

St. Mark Bible Study God's Mercy

God's Mercy

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children. ([Psalm 103:8-17](#))

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort. ([2 Corinthians 1:3](#))

Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy. ([James 5:11](#))

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. ([2 Peter 3:9](#))

Mercy, then, is an attribute of God.

In Exodus there is a wonderfully moving declaration that one attribute of God is mercy:

Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai.... And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. ([Exodus 34:4-7](#))

And in [Second](#) Chronicles, in the temple, there is another great declaration of God's mercy:

It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the LORD, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the LORD; so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of God. ([2 Chronicles 5:13-14](#))

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These two passages set forth in rather formal style a declaration that God is merciful. As I said about the other attributes of the Deity, mercy is not something God *has* but something God *is*. If mercy was something God had, conceivably God might mislay it or use it up. It might become less or more. But since it is something that God is, then we must remember that it is uncreated. The mercy of God did not come into being. The mercy of God always was in being, for mercy is what God is, and God is eternal. And God is infinite.

There has been a lot of careless teaching that implies that the Old Testament is a book of severity and law, and the New Testament is a book of tenderness and grace. But do you know that while both the Old Testament and the New Testament declare the mercy of God, the word *mercy* appears in the Old Testament over four times more often than in the New? That's a bit hard to believe, but it's true.

This popular idea is a great error because the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New is one God. He did not change. He is the same God and, being the same God and not changing, He must therefore necessarily be the same in the Old as He is in the New. He is immutable, and because He is perfect He cannot be added to. God's mercy was just as great in the Old Testament as it was and is in the New.

Goodness is the source of mercy. I must apologize here for my necessity to use human language to speak of God. Language deals with the finite, and God is infinite. When we try to describe God or talk about God we're always breaking our own rules and falling back into the little semantic snares which we don't want to fall into but can't help. When I say that one attribute is the source of another, I'm not using correct language, but I'm putting it so you can get hold of it. If I tried to use absolutes, you'd all fall sound asleep.

God's infinite goodness is taught throughout the entire Bible. Goodness is that in God which desires the happiness of His creatures and that irresistible urge in God to bestow blessedness. The goodness of God takes pleasure in the pleasure of His people. I wish I could teach the children of God to know this. For a long time it has been drummed into us that if we are happy, God is worried about us. We believe He's never quite pleased if we are happy. But the strict, true teaching of the Word is that God takes pleasure in the pleasure of His people, provided His people take pleasure in God.

I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the LORD, and the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies, and according to the multitude of his lovingkindnesses. For he said, Surely they are my people, children that will not lie: so he was their Saviour. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. ([Isaiah 63:7-9](#))

God takes pleasure in the pleasure of His friends and He suffers along with these friends. He takes no pleasure in the suffering of His enemies. "As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" ([Ezekiel 33:11](#)). God never looks

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down and rejoices to see somebody squirm. If God has to punish, God is not pleased with Himself for punishing. "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked."

According to the Old Testament, mercy has certain meanings: to stoop in kindness to an inferior, to have pity upon and to be actively compassionate. It used to be a verb form of the word compassion, but we don't use it anymore—maybe because we don't have the concept anymore. God actively "compassionates" suffering men—I like that wonderfully well. For God to feel compassion at a distance is one thing, but for God to be actively compassionate with people is something else. Read what the Word of God says about it:

And the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them. ([Exodus 2:23–25](#))

That is at the close of the second chapter of Exodus. And the third chapter opens with the burning bush and goes on to the commissioning of Moses to go deliver Israel from Egypt.

When God actively exercised compassion on these people He did four things: He heard their groanings; He remembered His covenant; He looked upon their sufferings and pitied them; and He immediately came down to help them. The same thing is true in the New Testament, where it is said of our Lord Jesus that when He saw the multitude, He "was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd" ([Mark 6:34](#)). He said to the disciples, "Give ye them to eat" ([6:37](#)). That is being actively compassionate.

