

The Mercy of God

Covenant mercy, idolatry, wrath & restoration to covenant life.

Last study we saw that when God revealed his nature to Moses the first quality was mercy. In the same foundational revelation Moses also saw that this same God refused to clear the guilty.

...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]

There has been much written on these words in recent times. Some who seek to find a reason for their current non specific psychological and spiritual problems are directed to them. They are told that their problems all go back to their forefather's sins. According to this text, they are told, they cannot get free of their problems until they have broken the strongholds that have insidiously crept down through their family tree. Images of God quietly ignoring or even tending these problems are terrible and wrong, leaving the believer locked away in fear and dread (misery). It opens those who have a wobbly faith or a weak conscience to be put under further bondage. Some are even counselled to cut all ties with their family. So what did God mean? How did the covenant people understand it?

The context of God's covenant

The covenant of God was central to all God's dealing with His people from the beginning. If we don't understand the nature of that covenant relationship, and the blessings and obligations that flow from it, we will not be able to rightly interpret this passage.

The covenant was given to man by God. It was never a contract between two parties, Israel and God. *"I will make My covenant with you"* God declared. The essence of the covenant was God's gracious, holy presence with His people, making them his own treasured possession. So in that sense to obey the covenant was to receive the covenant relationship with God and walk obediently with him. This then was not a burden for in being with God they discovered the fullness of what it means to be truly human (walk in his image). If we see covenant as a contract and not a love relationship established and maintained by God we will miss the point entirely.

To reject a contractual promise between two parties is one thing, but to refuse the grace of God offered in his covenant is another. In the covenant God gives Himself fully to His people in order that they may be holy and blameless as He is. The true (heart) response, the only rational response is to receive Him. Not to do so is not only a violent offence to His grace, but also a decision to live outside of the covenant blessings. To refuse the grace of the covenant was to be given over to the curse of living apart from the God we were created to be with. We should read Deuteronomy 27-30 as well as the last part of Romans 1 to see the repercussions of refusing God's covenant mercy.

In the curse of non covenant living God may still remember mercy as the prophet Habakkuk prayed for [Habakkuk 3:2]. He knew that the wrath of God's judgements was the wrath of His love. Nowhere better do we see the great mystery of His holy love and mercy together than Isaiah 54:7-10.

*For a brief moment I forsook you,
But with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid My face from you,
But with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
Says the Lord your Redeemer.
For this is like the days of Noah to me;
As I swore that the waters of Noah
Should no more go over the earth,
So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
And I will not rebuke you.
For the mountains may depart and the hills may be removed,
But My steadfast love shall not depart from you,
And My covenant of peace shall not be removed,
Says the Lord who has compassion on you.*

Marcus Barth in his commentary on Ephesians develops the theme, “*In the Bible the ‘wrath’ of God, in turn does not represent the intemperate outburst of an uncontrolled character. It is rather the temperature of God’s love, the manifestation of His will and power to resist, to overcome, to burn away all that contradicts His counsels of love.*”

This holy love for His people is exasperated even more when His people worship idols. Not only are the idols weak and stupid in the light of God’s covenant presence, they can never deliver what their devotees expect of them. Their idols were taken up as a more convenient god to relate to than the Holy one of Israel. This attitude already reveals a huge rebellion and refusal of grace.

So if God were to “*Clear the guilty*” in Israel or any of his covenant children when they turn and sin with a high hand, when they stand and oppose his covenant love, then he would be sealing them in their pollution and rebellion. He may not, according to his holy love for his covenant children, work in any way that would jeopardise their relationship with him.

Where a man led his family away from covenant living, teaching them that the idol of wood stone or gold was more of a father than God, more of a redeemer and creator and king than God, then that man was placing himself, and his family in grave danger. If that high-handed sinning continued without repentance then God could by no means clear such guilt. The outworking of such pollution would not go away quietly. It would affect generations; that is if they too continued in their father’s rebellion. Where there was true repentance then the full blessing of covenant life was enjoyed again instantly, with no nasty residue’s left over from their father’s sins. The teeth of the children are set on edge because of their own sins, not the sins of their father,

*What do you mean by using that proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying,
The fathers eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge?
As I live, declares the Lord God, you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore, Behold all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die. [Ezekiel 18:1-4]*

The context of the last statement, “The soul who sins shall die” is to be understood as sinning against the covenant provisions and graces of God.

The notion that God would arbitrarily strike at future generations because of some peccadillo of our forefathers is astoundingly pagan. What have we learned of Him if we think such ways? Moses and the Prophets were joined by Christ and the Apostles to show us the true response to covenant love.