

about this book

Is not mercy a relic of bygone days, such as when Portia pleaded with Shylock to show it to his victim? Is it a thing more fitted for Grand Opera, than the beginning of the 21st Century?

What is the way out of the vast human misery of our times?

What will make us merciful to others in an age which really needs mercy?

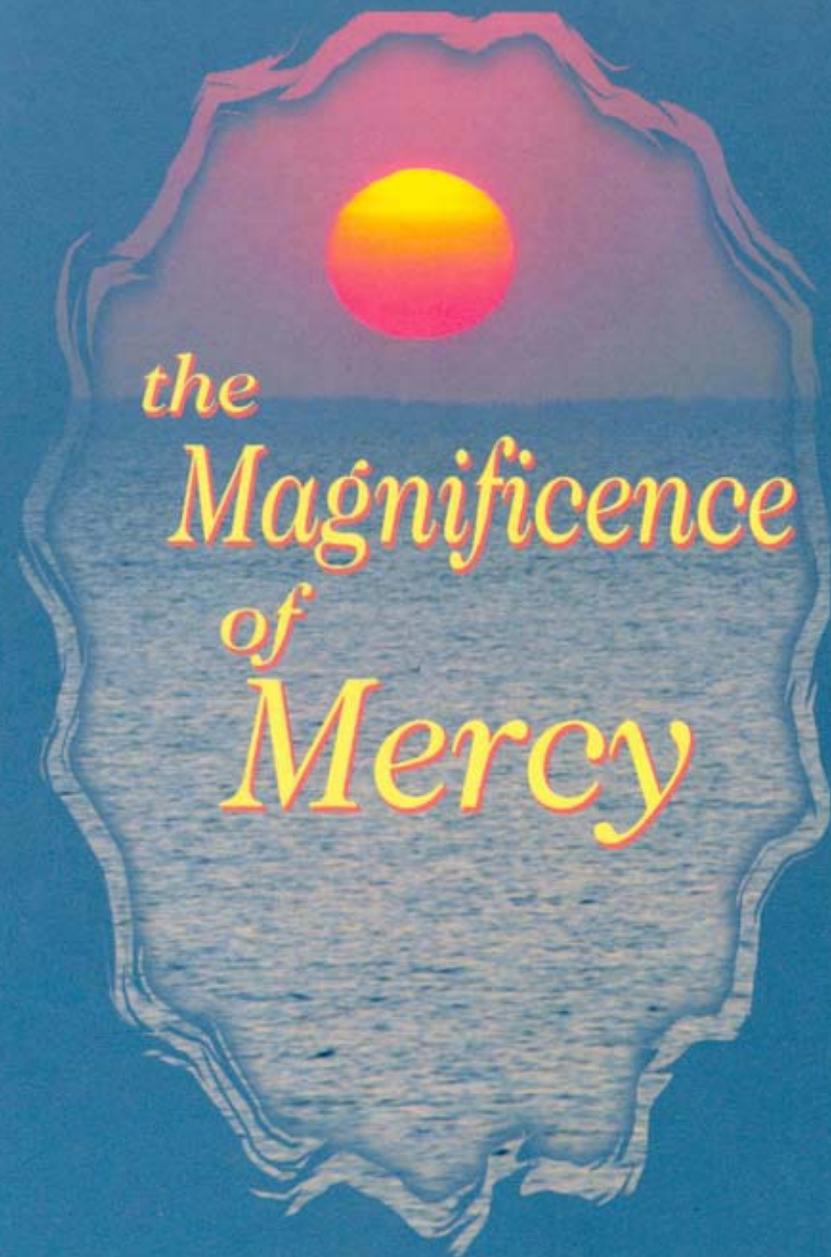
These are some of the points that Geoffrey Bingham raises as he pursues the theme of 'The Magnificence of Mercy'. Whilst showing the biblical teaching of this subject, he also brings it to the practical point of Divine and human pity in action.

about the author

The Rev. Geoffrey Bingham, an Anglican clergyman, a teacher of interstate and international experience, has been a missionary with the Church Missionary Society, Principal of the Pakistan Bible Institute and of the Bible College of South Australia, and is currently Executive Director of New Creation Ministries.



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Geoffrey Bingham

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Ah, Strong, Strong Love!
All Things Are Yours
Angry Heart or Tranquil Mind?
Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss
The Day of the Spirit
The Everlasting Presence
Everything in Beautiful Array
The Glory of the Mystery
and the Mystery of the Glory
Great and Glorious Grace
Oh, Father! Our Father!
The Profound Mystery
The Splendour of Holiness
Sweeter than Honey, More Precious than Gold
The Things We Firmly Believe

The Magnificence of Mercy

Geoffrey Bingham

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Foreword

WHY WRITE A BOOK ON MERCY?

What is there about mercy which would demand the writing of a book? Only one who has been delivered from misery by mercy could truly tell us. Often in human living we see people who were once desperate, unable to get themselves out of their insuperable difficulties, and we have seen a person or persons exercise mercy and liberate them.

Biblically, Man is in an inextricable situation of misery. We need not here go into all that. God’s mercy is something which in human terms we would call involuntary. God moves in mercy to release Man from his misery. If He does not move to release Man, then He cannot be called ‘unmerciful’, since mercy is something He does of His own will. Were He obligated to move, then mercy would not be mercy. We need not, here, go into the dynamics and practices of all this.

My own personal reason for writing this book is that I have been, over many years, the object of God’s mercy. I *know* that mercy, and it never ceases to astonish and humble me. As I understand it, God has mercy when men in guilt have terrible misery. He also moves in mercy when situations, which do not necessarily arise from personal guilt, oppress human beings to the point of intolerable suffering and distress. Yet

again, He moves in mercy to give rich vocation in life to persons who have not previously had direction and purpose, or who have had somewhat pointless vocations, and minor goals for living. Since all of these situations are the lot of most of us, mercy comes as a beautiful and liberating action of God. Only one who has known mercy in these ways would want to write or tell about it.

It has been my experience that I—with many others—have often cried for mercy. Part of the ancient Christian liturgy has been, '*Kyrie eleison! Christus eleison! Kyrie eleison!*', and it seems, in all ages, to be the cry of many hearts. Some simply do not address Christ because they do not know he is a great source of mercy. There are those who cry to God, although they do not know Him personally. One does not need to read a book about mercy in order to cry out of the misery that oppresses and the doom that threatens. Mercy is scarcely a matter of research! Even so, I have been richly rewarded in the digging I have done—exploring the Scriptures which are resonant with God's great and practical pity. I guess that, at best, I am a 'home theologian'. I have always thought the Bible was for such as I am—given in the brilliant and helpful fruits of more scholarly research.

In this minor research, I have come to see that Israel needed, wanted and received certain foundational realities in regard to God, especially as He revealed His glory to them in His covenant. In particular, in Exodus 34:6-7 He revealed His attributes of mercy, favour, steadfast love, long-suffering, faithfulness, forgiveness and the holiness which does not forgive evil where Man is impenitent or scornful of covenant goodness. I have also come to see that these qualities of God—if we may call them that—were unchanging and unwavering. God kept reminding Israel in both their

adversity and prosperity that He was the Lord and as such unchangeable, that is, wholly dependable. So by the law, by the prophets, and by the constant acts of God they were reminded of this covenant God and His great character.

Human beings, even covenant-related human beings, have a way of forgetting God, trying to ignore Him as they seek to go their own ways. We would all have to admit to this. The incarnation of the Word—God becoming Man in Jesus—is one of the most remarkable miracles of history. In him was not merely a *reminder* of all that God is, but the very manifestation of God Himself: 'Emmanuel, God with us!' Jesus was mercy incarnate, as he was love, and goodness, righteousness and holiness incarnate. God spoke to Man through His Son, and still so speaks.

It was the great act of the Atonement, that of giving His Son up for us all, which was His supreme act of mercy. His movement in history to set Christ forth as His required and satisfactory propitiation is what has caused the world to think. It is startling—God abandoning up His only and true Son. We are confronted by it. What does it mean? What must we think and do in the light of that act?

The truth is that we are confronted by mercy—mercy incredible and unspeakable. We cannot hide from the Divine mercy. It is always there before us in Christ. We cannot evade history. No other persons confront us as does Jesus, and no other act has ever equalled or surpassed this act—not even any other act of God.

So that is why we write about mercy. Readers may find some of the material tedious. More's the pity if they do. The book builds up to a climax, but first sets the basic foundational ideas for understanding that climax. I urge readers to undertake a serious reading,

and not skim the contents. The reward lies in the deepest understanding of His 'everlasting mercy'.

It may even be that some readers have never come under that mercy. What an experience to do so! What liberation! What meeting with the great love of God! Of course; but the greatest outcome of knowing God's mercy is that we begin to have mercy on others. When God's mercy becomes translated into Man's mercy to Man, then the subject is no longer in the abstract. It is touching us all where we live, and that is what matters.

I hope this brief treatment of mercy will draw us to the acts of mercy so needed in a world of human carelessness, of human misery and grief.

1

Mercy in Today's World

AN INTRODUCTION TO MERCY

Mercy is a word that is rarely used today. It is virtually absent from our conversation, and is not found in our modern songs. A simple description of mercy is 'that pity which is practical'. What we see on our TV screens of sufferings through droughts, floods and wars often moves us to pity. 'Compassion' we call it, and are glad that we still have feelings. Mercy is pity and compassion which seeks to do something about the situation of suffering. As we will see, time and again, mercy is aid given to help a person or a people out of intolerable human misery.

Modern humanism has engulfed most of us. We have said goodbye to the 'God of the gap', since the gap between our lack of knowledge and modern science has been filled. God is redundant—given in that He still exists. We can manage quite well apart from Him—given enough time and thought—so that misery can eventually be eliminated. Meanwhile, we are a century, beyond all other centuries, which has mercy on people in misery. We congratulate ourselves. Even so, there are still those indignant ones who might accuse

God of being unhearing—callously indifferent to the human plight. For the most part, however, humans seem no longer to think of God doing anything. On the one hand they think they can do something about most things, and on the other hand they shrug off the matter of human misery as though a good dose of human entertainment is the best antidote for anguish. Entertainment is a vast industry today—a concerted attempt to deny the reality of Man’s pitiable plight.

Rightly seen, Man’s misery cannot be so easily neutralised. We demean Man when we think him incapable of great misery. His lofty character makes him a candidate for suffering of the most terrible kind. In the context of deserved anguish, mercy shows itself as a beautiful thing. When it comes unbidden, then it brings surprise of the richest kind. Mercy is indeed sweet, as John Masefield has shown us in his epic poem ‘The Everlasting Mercy’. Saul Kane, the wild man, has lived in something like a hell of his own making, and in his horrific wretchedness has come to the end of his tether. Looking ahead in his wretchedness, he sees old Callow the farmer:

His grave eyes looking straight ahead,
Shearing a long straight furrow red;
His plough-foot high to give it earth
To bring new food for men to birth.¹

Something happens to Kane, and he cries:

O wet red swathe of earth laid bare,
O truth, O strength, O gleaming share,
O patient eyes that watch the goal,
O ploughman of the sinner’s soul.
O Jesus, drive the coulter deep
To plough my living man from sleep.²

Then comes the classic passage that tells of the everlasting mercy:

O Christ who holds the open gate,
O Christ who drives the furrow straight,
O Christ, the plough, O Christ, the laughter
Of holy white birds flying after,
Lo, all my heart’s field red and torn,
And Thou wilt bring the young green corn
The young green corn divinely springing,
The young green corn for ever singing;
And when the field is fresh and fair
Thy blessed feet shall glitter there.
And we will walk the weeded field,
And tell the golden harvest’s yield,
The corn that makes the holy bread
By which the soul of man is fed,
The holy bread, the food unpriced,
Thy everlasting mercy, Christ.³

Saul Kane had sunk deeply into a life of reprobation, and so much so that he felt he could never change. Misery he had, but he had tried to drown it in alcohol and riotous living. He was a prodigal who seemed to revel in the pigsty until two women talked to him directly about his evil. That was when he longed to be liberated from his wretchedness. Something of the given image of God in him yearned for peace and purity, hence his cry:

O patient eyes that watch the goal,
O ploughman of the sinner’s soul.
O Jesus, drive the coulter deep
To plough my living man from sleep.⁴

Man without God is in deep pain. God in His compassion moves the affairs of men and nations to release the pitiful from their plight of pain.

¹ John Masefield, *Selected Poems*, Heinemann, London, 1961, p. 11.

² Masefield, *Selected Poems*, p. 11.

³ Masefield, *Selected Poems*, p. 12.

⁴ Masefield, *Selected Poems*, p. 11.

THE MERCY OF MAN

If Man needs the mercy of God, he also needs the mercy of Man. Robert Burns wrote ('Man Was Made to Mourn'):

Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!⁵

As we will see, Man is never truly merciful until he has tasted and received the mercy of God. Under mercy he proves most merciful. The magnificence of human mercy is told well by the beautiful Portia as she faces the angry and merciless Shylock:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest,
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.⁶

Countless thousands mourn Man's inhumanity to his own race, but when mercy comes it is sweetest of all – whether from God or Man.

MERCY AND THE MODERN MAN

In one sense, Man is always modern. Innately he does not change through his generations, but it seems that this generation of our race is more merciful than at any time in human history. When did nations have pity on other nations such as they have pity today? When did one country send to another to help it in drought, famine and other calamities? When did governments set aside a percentage of their annual income to give aid to less fortunate peoples? We are witnessing a marvel today not known in other centuries.

Cynics might say that such giving is not wholly disinterested, and that it is enlightened self-interest which is at work, yet there can be no doubt that the wretched plight of starving human beings in flood-time and famine—as we view such pitiable suffering on our TV screens—moves many of us to give, and even in a sacrificial way. There is commendable mercy of a sort abroad. Some would claim that this is a spin-off of the Christian gospel—the good news of a loving God, translated into practical action. It might well be. The Church has had its sad days of cruelty and casuistry, but there has always been an unfailing ministry of mercy in healing of the sick and wounded, care for the poor and starving, teaching for the illiterate and comfort to the hurt and distressed. That is one of the glories of its history.

Present humanism seems no less eager to bring succour to the human race. The humanism of which we speak is mainly Western in origin. It is more than a remove from orthodox Christianity, but it retains the 'do-goodism' of the past generation. When 'doing good' becomes divorced from the constraint of godly mercy and grace, then it degenerates into either a hard,

⁵ Robert Burns, *Robert Burns's Poems and Songs*, J. M. Dent and Sons, London, 1958, p. 10.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. W. Moelwyn Merchant, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, IV, i, 181ff. (pp. 138f.).

Pharisaic pietism, or a sentimental moralism that fails to get at the heart of human misery. By all means let social aid be done—whatever may be our motives for doing it—but social aid, when given and done, may fail to touch the deepest need of Man, that is, liberation from human misery. It may even simply be ‘the aid-trade’—an action triggered by guilt in our Western countries, guilt at having more than we need. Better this kind of guilt than no guilt, but much better the mercy that does not spring from guilt, but from grace—that which is thankful for prosperity, but has genuine mercy on those in misery.

THE TRUE GIVING OF MERCY

There can be no doubt about the matter of true mercy. The biblical teaching is that we must see the extent and nature of human evil and the need for Divine mercy that is required before we can rightly embark on giving mercy to others. Much that passes for mercy today may even be—as we have suggested—a soporific to our consciences. It is often pale and weak mercy which we dole out to the human race, because, in fact, we ourselves have not come under the magnificent mercy of God. We have seen no need to do so. We have deficient views of evil. We see Man more as victimised by history than as suffering for his own sin. Our humanism has watered down the evil of Man, and we have a careless ignorance of the vast powers of darkness. We give Man the crust of our sympathy, but starve him of the bread of life that his spirit needs. To give the former brings some supine satisfaction to us, but the latter requires great love and a deep involvement in true suffering.

2

Man's Cry for Mercy

THE HISTORIC CRY FOR MERCY

There is no question about the need for mercy. Mercy is practical pity. The Bible portrays God as moved with compassion, doing something for Man in his misery. Mercy is needed when a person or a people can do nothing about their situation. They are—so to speak—pinned down under the pressures that bring suffering. Often there is a cry for help. David, under the intense guilt of his sin—so suddenly revealed by the prophet Nathan—was struck with the evil of his sin and himself. He cried to God for mercy, for he dreaded the outcome of his crime. ‘Have mercy on me, O God!’ he pleaded.

The Cry for Mercy in the Bible

Another Psalmist—unknown by name to us—said, ‘Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!’ (Ps. 130:1). He explained, ‘If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?’ (Ps. 130:3). Like David he dreaded the outcome of his sin, but like David he knew God to be merciful. Habakkuk the prophet knew

with sinking heart that Israel must be scourged by the Chaldeans, that 'bitter and hasty nation', and he cried to God, 'in wrath remember mercy' (Hab. 3:2). In all of these cases the persons seeking mercy know they are not entitled to it, but they fear the outcome of their sin.

In the Gospel of Matthew there are two occasions in which blind men seek deliverance from their blindness (9:27-30; 20:30-34), an occasion when a Canaanite woman cries for her daughter to be delivered from demon-possession (15:22-28), and an occasion when the father of a demon-possessed son pleads for deliverance of his child (17:15-18). In these cases they cry out, 'Have mercy!' They are in a situation from which they cannot extricate themselves. Those who are blind know the misery of not seeing. The mother and the father cannot bear the terrible distortions of the human spirit which they witness in their children.

One of the most poignant cries for mercy is told in the parable of the rich man and the poor man, often entitled 'Dives and Lazarus'. The rich man in the torment of hell lifts up his eyes to Abraham and cries, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame' (Luke 6:24). This is a story of a man who has put himself outside mercy, and cannot rightly expect it.

Man's Cry for Mercy in History

History is filled with cries for mercy. In war there is no mercy. In the cruelty of rapists, homicides and genocides, the victims have cried for mercy only to be denied it. The poor and weak have often heard their cries for mercy fall on the deaf ears of the rich and the strong. Parents have been merciless to children, and

children to parents, as also brothers to brothers and sisters.

If our century is said to be one in which mercy is widely practised, let us remind ourselves of the massacres which have taken place within it. Massacres are not peculiar to our century, but some of the most horrific of them have taken place in our own lifetime. Six million Jews destroyed in 'The Holocaust' has been matched by the twenty-five million Russians liquidated under Stalin. There have been horrible tribal genocides committed on the African continent, and fearful purges in South America. Muslims and Hindus destroyed each other at the time of the division of India and Pakistan. The tragedy of Muslims and Christians in Lebanon, of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, shows us that there is little mercy shown in the name of nationalism and religion. This is to say nothing of two world wars in this century, and the innumerable lesser wars—both cold and hot! It is doubtful whether any war can be called essentially necessary, but when they happen they are not the scenes of mercy.

MAN'S DEEPEST CRY FOR MERCY

The starved person may be fed by someone who has had mercy on him. The poor may be comforted by the largesse given to him. The sick may be healed and begin life afresh—in health. The insane may find sanity through a miracle of healing. Wellbeing may come to nations, and even prosperity. All these things may happen and yet the misery of Man—his deepest misery—may not be alleviated. It is to this misery we must penetrate with a view to understanding it. When we come to understand it in some measure, then we

may be able to share the mercy needed with those who need it.

What often prevents us understanding the deepest elements of human misery is our activity to alleviate misery. Unfortunately, it is more at the *seen* level of misery that we work, and not that intangible and *unseen* level where the misery is most felt. We will need to come back to our quest for truly understanding misery. Meanwhile we will look at some human attempts to alleviate suffering at its worst.

THE MERCY OF HUMANISM

We have already mentioned this, though mainly in passing. Humanism is certainly out to get the best deal in life that it can get for Man. Of course—humans being what they are—there may be strong elements of selfishness in some of us so that we get the very best deal we can for our own selves, and in the process trample on others. Even so, the humanist is an optimist. He believes Man has within himself the capacity to deal with the problems that face this world. Given enough education, training, practice and time, there is nothing he cannot eventually accomplish.

This means he—the humanist—will be able to shape a world in which there will be no want, no inequality, no domination by selfish rulers and no exploitation of some humans by others. If Marxism does not succeed—as it seems not to be succeeding—then there is Socialism. It may even be that Democracy will work. In any case, Man is not stupid, and ultimately will find a way. So goes the creed of the humanist. Certainly he wishes to see a fair deal for all, and believes that high technology will ease out most of the wrinkles in the human scene. Ultimately, Man should

be able to control the weather, do something about cyclones, and even about earthquakes. Famines will gradually cease, plagues will be kept in tow, and things be much better, generally.

If we think this reasoning is idealistic, and not capable of fulfilment, let us not think the humanist to be a blind fool. He sets about doing something for Man in his present dilemma. He knows that Man's problems lie mainly within himself, and not necessarily in the nature of the universe. Resources are available to the human race of anthropology and cosmology. Man has come to know what Man is, and what the universe about him really is. He has great insights of sociology and utilises these through psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, medical doctors and others.

In fact, we have a great host of human-helpers today, and they seem to be doing some good around society. Whilst they have not reduced the rate of crime, nor in any way changed human nature, they are at least a help. They help confused people cope for the moment, if not permanently. Their care and concern bring great comfort to many. The band of such helpers presses on doggedly, sure that one day they will effect a genuine change in society. In their own way they are people of mercy. Professionalism may dog their steps, but on the whole they are out to help Man. They believe this is within their capacity.

There are problems, of course, that attend such aid—problems that are in all welfare states—but it is not our intention to discuss these here. What we will mainly look at is the fact that the biblical idea of mercy has been reduced or obliterated. A new kind of mercy is abroad which seems to outmode the old. A new kind of healing is in the air, which takes notice of our modern anthropological and sociological insights and moves within the perimeter of these. This new mercy seems

more down-to-earth, more practical, more pragmatic. We need to face the fact that a different healing is about, and it is in fashion in many of our churches. Theology has to a large degree given way to psychology, although some brave spirits have sought to make a synthesis of the two.

All of this is not to say that the new humanism—especially the new *Christian* humanism—is necessarily effective, even in the short run, let alone in the long run, but effective or not it is with us, and it seems we have to make decisions in regard to it, and because of it. Before we do that with finality, we ought to see the nature of biblical mercy, and determine whether it is outmoded. It is possible that the new mercy may originally have stemmed from the biblical, and it is also possible that if it ceases to understand its Bible origins, or cuts itself off from the parent plant, it may root itself in such soil as will not sustain it or keep it vigorous.

MAN IN NEED OF GREAT MERCY

To hearken back to Man's cry for mercy: we need to see whether our modern understanding reaches the inner depths of the human spirit, or whether it stops far short of that. Is it possible that we are seeking to have mercy where we do not understand the misery Man is suffering? Is it possible that we are in the same case as those whom Jeremiah criticised (Jer. 6:14; cf. 8:11; 30:11-14): 'They have healed the wound of my people lightly [as though it were a scratch], saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace'?

Is there a misery of the human spirit which our modernity—with all its insights—cannot really touch? This we must see. The cry for mercy may not be

articulated in so many words, but it seems to emanate from the human race in every generation. It is not difficult to know it today, if we are looking.

THE CAUSE AND NATURE OF THE GREAT MISERY

We must state our case—the case on which, and about which, this book is written. It is this: Man's major misery is that he does not know God, that he is not himself—Man—because he does not know God. Man is thus devoid of himself, of his true self. His misery lies in opposing God. We could almost wish a curse on those who ignore this reality, or scorn it as an idiot idea, for they obscure the sad but brilliant truth that Man is existentially a void without God, devoid as he is of creational and redemptional reality. Every atom of himself strains away from himself as it also strains towards God, strains away from God as it also strains towards himself. This is the painful dilemma of Man: made for God, he seeks to live for himself, and knows the misery of self-dislocation.

Along with this misery is the dread of God, the fear of judgment, the confrontation of human death—his! There is the deprivation of the true glory, and this is self-deprivation, as it is also self-depravity. It is this lack and this lostness which drives Man to emulate God, to seek to justify himself in his universe, and which causes him to devise an imitation or surrogate mercy, so that he imagines that what God does not do, he—Man—does in the most practical way. He seeks to deny his innate misery by a devised exoteric mercy, that is, having mercy on something or someone outside his own inner misery. All such self-justifying attempts only increase his guilt because of his refusal of God's grace, and so his self-manufactured grace is a

denial of the true grace of God. This serves to increase the content of his own guilt, and so extend his misery.

When we ask whether God will have mercy on humanity in such a case, the answer is, 'Yes, for the riches of His mercy are inexhaustible, and mercy is great beyond the aggregate of our sinfulness and misery'.

3

God's Ancient Mercy

THE EVERLASTING MERCY

Masefield's title to his poem 'The Everlasting Mercy' is a term not found in the Scriptures, as such. Yet, timewise, His mercy is everlasting. Before time, before creation came to be, God's mercy planned the redemption of the human race. Even before our grave act of the Fall had taken place—our sin of rebellion against the Most High God—mercy had planned Man's release from misery. In time that mercy has been shown towards the recurring distress and wretchedness of Man. Then Jude bids us, 'wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life'. Thus mercy, we say, is prevenient, is contemporary and is eschatological. It is ancient, it is new, it is eternal.

THE ANCIENT MERCY

We mean 'ancient from our point of view'. Human misery was not something God foresaw—in the sense that He looked down some avenue of time. God does not look down avenues of time. His eternity does not

allow Him to be caught in the web of time. What He foresees becomes so because of His sovereignty and His wisdom. From our time point of view He planned His everlasting mercy. Hence Paul says, '[He] who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago', that is, 'from [or before: *pro chronon aionion*] times eternal' (II Tim. 1:9; cf. Eph. 1:4-5; I Pet. 1:2, 20).

Mercy, then, is from before time. It also is as ancient as the fall of Man, for at that point of time (Gen. 3:15) God promised the defeat of the serpent and the release of Man—by a man! Romans 8:18-25 speaks of the misery of creation, and the misery of Man within creation, when it speaks of the intolerable subjection to futility of the whole creation:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (vv. 22f.).

The threat of death's corruption has been across the whole race, as well as across all creation, and no matter how much we rationalise that death, its burden is always upon us as a race and as a universe. That is our essential misery. The millenniums have rolled past and full relief has not yet come, for 'your bodies are dead because of sin' (Rom. 8:10; cf. 5:12). Even so, Christ is the fulfilment of the proto-evangel of Genesis 3:15.

The Recurring Misery and Mercy

To be in Eden as fallen humanity would be to live in recurring misery, for the contrast between innocence and guilt would be too painful to bear. Mercy

pronounces the curse, and excludes Man from the —now painful— Edenic delights. Guilt in a paradise makes the paradise a hell. Banishment is a mercy of sorts. Humanity is free to be guilty without the perpetual confrontation of its loss, and the direct holiness of God.

The first misery beyond the misery of failure was the primary murder. Cain epitomises the misery of Man who is angry with both God and his brother, and this without authentic cause. His sin crouches to take him, leaps upon him, and destroys him. This is where we see—for the first time—*that misery comes out of guilt*. Cain sets the protest for all the guilty who will follow. He tells God:

My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive, a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me (Gen. 4:13-14).

Surprisingly—to us—God does not confound Cain in His justice. In wrath He remembers mercy, and instead of telling Cain he must face the music, He ameliorates the terror of the murderer, protecting him. This is His mercy.

Covenant and Mercy

It is His mercy that He warns the human race of its coming doom, through Noah the preacher of righteousness: 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth'. This was because, 'The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually'. The Flood was a mercy to Noah and his family

(‘But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD’), but also was a mercy to the creation which was cleansed from so much moral pollution. Then—following the Flood—the covenant promised to Noah and the entire human race was to be a continuing mercy:

I will never again curse the ground because of man . . . neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (Gen. 8:21–22).

This was—and is—a unilateral covenant of grace and of peace.

This grace—or mercy—must be seen in the light of Lamentations 3:22, which is translated in the *RSV* as, ‘The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end’. The *AV* has, ‘It is of the LORD’S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not’. ‘That we are not consumed’ is after Luther’s translation—an interpretation which is included in the margin of the *NASB*, and of which the Keil-Delitzch commentary approves. The thought, anyway, is repeated in Psalm 78:38 (cf. Jer. 3:12), ‘Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often, and did not stir up all his wrath’. In other words, God’s holiness demands wrath, and wrath will destroy, but in wrath God remembers mercy and does not consume the offender.

Mercy and the Covenant with Abraham

It has been pointed out that Genesis chapters 1 to 11 were written to give the right context and background to God’s universal covenant with Abraham. Certainly, without those chapters the covenant would not make

much sense. What is shown in Genesis 12 is that the covenant with Abraham pertains to all the nations of the earth: ‘by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves’. Whilst to some degree this universality of God’s covenant appears to have been lost in favour of His special love to Israel in the Mosaic Covenant, yet elements are found in the Old Testament and revised in Zechariah’s song in Luke 1:68–79 where the priest refers back to God’s covenant with Abraham, and forward to:

the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death [the Gentiles], to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Paul expands this in Galatians 3:7–9, when he says:

So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith.

Without doubt, then, God, who destroyed the earth by the flood and Sodom and Gomorrah by fire, has mercy on the sinful nations and brings the grace of Christ to them, universally, via covenant.

Israel, Covenant and Mercy

In our next chapter we will see the matter of God’s mercy, steadfast love and graciousness as they pertained to Israel, but here we simply observe that the mercy of God was a vital element of God’s covenant with it. Although Israel was incurably idolatrous—as Stephen so powerfully pointed out to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7—yet God was merciful when His wrath should rightfully have consumed that nation.

The Church, Covenant and Mercy

Again, we will be looking in detail at the Church in the time of the New Covenant, under Christ. Here the mercy of salvation will be clearly seen, and the gift of further mercy given in order that the servants of the covenant should proclaim the gospel to the nations. Thus, from Genesis 3:15 to the eschatological mercy for which we wait in hope, we will have seen that God's mercy has been known in the world from its inception to its end.

The Coming Mercy

We have well called God's mercy 'the ancient mercy', because it has been present in all human history, and far beyond our recognition, assessment and comprehension. We have already mentioned that Jude enjoined the readers of his letter to 'wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life'. Mercy, then, is both present and eschatological. When Peter told his readers to 'set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ', he was surely speaking of coming mercies. When Paul spoke of 'awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ', he was also thinking of the glories which come to the redeemed from grace and mercy.