A great many people are very merciful in their beds, in their lovely living rooms, in their new cars. They have compassion (a noun), but they never "compassionate" (a verb). They read something in the newspaper about somebody suffering and say, "Aw, isn't that terrible! That poor family was burned out and they're out on the street with no place to go," and then they turn the radio on and listen to some program. They're very compassionate—for a minute and a half—but they don't "compassionate"; that is, they don't do anything about it. But God's compassion leads Him to actively "compassionate." He did it by sending Moses down to deliver the children of Israel.

One fact about the mercy of God is that *it never began to be*. I've heard of men who were hardhearted or careless, but they began to get stirred up and mercy blossomed forth. It never was so of God. God never lay in lethargy without His compassion. God's mercy is simply what God is—uncreated and eternal. It never began to be; it always was. Heaven and earth were yet unmade and the stars were yet unformed and all that space men are talking about now was only a thought in the mind of God. God was as merciful as He is now. And not only did it never begin to be, but the mercy of God also has never been any more than it is now.

Scientists tell us that there are heavenly bodies that disappeared in a grand explosion so many light-years away that it will yet be thousands of earth years before their light stops shining. The light is still

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coming, though the source of the light has long ceased to be. And there are stars that burn up bright and dim down low again, but the mercy of God has never been any more than it is now for the simple reason that the mercy of God is infinite, and anything that is infinite can't be less than it is, and it can't be any more than it is. It is infinite, boundless, unlimited; it has no measurements on any side. Measurements are created things, and God is uncreated.

The mercy of God has never been any more than now, and the mercy of God will never be any less than now. Don't imagine that when the day of judgment comes God will turn off His mercy as the sun goes behind a cloud or as you turn off a spigot. Don't think for a minute that the mercy of God will cease to be. The mercy of God will never be any less than it is now, because the infinite cannot cease to be infinite, and the perfect cannot admit an imperfection. And again, nothing that occurs can increase the mercy of God or diminish the mercy of God or alter the quality of the mercy of God.

For instance, the cross of Christ. When Jesus died on the cross the mercy of God did not become any greater. It could not become any greater, for it was already infinite. We get the odd notion that God is showing mercy because Jesus died. No—Jesus died because God is showing mercy. It was the mercy of God that gave us Calvary, not Calvary that gave us mercy. If God had not been merciful there would have been no incarnation, no babe in the manger, no man on a cross and no open tomb.

God has mercy enough to enfold the whole universe in His heart, and nothing anybody ever did could diminish the mercy of God. A man can walk out from under and away from the mercy of God as Israel did and as Adam and Eve did for a time, as the nations of the world have done, and as Sodom and Gomorrah did. We can make the mercy of God inoperative toward us by our conduct, since we are free moral agents. But that doesn't change or diminish the power of the Word of God nor the mercy of God. And it doesn't alter the quality of it.

The intercession of Christ at the right hand of God does not increase the mercy of God toward His people. If God were not already merciful, there would be no intercession of Christ at the right hand of God. And if God is merciful at all then He is infinitely merciful. It is impossible for the mediatorship of Jesus at the right hand of the Father to make the mercy of God any more than it is now.

No attribute of God is greater than any other one. We think so. But since all of the attributes of God are simply God, then it's impossible that anything in God can be greater than anything else in God. That's good theology. You can't argue it down; it's true.

And yet there are attributes of God that can be needed more at various times. For instance, when the Good Samaritan went along and saw the fellow who had been beaten up by robbers lying there, the most needed attribute at that moment was mercy. He needed somebody to "compassionate" him. And so the Good Samaritan got down off his beast and went over and "compassionated" him. That's what he needed at the time.

And that's why the mercy of God is so wonderful to a sinner who comes home that he wants to write about it and talk about it forever. It was what he needed so desperately at the moment. We sing, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound," and yet the grace of God is not any greater than the justice of

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God or the holiness of God. But for people like you and me, it is what we need the most desperately. It isn't God who is different; it's us. You could go to heaven and say to an angel, "Isn't the mercy of God wonderful?" He'll know that it is, but he won't understand it the way we do.

