

What Motivates God to Continue Loving Us?



Session 1



Psalm 103; John 3:16-17

Session Objective

In this session, participants explore Scripture's testimony of God's loving kindness and steadfast love that reach out to everyone in a covenant of grace and mercy. Participants will see that the forgiveness we offer to one another starts with God's nature to love us and to show mercy to us.

Faith Statement

God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, a way of life and salvation, sufficient for and adapted to the whole lost race of humanity, doth freely offer this salvation to all people in the gospel. In the gospel God declares God's love for the world and God's desire that all people should be saved; reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ; invites and commands all to embrace the offered mercy; and by God's Spirit accompanying the Word pleads with humanity to accept God's gracious invitation.

— *Westminster Confession of Faith*
(6.187–6.188)

Session Overview

 Enter	Attributes of God, Attributes of Me
 Engage	Option A: Resting with the Question
	Option B: Luck of the Draw
 Explore	Option A: A Modern Psalm
	Option B: Bible Study with Faith Statement
 Express	Option A: Case Study
	Option B: Forgiveness Mural
 Exit	Option A: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"
	Option A: Litany with <i>A Brief Statement of Faith</i>

 Enhancements

- Family Connections
- Worship Connections
- Intergenerational Activity




For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Read Psalm 103 and John 3:16–17 slowly to yourself and write down the words that stand out to you. Why do you think these words stood out to you today? Reflect on the following questions:

- Psalm 103 is a joyful song that celebrates God’s love. How do you sing a joyful song of God’s love?
- How have you experienced God’s steadfast love and loving kindness that is described in Psalm 103?
- What has been your experience with John 3:16–17? Does it have particular positive or negative meanings for you?
- How have you experienced forgiveness?
- What do you want the youth in your group to take away from this session?

Thank God for this time and ask for what you need in order to share your personal knowledge and experience of God’s love with the group.



Understanding the Scripture

Both Psalm 103 and John 3:16–17 testify to God’s unending love for humanity. Psalm 103 is one of the many hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God in the book of Psalms, often considered the worship book of the people of Israel. Authorship and dates of many of the psalms have not been determined, though the stories and events reflected in some of them point to dates from the Israelite monarchy or earlier (1000–587 B.C.) or from the Babylonian exile (587–539 B.C.). Contemporary readers often find that reading the psalms aloud makes the patterns and repetitions of poetry in them more apparent. The psalms’ profound imagery, full of emotions and reflections about life, becomes more pronounced as well.

Psalm 103 describes God’s character through actions people have experienced. It begins with a call to individuals to bless the Lord—to glorify the Lord—and ends with a similar call for the whole world to bless the Lord. This meditation on God’s goodness and forgiving love might remind readers of Exodus 34:6–7, which cites God’s mercy and God’s readiness to forgive. The qualities listed in Psalm 103 underscore that God is gracious, loving, forgiving, and merciful and that God does not demand punishment for sin. God’s actions

display God's character, and the psalmist refers to creation (in verse 14) and the Exodus of Israel from Egypt (in verse 7) as premier examples of God's attributes. The pinnacle of this Psalm's description is in verse 13: "As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him." What a tender and powerful description of God's love for the world!

Knowing God's amazing love, we are not surprised to hear Jesus tell Nicodemus about God's love for the world. Nicodemus was a leader of the law and a religious leader who had asked Jesus about his teaching and miracles. Jesus tells him about God's story of salvation in which the covenant of grace, through mercy and love, is completed in the gift of Jesus Christ for the world. We discover in Jesus' words in John 3:16–17 that the incarnation of God into human flesh in Jesus Christ is foremost about the possibility of new life, rather than judgment. In Jesus, God's mercy and love are again shown to the world. Those who believe live in God's unending presence, in this life and in the one to come.



Understanding the Faith Statement

In the 1640s, the English House of Commons commissioned clergy and Parliament members to sort out who had control in the church and state. This Westminster Assembly completed the Westminster Standards, which organized Reformation teachings into a way of life for the church based on Scripture and a covenant theology that focused on duties to God and to one another. The Puritans and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians brought the *Westminster Confession* and its catechisms to the colonies. In 1729 the first Presbyterian synod adopted the confessions and catechisms.