A CONCLUSION REGARDING THE 'ANCIENT MERCY'

Time—as we know—can be painfully slow when we are suffering. Its slowness can be intolerable. In one sense, time passes in a flash, especially when it is being

enjoyed. Viewed from the point of view of God's transcendence, time hastens to the goal of history. Yet, as Job, Jeremiah and the psalmists inform us, the misery we know makes time seem to be a long and drawn-

out thing. In this misery we grow old. Jeremiah prays, 'Remember my affliction and my bitterness, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.'

For those in misery history does not hasten. The consolation of men and women in misery is that the Lord is the God of compassion and mercy, and He will vindicate history and Himself. The paradox of a thousand years being as a day, and a day as a thousand years is intelligible only as we know Him to be the God of mercy. His mercies are new every morning, and fresh all the day long. They encourage and sustain us, in the midst of human miseries.

4

Israel and the God of Mercy—1

A PERSONAL NOTE TO THE READER

What now follows in this chapter is a study of the attributes or characteristics of God as they were revealed to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7. Moses had asked for this revelation. Where—perhaps—we might have looked for a *visual* revelation, God gave Moses a *verbal* revelation, and for this reason it is most valuable; indeed, its value cannot be assessed. In these days of limited reading, some readers develop a ‘digest’ mind and cannot concentrate on any lengthy examination of an idea. I believe the reader who will persist with this chapter and seek to understand it thoroughly, will receive no less a revelation of God for his labours than did Moses when he was given it by God. Such a revelation is not simply a theological understanding, but a *personal* one. It is no exaggeration to say that the personal understanding could be life-transforming.

ISRAEL AND THE COVENANT

It is difficult for us to understand why Israel should have become a slave people within Egypt, especially when God had given promises of greatness to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—promises which must have seemed empty to the small captive and suffering nation. Exodus opens with an account of the wretchedness of the people, and of God remembering His people. In 2:23-25 we read:

In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died. And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition.

Israel witnessed the liberating hand of God in the ten signs visited upon Egypt, and then at the Red Sea it saw the army of Pharaoh defeated and destroyed. Many wonderful signs had been given to encourage the Israelites in the wilderness, but—later—their act of idolatry in relation to the making of the golden calf alarmed Moses as to the nature of his own people. Knowing himself unable to lead them out of his limited resources, he asked God to give him a revelation of His glory. This was equivalent to asking God to reveal Himself so that Moses could be sure He was a God who could take them to the promised land. God graciously revealed Himself, at least as much as was necessary for the prophet to know, thus reassuring Moses as to His own character. That revelation of the God of covenant we see in Exodus 34:6-7:

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 generation.'

From this revelation we see the nature of God, at least as it was expressed in the covenant with Israel. Those under covenant as it was made in Exodus 24:1–8 can expect the following things of God: He will be merciful (*rachum*); gracious (*channun*); long-suffering ('*erek 'aph*), that is, 'slow to anger'; and will abound in steadfast love (*chesed*) and faithfulness ('*emeth*). He will forgive iniquity, transgression and sin, but yet He will not acquit the guilty. It is as much His faithfulness to Israel to have mercy as it is to be merciless towards those who remain impenitent in their guilt.

In pursuit of our study it will be good for us to see what mercy is, yet because graciousness (*chen*), long-suffering ('*erek 'aph*), steadfast love (*chesed*) and faithfulness ('*emeth*) are all linked with mercy (*rachamim*), and often paired with it, we need to understand these other words also. In fact, it is not simply a word study, but a seeing of the nature of God, since these elements are constituent characteristics of Him, and from them – especially as we see them in action – we understand His nature. It was God's intention that this should be so. We will leave the element of mercy (*rachamim*) until the last.

GRACE, GRACIOUSNESS – CHEN, CHANNUN

God is gracious (*channun*). *Chen* is associated with one who is superior, looking with favour on one who can be said to be inferior. Thus Noah is said to have found grace (favour) in the eyes of the Lord. Abraham trusted he would find favour in the sight of the Lord, that is, of the three men who visited him by the oaks of

Mamre and constituted a theophany—a manifestation of God. Lot sought favour in God's sight to stay at Zoar. Joseph found favour in the sight of Potiphar. Boaz was gracious to Ruth, favouring her. Moses told God that the sign of His favour towards Moses and the people would be that He would go with them. Hannah desired to find favour in the eyes of Eli the priest. It was said of Esther before King Ahasuerus that 'she found grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins'. In Proverbs 19:17 and 28:8 there is the man who is 'kind [that is, gracious and favourable] to the poor'.

In every case this favour or grace is not an abstract element, something merely in the mind. It is a certain kind of action by one person to another. God, by reason of the covenant, would always have favour towards Israel, but it would be the grace of the stronger to the weaker, comprehending the frailty of the lesser covenant partner, so that no matter how Israel failed, God would continue to favour her. We will study the word *chesed*—that is, 'steadfast love'—which is often translated 'grace'—that is, *charis*—in the New Testament. The ideas of *chesed* and *chen*, when added together, come very close to the content and meaning of the New Testament word 'grace' (*charis*), for in it is the thought of God's favour upon the undeserving, and the rich action of His love which redeems and enriches the person who is moved by the same grace to believe and receive redemption.

SLOW TO ANGER, LONG-SUFFERING – 'EREK 'APH

The term 'slow to anger' is used many times in the Old Testament. See Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Proverbs 14:29; 15:18; 16:32;

Jeremiah 15:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; and Nahum 1:3. The thought is that God postpones His anger and judgment when He may rightly effect judgment immediately. The New Testament uses of the term bear this out, namely Romans 2:4–5; 9:22; I Peter 3:20; I Timothy 1:16; and

II Peter 3:9. It carries the idea of patience in the face of provocation, and kindness which awaits its time. Of course, all the elements in this covenantal promise have significance in the light of God's holiness, His righteousness, and His justifiable wrath where evil exists. We think of 'long-suffering' as a person suffering wrong longer than he can be reasonably expected to tolerate it. Thus, when 'love suffers long' we see it as a remarkable happening.

STEADFAST LOVE, STEADFAST LOVING – *CHESED AND CHASID*

One of the most used words regarding God's nature and action in the Old Testament—especially within the covenant relationships He has with Israel—is the word *chesed*. It is difficult etymologically to establish its origin or meaning,¹ but we can derive its significance from its various uses in the Old Testament, of which there are almost 200 mentioned. It can mean kind-ness, pity, loyalty, loving-kindness and steadfast love. Steadfast love is really faithful love or unfailing and unwavering love. It seems to refer to relationships

¹ Norman Snaith (*The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, Epworth, London, 1950, pp. 95–100) insists that the meaning can be traced through etymology. T. H. C. Vriezen (*An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1970, pp. 312–13) does not try to trace its etymology, whilst George A. F. Knight (*A Christian Theology of the Old Testament*, SCM, London, 1964, p. 195) says, 'Attempts to reach the meaning of the word [*chesed*] by etymology have so far failed'.

between friends, members of a family, or the community of covenant, and in that sense implies the element of loyalty. The AV translated *chesed* as 'mercy' some 100 times, and this because in the Septuagint *chesed* is translated *eleos*, which in the New Testament means mercy or pity. Only once in the RSV is *chesed* translated as 'mercy' (Ps. 23:6); elsewhere it invariably translates *chesed* as 'steadfast love'. Even so, some scholars maintain that when *chesed* is linked with *rachamim* (mercies), as in Jeremiah 16:5 ('my steadfast love and mercy'), then it takes on the quality of mercy. Likewise 'steadfast love' is really loyal love, that is, love which is faithful, and 'steadfast love and faithfulness' are linked eleven times. Again, 'covenant and steadfast love' are linked a number of times, showing that steadfast love is within covenant. God's long-suffering—His being slow to anger—is also linked with steadfast love. These couplings of steadfast love with mercy, faithfulness and long-suffering—all being within the covenant—are not arbitrary, seeing God is immutable.

We are driven to the conclusion that the statement of Exodus 34:6–7—repeated in part or whole a number of times—is the revelation of God's character to His people. They can remain secure in the knowledge and experience of His covenant, grace, long-suffering, steadfast love and faithfulness, without fear. No matter what they do—short of actual apostasy—He will continue His goodness towards them. Of course, there is also 'the sting' in the statement, 'I will by no means acquit the guilty', but that we will discuss later.²

² It is interesting to note that the change in the RSV from the AV's use of 'mercy' and 'loving kindness' to 'steadfast love' does not altogether meet with Markus Barth's approval. In his commentary on Ephesians 2:4 ('But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us') he says:

Mercy (*eleos*) is the LXX and the NT translation of the OT term *hesed*. The RSV rendering of this noun is 'steadfast love' and suggests that *hesed* is the stable and loyal way in which God keeps the covenant. The KJ version 'loving-kindness' may still be preferable because it conveys the 'undeserved mercy' or 'prevenient grace' (*Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1–3*, The Anchor Bible series, Doubleday, New York, 1981, p. 218).

In the light of Barth's comment it ought to be considered whether *chesed* should be invariably translated 'steadfast love', and never 'mercy'. It can be supposed that *chesed* is

We may come to some sort of a conclusion here, namely that *chesed* does not stand apart or alone from mercy, graciousness, long-suffering and faithfulness, but partakes of something of all of these, as they of it, there being an overlapping of them all, as we would suspect, since these elements or attributes in God are of the one piece. This will be greatly helpful to keep in mind when we continue with our study of mercy. Also helpful will be our remembering that God does not simply *have* 'steadfast love', but that He 'abounds' in it, and is 'keeping [it] for thousands'. That is, the living God is the God Who acts, and He acts out of, and in conformity with, these elements. In Jeremiah 9:24, God says, 'I am the Lord who *practise* steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth'. Here, incidentally, we have a glimpse of *chesed* which is universal and not confined to the covenant with Israel—a point we shall later review.

Chasid is translated in the AV as 'merciful', but in the RSV has been translated variously as 'faithful', 'loyal', 'godly'—all terms which mean that the ones described love God or Man with what might be called a human steadfast love. An exception is Jeremiah 3:12

almost synonymous with the other elements of God's nature in Exodus 34:6–7. For parallels to this passage see Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 4:31; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8–9; Jonah 4:2. Note that some scholars see a link between the Exodus passage and John 1:14, grace (*charis*) and truth (*aletheia*) being the equivalents to *chesed* (steadfast love; grace) and '*emeth* (truth; faithfulness).

where God says, 'I am merciful [*chasid*]', meaning that as *chasid* He is merciful.

**HAVING FAITH; FAITHFUL; FAITHFULNESS—NE'EMAN;
'AMAN; 'EMETH; 'EMUNAH**

We have already seen that *chesed* has within it the quality of loyalty and faithfulness so that it is steadfast love, that is, faithful love—love that does not waver or vacillate. God loves the weaker covenant partner and will always do him good, no matter what happens. The nouns '*emeth* and '*emunah* mean faithfulness, whilst the verbal stem '*aman* means 'to be secure or firm', such as a nurse supporting a child (Num. 11:12; Isa. 49:23), a house being well built (I Sam. 2:35—'a sure house'), and a wall firmly holding a nail (Isa. 22:23, 25).

'*Emeth* and '*emunah* carry the ideas of truth and faithfulness. He who is true to his word is faithful, and so these two ideas are virtually the one. They carry the thoughts of constancy, firmness, fulfilment of obligations and promises. Thus in our Exodus 34:6–7 passage, God is the faithful covenant partner, strong on behalf of Israel who is weak; consistent, unwavering with His promises. This is why the Psalmist can say, 'I have spoken of thy faithfulness and thy salvation; I have not concealed thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness from the great congregation', and 'Thy steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, thy faithfulness to the clouds' (Ps. 40:10; 36:5). One of the classic statements (Ps. 89:1–5) that has come down to us links steadfast love and faithfulness together:

I will sing of thy steadfast love, O LORD, for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim thy faithfulness
to all generations.

For thy steadfast love was established for ever,
thy faithfulness as firm as the heavens . . .
Let the heavens praise thy wonders, O LORD,
thy faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!

The sad sinfulness of Israel—those who made a god of gold in the wilderness and cried, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt!’—contrasts with the covenant faithfulness of God:

The Rock, his work is perfect;
for all his ways are justice.
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and right is he.
They have dealt corruptly with him,
they are no longer his children because of their blemish;
they are a perverse and crooked generation (Deut. 32:4–5).

Isaiah records the everlastingness of God’s faithfulness. In 25:1 he says, ‘O LORD, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things, *plans formed of old, faithful and sure*’. In Micah 7:20 the prophet speaks of the *continuing* covenant faithfulness of God: ‘Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as thou hast sworn to our fathers from the days of old’. No matter what Israel has done, God will not renege on His promises. In Zechariah 8:7–8 the prophet conveys God’s word:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, *in faithfulness and in righteousness* [emphasis mine].

The God of Covenant Is Faithful

In speaking of God’s everlasting faithfulness we must refer to ‘the everlasting covenant’, for this is what it is called in Genesis 9:17; 17:7, 13, 19; II Samuel 23:5;

I Chronicles 16:17; Psalm 105:10; Isaiah 24:5; 55:3; 61:8; Jeremiah 32:40; 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60; and 37:26 (cf. Heb. 13:20). Some see God’s first covenant being one of works, and that this was with Man when he was created. If he obeyed God, then all would be well with him. Whilst that is no doubt true, it is difficult to know how the idea of a covenant arose.³ There can be no doubt that God made a covenant with all mankind through Moses, and in this He was both Initiator, and Protector of us all.

It is when we come to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that the matter of covenant is formulated strongly and richly, for, as we have seen, the covenant is eternal. God will continue faithful to the end of history. ‘He who has begun a good work . . . will continue it up until the day of Jesus Christ’, and ‘if we are faithless, he remains faithful’. Exodus 2:24 (cf. 24:7) shows us that God links the covenant with Israel with the covenant made with Moses. Under Joshua the covenant was renewed (Josh. 24:24f.), although Joshua seemed to have little confidence in the people. Linked with the covenant with Israel through Moses was the promise of the Davidic covenant made with David and his descendants (II Sam. 7:12–17), and this covenant—so well set out in Psalm 89—was necessary, since the northern kingdom later went into captivity for covenant-faithlessness. Judah, too, had to undergo

³ Some theologians believe that the commands and warnings given to Adam in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 constitute a covenant because of their conditional nature. There is no explicit statement of a covenant, and no reference back to such an arrangement. Some scholars use Hosea 6:7 to substantiate their argument: ‘But at Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me’. This statement ‘at Adam’ is thought by most scholars to refer to a place name, and not to the events in Genesis chapters 1 – 3. They believe that Israel at Adam was faithless to the covenant God had made with Israel. It is difficult to know where the place Adam was located.

reform in the time of King Josiah (II Kings 23:1-4). It had to renew the covenant with God, but ultimately it succumbed to its own faithlessness.

Jeremiah—perhaps more than any other person—saw the incorrigible nature of Israel, and how it would not hold to the covenant. He was given the vision of a new covenant, and this is set out both in Jeremiah and Ezekiel as ‘an everlasting covenant’. It is still the Abrahamic covenant, coming—as it were—into its own. In a remarkable passage—Jeremiah 31:31-7—Jeremiah shows that in the New Covenant there will be the same principle of ‘I will be their God and they shall be my people’, and—as with Exodus 34:6-7—He will forgive their sins, and this, seemingly, without the sacrificial cultus such as Israel had known under Moses. It is, however, His faithfulness that God insists upon in verses 35-36. He is adamant that He will never cast off Israel.

With the coming of Christ, the New Covenant is inaugurated powerfully in the blood of Christ (Matt. 26:28; cf. Heb. 8:1 - 9:22); hence that blood is called ‘the blood of the eternal covenant’.

We have seen enough, then, to know that the various characteristics and elements of God’s nature as seen in Exodus 34:6-7—including this one of faithfulness—bring assurance to God’s covenant people. No matter how they fail as the weaker partner of the covenant, God will not forsake them. Indeed He will support them, and make them able to live in the covenant *for their own good!*

THE FAITHFULNESS AND ‘THE STING’

The dangers of such assurances of God’s faithfulness, steadfast love, mercy and graciousness are clear: some

members of Israel may presume upon this covenant relationship. They may think it does not matter what they do, and that God will allow anything and everything. This is by no means the case. In Exodus 34:7 He had first said, ‘...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’, and then He had said, ‘...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 generation’. The former—forgiveness—we might call His grace, and the latter the demands of His holiness. Let us first look at the nature of God’s forgiveness.

‘Forgiving Iniquity and Transgression and Sin’

Doubtless this action of God springs from His mercy, His grace, His long-suffering, His steadfast love and His faithfulness. Forgiveness is an act which human flesh finds unintelligible, yet it is the rich and practical element of covenant. The Levitical laws that demand sacrifices so that sins may be forgiven do not negate God’s gratuitous forgiveness. The sacrifices are ordered by God so that the worshippers may offer acceptably to Him. They not only learn that ‘almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins’ (Heb. 9:22), but also they see the necessity for life to be given in order that forgiveness might come. There must be no presumption about forgiveness. Only God can forgive. Forgiveness is lauded highly in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms. By it a man can be blessed (Ps. 32:1-2), can be freed from the tyranny of his conscience, can be at peace with God. The prophet asks:

Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression

for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger for ever
because he delights in steadfast love (Micah 7:18).

There we have it: God forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. Then may a man do as he likes, since 'He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities' (Ps. 103:10)? The answer to this is a sturdy 'No!' The answer lies in 'the sting'.

'Who Will by No Means Clear the Guilty'

This refusal to clear the impenitent of their guilt we might call 'the sting', for all God's covenant dealings are in holiness and righteousness. His covenant wrath springs from His covenantal holiness (Exod. 19:5-6; Lev. 11:44); hence His refusal to clear or acquit the impenitent guilty is often repeated (e.g. Num. 14:18; Nahum 1:3; Deut. 32:35; Josh. 24:19; cf. Job 10:14; Isa. 29:6; Ps. 9:16-17; 11:5-6; 58:10-11). In other words, idolatry, rebellion and waywardness are not encouraged by God's faithfulness, for His faithfulness encouraged the covenant people to be likewise faithful.

When we come to the subject of God's mercy—His acts of practical pity as He is moved by compassion—we will see that even extreme faithlessness on the part of the covenant people can be forgiven when that faithlessness has brought them to misery. It is misery, of course, which moves God to compassion. God is as faithful to His promise to judge and chastise as He is to His promise to exercise steadfast love and mercy in all the earth. This is seen clearly in II Timothy 2:11-13 where the passage shows that He will save the elect—and judge the faithless.

5

Israel and the God of Mercy—2

THE MERCY OF GOD

Mercy a Covenant Attribute of God

In Exodus 34:6-7 mercy is the first element of God's nature that is named. Wesley's famous hymn-line—'Thy nature and thy name is love'—is doubtless true. It can be shown that all the elements of Exodus 34:6-7 add up to, or together constitute, love, but then love is not only *chesed* ('steadfast love' as grace), but it is also that which visits the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation. Love—as P. T. Forsyth tirelessly pointed out—is *holy* love, and so it must deal with the unholiness of human rebellion and sin, or it will not be authentic love. When, then, the love of Exodus 34:6-7 expresses itself in mercy, we ask whether mercy itself can be holy, since it would often seem to oppose itself to justice. Habakkuk's plea, 'in wrath remember mercy', reminds us that mercy, in fact, has to do with wrath which

itself is the outworking of God's justice: His adherence to the law and His insistence that all transgression must be punished.

As we have seen, all the attributes are revealed in the light of covenant. That is, it is with His covenant people that God is gracious, slow to anger and faithful. It is to His people that He is merciful. This adjectival thought is repeated a number of times in some of the passages we have already studied, such as:

Deuteronomy 4:31:

... for the LORD your God is a merciful God;

II Chronicles 30:9:

For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him;

Nehemiah 9:17:

But thou art a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful;

Nehemiah 9:31:

Nevertheless in thy great mercies thou didst not make an end of them or forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God;

Psalms 86:15 (cf. Ps. 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8):

But thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious;

Psalms 112:4:

... the LORD is gracious, merciful, and righteous;

Jeremiah 3:12:

'I am merciful,' says the LORD, 'I will not be angry for ever';

Joel 2:13:

... he is gracious and merciful;

Jonah 4:2:

... thou art a gracious God and merciful.

In addition to the adjective 'merciful', the nouns 'mercy' and 'mercies' are used of God's nature and actions some thirty-five times. Later we will look at some of these references as we try to work out

the nature of mercy in the Old Testament, but it would be valuable first to look at some of the Hebrew words linked with the idea of mercy.

Mercy in Covenant and in All the World

In the light of our mention of mercy being within covenant, we have a question to consider. As we have mentioned, the thought of mercy is a covenant one, but naturally we ask, 'Was not—and is not—God's mercy for all people and peoples?' This is answered in the Old Testament in Exodus 33:19, 'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy'. In Romans 9:15 Paul quotes this verse, as he speaks in relation to both Jews and Gentiles. In Romans 11 Paul argues that the Jews have been shut up to unbelief, that is, a hardening has come upon Israel in order that the Gentiles might hear the Gospel and believe. He says in verses 30 to 32 that whereas the Gentiles were once disobedient, now through the disobedience of Israel they have received mercy, 'For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all'. The 'all men' here must mean both Jews and Gentiles. This is followed up by Peter (I Pet. 2:9-10) quoting Hosea 2:23, where God says that those who were not His people have now become His people.

On this score, then, we must see mercy as universal. Even so, it seems that mercy was primarily concentrated upon Israel, God's covenant people. We might quote Psalms 33:5 and 119:64, where it is said, 'The earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD', and argue that since steadfast love (*chesed*) is universal, therefore mercy (*racham*) will likewise be for all nations and persons, since *chesed* and *racham* always seem to go together. In any case, since it is of the Lord's

chesed that we are not consumed, and since He does not willingly afflict the children of men (universally), but has compassion (*racham*: 'mercy') according to His steadfast love (*chesed*), then it would seem His steadfast love and mercy are towards all men (Lam. 3:22-33). A study of the Book of Jonah will show God's mercy towards one nation (cf. Jonah 4:2), and other prophecies show that God has plans 'for good and not for evil' for many nations. Of course, the covenant with Abraham was a matter of mercy, and was intended to bring blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3), a point which Zechariah reiterates in Luke 1:72-79.

Merciful, Mercy, Mercies – *Rachum*, *Racham*, *Rachamim*

We may now look at the meaning of the word 'mercy', and some of its contexts of usage. God is merciful (*rachum*), as we saw above. Mercy (*racham*) is linked with the seat of feeling—the bowels—for that was where the Hebrew experienced the sense of compassion. Our modern term is 'heart', rather than 'bowels', although the latter is the term used in the *Authorised Version* of the New Testament. In Genesis 43:30, Joseph's heart yearned for his brother (AV, 'his bowels [*rachamim*] did yearn [*kamar*] upon his brother'). Some scholars see mercy as linked with the womb, as one of the words for womb is *racham*, and although in Isaiah 49:15 the word *beten* (a synonym for *racham* or *rechem*) is used for womb, yet the statement is, 'Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion [*rachamim*] on the son of her womb?' The words 'womb' and 'bowels' are often used synonymously; for example, when a woman is feeling compassion, she feels from her womb.

The idea of mercy, then, is primarily a *familial one*. Just as a woman has compassion or mercy for her child (Isa. 49:15), so a father has compassion towards his beloved son (Jer. 31:20). In Psalm 103:13 the use is ontological so far as a father is concerned, but metaphorical so far as God is concerned: 'As a father pities [*racham*] his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him'. A brother yearns in his heart (*rachamim*) towards a brother (Gen. 43:30; Amos 1:11), and a lover betroths his beloved in mercy (Hosea 2:19). Zechariah 7:9-11 shows that mercy is a relational matter, especially within the covenant:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart.

Having said all this, we still have not defined mercy. The words such as 'pity', 'compassion', 'yearning', 'heart', 'bowels', 'womb' all tell us that mercy is born and exercised in the context of relationships. In Psalm 77:9 the psalmist cries, 'Has God forgotten to be gracious [*channun*]?' Has he in anger shut up his compassion [*rachamim*]?' In Jeremiah 16:5 (as in Neh. 9:17; Ps. 51:1; 103:4; Exod. 34:6) steadfast love and mercy are coupled; in Deuteronomy 13:17 mercy (*racham*) and compassion (*rachamim*) are coupled; and in Daniel 9:9 (as in Exod. 34:6-7) mercy and forgiveness are linked. These all show us that mercy is operative in rich and even intense relationships. They also show us something of the quality of mercy.

For the most part, mercy is that tenderness, pity, compassion and yearning which is evoked by the relationship in which one who is capable of helping sees the vulnerability of another to weakness, failure, calamity, tragedy and disaster. Such feelings move the

merciful one to appropriate action so that the one under oppression and disaster is rescued. We have already said that mercy is practical pity, that is, pity that acts. Often we have feelings of pity but are not moved to action, or we do not have the capacity to deliver.

Mercy is really the compassionate action that seeks to deliver another from misery. That misery is sometimes the result of a person's foolishness, and sometimes the result of victimisation. To a great degree, mercy is that action of God which delivers a person from self-deserved and self-wrought misery. In fact, it is impossible—for the most part—to understand mercy apart from the reality of the wrath of God and culpability of a person or the nation within the life and context of the covenant. There are, of course, those outside the covenant, and their sinfulness also makes them culpable before the Most High, the Creator of all. His true law is universal, and not only covenantal. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Thus, in order to understand mercy, we must first understand the wrath of God.

6

Israel and the God of Mercy—3

MERCY, HOLINESS AND WRATH

The Covenant Wrath of God

When it comes to the matter of God's wrath we are forced to understand other elements of His nature, such as holiness, truth and righteousness. In this way our enquiry into the nature of mercy leads us to the whole nature of God. We need to understand that whilst we can discover the attributes of God from a reading of the Scriptures, yet each attribute is not an entity in itself, so that one is clearly distinguished from another. Indeed, God does not so much *have* attributes of righteousness, holiness, truth, goodness and love as He *is* these things; that is, He does not *have* holiness, but *is* holiness, and so on.

Human ideas of wrath and anger are not the ideas we should attribute to God. Human anger arises from various elements, such as frustration of one's desires and purposes; injustice done, and injustice not

requited; reaction to various experiences of rejection, disappointment, hurt; and so on. Basically, chronic anger is anger at God, Man and creation for their failure to fulfil the ideals and expectations of the subject. Such anger has strong elements of egotism and irrationality, and yet rationalisation of the anger itself, as though to be angry is to be in the right. The actions of anger do not relieve anger, and expressions of anger generally build up guilt and so compound the tides of anger within a person.

When we see anger in human affairs and then project that image on to God, we devise a horrible Deity indeed! He is grim, moody, dark, vengeful and judgmental. This is probably a reflection of how we are in anger, but in any case our guilt ensures we see it that way. When, then, we speak of Divine wrath we are angry at God's anger! We do not realise that God is not One swayed by emotions, is not lacking in clear understanding, and is a God who hates evil and has an unswerving intention to destroy it. Indeed, this is what He is doing throughout history, and history itself will climax in the final and irreversible judgments which will annihilate evil for ever.

Unfortunately we think that God can ban evil by a fiat, and intends so to do. We do not realise that the only way in which His wrath could be righteously outpoured—that is, in conformity with all His goodness, righteousness, holiness, truth and love—was by the Cross of His Son. Whilst this may seem to be only a New Testament insight and action, the principle is inherent in all sacrifice, and in the *chesed*, *chen* and *rachamim* of the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because our book relates primarily to the subject of mercy, we cannot escape dealing with other elements of His nature, although we will not deal exhaustively

with them. Since mercy relates very much to God's wrath, and since God's wrath cannot be understood apart from holiness, we must first look at His holiness, particularly as it is set out in the Old Testament, and to some degree as it is set out in the New Testament.

The Holiness of God

Habakkuk's statement to God, 'Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong' (1:13a), is the commencement of his argument that God cannot look on the Chaldeans—'that bitter and hasty nation'—and not destroy them as they go about their work of ravaging Israel. He has already addressed God—'Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One?'—and has added, 'We shall not die'.

His argument is that God is the Holy One of Israel and the God of His covenant people. How then can He destroy them? Surely the Chaldeans are more worthy of judgment than Israel. The prophet then sees that because Israel is God's holy people, it deserves judgment more than the Chaldeans, since it has failed to live in the holiness God has required of it. The Chaldeans are merely an instrument in God's hands—they are not a covenant people. Habakkuk's words, then, are true of God, but apply to Israel. That is, God is of purer eyes than to behold Israel's iniquity *without punishing it!* He cannot look upon Israel's evil and *not requite it!*

This leads us to the heart of the holiness of God and sets out the wrath of God. God is holy: He requires holiness of His covenant people and—indeed—of all mankind. Where there is unholiness He must punish that evil and destroy it from the face of creation. At

the same time we should keep in mind that the message of Habakkuk does not stop at God's punishment of sin, but it is also that His holiness simply purifies Israel the Holy People. Hosea 11:8-9 shows that God's compassion is not antithetical to His holiness for He says:

My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger,
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not Man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come to destroy [emphasis mine].

Time and again in the prophecy of Isaiah God says, 'I am your God, *the Holy One of Israel*, your Redeemer!' Whilst God's holiness demands His wrath, yet His wrath is not arbitrary. *In wrath He remembers mercy!* We will see more of this later.

Israel's Understanding of God's Holiness

Israel knew from its meeting with God at Sinai that He was (is) holy. They feared to touch His holy mountain and even to hear His voice (cf. Heb. 12:18-21). His holy works in Egypt had redeemed them from bondage. In Exodus 24 the bonding of the covenant was an awful—as also an awful—one, for it was in and by blood. The people were to obey Him under pain of terrible judgment. Deuteronomy chapters 27 to 30 outlined the actions God would take against a faithless and idolatrous Israel. We can say that, in the light of these Deuteronomic and other equivalent passages, the law shows the wrath of God upon all that do not obey it, especially as law was given through the grace of liberation. Exodus 20:1ff. shows that obedience to the law is expected following God's liberation of Israel from Egypt. The principle is, 'Let my people go that

they may serve [worship] me'. Serving God was living in His holiness as well as in His righteousness (cf. Isa. 5:16).

God's Holiness Lies in His Creator-Being

Israel knew the holiness of God because He had elected to be their God, but long before His acts of covenant He was the Creator-God. This transcendency of God was shown in and by the creation—a matter to which the Psalms and Prophets often advert. The One who creates is Lord of all. None dare approach Him. He is the Most High God. The idols are not only puny alongside Him, but they are a foolish affront to His Most Holy Being. Great celestial creatures attend the High Creator, but only unclean demons attend the senseless idols! In passages such as Isaiah 44:9-20 the stupidity of idol making is shown, but in passages such as Isaiah 40:12-26 the magnificence and holy power of God in creation are shown forth in glorious description. There is nothing wrong about Man's creatureliness, but something horribly evil about his ego that pits itself against the majesty of the Creator-God.

