### God’s Mercy

**1. Definitions**

God is merciful toward His suffering creation. The concept “mercy” has two main components. First, mercy is compassion. Second, it includes pardon for transgressors. Tozer, highlighting these two aspects of mercy, summarizes, “Mercy is God’s goodness confronting human guilt and suffering.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The New Testament term describing the Lord’s compassion is σπλαγχνίζομαι (*splangnidzomai*). Examples of its use are found in Matthew 15:32 and Matthew 20:34. God’s mercy is also indicated by the term ἔλεος (*eleos*), for example, in Titus 3:5 and Hebrews 4:16.

Millard Erickson comments on the idea of compassion, “God’s mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for his people. It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Hodge reaches a similar conclusion: “Mercy is kindness exercised towards the miserable.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper writes, “The mercy of God is goodness as compassion upon man, whose sin has brought him into untold misery.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Finally, Shedd comments, “All blessings bestowed upon the natural man are mercy, insofar as they succor his distress, and grace, so far as they are bestowed upon the undeserving.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Concerning the second feature of mercy, pardon for iniquity, we may cite New Testament passages speaking of forgiveness for sinners in Christ (see Tit 3:5; Rom 11:32; 1 Tim 1:13). Joyner writes, “To experience the mercy of God is to be preserved from punishment that one does in fact deserve.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

**2. Biblical Data**

In the Old Testament, Yahweh’s mercy appeared immediately after the first transgression. After Cain killed his brother, he did not receive full punishment for his sin, but along with banishment received a promise of divine protection (Gen 4:11-15). Even after God destroyed the wicked world by a flood, He gave the gracious promise, “I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done” (Gen 8:21). Later in the book of Genesis, the Lord promised to spare an evil city for the sake of ten righteous persons in it (Gen 18:32). When Lot fled from condemned Sodom, God spared the city Lot fled to for refuge for his sake (Gen 19:19-21).

Even though in later chapters, the Torah stresses Yahweh’s holiness and righteousness, expressed in the Mosaic Law, nonetheless His mercy was not forgotten. When the Lord “heard the groaning” of Israel suffering in Egyptian bondage, He sent Moses to deliver them (Ex 2:24; сf. Isa 63:9). Additionally, God displayed His mercy toward His people, who constantly strayed from His way. There were two instances when Yahweh was ready to annihilate Israel: when they worshipped the golden calf (Ex 32:10-14), and when they refused to enter Canaan (Num 11:17-20). Yet, in both cases He pardoned the people in response to Moses’ intercession for them. The psalmist also recalls God’s mercy to Israel in the wilderness: “He, being compassionate, forgave {their} iniquity and did not destroy {them;} and often He restrained His anger and did not arouse all His wrath” (Ps 77:38).

We see another display of Yahweh’s mercy when He allowed Moses to look upon the Promised Land as a concession when punishing his disobedience by not allowing him to enter it (Deut 3:27; 34:1-4). In addition, Deuteronomy 10:18 mentions God’s special care for orphans, widows, and strangers. Finally, although the Lord anticipated Israel’s future apostasy and violation of the covenant, He nonetheless promised to show mercy to His people and restore them (Deut 32:36). Yet, this display of mercy would depend on the fidelity of their future relationship with Him (see Deut 13:17).

The book of Judges provides us with many examples of the Lord’s mercy. Israel repeatedly turned away from Yahweh and experienced His chastisement as a result. However, mercy always followed punishment. At one point, after Israel’s repentance, “He could bear the misery of Israel no longer” (Judg 10:16). Judges 2:18 gives the following summary:

When Yahweh raised up judges for them, Yahweh was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for Yahweh was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them.

The psalmist comments,

Many times He would deliver them; they, however, were rebellious in their counsel, and {so} sank down in their iniquity. Nevertheless He looked upon their distress when He heard their cry; and He remembered His covenant for their sake, and relented according to the greatness of His lovingkindness. He also made them {objects} of compassion in the presence of all their captors (Ps 106:43-46).

Mercy was granted to the family of Eli in spite of the fact that his sons desecrated their priesthood: “Yet I will not cut off every man of yours from My altar so that your eyes will fail {from weeping} and your soul grieve” (1 Sam 2:33).