Charles Finney said in his great little hymn, "These creatures round the throne, they have never, never known a sinful world like this." They cannot appreciate the love and mercy of God as we can. They talk about the holiness, the judgment and the justice of God, and they sing to Him, "righteous are thy judgments" ([Revelation 16:7](#)), because they have never known sin. Therefore they are not in need of mercy as you and I are.

God is equal to Himself always. But when you're in a jam, you need certain attributes more than others. When I'm in the doctor's office I need pity.

I want help. I can look up at the wall and see his diplomas and know that he's educated. But I just want him to be nice to me because I'm always scared when I go to a doctor. And when we come to God our need determines which of God's attributes at the moment we'll celebrate. And we'll have a thousand of them to celebrate.

The Operation of God's Mercy

The judgment of God is God's justice confronting moral inequity and iniquity. When justice sees iniquity, judgment falls. Mercy is God's goodness confronting human guilt and suffering. When the goodness of God confronts human guilt and suffering, God listens, God hears, and the bleating of the lamb comes into His ear and the moan of the babe comes into His heart, and the cry of Israel comes up to His throne. The goodness of God is confronting human suffering and guilt, and that is mercy.

All men are recipients of God's mercy. Don't think for a minute that when you repented and came back from the swine pen to the Father's house that mercy then began to operate. No, mercy had been operating all the time. [Lamentations 3:22](#) says, "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not." So remember that if you hadn't had the mercy of God all the time, stooping in pity, withholding judgment, you'd have perished long ago. The cruel dictator is a recipient of the mercy of God. The wicked murderer is a recipient of the mercy of God. And the blackest heart that lies in the lowest wallow in the country is a recipient of the mercy of God. That doesn't mean they'll be saved or converted and finally reach heaven. But it means that God is holding up His justice because He's having mercy. He is waiting because a Savior died. All of us are recipients of the mercy of God.

You may ask, "When I am forgiven and cleansed and delivered, isn't that the mercy of God?" Sure, that's the mercy of God to you, but all the time you were sinning against Him, He was having pity on you. "The Lord is... not willing that any should perish" ([2 Peter 3:9](#)). [Romans 2:4](#) says, "Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering?" He is waiting. God would take this world and squeeze it in His hand as a child might squeeze a robin's egg and destroy it out of mind forever, except that He is a merciful God. He sees our tears and hears our groans in all His love and mercy. He is conscious of our suffering down here.

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All men are recipients of the mercy of God, but God has postponed the execution, that is all. When the justice of God confronts human guilt then there is a sentence of death, but the mercy of God—because that also is an attribute of God, not contradicting the other but working with it—postpones the execution.

Mercy cannot cancel judgment apart from atonement. When justice sees iniquity, there must be judgment. But mercy brought Christ to the cross. I don't claim to understand that. I'm so happy about the things I do know and so delightedly happy about things I don't know.

I don't know what happened there on that cross, exactly; I know He died. God the mighty Maker died for the sin of man, the creature. I know that God turned His back on that holy, holy, holy Man. I know that He gave up the ghost and died. I know that in heaven is registered atonement for all mankind. I know that! And still I don't know why, and I don't know what happened.

I only know that in the infinite goodness of God and His infinite wisdom He wrought out a plan whereby the second Person of the Trinity, incarnated as a man, could die in order that justice might be satisfied while mercy rescued the man for whom He died.

That's Christian theology. Whatever your denomination, that's what you want to go to heaven on. You can't go to heaven on spirituals and choruses and cheap books, but you can go to heaven on the mercy of God in Christ. That's what the Bible teaches. Justification means that mercy and justice have collaborated so that when God turns and sees iniquity, and then sees the man of iniquity rushing to the cross, He no longer sees iniquity but justification. And so we're justified by faith.

