

CHAPTER XVI

THE MERCY OF GOD

"Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Rom. 9:18).

It is not the author's aim to attempt an exhaustive treatment of this text, but rather to write in a more general way on the Divine attribute of mercy. The text does make it plain, however, that the mercy of God is not universal; it does declare that God is sovereign in bestowing mercy; it does affirm that He consults His own pleasure as to the objects of mercy. This does not mean, however, that mercy will be denied any sinner who comes to Jesus Christ. This cannot be, for Christ hath said, *"All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out"* (Jno. 6:37). Every sinner who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will find mercy with God, and "whosoever will" may come.

Let it be observed that the text puts the exercise of mercy in opposition to hardening as divine acts. It will, therefore, aid us in understanding one action if we can understand the opposite action. Whatever God does in hardening a sinner, He does the opposite in exercising mercy. Observe also that the context speaks of "vessels of wrath," and "vessels of mercy." *"What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory"* (Rom. 9:22,23).

The Hardening of Sinners

In hardening sinners, God does not put any sinful principle in them; this would make Him the author of sin. The sinful principle is already there; we are children of wrath by nature: *"Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others"* (Eph. 2:3). But in hardening sinners, God leaves them to act out their own sinful desires, only controlling them so that their sinful desires shall not produce those particular actions that might overthrow the purpose of God. To illustrate: In the death of Christ, His murderers were acting out their own sinful wishes, but they were controlled by God, so that their deeds were the fulfillment of His prophetic word and the accomplishment of His eternal purpose. This explains why they parted His garments and cast lots for His vesture and gave Him vinegar mingled with gall to drink. It also explains why His bones were not broken, and why His side was pierced. God was in control of those who put

His Son to death so that they did the particular things that the prophets had predicted. *"But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe. For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken"* (John 19:33-36); *"They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture"* (Ps. 22:18); *"They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink"* (Ps. 69:21); *"And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots"* (Matt. 27:35).

In Acts 14:16 we read that God *"who in times past suffered (permitted) all nations to walk in their own ways, which means that He left them to their own depraved wills. Now, the showing of mercy is the very opposite of leaving sinners to act out their own sinful natures. It is the putting of something good in them, a holy disposition and a good principle, by which they repent of their sins and believe on Christ. Showing mercy to those who come to Christ and plead His blood is objective mercy; "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure"* (Phil. 2:13), is subjective mercy. *"Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth"* (Rom. 9:18).

In Eph. 2:3-5: *"Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)"* And in Titus 3:5: *"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost."* It was in mercy that Christ died for us, and it was also in mercy that the Spirit enlightened our sin darkened understanding.

Humility vs. Pride

The contemplation of God's mercy fills the redeemed soul with humility and praise, two virtues of great value in the sight of God. And whatever God values ought to be sought after by us. If God hates pride, I ought to seek to be humble. If God is pleased with a spirit of thankfulness, I ought to seek after a thankful spirit. It is natural to seek those things which are prized by men; it is supernatural to seek that which God approves. The world admires the proud and self sufficient

spirit, and therefore, it is men like Napoleon and other men of war who are the world heroes. But it is the meek and quiet spirit that is of great price in the sight of God: *"But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price"* (1 Peter 3:4). And there is nothing that will make us more humble and thankful than the contemplation of divine mercy. Mercy reminds us of our miserable condition as children of wrath. Mercy explains our salvation: Without mercy we would be consumed by the wrath of God's justice.

Mercy Defined

Webster defines mercy as the compassionate treatment of an enemy. Robert Haldane says that mercy is that adorable perfection in God by which He pities and relieves the miserable. Men are in a miserable condition because they are in rebellion against God and deserve punishment. Mercy implies that the sinner has nothing to say in his own defense. We understand the meaning of mercy when the defendant throws himself on the mercy of the court. That means that he is guilty and has nothing of merit to plead before the law. And this is exactly the condition of every man before the bar of divine justice. Mercy is our only hope. We may plead for justice before our fellowman, but to ask God for justice (to ask God to give us what we deserve) is the same as asking for a room in the regions of the damned.

