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Have Mercy on Me Four Glimpses into the Heart of God

By David Mathis

The mercy of God is one of the most precious realities in the world, one of the most revealing themes in all the Bible, and one of the most tragically misunderstood truths about God. If you want to know who God really is, if you want to peek into His heart, it is not the display of his just wrath and cosmic power to which you should look. Rather, set your eye on His mercy, without minimizing the fullness of His might, and take in the life-changing panorama.

Many of us today are prone, by nature and nurture, to see God's mercy as peripheral or incidental to who He is. We suspect that perhaps He shows mercy by accident or weakness. But if we let the Scriptures have their say, we will see that when God shows His mercy, He does so with utter intentionality and strength, and we as His creatures get our deepest glimpse of who He is not just in His sovereignty but His goodness. Not simply in His greatness but His gentleness. Not only in His towering

might but also in His surprising tenderness.

But God's mercy not only shows us who He is, but also tells us something essential about ourselves. That we have been shown mercy means not only that we didn't deserve His favor, but that we deserved His righteous hammer against the anvil of justice. Our cry for mercy admits to our undeserving, not just undeserving. By rights, we should be under His impending wrath, like all mankind (Ephesians 2:3) — but for the “the tender mercy of our God” (Luke 1:78).

But we are not the first to peer into His heart and catch a glimpse of His fatherly posture toward us. God has made the world to turn again and again on fresh revelations of his mercy.

Moses Saw Mercy

The first great glimpse of God's mercy came to Moses. In one of the most important passages in all the Bible, after Moses has asked God to show him His glory, God answers, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exodus 33:19).

When asked to show His glory, God

puts His goodness in grace and mercy on display — and His utter freedom in showing His mercy to whomever He chooses. Israel may not be all that more righteous than Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but God’s mercy on Israel is not based on Israel’s efforts and earning. Rather, God, as God, is utterly free to show mercy to whom He will — and He has chosen to be merciful to His people.

Just a few verses later, as he passes Moses by, God proclaims, “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 on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exodus 34:6–7)

God is not unjust; by no means will He clear the guilty and sweep sin under the rug. But the leading revelation of His glory is His mercy. The first and greatest truth for His people to know about Him is He is “a God merciful and gracious.” His grace and mercy shine as the apex of His glory. He is “slow to anger” — He will show wrath, and justly so. It would be unloving to His people if He did not get angry when they were threatened and assaulted. And yet even in such justice, He is slow to anger. Wrath is His righteous response to evil, but it is not His heart. Justice is the stem; mercy is the flower.

David Fell on Mercy

Moses’s glimpse of the merciful God rightly became the leading revelation in Israel. It would be remembered, even as His people turned their backs to Him, “the Lord your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away His face from you, if you return to Him” (2 Chronicles 30:9). The prophets celebrated Him as “gracious and merciful” (Isaiah

30:18; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2), but the Psalms in particular basked in His mercy (see Psalm 86:5; 103:8; 111:4; 116:5; and 145:8–9, among others).

It should be no surprise, then, that Israel’s great psalmist-king, David, would cast himself utterly on the mercy of God. He began his great song of confession, Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1).

Later, when David recognized his sin against God by numbering the people, the prophet Gad gave him three options for God’s discipline: “Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land?” (2 Samuel 24:13). David had glimpsed the heart of God, and he knew where to fall: “Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man” (2 Samuel 24:14).

Jeremiah Wept for Mercy

In the generations after David, Israel fell into a spiral of moral decline. Eventually came the bleak moment Moses had foreseen as inevitable in the hard and wandering hearts of the people. In 587 BC the Babylonians besieged, conquered, and decimated Jerusalem. It was the most tragic and horrific moment in all the Old Testament. The city was so famished and desperate that women boiled and ate their own babies (Lamentations 4:10).

Into these blackest of times, the prophet Jeremiah penned the darkest and most despairing verses in all the Bible: the book of Lamentations. Chapter 3 is the heart of his lament, where the pain is most exposed, and hope seems almost lost. Yet even here, faith shines forth as the prophet gets a glimpse into the heart of God through His mercy.

“Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in Him.” (Lamentations 3:19–24)

In the very time and the very place where God’s people would be most tempted to abandon hope, the prophet points to the mercies of God, never ceasing and new every day.