The *Westminster Confession* emphasizes God's perfect and holy love and says that "God has made a covenant of grace with humans; through Christ, relationship to God is restored."¹ God, with infinite and unfailing love, reaches out to love and to save people, before we can respond. Our actions as Christians are based first on God's actions for us.

1. *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2007), p. 120.



Teaching Today's Question

God's steadfast compassion and mercy is amazing good news for young people who are painfully aware of their own shortcomings—even if they don't readily admit them. As teens get older, they become more attentive to the shortcomings of parents, other authority figures, nations, churches, and all of humanity as they witness our collective failure to resolve differences and even to feed and clothe one another. As your participants encounter God's loving kindness in the Scriptures and examine its implications for real-world scenarios, they may find ways to forgive themselves, to ask for forgiveness, and to respond to the failures of others with the love that God freely gives to the world.

Main points for this session include:

- God's steadfast and unfailing love motivates God's mercy and forgiveness.
- God's love for us is complete and everlasting.
- The forgiveness we give to one another, and ask for, begins with God's loving and forgiving nature and actions.



Enter

Attributes of God, Attributes of Me

- Newsprint, markers, adhesive name tags

Before participants arrive, post a large sheet of newsprint in a prominent area of the meeting space. Write *Attributes of God* in the center with a marker. On a name tag, write your first name and one character trait you would use to describe yourself.

As participants enter the meeting space, greet them by name and give each person an adhesive name tag and a marker. Ask participants to write their first name and one character trait they would use to describe themselves on their name tags. Then invite participants to write one or two character traits they would use to describe God on the posted sheet of newsprint. As more participants arrive, the new arrivals might have trouble thinking of other character traits of God, but encourage them to use synonyms or to remember words from favorite hymns or other songs to add to the list. Ask the group to explain why they wrote down the traits they did, and how they have seen examples of God using these traits.

When most of the participants are present, invite the group to introduce the person sitting on their left to the rest of the group, using the person's first name and the character trait on the name tag. ("This is Scott and he is adventurous.") Have the group respond to each introduction by using the person's character trait as a name. ("Hi, Adventurous!") Invite the group to use the character traits as names for the remainder of the session.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

- Newsprint, marker, candle, matches, recording of contemplative music, music player

Before participants arrive, write *What motivates God to continue loving us?* on a sheet of newsprint and post the newsprint in a prominent location. Place the candle in the center of the meeting space.

Gather the participants in a circle around the candle and light the candle to focus the group's attention. Point out the session question, which is written on the newsprint, and let them know that it was initially asked by a Presbyterian teenager who was wondering about forgiveness. Invite group members to contemplate the question while you play the contemplative music. After a couple of minutes, invite the participants to share their reflections while discussing the session question and the following questions:



- Why might someone ask this question?
- What issues or other questions are at the heart of this question?
- Why does God love human beings?
- Is God’s love for us the same kind of love that we experience between people, such as the love between parent and child, or love between friends, or romantic love? Why or why not?

Pray the opening prayer.

Option B: Luck of the Draw

- Copy of “Session 1 Questions” (Web Resource 1a), scissors, small basket or plastic cup

Before the participants arrive, cut out the questions found on “Session 1 Questions” (Web Resource 1a) and place them in the small basket or plastic cup.

