such as the phrase "love and forgiveness" in verse 8. If there are words or phrases that don't make sense to you, feel free to mention those and we'll discuss them.

5 **STATE:** After you have underlined, circled and bracketed, choose the three phrases from Psalm 103 that mean the most to you. Put three stars by the most meaningful phrase, two stars by the next, etc. Then, share with the group your three-star phrase, and tell how understanding and applying that truth could be helpful in your walk with God. **For example:** "The Lord is slow to anger." If I understand that God is slow to anger, I will be more patient and gracious with myself and others. I will want to be slow to anger.

CONTEXT

This is a psalm of hope based on David's confidence in God's love and compassion. This magnificent hymn praises God for His personal blessings (vv. 1-5), for His national blessings (vv. 6, 7), for His forgiving love (vv. 8-14), and for His eternal love (vv. 15-18).

PSALMS AS POETRY

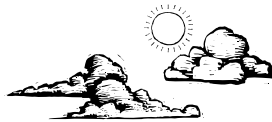
Perhaps the most important thing to remember in reading or interpreting the Psalms should also be the most obvious: they are poems—musical poems.



... Hebrew poetry, by its very nature, was addressed as it were, to the mind through the heart (i.e., much of the language is intentionally emotive).

... [Hebrew music poetry] is intended to appeal to the emotions, to evoke feelings rather than propositional thinking, and to stimulate a response on the part of the individual that goes beyond a mere cognitive understanding of certain facts.

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stewart, *How to Read The Bible For All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 170-176.



Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the *New International Version*, ©1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Published by Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Psalm 103:1-14

- 1 Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
- 2 Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his **benefits**—
- 3 who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,
- 4 who **redeems** your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,
- 5 who **satisfies** your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- 6 The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.
- 7 He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel:
- 8 The LORD is **compassionate** and **gracious**, slow to anger, abounding in love.
- 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;
- 10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.
- 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for **those who fear him**;
- 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
- 13 As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on **those who fear him**;
- 14 for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. *(emphasis added)*

BENEFIT

An act of kindness; something that promotes well being.

Insight:

REDEEM

To buy back; repurchase; to liberate by payment; to release from blame or debt; clear; to free from bondage of sin.

Insight:

SATISFY

To gratify the need, desire, or expectation of; to fulfill a need or desire.

Insight:

COMPASSION

Sympathetic consciousness of another's distress together with a desire to alleviate it.

Insight:

GRACE

Unmerited, divine assistance given man for his regeneration or sanctification.

Insight:

"TO THOSE WHO FEAR HIM"

In the Old Testament of the Bible, the word *fear* is used to communicate the concept of faith. So, the phrase in verse 11, "to those who fear Him," refers to persons who have entered into a covenant relationship with God. In New Testament terms, a believer has entered into that covenant relationship through Christ. Therefore, the promise of God's love in Psalm 103 is for all believers.

LEADER'S RESOURCE: The phrase, "to those who fear him," in verse 11 does not imply if you fear him enough, then you will be loved. His compassion can be experienced by all believers.

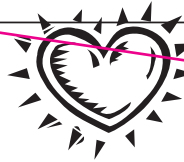
LEADER NOTE: An excellent way to include the gospel with this study is to use the verses from the *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet as parallel passages. For example, if the student says verse 12 is his three-star verse, have the group read and discuss Romans 3:23 and 6:23. For verses 9-11, use Romans 5:8 and John 3:16. *Hint: Do not tell them these verses are from the Four Spiritual Laws.*

VISUALIZE THE PRINCIPLE

1 READ: Read PERSONAL SIDE and answer questions.

2 DISCUSS

- God's unconditional love should motivate me to be honest with Him about failures, mistakes, sins and wrong attitudes.
- Accept myself and value myself.
- I no longer have to perform for others or compare myself with others.



PERSONAL SIDE

The day I began to experience God's love in a personal way was a pivotal one. I began to grasp that God was safe harbor for me. He was not a policeman or judge in my life. He was not someone to hide from. He is a gracious, forgiving heavenly Father who knows everything about me, but still forgives my wrong doings and weaknesses and loves me unconditionally.

I grasped for the first time that I could be honest with God because of His love. He could not be surprised or shocked by my sin, my shortcomings or failures. Instead of running away from God, I began to run to Him for love and forgiveness, especially when I messed up.

I didn't have to perform to feel accepted. I could love, forgive and accept myself because I was experiencing the love and acceptance of God. I could look at myself in the mirror and say, "Barry, you're not perfect, but you are loved and forgiven."

When I sinned, I was honest with God. That was a new experience. Instead of hiding it, I admitted my sin to God and accepted His forgiveness. It wasn't an attitude of "thanks for letting me off, God, I'm glad to be out of trouble." It was an attitude of, "thanks for forgiving me God, I want to please you and I need your power to change me from the inside out." I felt a new freedom with others, with myself, and tremendous openness and security in my relationship with God.

What might some of the results have been in Barry's life if he had not discovered the unconditional love of God? How might this have affected him later in life as a husband? Father? Leader?

DISCUSS

What effects does knowing God's unconditional love, understanding and forgiveness have on:

- How you relate to God?
- How you view yourself?
- How you relate to others?