The Suffering of God

I said before that God takes pleasure in the pleasure of His people and suffers along with His friends. "In all their affliction he was afflicted"

([Isaiah 63:9](#)). If you are a good tight thinker, you may ask, "How can a perfect God suffer?" Suffering means that somewhere there is a disorder. You don't suffer as long as you have psychological, mental and physical order; when you get out of order you suffer.

As long as it is declared in the Bible, you must take it by faith and say, "Father, I believe it." And then because you believe, you try to understand. And if you can understand, then thank God; your little intellect can have fun leaping about rejoicing in God.

But if you read it in the Bible and your intellect can't understand it, then there's only one thing to do, and that is to look up and say, "O Lord GOD, thou knowest" ([Ezekiel 37:3](#)). There is an awful lot we don't know. The trouble with us evangelicals is that we know too much! We're too slick; we have too many answers. I'm looking for the fellow who will say, "I don't know, but oh Lord God, Thou knowest." There's someone who is spiritually wise.

So how can God suffer? Suffering would seem to indicate some imperfection, and yet we know that God is perfect. Suffering would seem to indicate some loss or lack and yet we know that God can suffer

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no loss and that He cannot lack, because God is infinitely perfect in all His being. I do not know how to explain this. I only know that the Bible declares that God suffers with His children and that in all their affliction He is afflicted. In His love and in His mercy He carries them and He makes their bed in their sickness. I know this but I don't know how.

A great old theologian once said, "Don't reject a fact because you don't know a method." Don't say it isn't so because you don't know how it's so. There is much you can't explain. If you come to me and ask me the how of things, I'll ask you twenty-five questions, one after the other, about yourself—your body, your mind, your hair, your skin, your eyes, your ears. You won't be able to answer one question. Yet you use all those things even though you don't understand them. I don't know how God can suffer. That is a mystery I may never know.

A lot of hymn writers who should have been cutting the grass at the time have written songs instead. One of them says this: "I wonder why, I wonder why He loved me so. I will love and pray that I might know why He loved me so." You will never know that. There is only one answer to why God loved you: because God is love. And there is only one answer to why God has mercy on you: because God is mercy, and mercy is an attribute of the Deity. Don't ask God why, but thank Him for the vast wondrous how and fact of it.

I'm going to paraphrase a little quatrain written by Faber about how God can suffer:

How Thou canst suffer, O my God,

And be the God Thou art

Is darkness to my intellect

But sunshine to my heart.

I don't know how He does it, but I know that when I'm sick, God's sad, and I know that when I'm miserable, God suffers along with me. And I know that in all my sickness, He'll make my bed because His name is goodness and His name is mercy.

The Nearness of God's Mercy

The nearness of God's mercy is "as a father pitieth his children" ([Psalm 103:13](#)). After the first World War the United States with its big heart gave vast sums of money to the dislocated orphans of Europe, but they didn't have enough to meet the need. In one of the places where they were taking in orphans, a man came in, very thin, with large, unnaturally bright eyes, thin cheeks and thin arms, leading a little girl. She also showed signs of malnutrition—eyes too large and bright, her little abdomen distended and her thin little legs and arms too small and too thin for her age.

This man led her in and said to the person in charge, "I would like you to take in my little girl." And they asked him if she was his daughter.

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"Yes," he said.

"Well," they said, "we're awfully sorry, but our rule here is that only full orphans can receive any help. If one of the parents is living then we can't take responsibility because we just don't have enough. There are too many full orphans for us to take a half orphan."

And he looked down at his little girl, and she looked up questioningly with big, too-bright eyes, and then he turned and said, "Well, you know, I can't work. I'm sick. I've been abused. I have been in prison. I've been half starved, and now I'm old and I can't work. I can barely stagger around. But I brought her down for you to take care of her."

And they said, "We're sorry, but there's nothing we can do."

He said, "You mean that if I were dead, you'd take care of my little girl and feed her and she could live and have clothing and a home?" They said, "Yes." Then he reached down and pulled her little skinny body up to himself and hugged her hard and kissed her. Then he put her hand in the hand of the man at the desk, and said, "I'll arrange that," and walked out of the room and committed suicide.