God was also the Creator of Israel. This creation is a significant and brilliant act of God. To some degree it is a new creation, but actually it is a renewing creation, such as we find in Ephesians 2:15 where God creates 'one new Man' through Christ by his death and resurrection. Israel was a part of fallen humanity, but God by a holy and covenantal act recreated this portion of that humanity. Hence in Isaiah 41:14-20 the regeneration of Israel is described, 'that men may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, *the Holy One of Israel has created it*'. In Isaiah 43:15, God tells Israel, 'I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King'.

Likewise in Isaiah 45:11, 'Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker . . .'

God's Holiness Is Shown in His Actions

It was God's deeds which showed His holiness. Exodus 15:11 asks, 'Who is like thee, O LORD among the gods? Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?' In this statement God's holiness shines forth in glory. Likewise Hosea 11:9 has God saying, 'I am God and not Man; the Holy One in your midst'. Such a statement shows the otherness of God's nature. In Him is nothing human. Isaiah chapter 6 depicts the revelation of His holiness which He gave to Isaiah. The celestial creatures—the seraphim—cover their faces and their feet at the sight of God, crying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts [*Yaweh sheba'oth*]', and they explain, 'the whole earth [that is, all things] is full of his glory'. Notice here that holiness is glorious. Many times in Isaiah the ineffability of God—as in Exodus 15:11—is set out by the question, 'To whom shall you liken me?' There is no one; there is nothing! He is indeed holy, that is, separate from all evil, yet powerful, transcending and overpowering such evil.

Israel Must Be Holy Because God Is Holy

Primary for Israel is the command of God to His people that they be holy, 'I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy' (Lev. 11:44; cf. Exod. 6:7).

In many ways God had told Israel it was God's holy nation. Exodus 19:5-6 says:

Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all

the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Time and again Israel comes under the prophetic word to be holy and so not profane the name of the Lord, but to sanctify it, especially in the eyes of the heathen.

Israel was taught holiness by the tabernacle, its pattern, its furniture and its rituals. All furniture and priests had to be consecrated by the solemn ceremony of blood shedding and sprinkling. The modes of sacrifice and worship were detailed and had to be observed. Deviation from prescription met with judgment. In Leviticus 10:1-3, Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, offered unholy—that is, unprescribed—fire, and 'fire came forth from the presence of the LORD and devoured them'. God's holiness must not be taken lightly. The defeat of Jericho was marred by the sin of Achan who disregarded the fact that everything in that city was to be 'holy to the Lord'. Likewise Saul did not sanctify God by sparing some of the cattle, thinking they could be used for sacrifice. The story in I Samuel 6 of the ark being returned by the Philistines to Bethshemesh in Israel tells of seventy men who looked into the ark and were slain. The men of Bethshemesh said, 'Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?' The failure to sanctify God is always brought to judgment, whether it be Uzzah steadying the ark, or Israel profaning God in the eyes of the nations by its idolatry and forbidden alliances.

God's Holiness and Wrath in Isaiah

One of the rich things concerning God's holiness was that it was—and is—redemptive. God's holiness—His 'otherness'—is shown in His being Creator of all the earth. Man seems so transient, so frail, so small a thing beside God in His creatorial Being. Yet

the term 'the Holy One of Israel', whilst it is often a term for the transcendent God, is nevertheless the name of One who dwells with Israel. Thus in Isaiah 12:6 we read, 'Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitants of Zion, for *great in your midst* is the Holy One of Israel'. Of course, 'in the midst' is a covenant matter. The Covenant Father dwells with His people (cf. Isa. 63:16; 64:8). Some thirty times He is called 'the Holy One of Israel', and each context tells us more and more of His character as He deals with His people.

What here concerns us are the following: (i) Israel must be holy since God is holy, and God will be wrathful, and He will punish when Israel profanes His name; (ii) God as the Holy One is Redeemer of His people, redeeming them not only from their enemies, but also from the misery of their sin and disobedience; and (iii) God will use His wrath to teach His redemptive love to them.

In Isaiah 1:4, Israel 'have despised the Holy One of Israel' and 'they are utterly estranged'. A description follows of their miserable state. In 5:16 the Holy One of Israel shows Himself in righteousness, that is, He is present in Israel regarding righteousness. In 5:24ff. we see the sorry state of the nation under judgment because 'they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel', so that 'the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people'. Time and again we meet this wrath which springs out of His holiness. Even so, the phrase, 'the Holy One of Israel, your Redeemer' – or similar terms – is used some seven times, and always in the context of liberating Israel from its enemies, and mainly from Babylon. It is to Babylon that Israel has been sent because it profaned God in the eyes of the nations, but God is merciful – in His holiness – to bring them back.

In Isaiah 54:7–10 there is a very moving passage in which God – 'the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer' – explains His wrath:

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 will not rebuke you.
For the mountains may depart and the hills 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.

This appears to be the principle enunciated in Isaiah 19:22:

And the Lord will smite Egypt, smiting and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will heed their supplications and heal them.

God's Holiness and Wrath in Ezekiel

We have already seen the principle of God's holiness and wrath in Habakkuk. Because Israel has profaned His name, His holiness is offended and His wrath is loosed – albeit in that wrath He remembers mercy and does not wholly destroy Israel. So in Ezekiel God's wrath is personal and will be loosed against Israel.

In chapter 1 the glory of God is shown in beautiful vision, but in chapter 7 God's invective is loosed against the nation:

Now the end is upon you, and I will let loose my anger upon you, and will judge you according to your ways; and I will punish you

for all your abominations. And my eye will not spare you, nor will I have pity; but I will punish you for your ways, while your abominations are in your midst. *Then you will know that I am the LORD.*

Thus says the Lord GOD: Disaster after disaster! Behold it comes. An end has come, the end has come; it has awakened against you. Behold, it comes. Your doom has come to you, O inhabitant of the land; the time has come, the day is near, a day of tumult, and not of joyful shouting upon the mountains. Now I will soon pour out my wrath upon you, and spend my anger against you, and judge you according to your ways; and I will punish you for all your abominations. And my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; I will punish you according to your ways, while your abominations are in your midst. Then you will know that *I am the LORD, who smite* (Ezek. 7:3–9, emphasis mine).

The Book of Ezekiel certainly shows that God's holiness expresses itself in wrath where the nation departs from the covenant. This theme is shown not only in the books of the Law (Genesis to Deuteronomy), but also in the books called 'the Former Prophets', that is, Joshua to Nehemiah. It is natural that we should find similar thinking in the 'Major and Minor Prophets' (Isaiah to Malachi). Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7 infuriates the listeners because Stephen convicts them of the idolatry that has always been in Israel, and which was the cause so many times of the nation's downfall. Even so, the Book of Ezekiel does not leave Israel in wretchedness and misery. Judgment is not for ever and, once executed, brings the liberation of grace. 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases', and God's mercy is upon His covenant people. This is seen time and again both in the Law and the Prophets. It is certainly evident in Ezekiel, and having seen the rightness of God's wrath upon evil, we may now be in a position to see the magnificence of His mercy.

We who read and discuss this matter of God's wrath in Israel ought not to view it with detachment or mere objectivity. 'I am the LORD: I change not' (AV), was said to Israel through Malachi. Likewise what happened in the past is not only for our information, but for warning against unholiness, information regarding God's wrath and exhortation to obey the Holy One. If we think we are in better shape, temper, or situation than Israel, then we might naturally think we do not need mercy and grace, and this would be a great error.

Israel and the God of Mercy—4

THE WRATH OF GOD AND THE MERCY OF GOD

'In Wrath Remember Mercy'

It would seem that Habakkuk had to remind God that in His wrath He should remember mercy towards errant Israel. The covenant revelation of God in Exodus 34:6 was that He was (is) 'slow to anger' (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15), especially in regard to Israel. The prophet did not have to remind God, so much as he had to remind himself of the love of God, and to see God's judgment as the wrath of love. If we ask what causes God's action of mercy, grace, slowness to anger (long-suffering), steadfast love, faithfulness, forgiveness and even refusal to clear the (impenitent, obdurate) guilty—as set out in Exodus 34:6-7—then we must answer that *it is His love*.

Here we are indebted to St Paul. His passage of Ephesians 2:1-10, and in particular verse 4, tells us that Man, being under wrath, receives mercy, and that

God's mercy springs from His love, 'But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us . . .' Paul was not saying anything new when he insisted that mercy springs from love to those under wrath and misery. This thinking was clearly present in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 54:8 we saw God's statement, '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'. Doubtless the 'moment' seemed of inordinate length to Israel under wrath, but God's 'everlasting love' reduces it to a mere moment. Likewise, the smiting and healing of Egypt is the principle by which His love has wrath, 'And the LORD will smite Egypt, smiting and healing, and they will return to the LORD, and he will heed their supplications and heal them'.

THE WRATH OF LOVE

Markus Barth, in his commentary on Ephesians, remarks:

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.¹

'The temperature of God's love' is a powerful phrase. In the Old Testament, this temperature is sometimes shown as white-hot when God's holiness is violated, but when wrath has done its work the stage is set for the Divine mercy.

¹ Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, pp. 231-2.

God Loves, God's Love—'ahab, 'ahabah

Because both Divine wrath and mercy arise from love, it is imperative that we look at the love of God in order to comprehend it. Without question, the New Testament word *agape* has become well known, for it was an old Greek word which was then—in the new Christian context—infused with unique meaning, a meaning it had not once had, and this in much the same way that *charis* was infused with a meaning that transcended even *chesed* and *chen*. The word *agape* was used in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the LXX) to translate the primary Hebrew word for love ('*ahab*), so that the LXX use influenced the New Testament writers. *Agape* was also used to translate other words which were synonyms for love. Just as *charis* transcended even *chen* and *chesed*, so *agape* transcended '*ahabah*. This is not to say that God's love or loving was any less in the Old Testament, but it is to say that the *revelation* of that love in the New Testament transcends that of the old.

The verb '*ahab*—'to love'—is the action of an overflowing passion which is spontaneous, ardent and overwhelming. It would seem almost to be irrational, but probably a better term for it would be 'suprational'. Certainly '*ahab* does not fit into purely logical categories. A prophecy such as Hosea's shows the love of God for wanton Israel, a love which seems to fly in the face of true morality. Indeed in that very prophecy of God's wrath—fierce and dreadful—God declared 'I will love them freely' (14:4), although He had previously said, 'I will love them no more' (9:15). His fierce wrath is shown under many figures (5:12-14; 9:11-17; 10:13-15; 13:7-8), but that wrath springs from His jealousy, His deep love for Ephraim. When Ephraim hears the voice of the loving God she will return to

Him and plead for restitution. Then God will say, 'I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them'.

God's Love ('ahabah) and His Steadfast Love (chesed)

What we have to see is that if God's *chesed*—His steadfast love—is dependable, invariable, never vacillating but always going towards His covenant people to do them good, then His steadfast love arises from His 'everlasting love'. Indeed, all the elements mentioned in Exodus 34:6-7 arise from this love, and—in a sense—constitute it. In Jeremiah 31:3, God says, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love ('*ahabah*); therefore I have continued my faithfulness [*chesed*] to you'. Just as in Paul mercy arises from love, so here does 'steadfast love' arise from God's full love. Only then do we understand the drive and constraint of the very nature, the very personality of God.

It could be observed that God's wrath does not spring from His steadfast love (*chesed*) so much as from His '*ahabah*—the full love of His being. 'Steadfast love' of course is one expression of God's '*ahabah*, but somehow Israel knew that no matter what it did—short of dreadful apostasy—God would never cease to rescue it, never cease to show His mercy, although both could not be thought of by the covenant people as their 'rights'.

The Outworking of Love, Wrath and Mercy

In Deuteronomy chapters 27 to 32 is the thesis by which the prophets work. If Israel will not keep the law, if it will turn away from God and worship other idols, and be caught in the corruption of the nations, then God will punish it, even to the scattering of it

among the captor nations. In 'The Song of Moses', those nations who have scattered the covenant people Israel will boast *they* have accomplished this as they view the misery of God's people. Wrongly they will claim they have done it, instead of realising it was God who gave over Israel into their hands. Whilst Israel will suffer terribly for its sinfulness, and will know that it is God who is making them suffer, yet the nations shall not escape God's dreadful wrath. The heathen nations profane God's name when they ascribe Israel's suffering to their own acts and not to God's wrath upon Israel. To preserve His holy name God will smite the smiters and relieve captive Israel and give it great blessing. This is what is meant by 'I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal' (Deut. 32:39; I Sam. 2:6; Isa. 19:22). God is primarily concerned for His holiness when He restores the nation (Deut. 32:36-43; cf. Ezek. 36:16-38), yet out of His love He will not merely restore them, but give them a new heart and a new spirit and rich prosperity. By this means He will teach them to loathe their former ways, 'Then will you remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds'.

Jeremiah is not at all unlike Hosea. In Jeremiah 3:1-6, Israel is shown as a faithless lover, one who is also shameless and yet looks unreasonably to God for acceptance on the grounds of His warm Fatherhood. If Israel has played the harlot, even more so Judah (3:6-10). Idolatry is rife in both kingdoms – the north and the south. Even so, God – who has judged both and given punishment to both – promises a wonderful day when both Israel and Judah will be joined in one, and all nations shall gather to the renewal of all Israel. In Jeremiah 10 there are severe warnings to those who refuse covenant-obedience. Jeremiah is forbidden

even to pray for the offenders. The terrible judgment and punishment is coming. In 13:14, He says, 'And I will dash them one against another, fathers and sons together, says the LORD. I will not pity or spare or have compassion, that I should not destroy them'. In 16:5 He says, 'I have taken away my peace from this people . . . *my steadfast love and mercy*'. It seems, then, that there is no hope for Israel, especially in 21:3-7 where God tells Judah of the doom that is coming to them through Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, who 'shall smite them with the edge of the sword; he shall not pity them, or spare them, or have compassion'.

Even so, throughout the book, God is jealous for Israel, and will judge those who harm her and punish them also. The rich promises of the new covenant tell of a wonderful day when the law of God will be in the hearts of His people, when their sins will be forgiven, and when they will *know* God.

So we could pursue the thought of God's holiness, His love, and His reasonable wrath. We have already seen that, in Ezekiel, God's wrath is shown upon those who transgress the covenant, but we have also seen that God will have mercy on Israel, forgive and cleanse her, and set her in her own land. Keeping in mind the covenantal saying, 'I will by no means clear the guilty', it now remains for us to see the state of Israel's misery and to see how it is that God shows His mercy on His rebellious people.

Israel and the Everlasting Mercy—1

THE EVERLASTING MERCY

This term of John Masefield is not found—as such—in the Scriptures, but the term ‘everlasting love’ is present. A number of times ‘steadfast love’ and ‘mercy’ are coupled, as though they were the one. In many psalms the refrain ‘his steadfast love endures for ever’ is found, and in one psalm (136) as many as 26 times. This would appear to indicate the everlasting nature of mercy. In Exodus 34:6-7 mercy is the first mentioned attribute of God. The covenant—as doubtless it relates to the Abrahamic Covenant and so to the New Covenant—is called ‘everlasting’ some 13 times. Twice God’s love (*‘ahabah*) is called ‘everlasting’, and since mercy springs from that love (cf. Eph. 2:4), then it is an attribute of God’s eternity. Whilst it is true that the use of ‘everlasting’ has the idea of ‘never ceasing’, yet its primary use is not quantitative, but qualitative. Hence God’s mercy is called ‘great’ and ‘abundant’, which not only means inexhaustible, but sufficient,

competent to cover all misery and liberate the objects of that misery from its dreadful bondage. In this sense God’s love, too, as it is called ‘everlasting’, always remains the source for the mercy He exercises. Jude, in his Epistle, therefore exhorts his readers, ‘wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life’ (v. 21).

It is a powerfully enriching thought that His mercy is everlasting, that there is no depth it will not plumb, no misery too dreadful but it can—and will—release us from it. At the last, looking back, we see something of the magnificent dimensions of this merciful mercy. When the psalmist said, ‘Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!’ he was able to say—with relief—‘But there is forgiveness with thee’, for had he not also cried, ‘If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?’

ISRAEL AND THE GREAT MISERY

The Misery of Man—in General

We have briefly examined the misery of Man in general, seeing that it stemmed from the fall in Eden. The curse that resulted from that fall is a deterrent to Man’s total happiness. Man’s sinfulness led to violence and corruption across the face of the earth and called for the judgment of God by flood. The judgment executed by God made an everlasting covenant of grace with mankind, even in the face of his sinfulness. He would never again destroy the earth by water, and He would maintain the creational rhythm of the seasons. The arrogant sinfulness of Man manifested itself in the attempt to build a great city independent of God, and a tower to heaven. The confusion of tongues at

Babel led to the scattering of the tribes of humanity, and out of that scattering emerged the act of granting the great covenant to Abraham and, through him, to all the nations.

Man—whether under the Abrahamic Covenant or not—suffers the misery of his own sinfulness, and the misery which comes from the cruelty, selfishness and evil of his fellow creatures. For the Israelite there was the security and grace of covenant, yet even in the face of that—and perhaps more so because of it—Israel suffered misery of the greatest dimensions. In one sense no Gentile could be as culpable before God as an Israelite, no nation could be as fearful an object of God’s wrath as Israel, the covenant people of God.

It is the misery of Israel we will now seek to see. Since misery and mercy are closely linked, our enquiry will be relevant and useful.

ISRAEL AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD’S GIFTS

In Romans 9:4–5 Paul gives a summary of God’s gifts to Israel:

They are Israelites and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever, Amen.

Each of these gifts is wonderful, significant and functional. Israel can do without none of them. No other nation had these gifts. They put Israel in a special bracket. This is illustrated by Moses’ reference to the law and the covenant God of Israel (Deut. 4:5–8):

Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land

which you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?

Certainly Israel stands out on this score in all history. It would be true to say that it was a greatly favoured nation. God made it clear it was not due to any innate excellence that He had chosen them:

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your forefathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt (Deut. 7:7–8).

All the gifts, then, of sonship, the law, the glory and the worship are unique to Israel. Israel should be a land of blessedness. Misery should never have to enter it. Covenant security and covenant peace (*shalom*) should make this a joyful people. Even so, there were conditions for such blessedness. Whilst the covenant was unilateral, and so was of grace, yet there were obligations. God makes demands of His people, and they need to know these and fulfil them:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and requites to their face those that hate him, by destroying them; he will not be slack with him who hates him, he will requite him to his face. You shall be careful, therefore, to do the commandments, and the statutes and the ordinances which I command you this day (Deut. 7:9–11).

ALL ISRAEL AND ALL THE COVENANT

This brings us again to Exodus 34:6–7 which we need to read afresh:

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 generation.’

We now need to see what is contained in this covenantal declaration of the nature of God: (i) mercy, grace, long-suffering, steadfast love and faithfulness are what Israel can expect under covenantal obedience. Even when they fail—short of hating God—these attributes of God will work towards them; and (ii) where there is impenitence (Exod. 34:7) and a deliberate hatred of God (Deut. 7:10) and idolatry (Deut. 5:8–10) then God will destroy. *The intransigent heart shall know no mercy or steadfast love.* It is important that we see this. What we have seen is that God pours out His wrath upon His disobedient people because they deserve it, and so that they will see their evil and repent, in which case He has been exercising steadfast love towards them although it has appeared to be only wrath. Those who disregard His wrath, and do not soften and repent under His chastisement, have shown themselves to be incorrigible covenant-breakers, and will, therefore, receive no forgiveness.

What we are now saying is very important: *God will go to the utmost extremes in mercy and grace for His covenant people, but there is a point beyond which He will never go.* To think that He will and He must, is to tempt God, and such tempting is visited by God with

irreversible judgment and punishment. ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.’ Since God’s grace has made a small nation His priest-nation among all the nations, His covenant people have a deep responsibility to witness to God as holy. God’s holiness is primary. It is His eternal Self, and there can be no talk of love transcending holiness. Love itself must be utterly holy.

For the purposes of our study we state another principle: God’s mercy will go to the utmost to rescue His covenant people out of misery. That misery may well be the result of both human guilt and Divine judgment, but in wrath God ‘remembers’ mercy and delivers His elect. His wrath is with a view to mercy. It is also true to say that no human being need despair –ever–of God’s mercy. His very despair is his cry for mercy, and such a cry is the sign that he is not utterly reprobate, that is, gone beyond the mercy of God.

It would seem that in Leviticus 10:1–3 the judgment on Nadab and Abihu when they offered ‘strange [false] fire’ on the altar and were consumed by the fire might fit into this category. Also the case of Korah (Num. 16:1–50) and his associates who claimed to be equal in priesthood with the appointed Aaronic order and were destroyed might represent sin ‘done with a high hand’. Sin done with a high hand (Num. 15:30–31; Deut. 17:12–13; cf. Num. 14:40–44; Deut. 1:43; Exod. 21:14; 32:33; Ps. 19:13) was unforgivable. There is the matter of a whole generation perishing in the wilderness. Psalm 95 is a very clear statement of Israel’s obduracy and idolatrous rebellion against God. The psalmist uses the psalm to urge his contemporaries not to fall back into the frame of mind which prevented their ancestors entering into the promised land. Paul in I Corinthians chapter 10, and the author

of Hebrews in chapters 3 and 4, also use this Psalm to exhort their readers not to fall away from God. In the New Testament the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira might also fit the description of 'sinning with a high hand'. It is possible, however, that all of these were judgments which did not necessarily imperil the eternal salvation of the victims, though we have to take Exodus 32:33 into consideration, 'But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book"'. We have an example in the New Testament of a person punished without necessarily being excluded from salvation. Paul and the church at Corinth (I Cor. 5:1-5) deliver a man to Satan 'for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of Jesus Christ'. Drastic judgment in time, and of the body, may save a person from eternal judgment. This is possibly the case in I Corinthians 11:27-32. What we do know is that in Israel idolatry profaned God, and where idolaters were intransigent God would visit their sins upon them and their equally intransigent descendants to the third and fourth generation, that is, those generations which persisted in idolatry. It is surprising God did not say He would pursue His wrath beyond the fourth generation. On the other hand He pursues His love for 'thousands of generations of them that love me'. We need to read Ezekiel chapter 18 to see that every person is responsible only for his own sins, and not for the sins of his parents or children.

MISERY WITHIN THE COVENANT OF MERCY AND STEADFAST LOVE

Keeping in mind the ultimate end of incorrigible covenant-breakers, we need to see that mercy delivers

from misery when God is moved to compassion. Whilst a penitent covenant-breaker can cry, 'God have mercy on me!' he cannot *presume* on this mercy, for that would constitute 'sin done with a high hand', and for such there is no forgiveness. We need to see that there are certain conditions for the mercy of God to apply, and will look at these later. For the moment we want to look at the misery which came upon persons in Israel because of their disobedience and their consequent guilt.

The accounts of misery in Israel are many, and the material available for research and comment would demand much time. We can only devote a limited space to the subject and this is a pity. An examination of Man's misery – even Israel's misery – would be both salutary and helpful.

MISERY IN THE BOOKS OF THE LAW

For present purposes we will omit the misery depicted in Genesis – part of which refers to the human race in general, and part of which refers to the covenant dynasty of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We commence, then, with Israel's suffering as an ethnic group in Egypt, where the twelve tribes had virtually been made into a slave people. Misery can be of two sorts; that is, (i) the misery which arises from our own sin, foolishness, disobedience and deliberate ignorance of God and His law; and (ii) from circumstances beyond our control, from alien forces oppressing us, from evil powers seeking to harm us, and from the sin, cruelty and selfishness of our fellow creatures. God delivers us from both kinds of distress when His compassion and pity move Him to acts of mercy.

Israel in Egypt, the Wilderness and Caanan

Israel was in great anguish and wretchedness under the hand of the Pharaoh of Egypt:

In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died. And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage and cried for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel and knew their condition (Exod. 2:23–25).

God's mercy was that He delivered them out of Egypt and destroyed the army of Pharaoh which pursued them.

The forty years in the wilderness brought various forms of suffering to the people. It is to be noted, however, that virtually all of this suffering came to them because of their disobedience. We have noted that Psalm 95 speaks of the obduracy of the older generation of Israel which left Egypt. These were they who came under the anger of God because they formed the idol of the bull calf and said, 'These are your gods O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' (Exod. 32:1–35). God was about to destroy the offenders but Moses pleaded for them. A number were destroyed and a plague came upon many, but God's mercy had been invoked and the older generation was not wholly destroyed. Psalm 95 speaks of what happened at Meribah–Massah when the people complained and Moses brought forth water out of the rock (Exod. 17:7), and on a latter occasion struck the rock twice in anger (Num. 20:13; cf. Deut. 6:16). We have talked about the event that brought judgment in Leviticus 10:1–3—the judgment on Nadab and Abihu when they offered 'strange [false] fire' on the altar and were consumed by the fire—as also we saw the case of Korah (Num. 16:1–50) and his associates who claimed

to be equal in priesthood with the appointed Aaronic order and were destroyed. To these events we could add many other complaints the older generation made. The point is that, apart from Joshua and Caleb, none of the older generation entered Caanan. Even Moses was prevented from doing so.

There is no question that Israel suffered misery in the wilderness, but the suffering stemmed from their own rebellion. The prophet Isaiah (63:7–14) describes the unwavering, steadfast love and mercy which God exercised:

*I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD,
the praises of the LORD,
according to all that the LORD has granted us,
and the great goodness to the house of Israel
which he granted them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
For he said, surely they are my people,
sons who will not deal falsely;
and he became their Saviour.
In all their afflictions he was afflicted,
and the angel of his presence saved them;
In his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.*

*But they rebelled
and grieved his holy Spirit;
therefore he turned to be their enemy,
and himself fought against them.
Then he remembered the days of old,
of Moses his servant.
Where is he who brought up out of the sea
the shepherds of his flock?
Where is he who put in the midst of them
his holy Spirit,
who caused his glorious arm
to go at the right hand of Moses,
who divided the waters before them
to make for himself an everlasting name,
who led them through the depths?*

Like a horse in the desert,
they did not stumble.
Like cattle that go down into the valley,
the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest.
So thou didst lead thy people,
to make for thyself a glorious name [emphasis mine].

Whilst we are shown the rebellion and some of the disasters it encountered, what is not shown to us is the wretchedness of the hearts which disobeyed God. In a sense we cannot know this, except by human instinct, for we all know the turmoil of guilt and some of the suffering that it brings. Later we will take a number of case studies from the Old Testament of the descent into misery which human beings know as they give reign to their depravity—that degradation which has come to Man through the Fall.

Two Powerful Factors Which Effect Misery

For the moment we can simply take two outstanding factors in penetrating into the matter of human misery which comes where there is culpability. The first is the continuous, devastating nature of sin as it entrenches Man in its power and resultant misery through the compounding of guilt. We mean that sin compounds itself through the action of guilt. Guilty Man sins, and sinning increases his guilt—and so on. Sin has an inbuilt deception, and the power by this deception to harden the object of its actions—the human spirit. We can see in Israel the hardening of the heart against God where rebellion compounded rebellion. We should remember that this is not simply a process which takes place of itself, but is indeed an act of God. Isaiah 64:5b-7 has it:

Behold, thou wast angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time,
and shall we be saved? . . .

We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away . . .
for thou hast hid thy face from us
and hast delivered us into the hand of our iniquities.

Note that the action of God 'deliver[ing] us into the hand of our iniquities' is an act of deliberate judgment. As in Romans 1:24, 26, and 28, the giving us up to our sins is His most personal and deliberate judgment. That judgment may deliver us over, eventually, unto grace, does not alter the fact of His wrathful judgment.

The second factor is idolatry. We can trace this as the primary problem in Israel. Stephen the martyr understood this very well. In Acts 7, as he addressed the Sanhedrin, he traced the nature of the true sanctuary of God—the tabernacle, and following it the temple—but showed the heart of the people was not in this sanctuary:

Our fathers refused to obey him [Moses], but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods to go before us . . .' And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and *rejoiced in the works of their hands*. But God turned and *gave them over to worship the host of heaven*, as it is written in the book of the prophets [Amos 5:25-27]:

'Did you offer to me slain beasts and sacrifices,
forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?
And you took up the tent of Moloch,
and the star of the God Rephan,
the figures which you made in worship;
and I will remove you beyond Babylon'

(Acts 7:39-43, emphasis mine).

We reserve a study of Israel and idolatry for later consideration. Now we simply recognise the dreadful misery of human beings when they are under the deceit and tyranny of idols; that is, the idolater 'feeds

on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?”’ and ‘Those who make them [the idols] are like them; so are all who trust in them’ (Isa. 44:20; Ps. 115:8). What we have seen here is some of the misery of Israel in Egypt, and in the wilderness. Now, in the Former and Latter Prophets, we will trace some of the misery of Man and the mercy of God, as Israel lived in the promised land.

9

Israel and the Everlasting Mercy—2

THE FORMER AND THE LATTER PROPHETS AND THE MISERY OF ISRAEL

The Hebrews called the books from Joshua to Nehemiah ‘the Former Prophets’; that is, they understood the books to be prophetic. By ‘prophetic’ we do not mean so much ‘predictive’ as ‘hortatory’; not so much as to *what* would happen, but *why* it would happen, and therefore *how* Israel ought to learn from its obstinacy and rebellion, abandon its habitual idolatry and turn back to walk in the ways of the Lord. The Deuteronomic formula—as we have seen it above—has worked through those books as though the writer or writers had it in mind.

Joshua and Judges

At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses had warned against idolatry and apostasy (chapters 27 - 32), and Joshua, during his leadership in Caanan, renewed the

same warnings. In particular, chapters 23 and 24 of Joshua repeat the Deuteronomic formula. Whilst the book does not describe much of Israel's suffering, as such, yet the Book of Judges tells the story of Israel's calamity time and again.