Paul Marveled at Mercy

Then, in the fullness of time, God sent His own Son not simply to dispense His mercy, but to embody it. Jesus is the Mercy of God made human. He didn’t just teach His people to echo God’s mercy in their lives (Matthew 5:7; 18:33; Luke 6:36; Luke 10:37), but He Himself was, and is, the mercy of God to us. Fittingly, the most prominent request made of Jesus in the Gospels is, “Have mercy on me!” (Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30–31; Mark 10:47–48; Luke 16:24; 17:13; 18:13, 38–39), which is precisely what He did in His perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection — extending God’s mercy not just to Israel, but to all the nations by faith.

The apostle Paul, who received his ministry because of God’s mercy (1 Corinthians 7:25; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 1 Timothy 1:13, 16), became the instrument of the decisive revelation. What Moses first saw, and David fell on, and Jeremiah wept for, Paul saw on the other side of Christ, and he marveled. In all the Bible, Paul gives us the clearest vantage into, as Romans 9:16 says, the God “who has mercy” — literally, the mercy-having God. In other words, God’s mercy expresses His heart, as Paul will show, in a way that the demonstration

of His wrath and the display of His power do not.

Romans 9:22–23 gives us the deepest glimpse into God’s heart, and what we find at bottom is mercy. This is perhaps as deep as the Bible goes in explaining to us why God governs his creation as He does. Paul puts it in the form of a question, not because He’s unsure of the truth, but for rhetorical effect, because it is awesome and sobering to contemplate.

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory?

Make no mistake, God does make known His omnipotence. And He does show His righteous wrath. He is holy. To not demonstrate wrath in a world of sin and rebellion against Him would be untrue to Himself and unloving to his people. God is phenomenally powerful, beyond our human capacity to comprehend it. And such an almighty God does indeed show wrath at the trampling of His glory and the harming of His people. But wrath is not His heart. Severity in God always serves His heart of mercy — to make known the riches of His glory to his people, who are the vessels of His mercy.

Entrust Yourself to Mercy

Our God is not simply sovereign, wonderful as it is to celebrate. And he is not only a God of uncompromising justice, thankful as we are that He is. He is the mercy-having God who invites us to look not only at His awesome authority and sovereign strength, but to set our eyes on His mercy and see into His very heart. Entrust yourself to the God who has mercy.

FUNNIES

Presidents come and go, but the shenanigans designed to charm the voters remain about the same. A delegation from the west, came to visit Teddy Roosevelt in Oyster Bay, for example, found him striding out of the house in a pair of Levi's with a pitchfork in his hand. "You can talk to me while I work, gentlemen. I've raised some bully hay this season. James, where's that hay of mine?"

Back came the voice of James: "Sorry, Mr. President, but I just ain't had time to replace it since you forked it up for yesterday's contingent!"

The account of Adam and Eve was being carefully explained in the primary Vacation Bible School class. Following the lesson, the children were asked to draw a picture to illustrate some part of the account.

Little Emily was most interested and drew a picture of a car with three people in it. In the front seat behind the wheel was a rather large man and in the back seat a man and a woman.

The teacher was at a loss to understand how this illustrated the lesson. But little Emily was prompt with an explanation. "Why this is God driving Adam and Eve out of the garden."

A just-out-of-seminary pastor was about to conduct his first wedding and was worried sick. An elderly preacher gave him some advice, "If you lose your place in the ceremony book or you forget your lines, start quoting scriptures until you find your place."

The wedding day came. And, sure enough, the young man forgot where he was in the ritual. Unfortunately, the only verse he could think of was, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

A parishioner had dozed off to sleep during the morning service.

"Will all who want to go to heaven stand up now."

All stood, except the sleeping parishioner. After they sat, the pastor continued, "Well, will all who want to go to the other place please stand?" Somebody suddenly dropped a hymnal, and the sleeping man jumped to his feet and stood sheepishly facing the preacher.

The sleeper mumbled confused. "Well, preacher, I don't know what we're voting for, but it looks like you and I are the only ones for it."

The preacher told me the other day I should be thinking about the Hereafter.

I told him, "I do, all the time. No matter where I am—in the parlor, upstairs, in the kitchen, or in the basement. I'm always asking myself, 'Now, what am I here after?'"