David also experienced the Lord’s mercy. When he fled from his son Absalom, he relied only on Yahweh’s condescension (2 Sam 16:12). Another key moment in David’s experience of God’s mercy was when God gave him a choice of punishments for his “illegal” census: defeat in war, pestilence, or famine. David responded, “Let us now fall into the hand of Yahweh, for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man” (2 Sam 24:14).

We must not fail to recall David’s prayer after his sin with Bathsheba: “Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions” (Ps 51:1). David’s son, Solomon, imitated his father’s reliance on Yahweh’s mercy, praying that God would hear the repentant prayer of His people, forgive, and restore them (1 Kin 8:49-53).

Yahweh’s mercy was again on display during the divided kingdom of Israel, which was a time of unfaithfulness to the Lord. Several striking examples stand out. When Jeroboam’s hand withered upon his ordering the arrest of God’s prophet, God immediately restored his hand when the prophet prayed for him (1 Kin 13:4-6). When Ahab sinned in respect to Naboth and then subsequently humbled himself before the Lord, God had mercy on him (1 Kin 21:29). Yahweh did so also for Jehoahaz (2 Kin 13:4), for Rehoboam (2 Chr 12:7, 12), and for Israel in general (2 Kin 13:23; 14:25-27).

Possibly the most remarkable example of Yahweh’s condescendence was His mercy to Manasseh, who committed more abominations in Judah than any other king of the Southern Kingdom. Yet, when he humbled himself and sought the Lord, Yahweh “was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom” (2 Chr 33:13). Such an act of kindness to an apostate demonstrates God’s merciful disposition. A wise woman of Tekoa once said, “God does not take away life, but plans ways so that the banished one will not be cast out from him” (2 Sam 14:14).

Even when God’s people failed to repent, God showed mercy nonetheless by sending them prophet after prophet: “Yahweh, the God of their fathers, sent {word} to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place” (2 Chr 36:15).

The psalms also speak of Yahweh’s merciful nature in forgiving sin and supporting those in need. He shows special favor toward the poor and oppressed (Ps 72:12-14; 69:33; 74:21; 18:27; 113:7; сf. 1 Sam 2:5, 8), the lonely (Ps 68:6), and orphans and widows (Ps 68:5; 10:14, 18). He comforts those “crushed in spirit”(Ps 34:18) and heals them (Ps 147:3). He “supports the afflicted” (Ps 147:6). Psalms 146:7-9 summarizes:

Who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. Yahweh sets the prisoners free. Yahweh opens {the eyes of} the blind; Yahweh raises up those who are bowed down; Yahweh loves the righteous; Yahweh protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, but He thwarts the way of the wicked.

Concerning Yahweh’s willingness to forgive sin, we refer to the following passages. His wrath is “for a moment,” but His blessing is “for a lifetime” (Ps 30:5; сf. 135:14). Yahweh is “a forgiving God” (Ps 99:8). He forgives our transgressions (Ps 65:3; сf. 130:4) and “pardons all your iniquities” (Ps 103:3). He remembers that we are “flesh” (Ps 78:39; cf. 103:14). The reality and abundance of this forgiveness is lauded in the following passage:

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on {his} children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear Him (Ps 103:10-13).

We furthermore learn that Yahweh’s mercy “extends to the heavens” (Ps 36:6). His people rejoice in it: “How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God!” (Ps 36:7). God’s mercy inspires confidence in prayer for His aid: (Ps 79:8; 143:8, 12; 119:76-77). One must not doubt His lovingkindness (Ps 767:7-11). Mercy is one of the most prominent of the Lord’s attributes:

For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.… You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth (Ps 95:5, 15; ср. 145:8; 111:4).

In the Old Testament prophetic books, we see many of the same themes covered in the earlier books. First, mercy is one of Yahweh’s primary characteristics. He “is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil” (Joel 2:13). The prophet Micah writes, “Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love” (Mic 7:18). Ezekiel echoes the thought that the Lord prefers mercy to wrath (Ezek 33:11).

The theme of forgiveness is emphasized in other prophetic utterances as well. Both Isaiah (Isa 55:7) and Jeremiah (Jer 3:12; 31:33) testify of Yahweh’s readiness to forgive. He not only forgives, but forgets our transgressions (Jer 50:20; Ezek 18:22). He “will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic 7:19).

