

Bethel Christian Church

The Mercy of God

Brian Arthur

The God of Mercy

Study 2

Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy [Matthew 5:7]

Great are Your tender mercies O God [Psalm 119:156]

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end [Lam. 3:22]

The mercy of God is not something to be experienced at conversion and then relegated to the past. The children of God are those who never fail to worship God for the present mercy He shows them. Without this communion of mercy we would shrivel and die.

We saw mercy means release from misery. Misery can be caused by many things. As described by God's Word it comes from either one of two things,

- The fruit of living in sin and guilt.
- Suffering of some description, be it from natural disaster, sickness, man's inhumanity to man, pain etc. This misery can be the result of living under the judgements of God, or due to general calamities that are part of the over-all fallen world order but nevertheless remain under God's sovereign hand.

If I ruled the World, I Would Ban all Misery!

The experience of misery and mercy in man's experience is seen from the beginning. Humanity it seems has always been blind to much of the nature and effect of suffering and misery. Sin seeks to cover itself in deceit. This of course must mean cover its misery as well as its presence and reality. We may also have been at odds with the way we think God can deal with sin and it's misery. We hold falsely to the belief that God is great enough to remove evil and misery by a command. The terrible song, "If I ruled the world" gives the sentiment to our ignorance that all God really needs to do is to speak the word and rid the creation of evil. After all that's what any one of us would do if we ruled the world. This idea means that we have never grasped the true nature of our evil or its misery. Therefore we will never appreciate our dire need for mercy. We will be swept into a world view that will leave us either continually frustrated with God for not doing enough or even anything, or we will retreat into a perfectionism that fails to see the current need for mercy for indwelling sin.

God's Own People in Misery?

One of the most miserable times in Israel's history was her latter days in Egypt. Why would the children of Abraham, whose 'father' had received such great promises be found in such suffering and misery? The answer is not easily found. The same dilemma faces us today. Where does misery fit in the daily life of a believer? If there were no misery we wouldn't need mercy, so why doesn't God simply eradicate misery? We do no service to those who are suffering deeply to try and work out simplistic answers to these great mysteries.

Show Me Your Glory Lord!

After the magnificence of God's covenant mercy was revealed in the exodus, and Israel was on its way to the land promised, it again discovered what it described as unnecessary misery in the desert. They experienced the misery of deprivation. God's

people suffered thirst. God's people suffered hunger. God's people were attacked by opposing nations. In adopting idols to love instead of the God who had saved them they discovered the misery of God's holy wrath. Confronted by his people's reaction to misery and his own limitations, Moses asked for a revelation of God's glory. Was Moses expecting another Red Sea, or something greater? He was seeking for God to demonstrate that he was able to deliver on His promises. Instead of a visual sign or wonder God gave Moses a verbal description of His character. This makes the revelation timeless and thus as relevant today as it was for Moses. Mercy was the first quality named when God revealed Himself to Moses.

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generations.' [Exodus 34:6-7]

The qualities of mercy, grace, slowness to anger, abounding and steadfast love, and forgiveness were the qualities revealed. These were the qualities of God's covenant love. To obey and receive the covenant meant living and being secured by this kind of love. Because of these qualities they could be certain of in their relationship with God. As recipients of God's covenant love the same is certain for us today. But some say, "What about this 'merciless' stuff at the end of this passage?" Surely, seeing the way God begins to describe His way with His people with the word mercy he contradict himself at the end by finishing with a threat of anything but mercy. To high handedly reject this covenant love brought them under God's judging holy (loving) discipline. This too was because he loved them and willed for them to return to his love. We never understand God's mercy if we see it simply as God letting us off the hook.

What God's Covenant People may Expect.

- Their LORD would always show grace, love from the stronger to the weaker. The love of the covenant maker understanding the weakness of the covenant receiver. No matter how weak Israel was and how often she failed to live in the fullness of God's covenant, God would continue to hold her and bring her through to glory.
- As their LORD he would not bring quick judgements upon them when they failed Him but would continue to show forbearance longer than they would expect.
- As their LORD he would remain steadfastly loyal to His Covenant promises, which meant that he would remain steadfastly loyal to them. He abounds in this steady loving, unlike his people who vacillates as the wind. No matter how they fail, God will never forsake them. Rather he will continue to be with them, even in judgement, in order that they might be blessed.
- As their LORD they may expect Him to forgive their sin. They may expect that He will not count up their sin as a divine accountant but take it away from them as far as the east is from the west. This was the blessing that brought Israel true communion with Him and the blessedness that kept their relationships with each other fresh and clear. The issue of an evil conscience was thus practically addressed. No wonder they treasured this grace.

These qualities are what the covenant people delight in. Their hearts are liberated as they live with God who loves them like this. They are thus freed from the dread and fear that comes when misery presses in.

*Thy loving-kindness extends to the heavens [beyond any possible opponent]
Thy faithfulness reaches to the skies.
How precious is Thy loving-kindness, O God!
And the children of men take refuge in the shelter of Thy wings,
They drink their fill in the abundance of Thy house,
And Thou dost give them to drink of the river of Thy delights,
For with Thee is the fountain of life,
In Thy light we see light. [Psalm 36:5-9]*

This beautiful Psalm gives the lie to dutiful religion, to a ‘commitment’ ground out in cold and calculated ‘obedience’. David, overwhelmed by the enormity of God’s mercy and compassion describes a spiritual smorgasbord into which they had been secured. To scorn ‘the river of God’s delights’ as dangerous, leading to shipwreck is folly indeed.

Mercy, God’s ‘Dangerous’ Freedom

Would this extraordinary mercy lead to complacency, even presumption? Could Israel interpret these blessings as an excuse for moral licence not liberty to love responsibly? The answer is yes. But because it is yes the gift of God’s mercy is not invalidated. When a good and holy thing is abused then we may not say the problem lies with the good and holy thing. The cry of legalists (rebels, for the law cannot create the will to obey), will always be “Grace leads to licence!” We note that this was indeed the reaction to our Lord’s ministry and also the Apostles. To dismiss the full freedom grace brings is a charge against the nature of God not just against a concept called grace. Grace, faithfulness, steadfast love, forgiveness and mercy are not concepts to be analysed but the present action of God revealing who and what he is all about. They lead to love and therefore to obedience. Where ‘gospel’ lead to emphasis on our commitment and our duty then love is absent. They were not blessings given in so that Israel could do as she liked. They were blessings that brought Israel into the true obedience of the Law. The Law of God was not a code to be lived out but a relationship in which to luxuriate in the dynamic activity of God’s love. Accordingly, those who trampled on God’s nature, using His grace etc as an excuse to sin high-handedly and remain unrepentant could expect that as their Lord He would by no means clear the impenitent of their sin. The fruit of their impenitence would have far reaching consequences.

God would, because of His love is Holy love, be as faithful in His promises to discipline and chastise His people as He was to bless them with steadfast love and mercy. In fact His mercy and steadfast love would mean nothing if this were not so. [See too 2 Timothy 2:11-13]