In Joshua's time, the tribes of Israel were seeking to root out the traditional peoples of the land. For certain reasons—some good and some not good—this was not completed. Chapter 1 of Judges summarises what had happened and continues the story. In chapter 2 the primary thesis of the writer is stated:

- (a) Israel was told to break down the altars of the idols, and drive out the Canaanites before them.
- (b) Because in many cases they had not done this, God—who had promised never to break His covenant with Israel—swore He would keep the Canaanites in the land to be a trouble to Israel and to test them: 'They shall become adversaries to you and their gods shall be a snare to you'.
- (c) A pattern of idolatry by the people, retribution by God in the form of power over Israel by the Canaanites, and so intense misery in Israel, became a regular cycle of existence; that is, 'Whenever they [Israel] marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them; *and they were in sore straits*'.
- (d) 'Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judges; *for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.*'

- (e) 'But whenever the judge died, they turned back and behaved worse than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them; *they did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.*' Because of this intransigence, God left the nations in the midst of Israel, 'that by them I may test Israel, whether they will take care to walk in the ways of the LORD as their fathers did, or not'.

The pattern then became as follows: 'the people did what was evil in the sight of the LORD'. The Lord strengthened the hand of Israel's enemies against Israel. Israel in oppression cried out to God. God then raised up a judge—a deliverer. The people were liberated and for a time rejoiced in God, but yet again 'the people did evil in the sight of the LORD', and so the cycle was repeated. The condition of the nation is summed up in the last verse of Judges, 'In those days there was no king in Israel; *every man did what was right in his own eyes*'. As a result of this, Israel knew calamitous days. Even so, God visited them—time and again—with covenantal mercy.

I & II Samuel, I & II Kings and I & II Chronicles

There is not a great deal of difference between the principles which obtain in the time of the Judges and those in the Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. The problem in Israel from the times of Samuel the priest-prophet-judge to Zedekiah the last king of Judah was still one of ignoring or breaking the covenant of the Lord by idolatry, of refusing the word of the law and the prophetic word as it came through 'his servants the prophets'.

Within the periods of the Former and Latter Prophets we have the (prophetic) history of Israel; the times in which the monarchy came to Israel with Saul as the first king, followed by David who really established Israel as a kingdom. He in turn was followed by Solomon who consolidated David's gains. Solomon had 'many strange wives', that is, those who brought with them the worship of their cultures, so that idolatry had a place within the royal dynasty. Solomon himself was involved in idolatry in his old age (I Kings 11:4-13) and was told by God that the kingdom would be divided because of that idolatry. On Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam ill-advisedly split the kingdom into northern and southern components. Rehoboam's mother was Naamah the Ammonitess, and Rehoboam 'did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the LORD'. Jeroboam took the ten northern tribes, and Rehoboam took Judah and Benjamin in the south. Many priests and Levites fled from the northern kingdom to Judah because of idolatrous practices (II Chron. 11:13-17). The northern kingdom practised idolatry, especially through the two golden calves set up by Jeroboam at Dan and Bethel, to prevent the people going to Jerusalem and the authentic temple of worship.

The Books of the Kings and the Chronicles tell of the history of good kings and bad kings. The good kings were those who sought after the Lord and true worship, whilst the bad kings were those who did not listen to the prophets of the Lord, nor observe the law. The same principles of misery and mercy that we find in the Judges, we find obtaining in both Israel – the northern kingdom – and Judah, except that the northern kingdom came under judgment even sooner than Israel. The pre-exilic prophets range from Joel in the 8th century BC, to Habakkuk in the 6th. Roughly in order, these prophets were Joel, Amos, Jonah, Hosea,

Micah, Isaiah, Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah. The exilic and post-exilic prophets range from Daniel in the 6th century to Malachi in the 4th. In order, these prophets were Daniel, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

The story of the prophets is, of course, the story of God constantly speaking to His covenant people – be they of the ten northern or the two southern tribes. They had been given the covenant, the sonship, the law, the worship and the glory, yet they had been incurably idolatrous. Hence they had brought themselves into strife and calamity through the judgments God brings upon those who are not faithful to His covenant. The prophets often came as warners, as correctors and as those directing the people back to the covenant and its law. Second Chronicles 36:15-16 describes the persistence of God and His prophets:

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, till there was no remedy.

They also came with the almost unbelievable message of God's own love (*'ahabah*), His covenant love – 'steadfast love' – (*chesed*) and His compassionate mercy (*racham*). In the light of God's holiness and His wrath upon sin, Israel should have been destroyed, but – as we do not weary of repeating – 'in wrath He remembers mercy' (Hab. 3:2), or that His wrath is with a view to His mercy (cf. Isa. 54:8-10; 19:22).

The Nature of the Prophet and Prophecy

What can be missed is that the sending of the prophets, and the direct word of prophecy from God

are part of His great steadfast love and mercy. Had He remained silent, and not spoken to His people, then the question of love and mercy would have been a limited one. In I Samuel 3:1 it was said, 'And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision'. Normally the prophet received his message from God by dream and vision (cf. Num. 12:6), although in the case of Moses, God spoke to him face to face. In I Samuel 3:21 – 4:1 the word of the Lord

and the word of the prophet are one, 'And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.'

Exodus 6:28 – 7:2 gives us the true picture of the prophet. He is God's very mouthpiece. God utters directly through him the word He wills to bring to His people. The primary Hebrew word for prophet was *nabi'* and derives from the verb 'to call', so that the prophet is either called or calls—perhaps both. The word *ro'eh* can be translated as 'seer' and is often associated with states of ecstasy. The further word *hozeh* is difficult to translate but 'prophet' and 'seer' are used for it. It is God who always takes the initiative in moving the prophet—a point taken up by the writer of II Peter 1:20–21:

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Whilst there were times of prophetic silence, yet God kept speaking to Israel. The silences were just as eloquent as the utterances, for to be denied God's immediate word to the situation was even a form of judgment. Israel needed the word. It is said that in the inter-testamental period there was only the *bath qol*,

that is, 'the echo of the voice', and not the word itself.

We can see, then, that the giving of the prophets was God's act of mercy.¹ Jeremiah 7:25–27 shows the persistence of God:

From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day, yet they did not listen to me, or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers.

Even so, Jeremiah must persist:

So you shall speak all these words to them but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them but they will not answer you. And you shall say to them, 'This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.'

As we have seen, God did not abandon Israel in spite of its obduracy towards His word and His steadfast love.

THE MISERY OF THE NATION

We cannot possibly cover the enormous tragedy that obtained in Israel from the time of its idolatry in

¹ Moses is the paradigm of the true prophet. Deuteronomy 18 shows that Moses was antitypical of the 'prophet to come', that is, of Christ himself who would be *the* prophet (cf. Acts 3:22ff.). How vital was the ministry of Moses as God's great prophet is shown in Numbers 12 where Miriam and Aaron would have classed themselves with Moses, but God showed Moses' prophethood to be unique. In Hosea 12:10, God speaks of His initiative in the matter of the prophets, 'I spoke to the prophets; it was I who multiplied visions, and through the prophets gave parables'. In verse 13 is added, 'By a prophet the LORD brought Israel up from Egypt, and by a prophet he was preserved'. More than this could not be said for the position, ministry and function of a prophet.

the wilderness to its exile as northern and southern kingdoms, its suffering in the return and post-exilic rehabilitation of the nation. In addition, there is the ground covered by extra-canonical books of the events which happened during the intertestamental period when Israel suffered under the hand of other oppressors. What we need to understand is that none of this happened in an 'off the cuff' manner. Israel was not the mere victim of circumstances and the historic movement of nations. Its own writers, leaders and prophets saw the nation as suffering misery because of its own sinfulness, as well as from the sinfulness of enemy nations. Indeed the whole of the Old Testament is a remarkable document on the nature of the calling, election and predestination of the covenant people of Israel. In this sense it is a socio-theological treatise which would richly repay any research given to it. For our part, we can only treat some *examples* of the misery Israel knew. In our last chapter we looked at certain *principles* by which it came into its misery. In our next chapter we will examine some of the elements of that misery.

10

Israel and the Everlasting Mercy—3

THE PERSONAL WRITINGS AND THE MISERY OF ISRAEL—I

More than once we have referred to the personal misery of Man; that is, in contrast to the corporate misery of the covenant nation. The personal and corporate misery cannot be separated so that each is a thing in itself. Take, for example, the Israelites in exile who would not sing the songs of Zion in a strange land (Ps. 137:1-6), and the author of Psalm 42 who longs, personally, for worship in the Temple of his former years. This is a deprivation and misery known by both a person and an exiled people. These intimate writings will be found throughout the Former and Latter Prophets, but most vividly in the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Even a cursory survey of them would require much time. For this reason we will be selective over a wide area of the Old Testament, taking passages which bring out some of the elements we have been studying.

Ezekiel Chapter 16

This long chapter is perhaps a strange choice for our first passage, but in fact it is—in itself—a short salvation history. God finds Israel as an abandoned—exposed—baby, lying in a welter of its own blood, for ‘you were abhorred on the day that you were born’. Israel is the nation the nations reject in the act of infanticide. In fact, it is not Israel who is addressed directly so much as Jerusalem the city, but the people of Israel are in mind. The origins of Jerusalem were Canaanitic—‘your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite’. Out of these despised beginnings Jerusalem was saved by grace. At the time of maidenhood her marks of rejection were still upon her, but God chose her as His spouse. Now the city became wonderfully beautiful under the patronage of love. That love, however, was despised as Jerusalem became a city of ‘abominations and harlotries’; that is, Jerusalem flirted politically with foreign nations, and so foreign deities. Yet Jerusalem was promiscuous, wanting these liaisons and not seeking payment for them.

Judgment is to come from the wrath of the Holy One of Israel. Verses 38–43 show the tragedy which will come upon Jerusalem:

I will judge you as women who break wedlock and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. And I will give you into the hand of your lovers, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber and break down your lofty places; they shall strip you of your clothes and take your fair jewels, and leave you naked and bare. They shall bring up a host against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. And they shall burn your houses and execute judgments upon you in the sight of many women; I will make you stop playing the harlot, and you shall also give hire no more. So will I satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall depart

from you; I will be calm and will no more be angry. Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things; therefore, behold, I will requite your deeds upon your head.

There seems to be little mention of Israel’s misery as such. The Book of Lamentations certainly depicts this misery greatly, and many references are made to the sacking of Israel and the humiliation of her people. What is amazing is the mercy of God, stated in verses 59–62:

Yea, thus says the Lord GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters [Sodom and Samaria], both your elder and your younger, and give them to you as daughters, but not on account of the covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be confounded and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive all that you have done, says the Lord GOD.

It would be difficult to describe the wretched and pitiable state of the people of God who have committed such idolatry, such rejection of the benefaction of love, such spurning of the intimate love of the Lord God Who wins His spouse by that same love. To view this situation objectively may have great value for us as readers of history, but unless we recognise our own sinfulness in our own idolatries, in the deceit and wretchedness of our own hearts—even daily—we will not understand the tragedy of Israel, and will not, of course, understand our own tragedy. This will mean we miss the richness of mercy.

The Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet

The first chapter of the prophecy opens as though it were meant to be a commentary on Ezekiel 16:

How lonely sits the city
that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the cities
has become a vassal.

She weeps bitterly in the night,
tears on her cheeks,
among all her lovers
she has none to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies (1:1–2).

Anguish comes with memory:

Jerusalem remembers
in the days of her affliction and bitterness
all the precious things
that were hers from days of old.
When her people fell into the hand of the foe,
and there was none to help her,
the foe gloated over her,
mocking at her downfall.

Jerusalem sinned grievously
therefore she became filthy;
all who honoured her despise her,
for they have seen her nakedness;
yea, she herself groans,
and turns her face away (1:7–8).

Jerusalem cries for understanding pity:

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see

if there is any sorrow like my sorrow
which was brought upon me,
which the LORD inflicted
on the day of his fierce anger (1:12).

More sorrow is shown:

My eyes are spent with weeping;
my soul is in tumult;
my heart is poured out in grief
because of the destruction of the daughter of my people,
because infants and babies faint
in the streets of the city (2:11).

Bewilderment and dismay are expressed:

Look, O LORD, and see!
With whom has thou dealt thus?
Should women eat their offspring,
the children of their tender care?
Should priest and prophet be slain
in the sanctuary of the Lord? (2:20).

Not only does Jerusalem cry out in pain and affliction, but also the prophet Jeremiah, himself. In chapter 3 he describes his suffering and misery. When we would think him to be disillusioned with God he shows himself to be far from that. In verse 19 he prays, 'Remember my affliction and my bitterness, the wormwood and the gall!' He ruminates, 'My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me'. Something flickers within him and he exclaims, 'But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope'. His hope, of course, is in the Lord – in His nature and being – so that he cries:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness.

This statement of Jeremiah is of immense importance. Traditionally we seem to have understood it as a general statement about God's providence; that is, He goes on giving us fresh mercies, daily. These 'mercies' we think of as gifts of life, food and clothing, but in this Lamentations context the statement is not generic, but specific. Jeremiah—paraphrased—is saying, "Though Jerusalem be in such a piteous state, though we see the terrible judgments on every side, and though we live in this distress and calamity daily, yet "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases". Somehow, in all this, God is loving us covenantally, steadfastly, not going back upon His promises. Indeed, "his mercies never come to an end", for in the midst of this wrath He is remembering mercy. His mercies are endless, "they are new every morning" '.

This is quite an astonishing statement, especially for us who are so soft-minded and weak-stomached today. Not, however, for those who hold firmly to Exodus 34:6-7. Indeed it is only in the midst of the disconsolate state of Jerusalem, her inhabitants and her prophet, that the true nature of mercy emerges. Lamentations 3:22-24 has its deepest significance in the sorrowed state of the people, not in the comfortable circumstances of a modern and secure people of God. For the latter, the question of mercy scarcely arises.

The Misery of Idolatry

We have commented before that Israel's history was one of conflict—the conflict of a nation torn between its covenant responsibility to God and its worship of idols. The reality of the covenant was that God was present to Israel as her King, Creator, Father and Redeemer, whilst those who practised idolatry within Israel thought of the idols (gods) as having these

qualities, in essence being more approachable than God, and demanding no high morality of the worshippers.

The aetiology of idolatry in Romans 1:21-27 is that when Man rejected the true God, he immediately became idolatrous. The vacuum of worship left by rejection of the true Deity demanded a worship that had all the love, passion, adoration and dependence that Man would have with the true God. It was simply that the *object* of worship was changed, worship itself being ontological. It would appear that non-worship is impossible to human living.

It also appears from the Romans passage that Man had to rationalise his world system by means of idolatry. By giving to the creature—the creation—the dimensions and value of the Creator, Man could develop a cosmology, theology and anthropology which were not palpably absurd. In fact all idolatry is wholly absurd, but Man as a religious creature shapes whatever theology he has to the worship he espouses.

At the beginning of this study on the misery of idolatry, we should see from the Romans passage of 1:21-32 that to refuse the true nature of God, and true worship of Him, is to distort every element of living. Man exchanged the truth of God for a lie, which means that Man lives wholly in the lie he has conceived. To live in so dreadful and terrible a lie is to lose true human integrity and so to be living falsely, thus denying oneself ontological reality and so ontological peace and the joy that is inherent. The terrible passage shows that God gives Man up to his idolatry and its consequences. The 'giving up' is itself a deliberate judgment, and not a mere shrugging of the shoulders by God and an abandonment to sin—as such. The passage shows so clearly that Man's sexuality immediately goes awry, firstly in immorality and secondly in perversion. This in turn—though

not necessarily in chronological order—brings Man into every kind of deficient relationship and practical evil, even to the point where Man has a reprobate mind, and loses proper moral sensitivity.

What we may easily miss in looking at idolatry objectively is the subjective misery human beings must experience as idolators. Firstly, they have the deprivation of God's glory and at the same time the loss of their own glory. Whilst a human being may harden himself against this loss, it is an undeniable thing. Man cannot be at peace without having God as his Father, his Creator and his King—along with the knowledge that God is Redeemer where and when a human person fails. Secondly, Man has to live in his depravity. He is not only deprived of glory, but he is also sinful and evil. Since depravity is not ontological, it must bring suffering of the most terrible kind. Thirdly, Man has to live without true relationships. No relationship he has can be ultimately dependable or satisfying. Indeed it is Man's most bitter pill he has to swallow that ultimately every other human being is in competition with him; this is the perpetual conflict. Fourthly, Man—in idolatry—has no authentic future. That is, he is without genuine hope. He must constantly manufacture his own hopes.

None of this is to say that Man does not obtain a certain enjoyment from idolatry. The very fact that idol-worship is worship, must give him some satisfaction, for worship Man must! Also that which is illicit is always immensely attractive, both because he can go against the true order of things, and because all evil promises much. All forms of evil are deceitful. They can promise the equivalents of peace and joy, but they cannot fulfil such promises.

If we add all these factors together, ponder them and compare them with their ontological opposites—the

authentic realities—then we must conclude that Man—as an idolator—exists within fearful distress.

Idolatry in Israel

The key to idolatry is given in Jeremiah 2:26–27:

As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed; they, their kings, their princes, their priests and their prophets, who say to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave me birth.'

Here the idol of wood is given father status, and the stone idol mother status. Israel has been created by such idols, and not by God, is the inference. Hence in Exodus 32:4, 8, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' The terrible thing about idols is that they are accorded the worship due only to God, and as such are hateful to Him Who calls Himself 'a jealous God'; that is, His love for His people causes Him to have wrath upon those who worship falsely. The two elements in worship as mentioned in Romans 1:19ff. are giving glory (honour) to God and giving thanks to Him. Giving God glory is the recognition of His Being, and thankfulness is for such glory and the gifts which are given to Man by it.

Man's idols are in forms, either of the mind or the sight. God has no form (Deut. 4:12) as such—'God is Spirit'—and He is not to be compared with any form on earth, for 'To whom will you liken me?' This ineffable One has always had to be worshipped in spirit and in truth. Man's creational affinity with Him allowed that, but the fall of Man has altered that affinity. Since Man must worship, then he must have some form, whether it be a seen form or an imagined one. This leads us to see that idols have no real existence

(I Cor. 8:4), that is, no ontological reality. In the Old Testament, Man makes idols, 'Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to *the work of their hands*, to what *their own fingers have made*' (Isa. 2:8). Paul puts them down to the imaginations of men (Acts 17:29). As such, the idol has no reality, and indeed is absurd. It is 'an image that will not move' (Isa. 40:20). It is 'an image, that is profitable for nothing' (Isa. 44:10). The one who worships it 'feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray' (Isa. 44:20). So God says, 'A workman made it; *it is not God*. The calf of Samaria shall be broken to pieces' (Hosea 8:6).

Even though 'nothing', yet the idols were also something. Like all things that impersonate the ontological reality, they draw upon the dynamic of the reality. Hence men are gripped by idols, 'Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone'. Idolators are not rational, 'A band of drunkards, they give themselves to harlotry; they love shame more than their glory. A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their altars' (Hosea 4:17-19). Idolators bow before their idols and kiss them incessantly (I Kings 19:18; Hosea 13:2). It is in the midst of increasing sin that men feel the urge to make even more idols (Hosea 13:2). From Exodus 32:6 we see that in such worship 'people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play', and I Corinthians 10:7 says, 'rose up to dance'.

As in Romans 1:19-32 idolatry was linked with sexual immorality, so the passion for idols is the giving of that love to them that belongs to God. God is to be loved because of His holy love, His steadfast love, His forgiveness and mercy. It is no wonder that idolatry has been mostly linked with sexual thinking and practice. Man is at his best when loving, so it is no wonder that impure love brings the perverse pleasure

which comes—though only momentarily—through illicit practices. Only a comprehension of the horrible impurity of idolatry—the perverse use of true love—can help us understand God's utter anger against idolatry. It is true that idols have behind them demonic forces which bring the idol-devotees into the grasp of such powers (cf. I Cor. 10:18-22; Deut. 32:17), but it is not that God's anger is directed only at such evil powers; it is that God takes all idol-worship to be evil blasphemy. His wrath is poured out against idolators.

Exodus 15:11 asks, 'Who is like thee, O LORD among the gods? Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?' The passage goes on to show what God has done, as against the pagan nations who worship other deities. We see that God's wrath is directed to Israel for going to other nations for help, and so giving credit to their deities, as though their own God could not—and would not—direct them. This is brought out strongly in the prophecy of Hosea. In chapter 2, Israel is caught up in harlotries; that is, she seeks lovers (idols, other nations) who will supply her with what she desires. Yet, 'she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold *which they used for Baal*'.

The Judgments on Idolatry

In Hosea many references are made to judgment, such as:

And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals
when she burned incense to them
and decked herself with her ring and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
and forgot me, says the LORD (2:13).

Ephraim shall become a desolation
in the day of punishment;
among the tribes of Israel
I declare what is sure.
The princes of Judah have become
like those who remove the landmark;
upon them I will pour out
my wrath like water.
Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment,
because he was determined to go after vanity.
Therefore I am like a moth to Ephraim,
and like dry rot to the house of Judah (5:9–12).

The 'day of the Lord' becomes an enlarging theme in the Minor Prophets, yet it is in Isaiah 2:12–22 that we see the terror that is to come against all idols and idolaters. Commencing with '*For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high*', the prophet goes on to describe the humiliation of those who worship idols:

And the idols shall utterly pass away.
And men shall enter the caves of the rocks
and the holes of the ground,
from before the terror of the LORD,
and from the glory of his majesty
when he rises to terrify the earth.
In that day men will cast forth
their idols of silver and their idols of gold,
which they make for themselves to worship
(vv. 18–20, emphasis mine).

Yes, they shall 'enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliff, from before the terror of the LORD and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth' (v. 21).

At the same time there are beautiful passages—particularly in Hosea—which speak of the mercy of God in the midst of their idolatry, such as, 'I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love,

and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.' This must be as close to Exodus 34:6–7 and God's 'covenant loyalty' as anything written in the Old Testament text. Again God's love reaches out in mercy to Israel.

If, then, we know the dreadful misery into which Israel had brought herself, and if we remember the times she had sought to leave her idolatries and return to the Lord (cf. 6:1–3), then we will know there was no way out for this nation. History has testified to the anger and judgments of God that all but decimated her as a nation, yet as we have observed, God was their covenant God, their Holy One of Israel, their Redeemer, their covenant Father, their sovereign God, ruling the affairs of men for His people as for His own holiness. None of this means much to us if it is merely objective history and not, in principle, *our* history. If we do not recognise our own passionate idolatries and disloyalties, then we will not much understand the riches of His mercy. What a relief and a wonder, then, to hear God say to Israel – as to us:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboim?
My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger,
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come to destroy (Hosea 11:8–9).

If we have missed the thrust of Exodus 34:6–7 and similar covenantal passages, then we will not understand what God is about in His mercy. His love is unfailing but His holiness demands judgment. His

wrath rightly springs from His holiness. It is not that His love, His steadfast love (covenantal loyalty), His forgiveness, His long-suffering and His faithfulness fight His wrath and judgment, but the truth is that His mercy does not fit into strictly logical and rational categories. Whilst He does not ignore sin done with a high hand, and the impenitence of apostasy, yet His mercy reaches out to sinful creatures in their idolatry and misery. He saves them from themselves because of His 'warm and tender compassion'. It is this knowledge which humbles us, and at the same time gives us marvellous hope.

11

*Israel and the Everlasting
Mercy—4*

THE PERSONAL WRITINGS AND THE MISERY OF ISRAEL – 2

The States of Suffering and Misery of Persons

It may appear to be a morbid occupation to examine the states of suffering of various members of the covenant people, but not only may case histories be valuable in helping us to understand the causes and nature of suffering, but in our situation we will also look at the same mercy of God which delivered many of these persons from their misery. Generally speaking there are two categories of people who suffered; namely those who did not require redemptive mercy since their suffering was because of their godliness, and not because of their sin—of course they required mercy, but mercy in their suffering—and then there are those who needed mercy because of their sinfulness. It is the latter group which we will endeavour to cover.

At the same time Paul gives us a principle in regard to serving God which we need to ponder. He said, 'having this ministry by the mercy of God' (II Cor. 4:1). Elsewhere he speaks eloquently of having ministry *by the grace of God*; but at first sight, having ministry *by the mercy of God* does not seem an appropriate way of talking. Paul seems to be saying that nothing in him warranted being given the gift of apostolic evangelical ministry. It was God's mercy that He took this persecutor of the Church and changed him to a minister of the gospel. In that sense, then, we can say that God had mercy on a person like Jacob who was a rebel from the womb, a man like Moses who killed an Egyptian, and a man like David who once pleaded with God that He should not remember the sins of his youth, but 'be mindful of thy mercy, O LORD'. These men all received a ministry through mercy.

Even so, we have stated that grace primarily deals with the matter of human guilt, whilst mercy deals with the misery which results from that guilt. Having said that, it is doubtful whether every mercy is linked with sin-related misery. Doubtless the prophets such as Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah and Daniel felt God's mercy upon them when their misery was deep because of the sinfulness of Israel, and God's subsequent wrath upon the people. Moses pleaded for his people, yet knew misery in his anger against them. David cried for mercy when he had numbered the people. Samuel felt the rejection of his people bitterly. Jeremiah's eyes constantly ran down fountains of tears 'for the wound of the daughter of my people'. Daniel could identify wholly with his people in saying, 'To us, O Lord, belongs confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee', but he could then turn to God and quote the memorial of Exodus 34:6-7 by saying,

'To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness'. Finally he could pray:

O my God, incline thy ear and hear; open thy eyes and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name; for we do not present our supplications before thee on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of thy great mercy (Dan. 9:18, emphasis mine).

Mercy, then, is never absent from any ministry or any life, but primarily it is the sinner in his misery who needs the full mercy of God.

CALAMITY-RELATED MERCY

Mercy is not always and only related to the misery wrought in one's spirit by sin. Calamity and oppression often come from outside. Israelites knew that all calamity is in the hands of God, but they also believed they could move Him within the calamity to have mercy; that is, to save them out of the misery brought by enmity, opposition, oppression and circumstances. Psalm 31 is a rich example of this. In verses 8-9 the writer talks of the grief caused him by his own iniquity, but, because he is 'down', his enemies believe they can vanquish him. He looks to God's steadfast love to deliver him. Likewise in Psalm 38 the enemies of David plot against him as the wrath of God is upon him, but he appeals to God for deliverance, at the same time confessing his sin, assured that being right with God he shall prevail. This principle is brought out again in Psalm 86:15-17 where the psalmist praises God for His goodness and His steadfast love, and then applies for help from God – that is, an act of mercy – in his time of trouble:

But thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and
faithfulness.
Turn to me and take pity on me;
give thy strength to thy servant,
and save the son of thy handmaid.
Show me a sign of thy favour
that those who hate me may see and be put to shame
because thou, LORD, hast helped me and comforted me.

Again, Psalm 57 is a plea for mercy in the face of adversity:

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in thee my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of thy wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by (v. 1).

In this psalm God's steadfast love and His faithfulness are mentioned in connection with His mercy. Thus we see the flow of covenantal care for the beleaguered of His people, in mercy, in steadfast love and in faithfulness. This is well expressed in Psalm 116:5-7 and really covers the principle we have just mentioned:

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
The LORD preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

The Universality of His Mercy

Psalm 145 verses 8-10 and 17 show that His mercy is not limited to Israel. We have touched upon this thought elsewhere, for Jonah's preaching to Nineveh was to bring them to the mercy of God, but in this psalm the matter is made explicit:

The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The LORD is good to all,
and *his compassion is over all that he has made*.

The LORD is just in all his ways,
and kind [*chasid*] in all his doings.

SIN-RELATED MISERY

The *locus classicus* of *sin-related misery* is Psalm 51. David had just heard the accusation of Nathan the prophet, 'Thou art the man!', that is, the man who had committed adultery with Bath-Sheba, and had manipulated the death (murder) of Uriah the Hittite, her husband. David, cut to his heart, cried:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to thy steadfast love;
according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin! (vv. 1-2).

David knew he could appeal for mercy. He knew God well enough to know He is the Lord of mercy. At the same time we might think David was a bit quick in appealing to that mercy. He was not. Psalm 32 is certainly a psalm which is linked with David's sin, and in that he tells of his misery experienced from unconfessed sin:

When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer (vv. 3-4).

This he had suffered for some time until he had confessed:

I acknowledged my sin to thee,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD';
then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin (v. 5).

David suffered misery from other situations. In Psalm 31 he cried:

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief,
my soul and my body also.
For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of *my misery*,
and my bones waste away (vv. 9–10, emphasis mine).

The word 'misery' can be translated 'iniquity', and this takes us on to the fact of the suffering that comes from sin. We have tried several times in our book to point out that both deprivation of God's and Man's glory is a fearful thing for the human spirit. Depravity of the spirit is also dreadful in its deprivations upon the mind and heart of Man. In Romans 1:24, 26 and 28 we saw that when God gave Man up to his sin, it was a judgment, not merely an abandonment without care or thought. A look at another psalm—the 38th—shows the intimate and personal closeness of God to the sinner, a closeness which brings deep anguish to him:

O LORD, rebuke me not in thy anger,
nor chasten me in thy wrath!
For thy arrows have sunk into me
and thy hand has come down on me.

There is no soundness in my flesh
because of thy indignation;
there is no health in my bones
because of my sin.

For my iniquities have gone over my head;
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.
My wounds grow foul and fester
because of my foolishness,
I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
all the day I go about mourning.
For my loins are filled with burning,
and there is no soundness in my flesh.
I am utterly spent and crushed;
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

Lord, all my longing is known to thee,
my sighing is not hidden from thee.
My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
and the light of my eyes—it also has gone
from me (vv. 1–10).

Here, again, is the oppression of sin which also acts as the wrath of God, especially as the guilt of sin accumulates and compounds itself within the human spirit. When we understand that the components of sin—and especially of sin's guilt—are pain, shame, heaviness, confusion, rebellion, pollution, anger, resentment, loneliness, dread of judgment, and the like, then we understand something of the misery of sin. We also understand that 'the way of transgressors is hard' (Prov. 13:15, AV), as we also can be sure our sin will find us out (Num. 32:23). Judgment is ever looming as even the most hardened of sinners know (Rom. 1:32). All of this, then, constitutes the misery of sin.