I heard that story years ago and I haven't gotten over it yet. Still I see that picture of the man who was too sick to work but who stood in the way of his daughter's getting decent food and clothing. And he said, "I'll take care of that," and he did. That's mercy—as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pities them that fear Him.

Jesus said, "The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him" ([Mark 9:31](#)). Peter said, "Lord: this shall not be unto thee" ([Matthew 16:22](#)). But Jesus said, in effect, "If I don't, you don't live." And so He went out not to slay Himself but to put Himself where they could slay Him. Mercy was showing compassion in the only way it could at the moment, by dying. So Christ Jesus our Lord died there on that cross, for He loved us and pitied us as a father pities his children.

Our Response to God's Mercy

We who have received mercy must show mercy. We must pray that God will help us to show mercy. We've received it; we've got to show it. This mercy can only come by atonement. Mercy can only operate toward us because of atonement. But atonement has been made.

In a hymn written around the book of Hebrews it says:

Where high the heavenly temple stands,

The house of God not made with hands,

The great High Priest our nature wears,

The Guardian of mankind appears.

Though now ascended up on high

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He bends on earth a brother's eye.

Partaker of the human name,

He knows the frailty of our frame.

Our Fellow Sufferer now retains

A fellow feeling of our pains,

And still remembers in the skies

His tears, His agonies, and cries.

In every pang that rends the heart

The Man of Sorrows has a part.

He sympathizes with our grief

And to the sufferer sends relief.

With boldness therefore at the throne

Let us make all our sorrows known

And ask the aid of heavenly power

To help us in the evil hour.

How wonderful this is! Our great High Priest, who is the Guardian of man, wears our nature before the throne of God. If you went up there near the throne and God would allow you to look—though I don't know how you can look on that awesome sight—there would be creatures you couldn't identify. There would be strange creatures there before the throne having four faces and "six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly" ([Isaiah 6:2](#)). You would see strange angels there such as Abraham saw and Jacob saw going up and down the ladder. You wouldn't be able to identify them because you've never seen an angel. I suppose there are other creatures there; I read about them in Daniel and Revelation.

But I know that as you drew near the throne, you would recognize one order of being. You would say, "Look, look, look, I recognize this! I'm familiar with this shape; this form I know! This is a man, this has two legs under him, this has two arms, this is a man!"

"The great High Priest our nature wears, and the Guardian of mankind appears." Though you might be very much a stranger among those strange creatures yonder, there would be one Being you would know. You would say, "I grew up among them; I knew them; I've seen them go down the street; I've seen little ones and big ones and black ones and yellow ones and red ones. I know this is a man."

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And He would smile down from the throne, because “though now ascended up on high, He bends on earth a brother’s eye. Partaker of the human name, He knows the frailty of our frame.”

Don’t pity yourself. Don’t be afraid to tell God your troubles. He knows all about your troubles. There is a little song that says, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,” but there’s Somebody who knows, all right. And our Fellow Sufferer still retains a fellow feeling for our pains and still remembers in the skies His tears, His agonies and cries, though He’s now at the right hand of the Father Almighty, sitting crowned in glory, awaiting, of course, that great coronation day that yet is to come. But though He is there and though they cry all around Him, “Worthy is the Lamb” ([Revelation 5:12](#)), He hasn’t forgotten us, and He hasn’t forgotten the nails in His hands, the tears, the agonies and cries.

He knows everything about you. He knows! He knows when the doctor hates to tell you what’s wrong with you and your friends come and try to be unnaturally encouraging. He knows!

With boldness, therefore, at the throne

Let us make all our sorrows known

And ask the aid of heavenly power

To help us in the evil hour.

“The mercy of God is an ocean divine, a boundless and fathomless flood.” Let us plunge out into the mercy of God and come to know it. I hope you believe this, because you’re going to need this mercy desperately if you don’t already have it. The mercy of God in Christ Jesus—amen and amen!