Gather the participants comfortably in a circle and give each person an opportunity to draw a slip of paper from the basket or cup. Have the person read the question on the slip of paper out loud to the group before sharing his or her answer to the question with the group. Continue passing the basket or cup around the group as time allows, replacing the questions in the basket or cup as necessary. To make things more interesting, consider having the participant who draws the question choose someone else in the group to answer the question. Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

- Bibles

Gather the participants in a circle, make sure each participant has a Bible, and ask everyone to look up Psalm 103. Count off “1, 2, 1, 2 . . . ” and so on, around the circle. Ask the “ones” to read aloud the odd verses, and ask the “twos” to read aloud the even verses. Lead the group in reading the alternating verses slowly and as dramatically as possible in order to bring the Scripture to life. Then turn together to John 3:16–17. Have the twos read verse 16 aloud and have the ones read verse 17 aloud. Explore the following questions together:

Opening Prayer

God of infinite love, sometimes we look around and are filled with the knowledge that you love us, because we see your love reflected in the beauty of nature, the love between friends, and feelings of hope. But sometimes we wonder how in the world you can love us when we pollute nature, when we are cruel to one another, and when we turn our backs to you. Open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, and our minds so that we can understand why you still love us with a love that never ends. Amen.



- Based on these two Scriptures, how do you think God views the world?
- How do you think God views our lives?

Continue by leading one of the following options.

Option A: A Modern Psalm



Bibles, newspaper, markers

Explain to the participants that the Psalms were meant for public reading and singing in worship in ancient Israel, and are still used that way today in Jewish and Christian worship. Explore the following questions:



- What does Psalm 103 say about God? What character traits and actions are highlighted?
- Why would someone say the things found in Psalm 103 about God?
- Why might a community say the things found in Psalm 103 about God?

Invite the group to imagine Jesus praying this psalm aloud with his hometown synagogue. Then explore the following questions:



- What different meaning does this psalm take on when we think of Jesus, the Son of God, saying these words?
- How might John 3:16–17 be like Jesus' version of Psalm 103?

Invite the participants to think about their current relationships with God and explore the following questions:



- Do you agree with what this psalm says about God? Why or why not?
- What experiences have you had that would lead you to say things like the psalmist says about God?
- What experiences has this church had, or have churches in your local community had, that would lead them to pray this prayer of praise about God?

Ask the participants to divide themselves into groups of two or three based on similar music tastes (i.e., rap or hip-hop fans together, pop or rock fans together, country fans together, and so forth). If your group has fewer than six people, do this activity as one group. Ask each group to rewrite Psalm 103 using modern language and in the style of music that everyone in the group enjoys. Encourage the groups to start this activity by coming up with the main idea of Psalm 103 (*hint*: check verse 8) and then think of ways that they, the church, or the local community has seen God's loving and merciful acts in their own lives. After a few minutes, give each group an opportunity to read or perform their updated version of Psalm 103. If time allows, consider turning the various presentations into a music video and show the video to the congregation or upload it to your church's Web site.

Option B: Bible Study with Faith Statement

- ✓ Bibles, copy of *Book of Confessions* for each participant or copy of "Session 1 Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1b) for each participant

Explain to the participants that the Psalms were meant for public reading and singing in worship in ancient Israel, and are still used that way today in Jewish and Christian worship. Explore the following questions together:

- What does Psalm 103 say about God? What character traits and actions are highlighted?
- Why would someone say the things found in Psalm 103 about God?
- Why might a community say the things found in Psalm 103 about God?

Invite the group to imagine Jesus praying this psalm aloud with his hometown synagogue. Then explore the following questions together:

- What different meaning does this psalm take on when we think of Jesus, the Son of God, saying these words?
- How might John 3:16–17 be like Jesus' version of Psalm 103?
- What does John 3:16–17 tell us about God's love for humanity?
- According to Psalm 103 and John 3:16–17, why does God continue to love us even if we do things that are wrong?

Give each person a copy of the *Book of Confessions* or a copy of "Session 1 Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1b) and invite one of the participants to read 6.187–6.188 from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* while the other participants read along silently. Summarize this faith statement for the participants by pointing out that God, with infinite and unfailing love, reaches out to love and to save us, before we can respond. Tell the group that, even though this statement of faith uses language that sounds old or stilted to us, it helped explain important theological beliefs using the contemporary language of the community it was written for. Explore the following questions:

- How is this confession a declaration similar to Psalm 103? Does it use similar language or concepts?
- In what ways does this confession help explain John 3:16–17?