What to us is wonderful and surprising is that the sinner can hold conversation with God even in the midst of his sin. Thus in Psalm 38 the writer can say, 'Lord, all my longing is known to thee, my sighing is not hidden from thee'. Almost unconsciously the person knows he should confess his sin, but the deceit of sin—that the sin is not sin—holds the sinner back from confession in a perverse self-pride. So in Psalm 32:5 David says, 'I acknowledged my sin to thee, and

I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin’. Likewise in Psalm 38 the psalmist says, ‘I confess my iniquity, I am sorry for my sin’. In Psalm 130:1–4 the writer speaks of the enormity of sin, and the grace of forgiveness:

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!
Lord hear my voice!
Let thy ear be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities,
Lord, who shall stand?
*But there is forgiveness with thee,
that thou mayest be feared [emphasis mine].*

Psalm 51 really sets out the classical position of Man under misery. He has the misery of depravity, of loss of glory, of shame for moral pollution and the knowledge that God requires truth in the inward parts. He seeks for purification, for the restoration of the joy of salvation, and then for a ministry by mercy of the gospel of the mercy of God. He knows that whilst he appeals to God’s *abundant* mercy, yet he, for his part, must have ‘a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart’ for this state constitutes the basis for mercy. God will ‘by no means acquit the guilty’, that is, the hardened and impenitent ones, since grace and mercy would further implant them in their deliberate sinfulness.

CONCLUSION TO ‘ISRAEL AND THE EVERLASTING MERCY’

We may now adduce the following principles which obtained in Israel in the Old Testament because of the covenant and covenant mercy:

- (a) God will forgive and restore Israel if, having departed from the covenant, it will return and throw itself upon His mercy. Nehemiah 9:27–28 states:

Therefore thou didst give them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer; and in the time of their suffering they cried to thee and thou didst hear them from heaven; and *according to thy great mercies* thou didst give them saviours who saved them from the hand of their enemies [emphasis mine].

David cried, in somewhat the same vein:

Be mindful of thy mercy, O LORD,
and of thy steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions;
according to thy steadfast love remember me,
for thy goodness’ sake, O Lord! (Ps. 25:6–7).

This would appear to make the mercy of God something which can be manipulated, but it is better to see that Israel knew mercy to be of God’s character and so they could *apply* to it. Thus Daniel prayed:

O my God, incline thy ear and hear; open thy eyes and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name; for we do not present our supplications before thee on the ground of our righteousness, but *on the ground of thy great mercy* (9:18, emphasis mine).

- (b) God will even show mercy to Israel when He ought to destroy the people, because of their failure to repent:

... thou art a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and didst not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a molten calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up

out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, thou *in thy great mercies* didst not forsake them in the wilderness (Neh. 9:17–19, emphasis mine).

- (c) God will always help His people in any kind of misery, firstly in sin-related misery as with David who applied to the mercy of God (Ps. 51:1ff.), as also when he cried in Psalm 40:11–12:

Do not thou, O LORD, withhold
thy mercy from me,
let thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness
ever preserve me!
For evils have encompassed me
without number;
my iniquities have overtaken me
till I cannot see;
they are more than the hairs of my head;
my heart fails me.

Secondly He was merciful when distress visited them, especially in the form of their enemies. In Psalm 69:16–18 the psalmist cried:

Answer me, O LORD, for thy steadfast love is good;
according to thy abundant mercy, turn to me.
Hide not thy face from thy servant;
for I am in distress, make haste to answer me.
Draw near to me, redeem me,
set me free because of my enemies! [emphasis mine].

In Psalm 123 the same plea is made in confidence, 'Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt'.

- (d) By His mercy God will bring His people back into their land after they have been in exile:

The LORD will have compassion [mercy] on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land, and aliens will join them and will cleave to the house of Jacob (Isa. 14:1; cf. 49:13; Deut. 30:3).

Perhaps no single psalm could sum up the mercy of God to calamity-related and sin-related situations within the covenant than Psalm 111:

Praise the LORD.
I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who have pleasure in them.
Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.
He has caused his wonderful works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy,
they are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and terrible is his name!
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
a good understanding have all who practice it.
His praise endures forever! [emphasis mine].

Our final observation regarding the Old Testament is that if God's mercy was shown so powerfully and consistently in the 'old', that is, the former covenant, then could it be less powerful and less wonderful in the New Covenant? This impels us to look at mercy in the New Testament and in the New Covenant. What a dynamic mercy, steadfast love, long-suffering, forgiveness and faithfulness must be worked out and substantiated through the incarnation of the Son of God!

We could not do better than to repeat Isaiah's own summary:

I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD,
the praises of the Lord, according to all that the LORD
has granted us,
and the great goodness to the house of Israel
which he has granted them *according to his mercy*,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love
(Isa. 63:7, emphasis mine).

12

Mercy Come in the Flesh

THE LIVING COVENANT-WORD

God's revelation of His glory was given to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7:

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 generation'.

We have seen how this covenant glory of God was in action amongst God's people. They believed the word of God, because He was the living God – that is, the God who not only talked but acted – and all His words were dynamic. By faith they obeyed, and walked in the will of the Lord.

With the coming of Jesus a new event took place. The glory of God was manifest in the flesh! 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father' (John 1:14). The glory which God showed to Moses, and which became the revealing

word or description of God to the people, now came as man—a man—into the human situation. Some scholars have sought to show that in John 1:14 ‘grace’ (*charis*) approximates to ‘steadfast love’ (*chesed*), and ‘truth’ (*aletheia*) to ‘faithfulness’ (*emeth*), and that really this glory incarnate covers all the elements or attributes of God mentioned in the Exodus passage. Indeed, they see John 1:14 as almost the parallel of Exodus 34:6. Whilst God reveals His attributes in the Exodus passage, yet we were permitted to see them in Jesus. He, Christ, was Emmanuel, ‘God with us’, that is, God-in-the-flesh. We have good reasons to believe this is so.

Of course, in Christ, words such as ‘grace’, ‘mercy’, ‘long-suffering’, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘faithfulness’ take on deeper meaning than previously. What is important is that this glory did not come as a verbal proclamation, so much as *a* person—the Person. Glory, then, moves and operates in the very person of Jesus. We do not have a theology of glory, but a *Person* of glory. We do not have a new covenant so much as the covenant is incarnate in him. He is grace and truth, love and forgiveness, wrath and judgment and personal deliverance—in himself. In the New Testament everything is in Christ and so mercy is incarnate in him.

Without question, the primary words of the New Testament are ‘grace’ and ‘love’, as in the Old Testament ‘steadfast love’ (*chesed*) and perhaps ‘faithfulness’ are primary words used in the covenantal situation. Roughly speaking, *chesed* (steadfast love) and *chen* (favour)—together—come close to the New Testament word ‘grace’, even if not quite. Grace transcends *chesed*, as doubtless mercy (*eleos*) transcends the concept of the Old Testament *racham*. Mercy nevertheless plays an important part in the New Testament. Just as there is no grace apart from God, so there is no mercy apart from Him. In other words,

there is no *commodity* of grace, and no *commodity* of mercy. They are both the *actions* of God. Hence we speak of God being rich in mercy, and talk of ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’ and ‘the grace of God’. This is heartening news for it means grace and mercy are the pure actions *of* God, and not even some enabling power *from* God.¹

The Coming of Mercy

In her ‘Magnificat’ (Luke 1:46–55), Mary says, ‘And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to

¹ This brings up the question of whether, strictly speaking, *chesed* should always be translated in the OT—as in the *RSV*—as ‘steadfast love’ and that alone—a point which we briefly raised before. Whilst ‘steadfast love’ may have its own nuances, yet as Markus Barth (*Ephesians*, p. 218) comments:

Mercy (*eleos*) is the LXX and NT translation of the OT term *hesed*. The *RSV* rendering of this noun is ‘steadfast-love’ and suggests that *hesed* is the stable and loyal way in which God keeps the covenant.

The *AV* ‘loving-kindness’ may still be a preferable word for mercy, and translates *chesed* in the LXX (235 times), which suggests that steadfast love and mercy are closely related, if, indeed, not sometimes synonymous. The fact that in Jeremiah 3:12 the *RSV* translates the adjective *chasid* as ‘merciful’ lends some weight to this thought. In Isaiah 54:7–8:

For a brief moment I forsook you,
but with great compassion [*rachamim*: mercy] I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love [*chesed*]
I will have compassion [*rachamim*] on you.

Mercy springs out of, or accompanies, steadfast love. In Hosea 2:19 steadfast love and mercy are also associated. We have suggested that *chesed* (steadfast love) and *chen* (favour, graciousness) are brought together in *charis* (grace) in the NT with the added soteriological element brought by Christ. Steadfast love which was translated *eleos* in the LXX is not actually brought into view, for love (*agape*) is now used, the equivalent to ‘*ahabah*’ in the OT. Of course we would not expect to find strict parallels, but it would be fair to say that mercy in the OT and NT are much the same.

generation'. She has just been speaking of the mighty things God does, but which He tempers with mercy. In Psalm 111 it is written, 'the LORD is gracious and merciful', and concludes with, 'the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom'. Those that fear the Lord know His mercy, and Mary was counting the ministry of being Messiah's mother as a mercy of God. The 'from generation to generation' really arises from Exodus 20:6 where the Lord promised His steadfast love to thousands of those who love Him and keep His commandments.

In his 'Benedictus' (Luke 1:68-79), Zechariah the priest speaks of 'the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant'. This mercy was the covenant by which 'we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life'. 'Delivered from the hand of our enemies' takes us back to the psalms we saw, in which the writers asked for God's mercy to deliver them from oppression. Likewise the opportunity to serve and worship God without suffering persecution is considered a mercy. From verse 76 the thought changes somewhat. John the Baptist—Zechariah's son—is to be the harbinger of God's salvation 'through the tender mercy of our God', and this mercy brings forgiveness of sins and the shedding of saving light upon those who 'sit in darkness and in the shadow of death'. This is a very beautiful mercy!

THE GIVING OF MERCY: JESUS' ACTS OF LOVE AND COMPASSION

Jesus can be said to be mercy incarnated, as indeed he was all of God incarnated. Paul later speaks of him as

the fullness of God, and of God's fullness dwelling in him. Out of that fullness Jesus ministered grace and mercy and truth. It was the fullness of God indwelling Man, and so that fullness expressed mercy in actions. Whilst 'the dayspring from on high' had visited Man for the mercy of salvation, yet all along the way God's mercy was expressed in acts of kindness. Mercy is aid to the miserable; that is, loving and gracious help in time of need—the expression of God's compassion.

In Matthew 9:27-31 we have the account of two blind men who cried aloud to Jesus, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David'. We do not need to stress the fact of the misery of blindness, although many brave spirits have lived wonderfully and patiently in such darkness. Doubtless the blind men had heard of Jesus' power to heal, and may even have thought of him as Messiah since they called him 'Son of David'. Whatever the case, mercy came to them in the form of beautiful sight. It is difficult for one who has not been blind to fully comprehend this. In Matthew 17:14-18 there is the account of the healing of the epileptic boy. The lad had suffered terribly, sometimes falling into fire and water. His was certainly a pitiable case of distress and misery. The act of mercy liberated him from demonic oppression. What an occasion of joy for the boy and his father! Again, those of us who have not suffered demonic oppression cannot comprehend the measure of mercy which came to the boy and his father.

In Matthew 18:21-35 is the remarkable story or parable of a king who forgave a debtor servant millions of dollars of debt, only for that forgiven man to thrust a fellow servant, who owed him a trifle, into prison. The king rebuked him, 'I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have

had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' The nature of mercy can be understood by this story.

Further, in Matthew 20:30–34 is the second story of two blind men asking for mercy, and being healed of their blindness. We are told, 'And Jesus *in pity* touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him'. If we think of these few occasions as being special times of mercy simply because the word 'mercy' is used, then we would be astray in our thinking. In Matthew 9:36 we are told that 'When he saw the crowds, *he had compassion for them*, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'. All his acts were acts of mercy; we must understand that.

What was remarkable about his acts was the fact that he did not demand repentance towards God and faith in himself as a condition for healing or deliverance from evil spirits. He simply healed as he went, liberating one and all. This was mercy *par excellence*. Whilst some pleaded for mercy, he had mercy anyway. He also taught the principle of mercy, as we shall see. Two occasions are of special interest, the first being that of the woman who had a spirit of infirmity, that is, of spondylitis. She had been bent for 18 years and Jesus released her, describing her as a daughter of Abraham, that is, a covenant person who should have been free, anyway. Likewise, in the case of Zaccheus Jesus said, 'Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham'. In this sense Jesus' healing and ministry could be called 'covenantal', although the more usual reference was to it being the action of the Kingdom of God. Of course Jesus' great work of mercy was the work of redemption, of which we shall speak later.

Universal Mercy

We saw in the Old Testament that 'The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love', and 'The LORD is good to all, and *his compassion is over all that he has made*' (Ps. 103:8; 145:9). The universal application of His mercy might not have appeared in the Gospels, except for the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28. She was not a Jew, and her daughter was demon-possessed. Unlike those under the covenant, she had no right to appeal to God's mercy, but she did. She cried to Jesus, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon'. For some minutes he seemed to argue that she had no right to such mercy, but having tested her he said, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' Her daughter was healed, as she showed that one condition for receiving mercy – if indeed there are conditions – was that of faith. She was outside the covenant with Israel, but not outside the mercy of Him who had created her.

It can easily be argued that Jesus came to show this universal mercy of God, but since he came to the lost of the tribes of Israel, his first duty was towards his own people. Later he would send his disciples into all the world, to all tribes and nations, with the message of God's mercy. Romans chapters 9 – 11 affirms His universal mercy, though nowhere is His mercy a right of Man, nor universalistic in nature.

Jesus – Man of Mercy

It may seem that our recounting, above, of what Jesus did – in the light of our theme of mercy – may be too analytical, merely a putting together of the facts. If so,

then we have missed the heart of mercy. We have good reason to believe that Isaiah 53 in all its elements pertains to Jesus and his Messianic ministry. In that passage it was said of the Suffering Servant:

He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief (v. 3).

Of him it was also said:

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted
but he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed (vv. 4–5).

These words remind us of the Good Shepherd of whom the prophet speaks in Isaiah 63:7–9, who led his people through the wilderness:

I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD,
the praises of the LORD,
according to all that the LORD has granted us,
and the great goodness to the house of Israel
which he granted them *according to his mercy,*
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
For he said, Surely they are my people,
sons who will not deal falsely;
and he became 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;
he lifted them up and carried them
all the days of old [emphasis mine].

When, then, in the Gospels we read of his pity, and his compassion, we know that he lived and expressed the Divine mercy. We cannot view all his acts of love

and mercy coldly, and see them simply as factual. Not only was it in the Cross that he was compassionate. He was ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief’. Whilst in fact he was not a sorrowful man, he was a man who was at one with people in their sorrow and misery. He was acquainted, that is, familiar, with griefs.

JESUS’ TEACHING ON BEING MERCIFUL

Jesus emphasised the need of Man to be merciful. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:7) he said, ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy’. The primary thought was not a *quid pro quo*. The one who is merciful is merciful because he has already obtained mercy. Whilst one can refuse to be merciful—as we saw in the parable of the unforgiving, forgiven debtor in Matthew 18—yet the constraint is always to have mercy on others, when God has had mercy on us. To refuse to be merciful when one has obtained mercy tells of a tragic state of spirit.

In Luke 6:32–36 Jesus speaks of doing good to others, not hoping for a reward, a *quid pro quo*. He said:

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

God’s mercy is that He does things, not expecting any reward. This is pure mercy. He is merciful to ‘the ungrateful and the selfish’. Our mercy, then, should not be only towards those who, being in need, will respond beautifully to our mercy. Nor should it be towards those who even expect it as their due. Prompted by true compassion, we would move in

mercy no matter what the attitudes of others, or what the results may be.

In Matthew 9:10–17 we have the account of the dinner Matthew made for Jesus at the time of his becoming a disciple of the Lord. He had invited his friends, all of whom were categorised as sinners by the Pharisees. They expressed surprise and indignation that Jesus would company with such people. Jesus said, in reply:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous but sinners.

Jesus quoted to them from Hosea 6:6, 'For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings'. Had these Pharisees had the gentleness and compassion of mercy within them, they would have rejoiced that Jesus was showing God's compassion on sinners.

Again, in Matthew 12:1–8 the incident took place where Jesus' hungry disciples were eating wheat grains, plucking them from the standing crop, doing this on the Jewish sabbath. The Pharisees considered this to be a breaking of the law – the work of harvesting! Jesus answered them by showing that sacrifices were made in the temple on the sabbath (Num. 28:9–10), and pointing out that David ate the holy shewbread of the tabernacle when his troops were hungry. He quoted Hosea 6:6 again, saying virtually that they – the Pharisees – were caught up in a deadly legalism, since they could not see that God's law contained mercy, in allowing for special situations. Doubtless Jesus was saying they lacked the warm flow of mercy, drained as they were of the great juices of love and mercy.

Jesus' story of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:21ff.), whose own large debt had been paid by his master, says about all that can be said regarding an unmerciful spirit. In Matthew 23:23–24, Jesus takes the Pharisees to task for their hypocrisy:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel.

Jesus was clearly saying that whilst tithing was a command of the law and ought to be obeyed, yet meticulous emphasis on tithing such small things whilst passing over the 'weightier matters of the law' was so hypocritical. The weightier matters of the law were 'justice and mercy and faith[fulness]'. By 'the law', Jesus may mean what the law demands, or he may be using the word generically for the whole system of the covenant, in which case this verse points back to Exodus 34:6–7 and related covenantal elements. The thrust of the law was not a rigorist legalism, but the law of love. True, it demanded righteousness, but not the elements of self-righteousness which bring loss of mercy and true faithfulness.

Two Parables on Mercy

Jesus taught mercy by the use of two stories. The first one – the parable of the Good Samaritan – is in Luke 10:25–37. A lawyer was asking Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life, and was told it came by truly loving God and one's neighbour. The lawyer asked, 'And who is my neighbour?' and in reply Jesus told the parable of the Jew who had been robbed and badly injured by thieves. His Jewish compatriots – a priest and a Levite – saw him separately, but made no

endeavour to help him. A Samaritan—of a race despised by the Jews, and a race at enmity with Jews—saw the robbed and wounded man and ‘he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds’, caring for him. Jesus asked the lawyer, ‘Which proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?’ The lawyer answered, ‘The one *who showed mercy* on him’. Jesus’ teaching was quite radical, but the point was clear. I see a man as my neighbour when I have mercy on him. I am then truly neighbour to him!

The second story is that known as the parable of ‘Dives and Lazarus’. It is found in Luke 16:19–31. It is, of course, a parable, yet is a story enacted endlessly in the annals of human history. The poor man—Lazarus—lived in illness, discomfort, hunger and misery as daily he watched the rich man live in great luxury. The rich man went to Hades, ‘being in torment’. He cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame’. He sees Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom, that is, Paradise.

The significance of the story is not difficult to discover. The rich man had had no mercy on Lazarus the poor man. He knew his name: he must have known who he was, his needs and misery, but he had done nothing about these things. He now wishes to use Lazarus to give him some ease from his suffering. When Father Abraham denies him that, he then wishes to use Lazarus to warn his brothers against the torment of Hades. He is told that Moses (the law) and the prophets are ever with his brethren, and these are dynamic enough to warn anyone. Dives did not obtain mercy because he had not been merciful. In his misery the rich man cried for mercy, but received the due reward of having failed to be merciful.

CONCLUSION ON ‘MERCY COME IN THE FLESH’

In our next chapter, ‘The Mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ’, we will see his mercy in redemption. In this chapter we have seen his high view of mercy, his own great acts of mercy and his demands upon us to show mercy. The writer of Hebrews called him ‘a merciful and faithful high priest’, and showed him to be beyond any other high priest. Jesus himself did not see his acts of mercy as proceeding from himself, but from God. In Mark 5:1–20 we have the story of the Gadarene demoniac, possessed by many demons. When healed, he desired to be with Jesus, but Jesus told him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how *he has had mercy on you*’. In this sense, then, we can rightly speak of Jesus as Mercy Incarnate.

13

'The Mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ'—1

CHRIST'S MERCY

In our previous chapter we saw that Jesus was really God's mercy incarnate. In Jude 21 the apostle wrote, 'wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life'. Without now going into the meaning of this verse, we see it relates to eschatological mercy—mercy at the end time. At the same time Jude could speak of mercy in the present time (v. 2), 'May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you'. What we gather from Paul is that the mercy of the Father can also be called the mercy of the Son (I Tim. 1:2; II Tim. 1:2). Peter links the present and the future when he says, 'By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead'.

What we are now about to undertake is seeing how it was that Jesus was the mercy of God for mankind. That he did acts of mercy and taught in regard to mercy, we have already seen. Now we set about seeing Jesus as this active mercy of God in redemption.

THE MEANING OF MERCY

It may seem strange that we have gone through twelve chapters of our book without looking closely at the meaning of the word 'mercy'. Words have a way of expressing themselves, generally from their contexts and usage, so we doubt that a reader has not grasped the meaning of our special word. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* has:

Forbearance and compassion shown by one person to another who is in his power and who has no claim to receive kindness . . . God's pitiful forbearance towards His creatures . . . Disposition to forgive; mercifulness . . . The clemency or forbearance of a conqueror, which he can extend or not as he thinks fit . . . An act of mercy; esp. one vouchsafed by God to His creatures: a gift of God, a blessing.¹

The following are some more theological descriptions of the word, 'The goodness or love of God shown to those who are in misery, irrespective of their deserts'.² 'God's tender compassion, that pity which He has for man in his weakness, and misery and helplessness.'³ 'A disposition to spare or help another.'⁴ 'The divine love, manifested in saving acts of grace, which God holds for his covenant people.'⁵ 'Active kindness to everyone in need of help.'⁶

¹ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, p. 1309.

² L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, p. 72.

³ N. H. Snaith, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson, SCM Press, London, 1957, p. 143.

⁴ C. E. Armerding, 'Mercy, Merciful', in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, eds M. C. Tenney and S. Barabas, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1977, p. 188.

⁵ E. R. Achtemeier, 'Mercy, Merciful', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, ed. G. A. Buttrick, Abingdon, Nashville, 1962, p. 352.

⁶ F. V. Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, A. & C. Black, London, 1960, p. 246.

These descriptions certainly give us a general idea of mercy.

The famous statement of Archbishop Richard Trench is found in his *Synonyms of the New Testament*:⁷

But whilst *χάρις* [*charis*: grace] has reference to the *sins* of men, and is that glorious attribute of God which these sins call out and display, his *free gift* in their forgiveness, *ἔλεος* [*eleos*: mercy] has special and immediate regard to the *misery* which is the consequence of these sins, being the tender sense of this misery displaying itself in the effort, which only the continued perverseness of man can hinder or defeat, to assuage and entirely remove it.

The Freeness of Mercy

We need to see that God is not *bound* to have mercy. Any such obligation would wholly cancel the idea of mercy. God said, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy' (Exod. 33:19; Rom. 9:15). Hence Paul said, 'He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy' (Titus 3:5). The wonder of mercy is, of course, its utter freeness. In the covenant, the people of God knew His steadfast love (*chesed*) to be unwavering, sure and steady. Some—as we noted—have called it 'covenant-loyalty'. Even in their most terrible days Israel could count upon that covenant-love. But what of mercy? Could they 'count' on it? The answer is both 'Yes!' and 'No!' Mercy will always be there because He is ever the God of compassion, but at the same time mercy will *always* be a surprise, and a wonder. That is because of the sheer freeness of it. Mercy, when it happens, is always

brehtaking, for it is unprompted and so is spontaneous on the part of God, even though many cry out in appeal to the everlasting mercy. The word is irreversible—'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful . . .'

CHRIST AND THE MERCY OF GOD

We now set our minds towards certain New Testament passages which demonstrate and explicate mercy. These passages bring us to an understanding of mercy which even Old Testament statements could not tell us. Mercy became incarnate in Christ, and we need no prophetic or former covenant words to tell us the nature of mercy—good as they were in their times. Whilst their word was foundational to our present understanding, yet Mercy Incarnate has come. If, then, we understand what we read of this Mercy Incarnate, and if the Holy Spirit gives us revelation because we are ready to hear, then we can be caught up into a richer understanding of God. The word 'mercy' should come wonderfully alive to us.

Ephesians 2:1-10

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the imperishable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

⁷ Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1978 (1880), p. 169.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

In looking at this and the other biblical passages which follow, I ask readers not to reflexively give way to disinterest—something which seems automatically to happen with many of us when we are faced consecutively with a number of ideas that we ought thoughtfully to consider. It is not that we lack the ability to think things through, but we may lack the incentive. Modern media serve us all too well in making ideas clear, but we become accustomed to ‘easy thinking’. Much of our thinking is in the realm of trivia. If we would give ourselves to the riches that can be ours by patience and application, then—particularly in this case—the great and profound theme of mercy might open more powerfully to us, and this to our great advantage.

God’s Great Plan for His Elect

Paul has been showing God’s great plan in the first chapter of this letter (Ephesians), and ‘great’ it is. Before time—before Creation—God has planned Man’s holiness, his sonship, and his redemption. He has also planned that everything should be summed up and unified in Christ. This means that ultimately there will be no dissension, no division, but only wholesome unity in heaven and earth: all things in creation will be finding that oneness in Christ.

Having revealed this, Paul prays that his readers may have special wisdom and revelation from God, to know the hope of their calling and their coming inheritance, as also the power that keeps them until that day. Having then shown the Lordship of Christ over

all powers, he suddenly confronts his readers with their former wretched state. *Mercy will not be seen as mercy until—and unless—the reader sees the wretched state of fallen Man, and—in fact—until he identifies with that state, seeing himself as needing mercy.*

Fallen Man—Decadent and Dead!

So Paul commences by telling us we were dead. In particular, he refers to the Christians who in their pre-Christian state were formerly Gentiles, hence his use of the term ‘you’. ‘Salvation is from the Jews’, as Jesus had told the Samaritan woman. The Gentiles were not in the running for salvation: *they were dead*. The word ‘dead’—rightly heard—is an ominous word, a dreaded word, a heavy word, a shocking term to describe a human being who has biological existence and who—to all appearances—is very much alive! The whole human race is dead, not only doomed to biological death, but dead now. To a secular reader this statement will sound absurd. How, possibly, can a man be dead when he is obviously alive, given in that he will one day die? Biblically, every man is dead to God: dead, each man, to his true self. God had breathed into Man the breath of life at creation, but he had lost that life in the Fall—the great rebellion against God. Yet it was not only ‘in Adam’ that Man died (cf. Rom. 5:12ff.), but each man and woman also pursues his or her life of committing sins. Sins are death in themselves, as well as active in extending the deathness of Man.

The Forms of Death

No man will believe he is dead, but he does not hear God’s voice, though God is *always* speaking. He

hears voices of dead idols and dead gods, but they do not speak him into life. His own future is dead—without hope—for devised idols have no future, no eschatology. Sin and guilt conspire to make Man a dead creature. As such, all that he touches dies. Man walks in his death and does not know he is dead. He thinks himself to be alive. This is the brilliant—though dreadful—deception of sin, of human lusts, of human ambitions. Man is forced to follow the course of this world. He knows its routines, he follows its fashions, he is caught in its patterns. He thinks he lives but does not. This is what Paul is saying in these first few verses of Ephesians chapter 2.

Most of what we have said in these present paragraphs is general, is theological and is set out in biblical language and biblical moral terms. A secular reader would shake his head at it, yet to translate those terms for him in the face of human existence is difficult. No sooner would we have described a man's deathful existence, than the reader would be compelled to scoff. In vain might we call him 'natural', and tell him 'the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit'. He would tell us that it is our inbuilt obscurantism which makes us talk in this way. Any man's preoccupation with himself, his advancement, his own things such as family, possession, vocation—and so on—is such that he is amazed to hear them described as 'the motions of death'. To him these things are the norm of life; they are the authentic actions of a living person. He sees religion as 'abnormal' or 'supernormal', and he cannot buy the statement that he—the secular man—is in death. He does not see himself in death, which is why Jesus said that unless a man be born again ('from above'), he cannot see the Kingdom of God. Most secular persons would readily agree they do not see such a Kingdom,

nor see any necessity to view it. The fact is that they are dead to it, dead in their way of 'life'.

When we try to translate this understanding of 'death' into the widest sphere of human living, then we are faced with the same unbelief. Whatever there is in history that did not—and does not—spring from the true life of God, and the life He has given Man, that must be counted as this 'death'. This *deathness*—to coin a word—would cover all Man's history, his philosophies, his religions, his wars, his politics, his governments, his modes and methods of existing on this plane. Given that behind them is the strong sovereignty of God controlling all things in a way unseen, yet Man's autonomous ways are ways of death. His self-rule is apart from God. He is out on his own, planning and doing—without God. When we bring this down to the particular ways of existence of persons, then the principle still obtains—personally. Death of this kind is a dreadful thing.

Man under Satan

There is a spirit which works in Man. Dead as is his own spirit—that is, dead to God—another spirit works within him, energising him to follow his egotistical behaviour patterns, in order to make something of this existence. Man—without knowing it—is a slave of 'the prince of the power of the air'. This prince is a brilliant supernatural power who never ceases to work in the human race. In speaking this way, Paul points not only to Gentiles but also includes the saints who were once Jews. He uses the word 'we'. 'Among these *we* all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so *we* were, by nature, children of wrath, like the rest of

mankind' (Eph. 2:3). How sad a statement is this! Slaves of our passions, and living under God's wrath – that is what we were. Not even the ancient covenant with Israel prevented many of them being so fleshly.

In II Corinthians 4:4, Paul speaks of Satan blinding the minds of men, so that they do not see the glory of the gospel. How brilliant Satan is to lead us to think we are not in such bondage! His self-concealment is a masterpiece of strategy.

Again, to the secular person this description of Man under Satan will sound strange and foolish, but the so-called 'secular man' will have to devise some rationalisation for the evil that is in the world. Every day he is confronted by it in its various forms of selfishness, cruelty, bitterness and deceit.

Man under Wrath

Paul says in this passage, 'We were by nature children of wrath'. What does 'children of wrath' mean? It certainly does not mean 'naughty children' or 'angry children'. It means our way of life as one under wrath; we follow the way and manner of wrath. The wrath here is the wrath of God, and it is that wrath to which we are subject. This brings us back to the passages we studied on Man's misery in the Old Testament, passages such as Psalm 31:10, 32:3-4, and 38:1-12. There we saw the guilt of Man literally affecting his body, bringing him into terrible emotional and organic states of experience, even to sickness, fear and depression. This state the psalmist understood to be God's wrath. In this sense he saw himself as 'a child of wrath', and that he would remain as such until God moved in *chesed* and *racham*, and brought him back to covenantal *shalom* (peace).