We also learn that after God chastises His people, mercy will follow: “In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, but with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you” (Isa 54:8); “Although You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me” (Isa 12:1); and, “For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry” (Isa 57:16).[[7]](#footnote-7) Correspondingly, God preserves a remnant in Israel (Ezek 6:8). However, before restoration or annulling of punishment Yahweh awaits repentance (Joel 2:13-14; Jer 26:3, 13, 19). A most elegant and moving expression of appreciation for Yahweh’s mercy is found in the book of Lamentations:

Yahweh’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. {They} are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness…. For the Lord will not reject forever, for if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness (Lam 3:22-23; 31-32).

We find it also significant that Yahweh is ready to show mercy even to the enemies of His people, including Egypt (Jer 46:26), Moab (Jer 48:47), Ammon (Jer 49:6), Elam (Jer 49:39), and Sodom (Ezek 16:53-55). We also recall the famous account of God sparing Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, upon their repentance (Jon 4:10-11).

As mentioned in our survey of the Psalms, in virtue of Yahweh’s mercy, His people turn to Him in prayer. In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah often relates to God in prayer the pitiful situation of His people, imploring Him to show mercy (see Lam 1:9, 11, 20; 2:18-22, 5:1-22). In his day, Isaiah inquired of Yahweh as to why “the stirrings of Your heart and Your compassion are restrained toward me” (Isa 63:15). Appealing to God’s mercy, Habakkuk (Hab 3:2) and Amos (Amos 7:2-6) interceded for Israel, the former requesting God, “In wrath remember mercy.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Later, both Nehemiah (Neh 1:5-6) and Daniel relied on Yahweh’s mercy for answers to prayer. Daniel openly acknowledged that Israel did not deserve the Lord’s favor, but were dependent on His kindness: “We are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion” (Dan 9:18).

Finally, during the Second Temple period we see examples where leaders of God’s people remind Him of His mercies when appealing to Him in prayer. The clearest example is the prayer of the Levites in Nehemiah chapter 9. They recount the Lord’s favor to Israel in the wilderness (v. 9-15). Yet, when Israel turned from Yahweh, He nevertheless did not abandon them, because He is “a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (v. 17), and continued to provide for them in the wilderness (v. 19-21).

The Levites’ prayer recounts the period of the judges, when God’s people were in distress because of their sins: “When they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers” (v. 27). Although they were stubborn in their rebellion, “In Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them, for You are a gracious and compassionate God” (v. 31). In conclusion, based on the history of Yahweh’s patience toward His people, the Levites ask that He would again turn to them in mercy (v. 32ff).

The New Testament makes a vital contribution to this teaching as well. Especially prominent is the theme of God’s saving mercy expressed in Jesus Christ. Even before His redemptive work on Calvary, Jesus demonstrated God’s mercy in His earthly ministry in reaching out to those in need.

When Jesus encountered people in need, He was moved with compassion for the blind (Matt 20:34; Lk 18:38), hungry (Mk 8:2), deceased (Jn 11:33-35), wanderers (Matt 18:11-14; Mk 6:34), those seeking the Lord (Mk 10:21), and the sick (Matt 14:14). When people appealed to Christ for help, mention is often made of His mercy (see Matt 9:27; 15:22; 17:15 and others).

The Gospel of Luke devotes special attention to the Lord’s mercy toward the unsaved. In particular, chapter 15 relates three parables of Jesus focusing on this theme: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the Prodigal Son. In all of these parables, the main point is the same: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk 19:10).

Luke highlights the Lord’s mercy in other texts as well. In the first chapter of his gospel, he records Mary’s utterance of praise for God’s mercy to His people “His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear him…. He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed. He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy” (Lk 1:50-54). In the same context, Zechariah (Lk 1:78) and the neighbors of Elizabeth (Lk 1:58) also extol God’s mercy.

Luke’s gospel also highlights forgiveness from the Lord. Jesus forgave the crippled man (Lk 5:20) and commissioned His disciples to preach forgiveness to the whole world (Lk 24:47). On the cross, Jesus extended forgiveness even to those who crucified Him (Lk 23:34). In addition, only in the Gospel of Luke the story is told of the tax collector who called on Yahweh for mercy and was justified (Lk 18:13).