God proved His love on the cross. When Christ hung, and bled, and died, it was God saying to the world, "I love you."
-Billy Graham

God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.
-Augustine

3 READ

HONEST WITH GOD

You can't shock God. You can't embarrass Him. We can tell Him anything and everything. Without fear of rejection. He is concerned about us and wants us to share anything and everything with Him. Are you frustrated over circumstances in your life? Feel like you need to unload? To ventilate? Nurturing some angry thoughts about the status quo? About others? About God? Tell Him.

We cannot tell others everything. Some things they don't need to know. Some things they can't take. Our words may depress them, confuse them, frustrate them, upset them, alienate them. No matter how close the relationship is with another person, eventually we can hurt and even destroy that relationship with our words. Only God can handle anything and everything we have to say, want to say, need to say. Deepen that relationship with God. Tell Him everything. He will never interrupt, except to inject a word of truth.

J. Grant Howard, *The Trauma of Transparency* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1979), pp.125,127.

REFLECT

There is nothing I can do to make God love me more.
There is nothing I can do to make God love me less.

DISCUSS

Why is the satisfaction of these three longings so crucial to our spiritual growth and health?

4 ASK & DISCUSS

DESIGN THE APPLICATION

(Just for them.)

1 ASK & DISCUSS

It frees me up. I am motivated to confess sin and accept God's forgiveness.

LEADER'S RESOURCE:

After the discussion on the indicators, you may want to emphasize two particular areas of being honest with God. **First**, address the area of confessing sin. Hiding sin will inhibit us from having a deep personal relationship with God. **Second**, remind them of the need to yield areas of their lives to God that are displeasing to Him or areas for which they need to trust God (dating relationships, recurring sin, etc.). Reiterate that a person cannot hold on to unyielded areas and walk with God at the same time. (These issues are covered in more detail in the lessons on forgiveness, the Spirit-filled life and walking in the Spirit, but introducing the idea now will be helpful.) Discussing the importance of being honest with God paves the way for talking in the future about the lordship of Christ and the filling of the Spirit.

Look again at Psalm 103.

What verses or phrases indicate that God loves you unconditionally?

How does it make you feel to know that God's love for you is unconditional?



PERSONAL REFLECTION

Do I really believe God understands me?
Do I really believe that there is nothing I can do to make God love me any more or less than He already does?
Do I truly believe that God has totally forgiven me?



RESPOND

"Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits" (Psalm 103:2).
Begin a list of God's benefits to you.



For further study:

How You Can Experience God's Love and Forgiveness,
Bill Bright (NewLife Publications);
Ephesians 3

Is it true that God is love to me as a Christian? And does the love of God mean all has been said? If so, certain questions arise.
Why do I ever grumble and show discontent and resentment at the circumstances in which God has placed me?
Why am I ever distrustful, fearful, or depressed?
Why do I ever allow myself to grow cool, formal, and half-hearted in the service of the God who loves me so?
Why do I ever allow my loyalties to be divided, so that God has not all my heart?

J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 115.



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2 STATE: Let's close our time with conversational prayer. Pray in short sentences using natural, conversational words. We simply want to thank God for His tremendous benefits to us. For example, "Thank you, Lord, for _____."

FOR THE LEADER: Explain clearly what conversational prayer is. Emphasize that no one has to pray if they feel uncomfortable doing so.



COACH'S CORNER: Instead of using the RESPOND box, on the student guide, have your students write their benefits list on a 3x5 card provided by you. Next, refer them to their three-star phrase and ask them to write it on the back of the card. Encourage them to write the key truth reflected in that phrase. Then, ask them to write out an application point. Encourage them to carry the card during the week as a reminder of this truth from God's Word.

L E A D E R ' S R E S O U R C E



BOOKS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The Trauma of Transparency – J. Grant Howard (Multnomah Press)

How You Can Experience God's Love and Forgiveness – Bill Bright (NewLife Publications)

Knowing God – J. I. Packer (InterVarsity Press)

Your God Is Too Small – J. B. Phillips (MacMillan Publishing)



TOPIC CONNECTIONS

Related *InterActa* small group studies: *Walk This Way; Under The Influence; My Bad*

FOR FURTHER STUDY

If your group would like to do some further study on the topic of being honest with God, you can take another week to explore the principles found in Psalm 32.

Read Psalm 32.

Ask: According to this psalm, what are some of the benefits of being honest with God about sin?

You will be blessed, feel forgiven, have freedom from guilt, feel cleansed from guilt.

Ask: What does David say the consequences are when we're not honest with God about sin?

You will be weary ("bones wasted away"), you will be depressed ("groaning"), drained of vitality ("hand was heavy upon me," "strength sapped").

Ask: What personal application can you make from this psalm?

O V E R V I E W O F M E E T I N G T I M E



Planning your group session

Allocating your time

INTERACTION AS A GROUP	INTERACTION WITH THE STUDY & WORD	INTERACTION WITH GOD	UPCOMING INFORMATION	OTHER IDEAS
Ice breaker? Refreshments?	Provided. Add personal story?	Worship / Praise / Prayer time?	Next meeting? Special event?	Music / Video?
_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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