In order to understand the theme of wrath⁸ more clearly, we need to look at Romans 1:18-32 – an exercise we will complete in our next section. In 1:18, Paul says, 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth'. Three times in Romans 1:18-32, Paul speaks of Man being given up to his sin and guilt. The 'giving up' of Romans 1:24, 26,

⁸ When we come to discuss God's wrath we should be aware that in seeking to understand wrath we must never start with human wrath or anger as our basis of thinking, or that will distort the nature of God's wrath. In fact our own human guiltiness precludes us from knowing God's wrath. *Wrath has to be a revelation from God*. In the OT we saw that His wrath springs from holiness (Hab. 1:13), or rather the violation of the holiness He has given to created Man and the creation itself. In Romans 1:18-32 we see that His wrath is giving Man up to his own compounding sin and guilt, so that whilst we would not say that God's wrath is sin, yet we can say that sin is God's wrath, in the sense that He gives us over to the sin and does not withhold us from it. God's wrath is His hatred of sin, and His intention to destroy it. The wrath is not only the attitude but the actual carrying out of that destruction. J. G. McKenzie in his book *Guilt: Its Meaning and Significance* (George Allen and Unwin, Great Britain, 1962, pp. 150-51) quotes from Father Danielou's book *The Lord of History* (pp. 154f.):

We have to reckon, whether we like it or not, with wrath as one of the divine attributes: and, what is more, for all its anthropomorphic appearance, this particular word may carry a stronger charge of mystical significance than any other, and afford the deepest insight into the meaning of the divine transcendence.

Danielou quotes Péguy (no reference stated or verified) as saying, 'Wrath is the emotional response of a sound personality to anything vile, low and mean'. Danielou's own conclusion is:

that the innermost kernel of this idea of the wrath of God would be simply a mark of the intensity of his being, and the irresistible force with which his power may be manifested in creation, when he is pleased to give a violent reminder of his existence to a world steadfastly turns [sic] away from him.

Even though Danielou uses the term 'attribute', it is doubtful whether that is the best word. God is holy, loving, merciful, but not wrathful—as such. He is *provoked* to wrath, but in no sense can He be said to be provoked to love. He is love. It is better to talk of 'the wrath of love'—for it is that—in which case wrath is not seen as impatience, or arbitrary action, when God is 'provoked'.

and 28 (*paredoken*) needs to be understood as God's deliberate act of wrath,⁹ and not to be thought of merely as God simply leaving them—Man—to their foolishness; that is, 'to stew in their own juice'. What happens to Man is a judgment of God, and this judg

⁹ *Ernst Käsemann* (*Commentary on Romans*, SCM Press, London, 1980, pp. 47–48) has a lengthy comment on *paredoken*. In it he says:

[Paul] seems to be in agreement that with Philo . . . 'the source of all wrongs is godlessness'. But Paul paradoxically reverses the cause and consequence: Moral perversion is the result of God's wrath, not the reason for it . . . The Creator divests himself of his directly perceptible sovereign right and becomes the hidden Judge, striking with corruption those who can live neither without him nor against him . . . Men have to endure what they wanted to attain—they are themselves their guilt and its cost . . . Despisers of God bring down God's curse on themselves. In this judgment one may see plainly what the reality of mankind and the world is when it breaks free from God and is given up by him to immanence.

John Murray (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977, p. 43) comments:

The retribution consists in giving up (*cf.* vs. 26, 28) to uncleanness. It needs to be noted that the penalty inflicted belongs to the *moral* sphere as distinguished from the *religious*—religious degeneracy is penalized by abandonment to immorality; sin in the religious realm is punished by sin in the moral sphere.

C. K. Barrett (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, A. & C. Black, London, 1962, p. 38) says:

The words 'God handed them over' stand three times in this paragraph (*vv.* 24, 26, 28), repeated with horrifying emphasis. God's judgement has already broken forth; only he has consigned sinners not to hell but to sin—if indeed these be alternatives.

C. E. B. Cranfield (*A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary series, T. & T. Clark, London, 1975, p. 121) says:

. . . this delivering them up was a deliberate act of judgment and mercy on the part of the God who smites in order to heal (Isa 19.22), and that throughout the time of their God-forsakenness God is still concerned with them and dealing with them.

Note: Some commentators—like Cranfield—see wrath as a means to bring to God's mercy. Hence the use of Isaiah 54:7–8, that is, that God's wrath is only temporary. Whilst *in covenant* this may well obtain, the question is whether it is valid to apply this to all mankind as a principle, in the light of Romans 9:15, 19–24, and 11:28–32.

ment is horrific. Man's state is not one which he can control. His will is to sin, but he is also driven pell-mell into it.

'THE RICHES OF HIS MERCY'

Man under wrath is in a terrible state, both of deprivation and depravity, and his personal being is awry and dislocated since his natural (creational) centre must be God. When, then, we add up the themes of 'death', 'conformed to the world'; 'enslaved to, and energised by, the prince of the power of the air'; 'sons of disobedience'; 'children of wrath', we see the terrible condition and predicament of Man. How does a person extricate himself from all this? The answer is, 'He cannot!'

Paul, having laid the foundation for understanding the mercy of God, says:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses made us alive in Christ (by grace you have been saved) and raised us up with him and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4–6).

Note the term 'rich in mercy', for it means that God does not barely have mercy upon Man in misery.¹⁰

¹⁰ Because the matter of mercy is so enthralling, and because I believe the passage of Ephesians 2:1–10 is the primary passage in dealing with it, I have thought it right to include the following comments—by others—on Ephesians 2:4–6. These verses are not to be passed over lightly. The reader should find them very rewarding:

E. K. Simpson (*Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977, p. 51) makes the comparison of what they were—verses 1–3—to what they will be made by mercy—verse 5a:

Paul has a gospel to proclaim radiant with life, a resurrection from a living death to a deathless vitality. Its recipients are upraised from 'sin's dark sepulchre' to the panoramic observatory of the skies. What can reanimate the cold sterilities of such a necropolis as he has just portrayed? The enquiry dates from the days of Ezekiel and admits of only one answer. The Spirit of the Lord must breathe on these dry bones. In the act of re-vivification the Creator must take the initiative. And how plenteous in mercy must He be to brood over the skeletons in that grim charnel-house of souls beheld in the valley of

vision, despite all their offensiveness, and to deign to requicken them by His own invincible energy!

John Eadie (*A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, ed. W. Young, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1979 [1883], pp. 140–41):

... in this mercy God is rich. It has no scanty foothold in His bosom, for it fills it. Though mercy has been expended by God for six millenniums, and myriads of myriads have been partakers of it, it is still an unexhausted mine of wealth.

H. Alford (*Alford's Greek Testament*, vol. 3, Guardian Press, Grand Rapids, 1976 [1856], p. 92), '... in compassion ... as applying to our wretchedness before (cf. Ezek. xvi.6)'. In fact see all of Ezekiel 16 for Israel's wretchedness and God's mercy—Israel sinful, God punishing, God insisting on His *chesed* of covenant.

S. D. F. Salmond (*Expositor's Greek Testament: Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1951, p. 287):

God who is wroth with sin, is a God of grace. His disposition towards those who are dead by trespasses and sins is one of mercy, and this is no stinted mercy, but a mercy that is *rich*, exhaustless.

Markus Barth (*Ephesians*, vol. 1, Anchor Bible Commentary, Doubleday & Co., New York, 1981, p. 218):

An allusion is made to OT passages such as Exod 34:6 and Deut 7:7–9 that speak of the riches of God's mercy, the motivation of his action by love alone, and the identity of God in his essence and his manifestation... Mercy (*eleos*) is the *LXX* and NT translation of the OT term *hesed*. The *RSV* rendering of this noun is 'steadfast love' and suggests that *hesed* is the stable and loyal way in which God keeps the covenant. The *KJ* Version 'loving kindness' may still be preferable because it conveys the meaning 'undeserved mercy' or 'prevenient grace'.

R. C. H. Lenski (*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians to the Ephesians and to the Philippians*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1961, pp. 414–15) says:

'Grace' is this love as it is extended to us sinners in our *guilt* and unworthiness and pardons the guilt for Christ's sake in spite of our unworthiness. 'Mercy' goes out to the *wretched* and miserable. Grace deals with the cause, the guilt; mercy with the consequences, the wretched death in which we lie... Having described us in our pitiful deadness, mercy is applied in order to remove this consequence of guilt; it is the mercy of love with its full knowledge and blessed purpose.

J. Calvin (*The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, Calvin's N.T. Commentaries, vol. 11, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 142):

On this ground he praises the mercy of God, meaning by its riches, that it had been poured out liberally and superbly. Although he here ascribed the whole of our salvation to the mercy of God, a little after he more precisely places it in His free goodness, when

The source of that mercy is 'His great love', and from that great fountain come His mercy and kindness. In fact, we can see that 'riches of mercy' and 'great love' both add up to grace, since Paul says 'by *grace* you have been saved'.

A revolution has taken place. From being a demeaned and depraved creature, Man has been raised from his moral and spiritual death. The scene comes to mind of Lazarus being in the tomb before which Jesus is standing. Martha is sick with the thought of his corruption—'It is four days and by this time he stinketh'—but when Jesus calls, 'Lazarus!' a new man, filled with life and fervour, comes forward, struggling to be free of his graveclothes, and Jesus urges the mourners to 'loose him and let him go!' So we were dead and stinking, filled with corruption. Now we are filled with life and fervour. From our state of humiliation we have been raised out of death into life, and in that life we reign with Christ in the heavenly places. What mercy! What great love! What superb grace!

We noted that Paul puts in brackets 'By grace you are saved', and yet rich mercy which springs out of great love is expressed in and by grace. It is grace because it saves us from the death-elements we have discussed above. It is grace because it has liberated us from the powers of death-dealing trespasses and the bondage of Satan, so that we are at last

he adds that this was done because of His great love. For he means that God was moved by this single consideration.

free of him and his system. It is grace because God has raised us from degradation to new life, and has given us what we had never had before—though God had ever planned it for us—namely *vocation*. Paul later speaks of walking worthy of this calling or vocation. The vocation is to reign with Christ, now, in the heavenly places, that is, the true ‘spirituals’.

In verses 8–10, Paul emphasises the free nature of God’s action. We are saved by grace alone—‘the free gift of God’ (Rom. 3:24; 5:17). Faith receives this gift, but only because grace is prior to faith. We must never think any work of ours did it, and not even faith is a work, for *faith is a response to grace*. Our old human boasting in our works is now defunct. We are free from that deadly self-righteousness—‘not having my own righteousness’. Thus the gift of vocation comes to us—‘For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them’.

All of this is amazing mercy. We have seen that God delivers from human misery wrought by sin, from misery wrought by others and from the misery of a non-vocation or false vocation. That God should deliver us from our sickening humiliation is wonderful, but that He should give us a new pride—if we rightly use that word—in preparing good works for us to do, as also preparing us to do them—why, this is beyond all our wildest dreams. We are now co-workers with God in His great plan to unify, reconcile, fill up and harmonise all things! This is mercy indeed. Understanding this we say, ‘seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not’. Far from fainting we are ‘lost in wonder, love and praise’.

‘The Mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ’—2

CHRIST’S MERCY IN ROMANS

Romans 1:18 - 2:11

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the

men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

Romans 1:18 - 2:11 must be examined with regard to mercy, for here *men are under wrath*. Wrath and mercy are generally linked, as we have seen in the Old Testament (Hab. 3:2; Isa. 54:8; cf. Exod. 32:9-14; Ps. 6:1-2; Jer. 10:24). We have already seen a similar principle in Ephesians 2:1-5 and, indeed, in the New Testament wrath and mercy are often linked. Romans

9:14-24 and 11:28-32 are two special passages in which this is the case, and ought to be looked at in that light. This is also the case—by inference—in I Peter 1:3 (cf. Jude 21) and 2:9-10. In Romans 1:24, 26, and 28—as we have seen—God's giving Man up must be regarded as His wrath, since these are the outworking of the statement, 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth'.

As we said in our previous chapter, the 'giving up' of Romans 1:24, 26, and 28 (*paredoken*) needs to be understood as God's deliberate act of wrath,¹ and not to be thought of merely as God simply leaving them—mankind—to their foolishness, that is, 'to stew in their own juice'. What happens to Man is a judgment of God, and this judgment is horrific. Man's state is not one which he can control. His will is to sin, but he is also driven pell-mell into it.

If God does not exercise wrath, then His holiness is in question—let alone His law and His righteousness. If God does not choose to exercise mercy, then Man is consigned to a state of 'no return'. Of course, God is not *bound* to exercise mercy, for such an act lies within Himself. If He is bound to do anything, then it is not a free act, so that mercy would not be mercy. He said, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion' (Rom. 9:15; Exod. 33:19). Whilst Romans 1:18-32 refers to all mankind, Paul's Jewish readers may have thought it referred only to the Gentiles and not to Israel, but Paul painstakingly shows in Romans 2:2 - 3:23 that Jews are also under judgment, since they do

¹ See the footnotes in chapter 13 (pp. 127-8) on (i) the wrath of God, and (ii) special comments on God's giving Man up to his sin and guilt.

the same things as Gentiles do. Even so, Israel is under covenant, and covenant—far from protecting Jews against judgment (2:1-3)—brings even greater wrath:

Or do you presume upon the [covenantal] riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (vv. 4-5).

Of course, what we see from a reading of Romans 1:16 - 3:26 is that God *in His mercy* redeems both Gentiles and Jews through the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ—received by faith. He lifts the abandonment, effecting reconciliation in its place (II Cor. 5:19-21). He has mercy on whom He will have mercy. We need to keep on seeing that His mercy is free and that He is not unmerciful if He does not have mercy.

What we saw in Ephesians 2:1-10 was that God, in Christ, has had mercy. It is for Man to advert to that mercy, and even to cry out for it. Thus, whilst the passage we have been studying does not use the word 'mercy', yet the whole of it is truly telling us of the mercy of God.

Romans 9:6-24

But it is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants. For this is what the promise said, 'About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son.' And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election

might continue, not because of works but because of his call, she was told, 'The elder will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 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 it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

This passage, which may appear to some readers as a somewhat complicated argument, requires us to read the text carefully. Paul is speaking of two types of vessels. The first are 'vessels of wrath made for destruction', and the others are 'vessels of mercy, which he had prepared beforehand for glory'. The first vessels—those made for destruction—deserve wrath, and that is where the matter ends. This set of vessels needs mercy, but for some reason known only to God they do not receive it. The second set of vessels—'vessels of mercy'—are those vessels who need mercy, and on whom God has mercy, although we do not know why, since mercy is not contingent upon a set principle which we can calculate. There is something about this kind of talk—God having mercy where He

wills—which infuriates the human mind. We demand that God act according to a knowable principle. That He acts according to His will irritates us, even though it need not.

The rest of the argument in this passage need not be considered for our purposes. We see both sets of vessels *need* mercy, but only one set *receives* mercy, which underlines the fact that mercy is a matter for God's (predestinating) decision, since God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy. God can be called merciful when He has mercy, but may not be called 'unmerciful' if He does not have mercy. It ought to be noted that God desires to show both His wrath, in regard to vessels 'made for destruction', and His mercy, in regard to the vessels 'prepared beforehand for glory'. His wrath and His mercy are legitimate and ought not to be questioned.

If we ask ourselves, 'What vessels are not *worthy* of mercy?' then we have to answer that no vessel could be worthy of mercy. If it needed mercy, then it would be a wretched vessel. There can be no question of meriting mercy. There is nothing special about a vessel which means it will have mercy. All vessels need mercy, without exception, but not all vessels receive mercy. Why are some then bound for destruction? *Answer*: all are bound for destruction. When we ask why it is that God has mercy on some, the answer must be that He has designed that His mercy come upon these vessels. He has planned that such vessels should 'make known the riches of his glory', that is, by His mercy, and His mercy is that they are 'prepared beforehand for glory', that is, the eschatological glory. If we leave the present argument and begin to delve into what glory is designed for God's chosen vessels, then the magnitude of His mercy begins to be apparent. To be like Him, conformed to His image, and to

rise in a body of glory—these are the great fruits of mercy!

Because the idea of mercy is foreign to human thinking, because grace is humiliating to the human spirit, neither the concept nor the experience can become concrete without a movement of God. The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit—things such as we are at present discussing—for they are foolishness to him. The natural man must become the spiritual man—a man of the Spirit—through regeneration, in which case he will be amazed at mercy. For example, he will be amazed that God takes *any* vessel and prepares it for glory; that is, to be eventually glorified, and not be cast on to the rubbish heap of his own degradation and making.

When we follow Paul's argument past verse 24, then we have the practical outcome of God's mercy; that is, those, both Jews and Gentiles, who—because of their sinfulness—were called 'not my people' become called 'my people', and those who were 'not beloved' are called 'my beloved'—and all of this without merit! We no longer are caught up in baseless human polemic, but in amazement at His gracious mercy.

Romans 11:13-32

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump; and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that

supports you. You will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off. And even the others, if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion he will banish ungodliness from Jacob’; ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’

As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

Paul is explaining how it was that Israel was rejected by God, and the Gentiles accepted. Israel was punished because of its unbelief, and so met the ‘severity of God’, whilst the Gentiles—branches of the wild olive tree—were grafted in to the domestic olive tree because of ‘the kindness [goodness] of God’. A mystery is entailed in all this: God sees Israel as His enemies because of their unbelief, but since God has called Israel, and does not go back on that call, Israel is

beloved (elected) because of the promises of God to the patriarchs. Paul concludes with the following (vv. 30–31):

Just as you [Gentiles] were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their [the Jews] disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

If we link the two passages together—Romans 9:6–24 and 11:13–32—we see that ‘the vessels of wrath’ are *those of both Israel and the Gentiles* who deserve wrath, and will meet wrath, whereas ‘the vessels of mercy’ are both the remnant of Israel and the elect of the Gentiles. When it is said that ‘God has consigned *all* men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon *all*’, the ‘all men’ and ‘all’ obviously mean ‘all who are His elect, upon whom He has mercy’, for by nature of the case the statement—in the context of Romans chapters 9 to 11—cannot be universalistic or the whole argument loses its point. The view that God ought to have mercy upon all men, that is, universally, destroys the whole concept of mercy. None deserves mercy, but mercy, when it acts, is an extraordinary and dynamic power. We must fight the tendency to say, ‘Why does He not have mercy upon all?’ for the question itself reveals our total ignorance of mercy, and especially our understanding of His holiness, His wrath and His grace.

For our present purposes, all that we need to see is that both the elect remnant of Israel, and those who are elect amongst the Gentiles, are under terrible misery until God has mercy on them. They are exactly in the state of the persons described in Ephesians 2:1–3 and Romans 1:18 – 2:6. If their state were not horrific, then mercy were no mercy!

Ah! but it is the wonder of mercy which grips our minds and hearts when we see it, by faith and by the Spirit.

NOTE ON 'MERCY' IN ROMANS

We have concluded that Romans 1:18 - 3:26 is an account of the mercy of God. Romans 2:4-5 does not mention mercy—any more than it mentions grace, as such—but the passage points to mercy which has refrained from destroying both the sinful Gentiles and the disobedient Jews. The exposition of mercy in chapters 9 - 11 fits with the view that mercy rescues from a disastrous situation, out of which the Jewish (elect) remnant and the elect Gentiles could not extricate themselves. Romans 15:8-9 states that 'Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy', and this comports with chapters 9 - 11. In 12:1, Paul calls for the brethren to offer up their bodies as a living sacrifice, and bases his appeal on 'the mercies of God'; that is, the mercies which he has expounded from 1:16 - 11:36, these mercies being the justifying righteousness of God, His work of sanctification and His righteousness in dealing with the nations of the earth, as all were acts of mercy.

15

'The Mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ'—3

CHRIST'S MERCY IN I PETER

I Peter 1:3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Peter has two statements in his first Letter regarding mercy, the first being that of 1:3-5 and the other of 2:9-10. In the first statement—that of our text here—Peter is deeply moved, so much so that he bursts into praise of God, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!' It reminds us of many a parallel passage in the Old Testament where God is blessed for His blessings. Psalm 103:1-5 is one of those doxologies:

Bless the LORD, O my soul;
and all that is within me, bless his holy name!

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your soul is renewed like the eagle's.

This portion of the Psalm is very much like a replay of Ephesians 2:1-10. 'Steadfast love and mercy' have moved the psalmist to deep gratitude. For what then is Peter grateful? The answer is that out of God's great mercy (*polu autou eleos*) we have been born to a living hope. The mercy is great—abundant—for God is 'rich in mercy', and the mercy is that He has taken that which was dead by nature and brought it into life. By natural birth we have only our fallenness, but by spiritual birth we become the children of God, see the Kingdom of God and enter into it. To be left in 'nature', where the things of the Spirit are foolishness to us, is to be condemned to lifelessness. John in his first Letter speaks often of being born again, Paul speaks of regeneration, and James speaks of being 'brought forth by the word of truth'.

This new birth is wonderful, and part of God's abundant mercy, yet it is to *what*—that is, the object of our hope—we are born that is so remarkable. We are born to 'a living hope', that is, to the hope of resurrection, of eternal life and of an inheritance. The inheritance is a rich theme throughout Scripture. Abraham was to inherit the earth; God's sons who conquer will inherit 'all things', that is, the all things of both heaven and earth! Paul talks about 'the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints', and he talks about inheriting the Kingdom of God. The object of our hope is to see God and be like Him, is to be conformed to the

image of His Son, is to receive a body of glory, is to be present at the marriage of the Bride and the Lamb, and is to be 'a kingdom of priests to our God', and to reign for ever. So remarkable an inheritance this will be!

Where there is an object for hope—however trite that may be—a human person can live in hope; otherwise he is hopeless, and that is a barren way of existence. The object of hope determines richness or poverty of our living. Peter, then, refers to what we have been saved *from*, but tells us the immediate fact of what we are saved *to*. Human hopes finish with fulfilment—trite and trivial as often they are—but hope of the eternal answers to the deepest yearnings and the highest vocational aspirations of humanity. We mean that hopes which operate only on the horizontal level of our humanity—within the five senses, and the three dimensions—can never satisfy the deeper ontological drives. To do this we need to have a vertical view which lifts that of our horizontal living.

It is 'great mercy', then, that God gives us glorious new birth and sets our destiny at the highest possible level for a human creature, namely, glorification.

I Peter 2:4-10

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone
chosen and precious,

and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.'

To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe,

‘The very stone which the builders rejected
has become the head of the corner,’
and

‘A stone that will make men stumble,
a rock that will make them fall’;

for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.

Verse 10 says, ‘Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy’. We are reminded of Hosea 1:8–11, quoted in regard to God’s mercy in Romans chapter 9. In Ephesians 2:11–22 we have Paul’s statements about the dreadful, lost and lonely state of the Gentiles, and the grace of God in making them His people, for Jew and Gentile—through the Cross—constitute ‘one new man’, that is, a new humanity which is neither Jew nor Gentile, nor yet an amalgam of both. In Ephesians 3:1–11 he discusses the plan of the ‘mystery’, or ‘the mystery of Christ’, which is that ‘the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel’.

In the passage we are discussing, God’s mercy has been to make Jew and Gentile into one spiritual household—His true temple. Each member is a living stone bonded into all others, and all together constitute the temple, and in this temple spiritual sacrifices are offered, for the people are a corporate priesthood. This is authentic vocation, indeed!—‘you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous

light’. All of this gives sense to Peter’s statement, ‘Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy’.

Mercy, indeed! Christian people may—sadly enough—take these mercies of God lightly, and busy themselves with the trite and trivial in life, but deep down in their consciences and in their spirits they will be troubled. The true dynamic of worship is recognition of His greatness, and thanksgiving for His nature and all His benefits towards us. God’s people need to be renewed in an understanding of, and delight in, His mercy.

Titus 3:1–7

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

This is a particularly good passage to highlight the nature of God’s grace and mercy. The first three verses show how vile we are as fallen human creatures. We may not like to face the reality of this as Paul spells it out. He has already spoken to Titus of the characteristic nature of the islanders, quoting one of their own prophets, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons’. He then includes himself and Titus in

the following, 'we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men, and hating one another'.

So the contrast is drawn. Against that background 'the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared'. This parallels the statement of Titus 2:11, 'For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men'. Interestingly, the translation of Titus 3:4 could be, 'When the kindness [*chrestotes*; generosity] and love to Man [*philanthropia*; cf. Acts 28:2, 'unusual kindness'] of God appeared'. Paul adds, 'He saved us', and makes sure no reader would think a human being could merit this—'not because of deeds done by us in righteousness'. Man can do *nothing* about his predicament! No! It is 'in virtue of his [God's] own mercy'.

What, then, does 'mercy' mean, here? Indeed, what does 'saved' mean? 'Saved' means the action which takes us from the category and painful misery of 'foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another', and so working on and within us that we go through the purifying bath of regeneration until all is washed and cleansed, and none of the filth of the past remains. It means being renewed in and by the Holy Spirit, the one who applies the cleansing and liberating work of the Cross, thus bringing about 'new birth', that is, 'regeneration' (*palingenesia*: cf. Matt. 19:28), which we have seen in I Peter 1:3, and which equals the 'quickening' of Ephesians 2:5. So rich and wonderful are these things which God does, that we can call them no less than mercy, for they could not come about but for that.

Paul speaks of all this mercy being poured out lavishly ('abundantly', 'richly') in 'the washing of

regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit'. It is this which brings us to be justified by His grace (as a gift to be received by faith; Rom. 3:24). To be justified is to be acquitted of all guilt, to be accounted as righteous before the law, and to have the righteousness of Christ accounted to us. It is to be freed from the tyranny of an evil conscience. To 'become heirs in hope of eternal life' is to know we will never die the death of sin, and that we will rise to the life immortal. All that we saw in regard to 'hope' and 'inheritance' in I Peter 1:3–5 is repeated here.

Again, let us remind ourselves that it is only one who has known the liberating dynamic of this gospel who will be able to understand the immeasurable mercy of God.

Hebrews 2:14–18

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. For surely it is not with angels that he is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.

In this Epistle the writer wishes—among other things—to show the reluctant Christian Hebrews to whom he writes, that Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. The only priesthood they have known is the Aaronic one—to which they had, in the past, given honour. Jesus is of another *order*, but the principle that a priest must understand his fellow human beings still obtains (see 2:17–18; 5:1–10). Although the

order is higher than the old Aaronic order, yet the true high priest must be no less 'merciful and faithful' than any other.

In his second chapter, from verses 9–18, we see what the Son has done for us. By his suffering on the Cross he became 'the trail-blazer of our salvation'. He did this as Man. He became Man to do this—to banish the fear of death and break the bondage of Satan. He was not concerned with creatures which are often thought to be higher than Man, that is, angels, but he did this—became Man—because God had given him His elect people to be both his brethren and his children. Had he not become Man, he could not have effected propitiation, nor could he have become a merciful and faithful high priest. If as Man he had not done that work *for us*, then he could not henceforth work *with us*.

What, then, does it mean that he 'became a merciful and faithful high priest' in the service of God? It is obvious that the primary goal was 'to make propitiation for the sins of the people'. Thus his work of the Cross was a high-priestly one. It was out of his own mercy that he came to do this. He himself was moved with compassion during his earthly ministry, when he saw the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd. He had been moved in eternity to become Man for the flock of God. He had personal compassion and pity, for that is always the basis of mercy. We see this compassion and concern in his high-priestly prayer, prayed on the night of his betrayal (John 17). As we see his humility in becoming Man—set out so movingly in Philippians 2:5–9—then we realise that *he wanted to become Man!* Far from being humiliated by incarnation, he was truly humble. In his earthly life he was faithful in every respect, never flinching, never drawing his hand back from the plough, suffering the

indignities which men and evil powers heaped upon him, especially in that terrible hour of the Cross.

He was merciful, then, to come. He was merciful in having come, and is still the merciful and faithful one, 'For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every way has been tempted as we are, yet without sin'. On this basis, says the writer of Hebrews, 'Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need'. Later he exhorts, 'since *we have a great priest over the house of God*, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water' (10:21–22, emphasis mine).

His mercy, then, is the mercy which redeems, which attends to us faithfully, and which takes us into the very presence of the Holy One, our God and Father.

CONCLUSION TO 'THE MERCY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST'

In these three chapters we have seen something of the mercy of Christ; to redeem us from all iniquity, to transform us from our deformed state, to aid us in holy living in the midst of this world's confusion and conflict, to give us true ministry and vocation, and to give us a living hope for eternal things.

It is the living hope to which Jude refers us in his Letter. In verses 20–21 he says, 'But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God; *wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life*'. What, then, does he mean by this last statement?

At the commencement of his Letter, Jude had said, 'beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ'. He had added, 'May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you'. He means, then, that mercy has brought us into the faith, and we need daily mercy that we might continue in it. Here, in verse 21, he exhorts us to 'wait' or 'expect' the mercy that is coming to us when he comes. It is similar to Peter's statement, 'set your hope fully upon the grace [mercy] that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ'.

In all of this Jude is thinking of 'that day'. 'That day' will reveal the ultimate mercy. At times we may have dreaded facing all things to do with 'that day', remembering, as we might, our own terrible sinfulness and failure. No, we are to wait with faith for the hope set before us, undeterred by accusation or innuendo from others. Not only, looking back, will we realise the immensity of mercy, but we will also see it face to face, unveiled in all its richness, especially when we will hear our Lord Jesus Christ say, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!' Waiting, then, is the work of hope, and it is this which maintains us firmly in our present living.

An interesting passage that comports with what we have just been saying is II Timothy 1:15-18:

You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, and among them Phygelus and Hermogenes. May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me . . . may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day—and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.

If in Jude we are to wait for the mercy, and if we know that that mercy is not a mercy which will redeem us 'on that Day', but rather show us the inheritance

that is ours, and the blessings that come to us as a result of living in Christ, then Paul is really saying, 'All blessing to Onesiphorus on that Day. May the Lord have much in store for him. May he revel in the great mercy of God as he is blessed'.

Our conclusion, then, is that we are men and women under mercy, being kept by the mercy of God, and that we wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ which will come to us 'on that Day'. These things confirm and encourage us now.

The Ministry of Mercy and Justice—1

THE PITIFUL, COMPASSIONATE AND MERCIFUL ONE

When we consider the words used of God, such as pitiful, merciful, kindly, long-suffering, forgiving and compassionate, along with the nouns love, steadfast love, grace, goodness and the like, then we wonder what it is we are hearing and reading. Most of these terms would be linked in our lives with emotional situations, since none of the things mentioned above can be wholly objective, or emotionless. Does God then *feel*? Is He to some extent the *object* of such feelings?