Mercy Described

The mercy of God is variously described. His mercy is said to be great: *"And Solomon said, Thou hast shewed unto thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with thee; and thou hast kept for him this great kindness, that thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day"* (1 Kings 3:6), and plenteous *"For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee"* (Ps. 86:5). and tender: *"Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us"* (Luke 1:78), and abundant: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"* (1 Peter 1:3), and rich: *"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us"* (Eph. 2:4), and everlasting: *"But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children"* (Ps. 103:17). It is so comforting for us poor sinners to know that God is so rich and abundant in the very thing we so greatly need as sinners. No wonder the Psalmist said, *"But I will sing of thy power; yea, I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the*

morning: for thou hast been my defence and refuge in the day of my trouble" (Ps. 59:16).

Mercy Distinguished

1. Mercy and grace have much in common, and yet there are shades of distinction between them. Grace views man without merit; mercy views him as miserable. Grace can be exercised where there is no sin; mercy can be shown only to sinners. This distinction is seen in the divine dealings with the unfallen angel. God has never exercised any mercy towards them, for they have never sinned, and are not, therefore, in a miserable condition. And yet they have been the objects of grace. It was in grace that God chose them out of the whole angelic race: "*I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality*" (1 Tim. 5:21). It was in grace that He made Christ their Head: "*And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power*" (Col. 2:10); "*Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him*" (1 Peter 3:22). And it was in grace that He gave them such honorable commissions: "*Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?*" (Heb. 1:14). God has dealt with the holy angels in grace, for they have not merited His favors. If holy angels cannot merit His favors, what hope is there that sinful men can do so?

2. Mercy and love are distinguished in the Scriptures. Love may be for an equal; mercy can only exist for an inferior. Mercy goes no further than giving relief from misery; love predestinated is unto the adoption of sons. Mercy may cause a king to pardon a traitor; it would require love in the king to make the traitor his adopted son.

3. There is also a distinction to be made between mercy and patience. There is a general mercy of God which is more nearly like patience. This mercy is temporal and is over all His works: "*The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works*" (Ps. 145:9). This general mercy belongs to His essential nature by which He supplies the needs of His entire creation, "*That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust*" (Matt. 5:45). But His covenant mercy is exercised sovereignly through Christ and is everlasting.

Mercy Demonstrated

1. The mercy of God is demonstrated in the gift of His Son to die for sinners. "*Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us*" (Lk. 1:78). It was not justice but mercy that sent Christ to redeem us from the curse of the law. "*Christ hath redeemed*

us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). Christ did not bring the mercy of God to us; it was the mercy of God that brought Christ to us. Christ is the channel of mercy, but not the cause of mercy. The death of Christ makes it possible for God to righteously bestow covenant mercies on His people, justice having been fully satisfied by Christ the Surety. Mercy comes from God, but it comes only through Jesus Christ.

2. The mercy of God is also seen in the regeneration of sinners. Making us alive when we were dead in sins was as truly an act of mercy as was the giving of Christ to die for us. *"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved"* (Eph. 2:1-5). This does not picture the sinner as doing something to cause God to regenerate him, but it pictures mercy triumphing over human depravity. *"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost"* (Titus 3:5). *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"* (1 Peter 1:3). As a sinner we did no more to merit the new birth than we did to merit the death of Christ.

We have a concrete example of the mercy of God in the regeneration of Saul of Tarsus. He attributes his conversion to the mercy of God. *"According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief "* (I Tim 1:11-13). This does not mean that ignorance and unbelief were the ground of mercy, but the evidence that his salvation was an act of mercy. Ignorance and unbelief cannot merit salvation, therefore, Paul's conversion was an act of mercy. Paul was the chief of sinners, but he obtained mercy. *"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief"* (I Tim. 1:15). There is no sinner too bad for mercy to save.

Here is the obligation of saints: we owe our salvation to the mercy of God in Christ. No man can appreciate the mercy of God who feels that he deserves salvation. Deserving mercy is a contradiction of terms. In humility and praise let us attribute our salvation to the mercy of God!