Finally, Luke tells of Jesus’ mercy toward His enemies. When Peter struck the ear of the high priest’s servant, Jesus healed him (Lk 22:51). Additionally, when James and John wished to send down fire from heaven to consume those who would not receive Him, Jesus, full of mercy, reproved them (Lk 9:51-56). Jesus spoke of the Father’s mercy toward the unrighteous as well (Matt 5:45).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Undoubtedly, the most powerful expression of God’s mercy not only to Israel, but also to the entire world, was the redemptive sacrifice of His Son on the cross of Calvary. Jesus Himself spoke of this as an expression of God’s love and mercy:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (Jn 3:16-17).

The New Testament epistles also depict a God of mercy. He is “full of compassion and {is} merciful” (Jam 5:11), the source of mercy (2 Jn 3; Jude 2; Gal 6:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2), and “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1:3).

The Lord’s mercy, in fact, is the central feature of the gospel. God saves us by His mercy in Christ, not on the basis of our good works (Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3). Paul writes to the church in Ephesus: “God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Eph 2:4-5). The new covenant with God sealed by Christ’s blood holds this promise: “I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Heb 8:12). We have constant access to mercy before the throne of grace (Heb 4:16).

Christ is not only the propitiatory sacrifice for sins, but is the merciful high priest of that sacrifice as well (Heb 2:17). Because He became human, He can sympathize with human weakness, which confirms the Old Testament word of assurance: “He remembered that they were but flesh” (Ps 78:39).

Paul examines another facet of the Lord’s mercy in Romans chapter 9. Here he contrasts Lord’s mercy toward the “chosen” with the “hardening” of the non-elect:

For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it {does} not {depend} on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy…. So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires (Rom 9:15-18).

We must understand this passage in light of its context, which deals with God’s choice of Israel as His people. In comparing this text with Romans chapter 11, we discover that God temporarily hardened Israel so that the offer of mercy and salvation could extend to the Gentiles (Rom 11:7-11, 25; 15:9). Then, He will again show His mercies to His old covenant people (v. 26-27). In the end, “God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all” (Rom 11:32).[[10]](#footnote-10) Comparing Romans 9 and 11, one may conclude that Pharaoh in a certain way represented Israel.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the case of the former, the Lord hardened his heart so that His power and name would be proclaimed in all the earth (Rom 9:17). Likewise, through the hardening of Israel, the gospel would be proclaimed in all the earth (Rom 11:7-11).

In Romans 9:23, we learn of the “vessels of mercy.” Commentators note how these are contrasted with the “vessels of wrath.” The latter are “prepared” (κατηρτισμένα) for destruction, while the former “He prepared beforehand (προητοίμασεν) for glory». We note here different verbs: κατηρτισμένα (*katertismena*) and προητοίμασεν (*proetoimasen*). Morris points out that the former verb is in passive voice, that is, the one who prepared them for judgment is not indicated. On the other hand, the latter verb is active, indicating that the Lord Himself prepared the vessels of mercy.[[12]](#footnote-12) Morris feels that unbelievers themselves prepare themselves for destruction. Finally, Morris observes the absence of any concrete statement that *all* the vessels of wrath will perish.[[13]](#footnote-13) He holds out hope that some might come to repentance and become “vessels of mercy” (see Rom 2:4).

We will conclude this topic by mentioning that the Lord is more inclined to show mercy to those with a sincere heart. We take, for example, the history of Paul, who, it appears, sincerely believed that he was serving God by persecuting believers in Jesus. He describes his experience thus: “…even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim 1:13).

1. Tozer A. W. The Attributes of God. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hodge C. Systematic Theology. – 1872. – V. 1 – P. 427. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MI: Concordia Publishing House, 1999. – V. 1. – P. 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Joyner R. E. The One True God // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 144-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Also see Jer 29:10-14; 33:26; Hos 11:9; 14:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Also see the prayer of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1:5-6, and the prayer of Daniel in Daniel 9:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Here the word “all” likely refers to the entire nation, not to each individual in it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dunn J. D. G. Romans 9–16 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, ТХ: Word, 1998. – P. 555. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Morris L. The Epistle to the Romans // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W. B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988. – P. 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Morris, p. 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)