Answers to these questions are not simple. We are not God but we are made in His image. It is true that some things about which we are emotional are reflections of His true being, yet some theologians have been insisting for centuries that God is impassible (without feelings or passions), whilst others say He is deeply moved by certain situations of suffering and

distress, as well as by the tragic disobedience and rebellion of Man. Jesus himself was moved by pity and compassion to have mercy. He wept over Jerusalem.

Article I of the Anglican *Articles of Religion* says of God that 'He is without body, parts or passions', meaning, He is Spirit, and that although we can speak of 'the eyes, ears, hands, mouth, heart and feet' of God, yet in fact He has no form in this sense, so, 'his form you have never seen' (John 5:37: cf. Phil. 2:6). He is unique, so that to think of Him in human terms is futile research. 'I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee', Hosea 11:9 (AV) tells us. We must wait on His revelation to know Him.

To think of God as the *subject* of affections is certainly in order, provided we do not attribute human affections to Him, but to think of Him as the *object* of them would mean that He is *driven* by His own attributes, instead of actually *being* those attributes, such as love, mercy and goodness. The fact is that we humanise Divine affections—for this is the only way we know them—and then seek to Divinise them. We do this by simply expanding or magnifying what is human, and because of this we do not change the affection qualitatively, but only quantitatively. This is called an anthropomorphic exercise and, of course, must be without success. All true knowledge of God is by revelation. By revelation we know He is love, that He is pitiful and merciful. When we say that certain things move Him to certain decisions, we must not think He reasons out something and comes to a conclusion. This would put Him in the category of a reasoning, thinking—and so concluding—Person, where, in fact, He knows all, and what He knows is because He knows it. He never *comes* to know anything, nor to reason out a matter. Thus, when we read a passage such as Hosea 11:8f.:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!
... My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger,
I will not act again to destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come to destroy,

then we must not think God is actually debating with Himself. Surely this is language to show the equivalent of human thinking, but it is thinking that is not human because it is on the Divine level. Thus when Genesis 6:6 says, 'And the LORD was sorry that he had made man upon the earth, and it grieved him to his heart', then this is a statement designed to show us—as humans—that God is not cold and implacable, but in the Divine realm does that which in the human realm would be described exactly as our passage states it. When, then, we read the following sentiments from Isaiah 54:8, 10, they are perfectly intelligible to us, as they are also deeply moving:

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 the mountains may depart
and the hills 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.

What we do know is that the terms pitiful, compassionate, merciful and loving certainly refer correctly to God, even if we are not to think of them in human terms alone. Perhaps a good example is when Jesus told his disciples not to call any Man on earth 'Father!', for he said they had only one Father—'Your

Father who is in heaven'. Heavenly Fatherhood not only transcends human fatherhood, but is a Fatherhood in quality beyond that of Man. Similarly, heavenly compassion is of a quality and nature that is beyond that which is human.

All of this brings us to the point that God is not inflexible, not grimly set in sternness so that He is unmoved by the misery of Man or the suffering of the human race. Christ shows to us—in a human way—the sympathy, tenderness, gentleness, pity and compassion that the Father has for the human race. He that has seen the Son in everything has really seen the Father.

IT IS HUMAN TO BE PITIFUL, COMPASSIONATE AND MERCIFUL

Because Man is in the image of God, then he reflects God's nature, and as such should reflect His pity, mercy and compassion. This is often what he does, but much of his reflection of God is adulterated, is mingled with egotistic motivations and actions. If humanity, universally, would be compassionate it would mean that the human race could live at a level of joy and peace far beyond what it has experienced in its history. Man on his own is self-seeking, and it is this which has caused much human suffering. Why is it that Man, being the reflection of God, is so often hard, harsh, unsympathetic and cruel? We need to know the things which make the human heart become hard.

The Hardness of Humanity

Because Man is alienated from God, he has 'dried out', so to speak, of the true juices of proper human living.

Man, as deprived and depraved, nevertheless often shows surprising elements of pity, mercy, compassion, tenderness, gentleness and care. This can be seen in the way human beings care for and love animals and pets. It is seen in parental and family love. An audience can often be quickly moved to tears and tenderness. National and family calamities often bring help and aid in substantial forms. Even so, the very people who can be so moved, often can also be callous and cruel in other elements of their lives.

The biblical teaching regarding hardness of heart takes into account Man's self-chosen alienation from God. Being far from the source of mercy, he becomes merciless. The author of Hebrews warns his Christian Jewish readers, 'Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin'. In Hebrews 3:7-8 (cf. Ps. 95) Israel was warned, 'Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as in the day of testing in the wilderness'. Sin further alienates us from God—the Source of true compassion and moral sensitivity. Idolatry takes the place of God and is cause for heart-hardening.

Whilst we know that Pharaoh's heart was hardened by God, we know that the real meaning of this was God's judgment, which gave Pharaoh over to the hardness of his own heart. It was simply that he could not say, 'I, of myself, have hardened my heart against God, and He cannot soften it', but rather God could say, 'This is my judgment that Pharaoh have a hard heart. He who hardens his heart I will harden in judgment.' Pharaoh hardened his heart by refusing to listen to God's word. Hardness comes when we refuse the word of the Lord—in whatever way it may come. Romans 9:18 has it, 'he hardens the heart of whom he wills'.

We have seen that God's mercy is on them that fear Him, whilst Proverbs 28:14 has it, 'Blessed is the man who fears the Lord always; but he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity'. With this goes Proverbs 29:1, 'He who is often reproved, yet stiffens [hardens, AV] his neck will suddenly be broken beyond healing'. It was said of King Zedekiah that:

... he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God; he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel (II Chron. 36:12-14; cf. Neh. 9:29).

We could quickly multiply the instances where sin (Jer. 17:23) and idolatry (Isa. 48:4) harden the human heart.

Paul shows, often, that the Gentiles, by living in immorality over generations, had developed moral callousness. In Ephesians 4:17ff. (cf. Titus 3:1-3), he said, 'due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness'.

Jesus understood hardness of heart. In Mark 3:5 we are told that, when many opposed his healing—on the Sabbath—of the man with the withered hand, 'he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart'. When he told the parables he knew they would bring hardness of heart, for in Matthew 13: 14-15 he quoted Isaiah 6:9-10 which speaks of those who heard the word of Isaiah becoming hardened in their hearts against it. In John's Gospel, Jesus gives the quote on a certain occasion, 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and turn for me to heal them'.

In Mark 6:51-52 we have the astonishing statement, that following the miracle of the loaves and fishes,

and the walking on the water during the time of terrifying wind, 'they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, and *their hearts were hardened*'. On a later occasion—in Mark 8:14–21—as they were in their boat and had forgotten to bring bread, he cautioned them, saying, 'Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod'. This leaven was an insinuating, penetrating unbelief that the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herod had in regard to Messiah. In fact, the disciples were unbelieving or in danger of not believing, for he asked them—they who had been fed with the loaves and the fishes:

Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? *Are your hearts hardened?* Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?

Two miracles of feeding had taken place, but they were still worried about bread. This was the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and Herod. By the questions he fired at them, we realise he was distressed by their hardness of heart.

The Hardness of Believers

Looking back at our previous sections in this chapter, we can see a number of factors which cause hardness of heart. The first is the deceit of sin. When we realise that these sins involve the deceitful lusts of the flesh, the deceits of other human beings, the deceits of Satan and his evil powers, and finally the deceit of our own flesh, we realise that many forces are pitted against believers. Another of these is idolatry, where the heart hardens against God and 'softens' towards the idols. We realise that law and authority are two

factors which harden the human heart, but only because it rebels and wishes to be autonomous. Where reverential fear of the Lord wanes, so does tenderness. Sin itself catches up its slaves in more sin, reduces our taste for God, steering us towards the things of sight rather than faith. To begin with, the drift may be slight, faint and imperceptible. The gap widens, the heart dries up and hardens. Moral and ethical insensitivity are well on their way.

Many a Christian believer has pleasant memories of his or her earlier years when there was a simplicity about love, a tenderness towards others, a gentleness in relationships. There was pity for those suffering, compassion for those in misery and aid for those in trouble. Nothing was too much trouble. What, then, changes all this? Doubtless some of the answers are shown above, but often Christians harden themselves against others who disillusion them, cheat, betray and criticise them. Often compassion is met without gratitude. Kindness can be taken for granted, or even as a 'right'. Some believing persons turn from the simplicity of the Gospel to more sophisticated ways of dealing with human troubles. Some students turn to scholarship which is heavily critical of biblical truth, and drift from a healthy and satisfying devotional life. The devotional side of experience is replaced by intellectualistic endeavours, and sometimes so much so that a warm, loving relationship with God turns to a hard rationalism. In some cases, because of offence taken at the foibles, idiosyncrasies, failures—and even deceitfulness and sinfulness—of Christian pastors, leaders and workers, people have stumbled and turned away from the faith. These sad situations have deeply affected, for 'a little one' has been caused to stumble.

What many of us deplore is how we can become dry in devotion, unresponsive to a world which needs

salvation, uncaring for things other than our own matters. We fail to 'look on the things of others', and 'put others before ourselves' (Phil. 2:1-4). Often our Christian duties become mechanical. Love seems to have departed. Even our emotions have dried up. We are very factual, objective and unmoved persons. We seem to be a million miles away from pity, compassion, sympathy and empathy.

We lack mercy.

THE LOSS OF LOVE AND MERCY

We saw in Ephesians 2:4 that God 'is rich in mercy', and that this mercy springs 'out of his great love'. If we deplore our lack of mercy, then that, at least, is a good sign and a good thing. Let us realise that it is because our love has faded. In Revelation 2:1-7 we read Christ's letter to the church at Ephesus in the last decade of the first century, and that church, though excellent in doctrine, labours and endurance has—tragically enough—'abandoned its first love'. It is strongly reprimanded, and urged to immediate repentance. In I John 2:15-17 the aged apostle warns his people against love of the world, for this will take away the love of—and for—the Father. Paul, in one of his letters, speaks of a companion who has travelled with him in ministry as having forsaken him—Paul—because he has 'loved this present world'. Jesus warned his disciples in his Olivet discourse that 'because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold'.

One of the saddest cases describing the man whose love has grown cold is in I John 3:16ff., 'if any one has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love

abide in him?' John urges, 'Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth'.

It is no wonder that Jude exhorted his readers, 'Keep yourselves in the love of God'. He told them that the way to do this was to 'build yourselves up in your most holy faith', and to 'pray in the Holy Spirit'. The awful statement of Paul in I Corinthians 16:22 (AV) was, 'If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema!' Not to love the Lord is not to love others.

COMING TO SPIRITUAL, MORAL, ETHICAL AND RELATIONAL SENSITIVITY

Mercy begets mercy. 'Be merciful, even as your Father in heaven is merciful.' He who has not tasted the mercy of God will not be merciful, and he who has not known God's love will not love in the way of true love. There can be a recovery from hardness of heart through drifting from the former 'single-hearted devotion to Christ', from the consequent rebellion of our hearts, from excessive love of pleasure and position, and from the idolatries which have come to possess our spirits.

The way back is to read afresh the Word of God, to hear its admonitions, to heed its warnings, to repent of the drift and dryness of our lives, to believe God's promises, to obey His laws, and to reject our idolatries. In this way, we will come anew to loving sensitivity to God, Man, and to our true selves.

ADMONITIONS TO MERCY

In Micah 6:8 the prophet said:

He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

The simple statement covers all that God requires of us. Similar to this is an admonition from the Lord in Zechariah 7:9-10:

Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart.

Such Divine exhortations were simply an expression of the law of the covenant. The Ten Commandments are summed up in love to God and love to fellow man. We might be misled into thinking this is a simple matter, and even that obedience to these commands is optional. In fact, God is very demanding. Obedience is required, and it brings life. Disobedience is lethal—it brings death. Leviticus 19—amongst other exhortations—has simple and clear teaching on social and relational responsibilities. In Deuteronomy 25:4 and other places, kindness to animals is enjoined.

We have seen that Jesus in his teaching enjoined mercy. If a brother sins against us, we are to forgive him 'seventy times seven'. He who has found God's mercy in forgiveness must likewise forgive his fellow servant who is a debtor. We are to be neighbour to our enemies, as the Samaritan was to the wounded Jewish traveller. Jesus said that only the merciful will find mercy. God has mercy upon 'the ungrateful and the selfish'. A true priest 'deals gently with the ignorant and the wayward'. God mercifully sends His rain and sunshine upon those who are unjust and evil.

These, and many other admonitions, alert us to whether or not we are being merciful in our dealings with friends and enemies. It is often with shame that

we recognise our hardness of heart, and such shame should lead us to that repentance which brings renewal in the acts and life of mercy.

Warnings to, and Judgments of, the Merciless

James (2:13) tells us, 'Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment'. The first portion of this verse is clear. Mercy will not be shown to the merciless. 'Yet mercy triumphs over judgment' may appear to say that God will even forgive the merciless when he comes to judgment. This is not the case. It surely means that he who has been merciful need not fear the judgment. As for forgiving the merciless who repent of their merciless spirit and acts, yes, God will surely forgive, as He forgives all sins when we repent.

The story in Matthew 18:21ff. of the merciless servant, who having been forgiven much would not even forgive little, stands as a terrible warning. The wrathful king said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me, and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' We are told, 'in anger his lord delivered him to the jailors, till he should pay all his debt'. Jesus warned, 'So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart'.

This makes the matter of love, mercy and forgiveness a solemn and serious one. 'If you do not forgive your brother *from the heart*' is affectionally demanding. Legal forgiveness will not do. Colossians 3:12-13 speaks of *warm* compassion and gentleness:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one

another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

We need to see the simple fact that if we are not merciful, then we are merciless.

In the prophecy of Amos there are a number of oracles against pitiless nations. In 1:11–12 God said:

Thus says the LORD:
‘for three transgressions of Edom,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because he pursued his brother with the sword,
and *cast off all pity*,
and his anger tore perpetually,
and he kept his wrath for ever.
So I will send fire upon Teman,
and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.’

In Psalm 123 the psalmist seems to be calling for judgment upon his enemies:

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.
Too long our soul has been sated
with the scorn of those who are at ease,
the contempt of the proud (vv. 3–4).

There is some parallel here with Israel in Egypt, where the judgment of God came upon Pharaoh and his people, and was seen so terribly in the destruction of the firstborn of the Egyptian families.

James has a famous oracle against the rich who have oppressed the poor, ‘Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries *that are coming upon you*’. Judgment is about to come to these rich:

Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up

treasure for the last days. Behold the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you (5:1–7).

James’ indictment is reminiscent of some of the prophets, particularly Amos who spoke about the idle rich, ‘Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, “Bring, that we may drink!”’ Judgment was pronounced upon them. Proverbs 14:31–32 said, ‘He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is kind to the needy honours him’. Then are pronounced the judgment to the wicked man, and security to the man of honour, ‘The wicked is overthrown through his evil-doing, but the righteous finds refuge through his integrity’.

Jeremiah speaks of extortion and its judgment, ‘Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper room by injustice; who makes his neighbours serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages’. The ‘Woe!’ points to judgment.

The parable of Dives and Lazarus here becomes a picture of judgment. Dives – the rich man – had ignored the misery of Lazarus, and had thus been merciless. The dreadful torment that came to him appears to have been without end. Could this be a warning to those who ignore the commands of God’s word and law of love, of helping to supply the genuine needs of their fellow creatures? In Matthew 25:31–46 the unrighteous are those who deny the brethren of Christ food, water, clothing, and visitation in sickness and prison. The righteous are those who have mercy

upon the fellow servants of the Lord. The unrighteous 'will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life'.

THE MERCILESSNESS OF GOD THE MERCIFUL

We have said that ultimately we cannot know the 'why?' of God's mercy. He is not bound to have mercy as we would understand it, and because He called Himself 'merciful', this means He is never unmerciful, although to our eyes He may appear to be so. We can quickly detect an unmerciful spirit in a human being, but this cannot be the case with God.

We have discussed more than once that God's anger is not 'chronic'; that is, He is slow to anger, and His overflowing wrath is but 'for a moment'. 'He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities' (Ps. 103:9-10), for, 'He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love' (Micah 7:18). He 'does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men' (Lam. 3:33). He said, 'I have no pleasure in the death of anyone' (Ezek. 18:32).

We have said these things because there is what appears to be a mercilessness about God. In the great covenant revelation, He revealed His love and mercy, but also that He would not forgive the sins of the impenitent and idolatrous. In Deuteronomy 13:6-11 the person in Israel who seeks to seduce others to idolatry shall be killed without mercy:

... you shall not yield to him, or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him, but you shall kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people.

Again, in Deuteronomy 19:11-13, Israel is to be unsparing to the man who murders in cold blood; he must die. Likewise, in 19:15-21, a false witness is to be severely punished. This fits with what the writer of Hebrews said (2:2), 'the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution'. The pronouncements against the nations in the writings of the prophets—for example, in Jeremiah and Amos—seems severe, but severity does not necessarily mean injustice. God takes note of the man 'who trembles before my word', for others may think He is weak. 'Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the sons of men is fully set to do evil' (Eccl. 8:11), as the wicked says in his heart, 'Thou wilt not call to account' (Ps. 10:13).

God is certainly merciless in regard to all evil. The Book of the Revelation shows His judgments on rebellious humanity, as they take place in the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls of wrath. In 6:15-17:

Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?'

Christ's actions against the Dragon, the Beast and the false prophet result in the destruction of these evil forces which demand that men and women wear the mark of the Beast. In a day, God crushes Babylon, that mighty city which had seduced the nations. God's judgments are implacable. Finally He judges all creatures He has made, and their judgment is just. Nothing will be left unpunished.

Even so, in all of this, God cannot be said to be merciless. He certainly brings just retribution, but is the One Who practises 'steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth', and says that He delights in these things (Jer. 9:23-24).

The Ministry of Mercy and Justice—2

MAN, THE MERCIFUL

There can be no doubt about it that Man is a merciful creature. We have already noted that he does many deeds of kindness and mercy, out of a pity and compassion that seems natural to him. That he is also cruel is also observable. He seems to be a contradiction, but any person—if he (or she) is honest with himself—knows this puzzling human contradiction. Any person can be both cruel and kind, compassionate and merciless, accordingly as situations dictate and that person responds or reacts. The reason for this is that Man is at once made in the image of God and is depraved by the Fall. The most sinful of human creatures never lose the image of God, and yet never fully reflect it because of their innate fallenness.

THE HUMAN MERCY THAT IS NOT MERCY

A strange biblical proverb (Prov. 12:10) says:

A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast,
but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.

The word for 'mercy' here is 'bowels' (*rachamim*), which in the AV is 'tender mercies', and in the NIV, 'kindest acts', that is, 'the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel'. It would appear that the righteous man follows the law, resting his animals on the Sabbath and being kind to them (Deut. 25:4), but the wicked do not observe the law, and are cruel. It may even be that the wicked man thinks he is merciful and that he even does acts of 'tender mercy', although this is not the case.

In life it would be difficult to find a human being who does not think that he is reasonably merciful. Many human beings think they are even more merciful than God. Some have weighty dossiers on the shortcomings of God to substantiate this. They protest that if they were God then they would not allow the suffering and distress that goes on in the world, about which God seems to do little or nothing. They confess that they do not have the power which God has, or they would long ago have done something about the matters in question, that is, something God has not yet done!

This, of course, is a superficial reading of God and the question of human suffering. Much human suffering comes out of human sinfulness, selfishness and cruelty. Man is a creature of guilt and anger. Were he free of guilt – which he can be through the Gospel – he would be free to be more truly human, less of a problem to himself and the human race. As it is, the matter of being merciful is a complicated one.

THE SELF-JUSTIFIERS

Rightly understand there is no greater problem in the human sphere than that of self-justification. Self-justification is the exercise which springs out of human guilt. Man, created in the image of God, has some awareness of his failure as an existent in a functional universe created by God. He cannot afford to face up fully to his shortcomings, but senses his inferior way of life, and seeks to justify himself by what he does. It is not grace and love which urge him to this, but human guilt. He is caught in a round of self-justification from which he cannot escape. All human beings – though in varying ways – are also seeking to justify themselves. This puts the whole human race in competition. Any man's (seeming) success threatens me. As a guilty person, I think God is my enemy. All my competitors are my enemies.

Man is also jealous of God and seeks to be as He is – self-dependent. In fact, Man has the urge and drive to be *like* God, but wishes to go beyond that and be *as* God. This is why he gets a perverse sort of enjoyment in doing what God does. One of the qualities of God is that He is merciful. Human beings wish also to appear merciful: indeed they wish to be merciful. Trying to do what God does, and improving one's self-image seems to be profitable.

Some human spirits are actually angry with God for what He does *not* do! This is a form of incredible human pride, but the persons are serious. They criticise God for being uncaring and dilatory, and set about doing what He has failed to do.¹ What they do not

¹ This whole matter is discussed in a more expanded way in the little book, *The Justice-Men and the Great Rage* (G. Bingham, NCPI, Blackwood, 1984).

realise is that every true action in life has already been planned for the elect of God to carry out (Eph. 2:10), and that this—rightly done—is the work which glorifies God (Matt. 5:16).

Man's so-called 'good works' can have the appearance of being good, when they are not necessarily so. A weed has been called 'a plant out of place', and often such works are virtually weeds. Ultimately they may well be the source of great harm. What we do ought to be by the leading of God, in accordance with His laws, and an act within the exercise of faith.

MAN'S MERCY IN HUMAN HISTORY

At the beginning of this book we discussed the fact that works of mercy are prevalent today. We now have armies of helpers, professional counsellors, social and welfare workers, advisers, legislators, aid groups, medics and paramedics, and many organisations fitted to handle calamities and catastrophes that take place in nature, or some of the happenings which spring from our technological civilisation. All these are intended to be helpful and, of course, rightly used, they are.

These helpers advise in relationships of personal, national and international nature. They also seek to lead helpfully in finance, commerce and economics. All of these could be said to be on the business of mercy to the human race. The last century has never seen so many working ideologies, and in fact the past 100 years has been the most liberal of all centuries. It has also been the century most wrought with revolutions and worldwide wars. Its weapons have been cruel and horrific. Terrorism has never been more prevalent. It has also been a century with many genocides.

In fact, does the statement, 'The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel', fit the bill? Systems such as fascism and communism have genuinely set out to liberate Man from his chains, but millions of human beings have been—and are being—destroyed in the attempts. Some might argue that this loss is regrettable, but necessary in the interests of a liberated human race. Communism and Fascism—to take but two of the ideologies that would liberate Man—both work on the premise that Man can handle his own world, that he has the power to do so, that he can eradicate economic oppression and help Man to get to his own godhead and enjoy his universe. They both dispense with God as an old-fashioned idea. At best He has ever been the 'God of the gap'. The gap of scientific knowledge has now been closed and God is redundant. Man has hitherto given to the supposed God what Man himself now purposes to handle, namely his universe and his destiny. We need not comment on this, other than to say that what one ideologist would consider to be mercy for the human race may represent the most dreadful bondage to some other persons.

Man lacks the wisdom to handle the matters of his own age by himself. He needs the wisdom of God and the plan of God, and where he works within these, less suffering and misery will result. The blasphemy of his supposed autonomy, his cursory disposing of God, and his hideous arrogance—all these simply compound his guilt, increase his misery and drive him on to more guilt-compulsive action—more disaster for the human race. The Most High God observes the shrill complaints and strident claims of the mini-messiahs but does not react, and disposes of them by sending them mad with their own hubris, or silencing their proud boasting into the dust of death.

Time has shown how weak proud Man is, how little he accomplishes that is of lasting merit. Not so for the humble ones, for many of them leave 'footprints on the sands of time'. Their toil leaves an eternal entail.

THE JUSTICE-MEN AND THE GREAT RAGE

Man has been given a mandate to be fruitful and multiply, to fill up the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:28), and so he has plenty to occupy his time. It is when he looks at systems and situations that anger him which causes much trouble. No human being can really handle the matter of his own guilt, and he must watch to see whether his strong criticisms of systems and situations are his way of off-loading his own guilt to others. He must see whether his anger does not have within it personal doubt and uncertainty. His indignation at God for doing nothing can boost his own pride, until he seems to think he is more merciful than God. In such a rage of self-righteousness he may so work for mercy that he becomes a cruel killer in the name of mercy and justice! The self-righteous terrorist can destroy hundreds of innocent lives by bombing a commercial aeroplane or a department store, or simply shooting innocent parents and children who cannot protect themselves. These are 'the tender mercies of the wicked' who think they are not wicked, but righteous saints and deliverers of the oppressed.

We ask ourselves what genuine benefits came from the Crusades, from the religious conflicts in Ireland and the equivalent conflicts in Lebanon. Doubtless in these struggles many have felt that they have fought for the right, and that they have done more that is practical than a dilatory Deity! Of course the matter is not simple, but it is best to leave vengeance

to God for He alone has the wisdom to execute it – and He does!

PATERNALISTIC MERCY

A true father is not paternalistic, but paternal. His fatherhood serves his children, and does not patronise them. He helps his children grow to maturity, and does not seek to make them dependent upon him. He strengthens their characters and does not weaken them. He welcomes the day when they can live life without having to lean on him. Likewise a true mother is maternal but not maternalistic. She does not give birth to children for her own sake, but for theirs. She delights in seeing them develop their personalities, characters and destinies. Often so-called acts of mercy rise out of this paternalism, maternalism – which are in fact forms of 'god-ism'. Counsellors have the constant temptation to 'god-it' in the lives of their counselees. There can be no doubt that humans love power, and most of all to have such power that they can play God to their friends or clients. This sort of power-desire lures many into the aid-trade. Such a desire reaches into the heart of religion where pastors and leaders are often – unwittingly – power brokers. Some accomplish this through their intellectual abilities and attainments, and others seek to do it by use of the supernatural. Some seek to accomplish it by the wealth they possess, turning needy folk into cringing mendicants. How the rich love to use this kind of power. These uses of power have ever been so, but they are the more deceptive because in many cases they have become accepted as the norm of human living. The use of mental techniques and some kinds of manipulative therapies may appear to be acts of

mercy, but they may simply draw clients even more deeply under the power of their mentors, and not heal the weaknesses or ailments that beset them.

There can be no doubt about the statement that life is most often a matter of play for power, and play with power, and play against power. So much has been done in the name of piety and devotion which may appear to be good works and mercy, but which is not essentially so. When leaders and helpers know how to use human guilt, they may well keep others in their power for long periods of time. They may make their clients and patients so dependent that they never achieve their true humanhood. Paternalism and maternalism can stunt normal growth. Many of these things appear to be mercy, but the test of true mercy is whether it liberates its objects or not.

THE PLOY OF PITY

Mercy that only appears to be mercy is not only exercised by power-hungry people, and people who wish to keep others under them so that they can enjoy doling out 'mercy', but this is also the case with nations. Paternalism and maternalism can be exercised by groups and nations. At the same time those with mendicant minds can also utilise human guilt to gain their ends. Theirs is the commerce of pity. It is well known that in some poverty stricken countries there are parents who maim their children shortly after birth so that they can be used as beggars. Beggary in some countries is a profession, and is often controlled by monopolists. In less horrible form is the appeal to pity by unfortunate nations. They manipulate the wealthy nations by accusations of sinfulness in having come to be so rich. The innuendo is that such gains have

necessarily been ill-gotten. The conscience of Christian countries is rightly moved by the terrible plight of other peoples in famine, catastrophes, plagues and chronic poverty. There can be no question about mercy—all nations ought to help all nations—but guilt and pity ought not to be used manipulatively.

As for nations, so for persons. Persons, too, who wish not to work, know how to appeal to human pity. Giving aid often helps to establish the mendicant mind. I once heard a clergyman say, 'After having been the head of our church welfare work for over 30 years, I am convinced that we make the prodigal so well off in the far country that he never wishes to go home to the father'.

By the same token some cruel persons develop an anti-pity cruelty. The bomber who destroys those who cannot defend themselves, and who are innocent—though not of course in the terrorist's mind—has killed his conscience. Pity is not part of his trade. Peter's advice, 'be pitiful, be courteous', is looked upon as unbelievable naivete. Humanity is not so far gone in general that it cannot weep for the inane cruelty carried out by those whose hearts are hardened, and who murder in the name of 'righteous justice'. It is better to err in the direction of pity, than to fall short in human tenderness. Whilst 'countless thousands mourn man's inhumanity to man', so-called mercy must never be the monopoly of the aid-trade, nor pity the manipulative power for greedy gain.

SOME CONCLUSIONS AS TO HUMAN MERCY

None of the things we have said in this chapter ought to turn us from acts of mercy. Given in that some so-called good works may virtually be 'weeds', yet such

weeds may represent relative good. Given in that the rich may use their wealth manipulatively, and the poor their pity, yet relative good may come of these things. God as Sovereign uses all our deficient actions and elements. It is easier to criticise than to act genuinely. An old adage has it, 'It is better to trust and be deceived, than to doubt and be mistaken'. Chronic criticism often sours into cynicism. All acts of all persons then become suspect. Flashes of the image of God sometimes show out in the worst of us, but are greeted with unbelief by the gloomy. Beauty is turned into ugliness by the complaining spirit.

It is best to hear Paul's quiet admonitions, 'do good to all men' (Gal. 6:10). 'I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life' (I Tim. 2:1-2). 'Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them . . . if service, in our serving; he who contributes, in liberality [AV has 'with simplicity']; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness' (Rom. 12:8). Peter's words are also helpful, 'Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king' (I Pet. 2:17, AV), to which we may add his, 'be pitiful, be courteous', and, 'He that would love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking guile'. John would admonish us that when we have this world's goods and see our brother in need, then—he would say—'let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth', out of which we will have free hearts of joy, with no condemnation.

So we could go on, but in our next chapter we will speak of the highest mercy of all that believing humanity can do—the mercy of ministry to others in the misery of human guilt.

18

The Most Merciful of All Ministries

MAN MERCIFUL TO MAN

Jesus had to become a man so that he could be a genuine high priest to the New Covenant people. He became a man so that 'he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people', and 'deal gently with the ignorant and wayward', and be 'a great priest over the house of God'. His humanity means much to us, especially as we know it is as glorified man—albeit he is Son of God—seated at the right hand of God and ever living to make intercession for us.

This ministry of Christ is also the ministry of his people. By this we mean that Christ is the Prophet, Priest and King, and that his people—all members of his body—are those who share his prophetic, priestly and kingly roles in the world today. They have ever shared in the processes of history, as he has worked them out in cooperation with the Father.

The Magnificence of Mercy

The bottom line of all this is that, (i) *we are the corporate community of mercy*, since we come with the proclamation of the liberating Gospel; (ii) *each of us is bound to proclaim the mercy of God as it is disclosed in the Gospel*; and (iii) *we are to practice God's mercy in our relationships with our fellow humanity*.