The mercy of God is the proper appeal of the pastor to his people. *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service"* (Rom. 12:1). The order in Romans is sin, misery, mercy, and grateful service. The first chapters are devoted to the sinful and miserable condition of sinners; the next section is devoted to the great doctrines of grace, which Paul calls "the mercies of God," and the closing chapters give exhortation to practical Christian living because of the mercy of God. The pastor is not a man with a big stick; he is God's man with a big Book, and a mighty appeal.

Psalm 136 is a threefold exhortation to give thanks for the mercy of God. From God's side the punishment of the wicked is an act of justice. From the sinner's side it is an act of equity; he gets what he deserves. But from the standpoint of the redeemed, the punishment of the wicked is an act of mercy. The redeemed Israelites were told to give thanks, *"To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: for his mercy endureth for ever"* (Ps. 136:10).

The Mercy-Seat

The mercy seat of the Old Testament, and the mercy seat of the New Testament are quite distinct, and must not be confused. The one is the type; the other is the antitype. Under the ceremonial law the mercy-seat was the lid or covering to the ark of the covenant: *"And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat; of which we cannot now speak particularly"* (Heb. 9:5). This mercy seat was the meeting place between God and Israel. Without this provision of mercy, His presence among them would have been their doom, they would have been consumed by His holy wrath. He could show them mercy and let them live because His justice had found satisfaction in the death of their sin offering, the lamb upon whose head their sins had been confessed and in this way transferred from the sinner to the lamb. The lamb thus made responsible for their sins had to die. Its blood on the mercy seat was the basis of peace between a sinful people and a holy God. Now this blood of the bulls and goats could not take away sins except in a typical and ceremonial sense, and then only for a year. *"For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins"* (Heb. 10:4). Its value was in pointing to a better sacrifice, *"The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29).

The New Testament mercy seat is not a place but a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no place to which a sinner can flee to escape the justice of God. Men may flee to other countries to escape the judgment of human courts, but there are no fugitives from divine justice. God has jurisdiction in all countries, for He is judge of all the earth. There are no sacred spots of mercy on this earth. Salvation is not a matter of geography. If one could find the very tomb in which Jesus lay, and hide in it in the hope of mercy, the hounds of justice would find him and punish him. A sinner might kneel at the very foot of the cross of wood on which Jesus died and yet not find mercy with God.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the true Mercy Seat and sinners must flee to Him for mercy. The very word that describes the Old Testament mercy seat: "*And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat; of which we cannot now speak particularly*" (Heb. 9:5) is applied to Christ in Rom. 3:25: "*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation (mercy seat) through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God*" The word means that which appeases the wrath of God. Christ made appeasement by bearing the wrath of God on the cross. The wrath due us fell on Him. The mercy seat, therefore, is Christ in His atoning death. He could not remain in glory and be our mercy seat. He could not be a mercy seat in His infancy or as a man going about doing good. His vicarious death was an absolute necessity. He was speaking of Himself when He said, "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit*" (Jno. 12:24).

There is no physical approach to Christ, the true Mercy Seat. It is a mental and heart approach. If the mercy seat were a material object like a seat of wood, or stone, or gold, then the approach would be physical. We come to Christ, the true Mercy Seat, when we look to Him and trust Him for acceptance with God.

We fear many people are hoping in the general mercy of God apart from Christ. They reason that a merciful God will not send anybody to hell. This was once the best hope the author had, but he came to see that it was a vain hope. A minister once visited a sick man and sought to interest him in Christ. But the man was indifferent, telling the minister that he had no fear, that he was depending on a merciful God and did not believe such a God would send him to hell. The preacher left with a sad heart. But a few days later the same sick man sent for the minister who, when he came, found the sick man greatly disturbed. Said the sick man: "I have been depending on the mercy of God, but it has just occurred to me that God is just as well as merciful, and if He should

deal with me in Justice instead of showing mercy, I would certainly be damned for my sins. Oh tell me how I can be sure He will deal with me in mercy!" Then the minister presented Christ crucified as the one and only mercy-seat. All who fail to trust the Lord Jesus Christ will be dealt with in strict justice, they will get what they deserve as rebels against God, for God out of Christ is a consuming fire. "*For our God is a consuming fire*" (Heb. 12:29).

"Repeated crime awake our fears
And Justice, armed with frowns, appears;
But in the Savior's lovely face
Sweet mercy smiles, and all is peace"