Invite the participants to think about their current relationships with God and explore the following questions:

- Do you agree with what this psalm says about God and God's love?
- Do you agree with what John 3:16–17 says about God's love?
- What experiences have you had that would lead you to say similar things about God?
- What experiences has this church had, or have churches in your local community had, that would lead them to say similar things about God?

- How would you sing a joyful song of God’s steadfast love today?
- How would you write a confession of faith for worship that explained God’s steadfast love?



Express

Option A: Case Study

- “Session 1 Case Study” (Web Resource 1c)

Give each participant a copy of “Session 1 Case Study” (Web Resource 1c) and ask a participant to read the case study out loud to the group. Invite the group to contemplate the situation in silence for a moment. After a full minute, break the silence and explore the following questions together:

- Who in this situation is in need of forgiveness?
- If you were Sonia, what would you do next? If you were David? If you were Isaiah?
- If you were best friends with Sonia, what advice would you give her? If you were best friends with David? If you were best friends with Isaiah?
- How do Psalm 103 and John 3:16–17 shed light on the forgiveness needed in this situation?

Option B: Forgiveness Mural

- Newsprint, markers, 2' x 2' sheets of foam board, large drop cloth or tarp, art supplies (including magazines, colored or patterned tissue paper, fabric scraps, decorative paper, scissors, glue, acrylic paint, paintbrushes)

In this option of each session, participants are given an opportunity to create a 2' x 2' section of a mural that explores the meaning of forgiveness. In Session 6, the participants connect the six sections into 6' x 4' murals.

Ask: How would you respond if someone asked you, “What motivates God to continue loving us?” Record the participants’ responses on a sheet of newsprint and post the newsprint in a prominent area of the meeting space. Divide the participants into groups of two or three. Give each group a 2' x 2' sheet of foam board and art supplies. Challenge each group to use the art supplies and foam board to create an artistic interpretation of the information found on the newsprint. Encourage the participants to use phrases or images from today’s session. When the groups are finished, give each group an opportunity to share their mural section with the rest of the participants.



Exit

Option A: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

- Copies of the *Presbyterian Hymnal*

Gather the youth into a circle, give each person a copy of the *Presbyterian Hymnal*, and ask everyone to turn to "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" (no. 276). Sing or read together at least the first verse and the chorus of the hymn to celebrate God's unending mercy and steadfast love. Pray the closing prayer.

Option B: Litany with *A Brief Statement of Faith*

- Copy of "Closing Litany" (Web Resource 1d) for each participant

Gather the youth in a circle and give each person a copy of "Closing Litany" (Web Resource 1d). Invite a volunteer to read the part of the leader and then count off "1, 2, 1, 2 . . ." and so on, around the circle. Ask the "ones" to read the part of Group 1 and ask the "twos" to read the part of Group 2. Read the litany together and then pray the closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

Loving God, truly you are full of mercy and steadfast, faithful love. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for loving us, and for continuing to offer your love and everlasting life to us. Help us view our friends and neighbors, our family, and even our enemies with the grace that you view all of us through. Help us be your agents of love and mercy in the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

“Family Connections” (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the six sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Worship Connections

Help the participants practice reading the litany found on “Closing Litany” (Web Resource 1d) as dramatically possible and then arrange for the group to present the litany in an upcoming worship service or other congregational gathering. Have the two reading groups read from different locations for dramatic effect. If possible, have the young people create a slide show to go with the reading, using photographs that depict different words or phrases in the litany. Consider having the young people use photos that they have taken themselves.

Intergenerational Activity

Gather the youth with church members from various age groups, from the youngest to the oldest. Divide the people gathered into small groups so that the age groups are evenly mixed. Give each small group a Bible, a sheet of paper, and pen. Have the groups read Psalm 103 together before working together to write their own psalm that describes and celebrates God’s love. When the groups are finished, give each group an opportunity to share their psalm with the rest of the participants. Consider using the psalms in an upcoming worship service or printing the psalms in a congregational newsletter or on the church Web site.

THE GREAT HYMNS



Amazing grace,
how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch
like my brother despite the fact
he never helps with the dishes.
Ever.