THE TRUE MINISTRY OF MERCY: HAVING MERCY WITH FEAR

Two Kinds of Mercy

Often, today, mercy is looked upon as any aid we can give to people in distress, without even enquiring as to the origin of that distress. Humanism has so affected Christians that they believe we should fly to the aid of people in any form of misery. Since humanism makes nothing of the next life and the ultimate maturation of Man, it has little time for the principle of suffering. 'Just don't let anyone suffer!' it exclaims, 'That is mercy!' Because of this, social and welfare service looms large. For purposes of definition we say, 'Let us have mercy in all things, but not without thought or discernment'. Mercy can help a person in misery. The deepest expression of mercy is not humanistic, but salvific. Mercy must be seen in the perspective of eternity. God help us if we are simply in the 'aid-trade' to pay off our guilt for being so prosperous, to prove or justify ourselves, or are simply soft-headed out of mawkish sentiment which prevents us seeing the real issues, and true ways of genuine mercy.

It is helpful to see the stages of God's mercy in which we live, for these encourage and constrain us to exercise mercy:

The Most Merciful of All Ministries

- (a) *Knowing the mercy that redeemed us*. Three strong passages which tell us of this are Ephesians 2:1-10, Titus 3:1-7, and I Peter 1:3-5. It is this initial experience of mercy which ought to keep us warm with mercy towards others. Paul never took this salvation for granted. He is a good model for us. Let us look at I Timothy 1:12-17:

I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and the love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience, for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

In this passage Paul is not saying that he received mercy because he was faithful, but because he was ignorant, that is, was not essentially impenitent, as in Exodus 34:6-7 where God said, 'I will by no means clear the guilty'. Paul also said he received mercy so that he could be an example to those who would come to believe. Paul, then, never forgot that he was saved as a sinner, and still regarded himself in that light – the greatest of sinners.

- (b) *Knowing the mercy that gave us ministry*. In II Corinthians 4:1, Paul said, 'Having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart'. Again, Paul never took his ministry for granted. Whilst he speaks of it elsewhere as the gift of grace, he is here saying it is of mercy. Galatians 1:15-16 gives us a window on his view:

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles [nations].

Paul saw clearly that salvation was not an end in itself, but was with a view to the ministry, that is, proclaiming the gospel.

We might say, then, that the greatest gift we receive is ministry. If we keep seeing it as the gift of mercy, then we keep in mercy and so remain merciful.

- (c) *Knowing the mercy that keeps coming to us.* In II Corinthians 1:3–11 Paul recounts the suffering he and his team had in Asia, ‘for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself’. In this account Paul speaks of ‘the Father of mercies and God of all comfort’, meaning that God’s mercies come to him – to us – in desperate situations. This reminds us of the classic passage on mercies in Lamentations 3:22–33, in which the prophet said:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness.

That is, believers have God’s mercies coming to them every day. The day of Jeremiah’s ‘Lamentations’ was a fearfully sad one, one wrought with horrors and terrors, yet the prophet saw God visiting with constant, fresh mercies. Like Paul and Jeremiah we have to recognise the constant mercies of God, so that we live in the warmth of mercy and keep being merciful.

- (d) *Knowing the mercy that is ultimately coming to us* – that is, eschatological mercy. Peter (I Pet. 1:3–5) said God – out of His great mercy – had begotten us anew to a living hope, that is, an inheritance which is imperishable. Jude enjoins his readers to ‘wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life’. Whilst eternal life is our present possession (John 5:24), yet we look to pass through the transition point of bodily death. If we realise that we have not received all mercies yet, we will still be mercy-dependent, and so keep ourselves in His mercy and be merciful to others.

SETTING UP OURSELVES TO BE MERCIFUL

Jude has a fine passage which gives us the background to living in mercy. In verses 17–23 he writes:

But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; they said to you, ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’ It is these who set up divisions, worldly people devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And convince some who doubt; save some by snatching them out of the fire; on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.

These are the last days; this is the last time. These things predicted by the apostles are happening. In the midst of these things believers are to build themselves up on their most holy faith. This is a deliberate and continuous exercise dependent upon the teaching word, the word of grace which is able to build them up. They are to keep themselves in the love of God. This could mean – middle voice – that they are to

be being kept in that love; that is, by God. It could also mean they should be keeping one another—mutually—in the love of God. In any case they are to live in the love of God, and this is a dynamic experience, covering all facets of life. We cannot stress too highly the necessity of living just as Jude bids us if we are to exercise mercy towards others.

Then they are to live in constant anticipation of the ‘mercy unto eternal life’, that is, ‘the grace that is coming [to them] at the revelation of Jesus Christ’. They will then see what now no eyes have seen, will hear what never has previously entered their ears, and will behold what the richest imagination could never have conceived. Living in anticipation of this mercy one would surely be merciful!

Then it is that Jude sets out three injunctions: (i) convince some who doubt; (ii) save some by snatching them out of the fire; and (iii) on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. There can be no doubt about it, these three actions are the actions of true mercy. For this reason we will look at them quite closely.

Convince Some Who Doubt

Who are the doubters? We could say that with the confusion of the last time, the presence of the scoffers, the divisions they bring and the clever worldliness of those who follow their own passions, even believers could become confused, and could begin to question the faith. Among the rabble of the day were those (Jude 16) who were ‘grumblers, malcontents, following their own passions, loud-mouthed boasters, flattering people to gain advantage’. The passage seems to indicate that, in fact, some of the doubters are also those who have disputed the faith and need to be

convinced since they are in doubt. If they are weak in the faith, then they need mercy, that is, tenderness, gentleness and understanding. If, however, they be another kind of doubter; that is, those who have been attracted by those who follow heresy (cf. v. 4), then they need to be overcome by the gospel in their wrong contention. All of this is mercy.

Save Some by Snatching Them out of the Fire

It is clear that we cannot save people, of ourselves, for that is the work of God, but then God chooses to use us. If we saw a person in a fire, we would instinctively try to save that one. If, remembering the mercy God had on us, we see those who are under the wrath of God, then we must snatch them away from danger. If we think God delights in men being burned up with fire, then we are mistaken. ‘He does not willingly afflict or grieve the [children] of men’ (Lam. 3:33). ‘His wrath is but for a moment.’ He has sent His Son that men ‘should not perish’. The gospel is ‘the power of God unto salvation’, for it is ‘the word of the Cross’. In Amos 4:11, Israel is ‘as a brand plucked out of the burning’, and in Zechariah 3:2 Joshua the high priest is ‘a brand plucked from the fire’. John Wesley, saved from the rectory fire when a boy, always saw himself as a brand plucked from the burning.

At the same time, ‘God is angry with the sinner every day’, and ‘the wrath of God is revealed from heaven upon all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their [acts of] wickedness suppress the truth’ (Rom. 1:18). He is the One Who has power to cast into Hell, the place where the merciless and rich Dives pleaded for respite via the Lazarus to whom he had not shown mercy. It is the situation ‘where the worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched’. Revelation 21:8

calls this lake of fire the second death, and says those who will be cast into it are 'the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters and liars'.

Jude does not tell us who these are who need to be saved, but they may be the doubters, those misled by the apostates, those may even be believers but who are in moral danger through the deceit of sin and the deceitful lusts of the flesh, or simply those who waver concerning the grace of the gospel. In our day and age we are apt to think all respectable people are untouched by the flames of hell when – as Manton puts it – 'They are in the suburbs of hell, the fire is already kindled'.¹ Saving is by proclaiming the saving work of Christ, telling the gospel of forgiveness, cleansing, justification, regeneration and love.

Manton cries to the Pastors:

*Minister! art thou sensible of the danger of souls? Are thy words as burning coals? Do they fret through the heart of a sinner? Christian! art thou sensible of the danger of thy carnal neighbours? they are burning in their beds, and thou wilt not cry, Fire! fire! they are besotted with lust and error, and wilt thou let them alone? Oh, unkind!*²

We had better ask ourselves whether or not we believe in God's wrath, hell, eternal punishment, lostness, perishing, eternal darkness, the lake of fire, the second death. If we do not, then the question of mercy does not authentically arise. If all men will be saved, ultimately, in an easy kind of universalism, then mercy is not mercy since the inevitability of universal salvation cancels out the nature of mercy.

Some may say universal salvation is mercy, but such a sentiment makes nonsense of God's holiness, His justified wrath on evil, His justice in regard to law and its requirement and the whole question of authentic morality. We had better think more deeply before we banish hell and its reality from theological thinking. We might find the true moral restraints found in the truth of Scripture may dissolve, and the moral fibre of the soul destroyed.

On Some Have Mercy with Fear, Hating Even the Garment Spotted by the Flesh

It may well be that the doubters, the burning brands, and the others who need 'mercy with fear' are all the one. We do not know. What we do know is that we must have mercy, but have it with fear. These last persons mentioned by Jude seem to be caught in moral pollution, and this could be as unsaved persons, or as those who claim to have faith. However, it may not be limited to them, for there can be great contamination within the fold of the Church. 'With fear' reminds us of Philippians 2:12–13 where we are to work out (not at) our salvation with fear and trembling. In Isaiah 66:2 the Lord says, 'But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word'. Galatians 6:1 says, 'Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted.' Rescue work can be most dangerous. There should be a healthy fear of contamination or contagion.

Paul assures us there are forms of evil which can be dangerous when we associate with the evildoers (I Cor. 5:9–11; II Thess. 3:14). Second Timothy 3:5 (AV) says, 'from such turn away'. Yet all of these need mercy.

¹ Thomas Manton, *An Exposition on the Epistle of Jude*, Klock and Klock, Minneapolis, 1983 (1906), p. 361.

² Manton, *Jude*, pp. 361–2.

In I Corinthians 5, Paul spoke of delivering the incestuous man over to Satan, 'for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus'. Probably his reference is to the same person in II Corinthians 2:5-11 where he counsels not being over-severe, but bringing forgiveness to the person.

The question is, 'How truly to have mercy?' when 'the garment spotted by the flesh' refers to ugly evil. The undergarment, close to the flesh would be soiled. For example, the leper's garment would be unwholesome to a healthy person. 'The perfect passive participle *εσπιλωμενον* denotes the past corruption that has defiled their garments, a defiling the effects of which abide and continue up into the present time'.³

A CONCLUSION TO HAVING MERCY

Paul counted it a high calling to proclaim the gospel, and so to share the mercy of God. For him it was not only a matter of indebtedness, but also of great joy. It was his life. So has it always been to those who have 'fire in the belly'. Love for God compels us all when 'we see any man have need' to seek to supply that need. We must keep warm in human feeling, sympathy, compassion and pity. God's richest expression is 'the riches of his mercy, out of the great love wherewith he loved us', for mercy out of love equals grace—'by grace you are saved'—and in the end it will be seen that all is of grace.

I must admit that what partly moved me to attempt to write this book was the knowledge of my own dryness in relation to mercy. Knowing this mercy for

³ G. L. Lawlor, *Translation and Exposition of the Epistle of Jude*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, Nutley, 1972, p. 136.

over six decades does not make one proof against that familiarity with it which brings us to lose our wonder and reverence for it, for the God of mercy. I noticed that the gentle juices of mercy were missing in me, and I knew the only way one could remain fresh in mercy was to go again and again to that event of history where the mercy of God is best seen—namely Calvary. Those wonderful words of George Herbert revive our vision of mercy and make it fresh, again, to us:

Who would know Sin, let him repair
Unto Mount Olivet: there shall he see
A man so wrung with pains that all his hair,
His skin, his garments, bloody be.
Sin is that press and vice which forceth pain
To hunt his cruel food through every vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice which on the Cross a pike
Did set again abroach; then let him say
If ever he did taste the like.
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine
Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.⁴

It is when we take mercy for granted that we quickly grow merciless. We also grow pitiless, passionless, and our proclamation becomes devoid of affection and sympathy, care and concern, and narrows down into a technical stating of salvific facts. This dry doctrine and correct theology does not speak to the human heart. Where there is no mercy in the eyes of the proclaimer, there is no response in the spirit of the hearer. The ministry of Jesus was one of true mercy. It spoke of mercy, but was filled with acts of mercy. Likewise the early apostolic proclaimers were

⁴ George Herbert, 'The Agonie', in T. E. Jessop, *The Enduring Passion*, Epworth Press, London, pp. 90-1.

men—and women—who understood the mercy of Christ.

THE COMMUNITY OF MERCY

Whilst we have set Paul forth—along with Peter and Jude—as a man who knew mercy and preached with ‘fire in his belly’ out of compassion for men and fervour for the gospel, yet we do well to remember that the whole Church was—and still should be—the community of mercy. Christ’s community is on a combined mission of mercy. It is not left just to a few rugged individuals with hearts of compassion to bring the mercy of God to the human race. When Pentecost came, and with it the Holy Spirit, and through him the revelation of God’s mercy in Christ, then also came the community of mercy, the new people of God. No sooner had thousands responded to the proclamation than a community was in progress which ministered daily to the needs of its members. The poor and the widows were fed, and the orphans cared for. The Epistles show us that the Spirit-given gifts of Christ ministered to the needs of the new community in love, unity and fellowship.

The history of the Church has been the history of the ministry of mercy. That this was so in the first century is evident, although its life and operations were by no means perfect. They needed grace and mercy to live as a community and to evangelise the world. History has shown us that, given in the failures, divisions and foolishness of the Church through almost two milleniums, the Christian people of God have always sought to show mercy not only to their own members, but also to all the world in misery. They have been to the forefront with

hospitals, hospices, care for the poor, the orphans, the widows, the handicapped, the dying and the helpless. They have provided schools, have sought to bring help during times of drought, flood and epidemics of diseases. An objective research into the efforts of other faiths and ideologies will surely show that the Church has been the outstanding community of mercy. None of this must be seen as mere participation in the ‘aid-trade’—that mixture of guilt-compelled action of doing good simply because we feel wrong about our own prosperity. Our prosperity should be the *source* of our mercy where it is needed, but not the *cause* of that mercy, for true mercy comes out of the gift of holy compassion and the desire to bring dignity to Man in misery. All boasting in regard to the ministry of mercy must be put aside. We must stop canonising the saints who have compassion and let them do it unseen, otherwise we frame them as specialists in mercy, and sanctify the aid-trade. For those merciful in heart there can be a quiet sense of joy, that the mercy of God on His people has evoked their compassion on yet other people.

A SIMPLE CONCLUSION TO THE MATTER OF MERCY

Mercy—as we have said before—is not mere benevolence. Mercy comes from God when He—according to His own Being—is moved by pity and compassion. Man is merciful because God has been merciful to him. The merciful ones of history have known the mercy of God and the mercy of others, and therefore have mercy.

True mercy is costly in the human realm. Few of us care to expend our emotions on objects of mercy. We

prefer carefully controlled situations in which emotion does not have to emerge. When Paul said, 'having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart' (II Cor. 4:1), he meant he did not lose heart in the face of seemingly insuperable difficulties. A thorough reading of the Second Letter to the Corinthians will show how much emotional or affectional expenditure there was in Paul's life. In chapters 4, 6 and 11 he talks—though without boasting—of the suffering that comes from proclaiming the mercy of God. On one occasion he said, 'apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches' (II Cor. 11:28).

Mercy takes time and effort, concentration and action. Whilst all needs do not have to be met, and whilst some misery has to be left uninterrupted because it is not God's time to act, yet the true person of God will always be alert to sense a need for mercy and respond accordingly.

Best of all, the wonder of having received mercy has brought the revelation of the inner heart of God—if we may use that seemingly extravagant figure. The knowledge from this revelation is what sustains us in life. It is also that which moves in His free mercy to have mercy freely in this world until the day when we receive 'Christ's mercy unto eternal life'.

19

The Everlasting Mercy and the Everlasting Covenant

GOD AND HIS COVENANTS

The covenant of God with mankind is the key to history, the key to God's plan for His creation, especially as it fell away from Him at the Fall (cf. Gen. 3:1–15; Rom. 1:18–32). 'The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham' (Acts 7:2). The glory of God is shown in covenant. That covenant is God's act of grace to the human race, for God is under no obligation to redeem it, but out of His grace He chose—even before time—to make a covenant people, an elect people, who would be holy, who would be made His sons, who would be forgiven their sins, and who would participate with Him in His plan to unify all things in His Messiah, the one we now know as Jesus Christ.

It is clear from Genesis 12:1–3 and related passages that this covenant was not only for the descendants of Abraham, but also for all the nations who would bless

themselves by Abraham (cf. Gen. 18:18; 22:17–18; 26:4; 27:29; 28:14; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8). Whilst God’s covenant with Man after the Flood was a promise that He would not judge the world by flooding it, yet the Abrahamic Covenant relates to the redemption of the nations. The covenant made with Abraham seems to be followed by the covenant made with Moses and the people of Israel, and then by a further covenant made with David (cf. II Sam. 7:4–17 and related passages). In turn, the promise of a new covenant appears to be yet another covenant in God’s order of things. This, however, is not the case. These covenants—rightly seen—really constitute the Abrahamic Covenant.

In Luke 1:68–79—the song of Zechariah—the old priest says under inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the promise to the house of David of ‘a horn of salvation’ was about to be fulfilled in the coming of Messiah, but that this would be by ‘his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham’. The result would be ‘to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins’, and ‘light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death’, that is, salvation to the nations (the Gentile peoples; cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6).

All of this is, of course, magnificent mercy. When Peter told the listening Jews, ‘You are the sons of the prophets and the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, “And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed” ’, he was saying this in the context of Jesus the Messiah (cf. Acts 3:11–26). In the New Testament, the matters of the covenant with Abraham, with Moses and with David are discussed in the light of the promise of the New Covenant. On the night of the Last Supper Jesus spoke of that supper in the light of Jeremiah 31:31–34 (and related passages)—‘I will make a new covenant with

the house of Israel . . . I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more’—when he said, ‘this is my blood of [or, in] the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt. 26:28).

Paul takes up the principle of covenant in Galatians chapter 3, where he shows that ‘the blessing of Abraham’ was not limited to Israel but was for all the nations—in Christ. Paul argues that the New Covenant people are those who have faith with father Abraham—they are the sons of God, and the people of God. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews twice uses the prophecy of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31–34, and develops his argument that the former covenant—that made with Israel through Moses—has now been superseded by the New Covenant. Now there is a new worship, a new hope and a new goal in ‘the eternal covenant’.

THE EVERLASTING COVENANT

We have already seen that the term ‘the everlasting covenant’ is used directly some fourteen times in the Old Testament, whilst the adjective ‘everlasting’ is used to speak of the nature of God, of the nature of the kingdom and even of ‘everlasting life’, that is, ‘the way everlasting’. Undoubtedly the word ‘everlasting’ has reference to duration, but it is primarily to the enduring quality of God’s attributes, His actions and His covenant. In this sense we are able to speak of God’s ‘everlasting mercy’ in that His mercy delivers us now—in *this life*—from the misery of guilt and oppression, but the joy of that deliverance will be known in the full freedom of eternity. In Hebrews chapter 11 the writer points out that none of the

faithful saints received in this life the fulfilment of the promises of God, but that all God's people will receive these simultaneously at the end time, the time of the *telos*, when God's 'everlasting covenant' will be fulfilled (11:39-40).

In the New Testament the term 'eternal life' is used a number of times by Jesus in his earthly ministry as described by the writers of the synoptic gospels. It is recorded seventeen times by John in his gospel, six times in the Johannine letters, eight times by Paul in his letters, and once by Jude, so that it is a significant term, and one related to 'the eternal covenant' and 'the eternal kingdom'. Eternal life is life lived within the eternal covenant and the eternal kingdom. To receive this life and to live in it is by God's everlasting mercy.

ETERNAL MERCY IN THE MIDST OF THINGS TEMPORAL

We have discussed the present fruits of mercy; that is, we have seen that we know, in this lifetime, the reality of God's mercy in our lives. We do not have to wait until the time of life beyond death in order to be forgiven our sins, to be cleansed from our moral defilement, and to be delivered from the hand of evil. For the believer, all of this has already taken place, although we have to walk by faith in these matters, and not by sight, and although the life beyond will utterly free us from impediments to holiness, yet God's mercy is presently operative. In fact, it needs to be this way, since by sight the situation often seems to be wellnigh hopeless.

What concerns us all is the helplessness of Man in his present dilemma. He knows so much misery in

natural disasters, calamities, sickness and wars. He seems to be the victim of almost insurmountable odds against him, and he cannot deliver himself from the existential misery which, universally, seems to be his lot. We have discussed this to some degree, especially in relation to social justice and social action. One of our problems seems to be that when we discuss social action, social justice and programs for alleviating misery, we either leave the sovereignty of God out of our thinking, in which case we must proceed on the basis of the sovereignty of Man (humanism), or we think of the sovereignty of God as something into which we may not enter, so that we leave everything to God. If the latter way of thinking seems good, then we must remember that being covenant people has already brought us to being people who must do the will of God and who are 'fellow labourers with God' in the outworking of His will.

THE EVERLASTING MERCY AND THE WILL OF GOD

We have already said that God's mercy is being worked out in the human scene, even though its consummation is eschatological. This means that God does not neglect mercy, social justice and social action, but works it through His people, and in this present world. We must work on the premise that He is working always (John 5:17), and is not negligent or dilatory. Doubtless, human views of *how* God ought to act in mercy will be at variance with the way in which He does. Paul's advice, 'Therefore do not be foolish [but wise, knowing] what the will of the Lord is' (Eph. 5:17), means that we should know His will and work within it. If we can speak of His 'historic will', that is, His will

in history and the goal of history, then we have many general indications of this in Scripture, namely that, in Christ, God is working to unify, fill up, reconcile and harmonise all things, and so to reveal His glory to all creation, thereby vindicating His work in history. Specifically, each person works within that will to share in this ultimate goal.

God's Will and His Law

A curious view of law persists with us as the human race. We look on God's law as static. That is, we see it as a form of legislation, as legal, as a standard to be obeyed under penalty of failure or transgression. The law is really 'instruction', the true way of life and the whole of wisdom. The law is certainly the will of God, but not simply as a standard of morality, or as a penal code. The New Testament sums up the law as love—love to God and love to our fellow creatures. Yet we persist in thinking that, when we obey the law, we are walking in moral probity and integrity and that this walking is what matters.

In one sense obeying the law is simply living functionally as is best for us and all creation. In one sense it is a 'by the way' matter: we obey, but do not see anything special about such obedience. Every act we do ought to be within the functional nature of law, but then, at the same time, every act ought to be part of the living, purposive and actional will of God.

The problem is that much of the human race is impatient of what is called 'mere morality', and is scornful of what it sees as dull and unimaginative conformation with God's will. Since it does not see that will as dynamic, that is, as of the principle of 'get up and go!', it sees little being accomplished by merely seeking, knowing and doing God's will. It has a more

imaginative and brilliant wisdom which will get things done. The trouble, of course, is how to evaluate what Man has done and does, that is, how far it has brought him as a race. His social impatience to get things done launches him on his schemes, and as attractive and commonsense as they often appear to be, they may not lead us to the *shalom* we value for the human race. The way of doing the will of God seems painfully slow and unproductive to the activist spirit of humanism.

THE CONTINUING COVENANT AND THE WILL OF GOD

Covenant to the faithful Israelite was always dynamic. It meant God never left His people. It meant that He was concerned with Israel as a nation. He always had its welfare in mind. He was always working for it providentially, redemptively and eschatologically. The glory which He revealed to Abraham was the glory He revealed to Moses—the glory expounded in Exodus 34:6-7 and in related passages. It is the same glory that He has revealed in Jesus Christ (II Cor. 4:6; John 1:14, 18), and it is a working glory. Mercy, grace, long-suffering, steadfast love, forgiveness and holiness always work out in the action of life of the covenant people. God's glory is not simply a visual brilliance. It is revealed in substantial action.

This is the Day of the New Covenant

Likewise it is the case with the people of the New Covenant, and the world in which they live. The God of glory goes on working, even though we humans—apart from God—may devise expedients to meet the

contingencies of the human race, and plan a better world for ourselves and for posterity. What is not generally acknowledged by the world is the fact that this is the age of the New Covenant, whether we recognise it or not, and whether we wish it or not. The New Covenant does not only operate among, and for, God's people, but is also the covenant which is to do with God's overall plan for all people, for Christ is Lord in this era, and in the age to come. He is covenant mediator, but he is also the Lord of history, and whether secular thinking accepts the reality or not, he is judging the nations, has 'the government upon his shoulders' and is controlling all things.

All of this means that whilst revolutions are taking place across the world in many nations, and whilst certain persons place their trust in ideologies to change the human situations and bring peace to the earth, yet even those who endeavour to make changes are under the Lordship of Christ. What I am trying to say is that every 'mercy' effort of the human race is ultimately subject to Christ, and to the God and Father of us all. There can be no sense in which Messiah is not working, even though to sight such actions are hidden. Because they are not seen, it does not mean they are ineffective.

We need to see that all situations happen under the sovereignty of God and His Messiah, but we must understand that all that happens is not, of itself, authentic. Many of our so-called 'acts of mercy' may not—when truly seen for what they are—be genuine acts of mercy. The immediate success or otherwise of human endeavours is no validation (nor invalidation) of the acts. We have to learn that, 'the Most High God rules the kingdom of men, and sets over it whom he will'; that, 'he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth;

and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What doest thou?"' Hence the wisdom of God says, 'By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles govern the earth' (Dan. 4:32; 5:21; 4:35; cf. Prov. 8:15–16; Ps. 83:18; Ezek. 17:24; Luke 1:51–53).

We conclude that since 'the powers that be are ordained by God', any government has been raised up and established by God—be it revolutionary or otherwise—but we are not to conclude that the government is necessarily righteous, or that its overthrow of the former establishment is thereby vindicated. At this point it is in the sovereign hand of God. Cyrus can be the saviour of Israel, but that does not make Cyrus a righteous person, but simply a person used by the righteousness of God (Isa. 45:1–7).

Mercy and the Will of God

The difficulty we face is knowing God's specific will for us as persons, and as the corporate people of God. When Christ tells us, 'Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful', and 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy', then our problem is to know what are *specific* acts of mercy within the *general* will of God. We have traced God's acts of mercy in that He delivers Man from misery, from oppression, and brings him into rich ministry which liberates others in misery. How then are we to decide on what is the misery from which we should deliver others? We would know generally that we ought to help people in misery, but should we go to the extent of revolution—opposing a government and bringing it down, even with violence? Are we merciless if we do not do that, and are we merciful if—for the sake of the majority in misery—we kill and maim some of the ruling minority?

We have seen that the early Church understood Jesus to be Lord. They knew his place in history to be above every form of authority and power, and yet that he was outworking the Father's plan by love. The Church itself exercised mercy towards the poor, the needy, the widows and orphans within its ranks, and saw beyond its own perimeters the misery of Man, and ministered mercy by the gospel. Beyond that it did not seem to go. Doubtless it understood the principles set out in the Revelation of John the Seer where, on the one hand, God was—and is—setting out His judgments upon evil, and on the other hand the evil of the Dragon, the Beast and the false prophet. They knew they were persecuted by the power of evil, by the Beast and Babylon, and yet the instructions given were for 'the patient endurance of the saints', and not the pitting of themselves in the modes of warfare used by 'this present and evil age'. Indeed theirs were weapons which were not worldly but mighty to the pulling down of many strongholds.

History and the People of Mercy

The people of mercy were constrained to true mercy within the context of their lives, their relationships, their community living. They espoused social righteousness as their way of life, but espousing does not mean succeeding. One can train one's conscience to be void of offence before God and Man, but Man will not necessarily give it the opportunity to work that justice out in life. The lack of the knowledge of God brings terrible evil (Hosea 4:1-3, 6):

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has a controversy
with the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or kindness,
and no knowledge of God in the land;
there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing,
and committing adultery;
they break all bounds and murder follows murder.
Therefore the land mourns,
and all who dwell in it languish.
and also the beasts of the field,
and the birds of the air;
and even the fish of the sea are taken away . . .
My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

Hebrews 11 shows that the faithful servants of God endured persecution, trials and hardships without hitting back at those who constituted themselves their enemies and persecutors, and they did not advance upon cruel despots and governments and seek to overthrow them, either for their own advantage or because they showed mercy—in this way—upon a beleaguered proletariat. If the will of God is for violence to overthrow violence, and war to defeat the tyranny of tyrants, then Marxism is right, and the basis of dialectical materialism the way to go; for then inbuilt into history—whether there be a Messiah or not—is the inevitable process of the decay of the ruling powers because they are doomed through the rising proletariat, and the way to a secular and dynamic kingdom of peace and joy has been opened up. Against such revolutionary liberation through violence is the weak and defenceless way of true people of God, pronouncing ultimate doom to all tyranny and evil in the final judgments of God and the renewing of all creation.

Surely the believer and the whole Church—beset about with the misery of mankind, the cruelty and selfishness which springs from the depravity of Man—must stand firm on the fact that God has mercy on the human race in Jesus Christ, and that mercy is

working to its planned goal—the judgment of all evil, the universal justice which will requite all injustice, and the liberation of redeemed mankind into the new creation. The conquest of the human heart is not by violence. It is by love, but love which is holy love. This holy love breaks through into the dark reaches of the human spirit, into its places of deepest and most profound misery, and it brings the human soul to inexpressible bliss, genuine freedom and the richness of God's *shalom*.

THE WAY OF COVENANT IS THE WAY OF MERCY

Exodus 34:6-7 and its related statements, along with the constant demonstrations of God's love, mercy, covenant loyalty (steadfast love), long-suffering, forgiveness and unswerving holiness, all appear before us and confront us as surely as they did when God revealed Himself to Moses and—no less—to all His saints. Enoch saw Him and was content to walk with Him; Abraham saw Him and came to justification immediately; Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Pascal all saw Him wonderfully, but no less Hannah, Elizabeth, Anna and all the unsung saints of God.

We have stated it, but it needs to be stated over and again, that what was wonderful under the former covenant with Abraham and Moses and David can be no less wonderful in the New Covenant mediated by Christ. The suffering of the man Jesus is without parallel in history, and so the extent of this mercy is without equal. We are encouraged by the magnificence of mercy in its new setting of the present—the everlasting—covenant. Only the man who needs mercy knows that his own spirit has the widest dimensions of all as the battlefield of his destiny. When he knows

the measurements of God's grace and mercy, then he knows all his failures, and the failures of the human race, have been encapsulated and destroyed in the great act of mercy—the Cross.

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