

Another Christmas is now in the history books, and it will soon be followed by our entrance into a new year. What will 2022 bring to us? Only God knows. Our responsibility is to enter the new year walking the pathway lying before us ... directions found in the Word of God. So, let's walk together with Jesus on the pathway He shows to us. God bless you as we close 2021 and enter 2022.

MERCY AND GRACE: THE GIFT OF GOD

A Devotional prepared by Dr. Robert L. Morris

Posted on December 27, 2021

“My soul, praise the LORD, and all that is within me, praise His holy name. The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and full of faithful love. My soul, praise the LORD!”
Psalm 103: 1, 8, 22b; HCSB

The people were restless, wondering what was next. They were dissatisfied with their present condition. It was hot, dusty, and dry. Water and food seemed a little scarce. The rumbling of complaints could be heard throughout the groups of people as they gathered together to share their hearts with one another. It happened! It was the leaders' fault.

Their basic complaints were focused on what they perceived to be the misguidance of Moses and Aaron after leaving Egypt. Their biting words were the evidence of their lack of faith in God and distrust for God's appointed leaders, Moses and Aaron. “If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” So they said to one another, ‘Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.’” (Numbers 14:2b-4; NKJV)

Moses was deeply disturbed at the opposition he and Aaron received from the people of Israel. Moses and Aaron joined their hearts in intercessory prayer to the Lord. They well knew the holy character of God. After all, God Himself had already disclosed His merciful and gracious spirit to these two leaders of Israel. God called Moses to meet with Him on the mountain. There a lengthy set of standards, activities, regulations, commands were carefully spelled out to Moses. His time on the mountain ended when God “gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.” (Exodus 31:18; NKJV) The restless people of Israel seemed weary at what appeared to them a great delay in Moses' return from the mountain. Among them, “When is Moses ever coming back to give us the word from the Lord?” may well have been the general topic of discussion. Complainingly they said to Aaron: “Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” (Exodus 32:1b; NKJV)

Meanwhile, God, from Whom nothing is hidden, had observed the disobedience of the Israelites, violating particularly the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” (Exodus 20:3; NKJV) The idolatrous act of fashioning a calf of gold was highly displeasing to the LORD God. He said to Moses: “Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’” (Exodus 32:7, 8; NKJV)

Moses obeyed the Lord, came down from the mountain, and “as soon as he came near the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing. (His) anger became hot, ... (don't we call that “righteous indignation”?) ... and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. Then he took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it. And Moses said to Aaron, ‘What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?’” (Exodus 32:19-21; NKJV)

A part of their cry to the Lord included this strong confession: “The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression ... Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.” (Numbers 14:18) There it is in the days of Moses and Aaron. “Abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression.” There it is: “mercy” and “grace.”

Now let’s move on. David wrote the 103rd Psalm. It is a Psalm of celebration, as the first six words and the final six words indicate: “Bless the LORD, O my soul!” It is in verse 8 that we find King David celebrating the very character of God: “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and full of faithful love.” This verse discloses four facts about God.

1. GOD IS COMPASSIONATE. The Hebrew word here is רַחֻם – “râḥūm” and is best translated “compassionate.” David adds at the end of the verse a strong synonym, noting that God is “full of faithful love.” The Hebrew word here, a synonym, is חַסֵּד, - ḥesed. It is an adjective, focusing on the caring or compassionate love of God. Here we have the Hebrew expression of the merciful and compassionate character of God. These are powerful words declaring a very basic element in the character of God. It is the heart of His moral nature. Because God is compassionate, He forgives our sins. And the source of His mercy is found in His love. The Apostle Paul helps us here. He wrote: “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” (Ephesians 2:4-5; NKJV) The Greek word Paul uses is ἔλεος – and it is pronounced as “ēl – ā – ōs.” This word conveys the truth that the recipient has a need, and the resources that are adequate to meet that need are within the very character or nature of the one expressing compassion.

2. GOD IS GRACIOUS. King David added that the LORD is “gracious.” God is not only merciful but is gracious. The Psalmist wrote in a great Psalm of Praise, that for those who delight in Him, “The LORD is gracious and full of compassion. He has given food to those who fear Him: He will ever be mindful of His covenant.” (Psalm 111:4b, 5; NKJV) For those whose lives are expressions of God’s grace, the Psalmist added: “He is gracious, compassionate, and righteous.” (Psalm 111:4; NKJV) The Hebrew word here is חַנּוּן – “ḥannūn.” Of the thirteen times this word is found in the Old Testament, eleven times it is in combination with רַחֻם – “râḥūm,” as defined above. Thus we have “merciful” and “compassionate” (or “gracious”) used together in our human attempt to understand just a little about the nature or character of God.

For those who “return to the LORD,” (Joel 2:13a; NKJV) “He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and He relents from sending disaster.” (Joel 2:13b; HCSB) Nehemiah declares that in spite of the rebellious hearts of the people of Israel, God is “a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in faithful love.” (Nehemiah 9:17; HCSB) In his prayer of confession and confidence, Nehemiah further stated concerning God’s relationship with His people Israel in their days of disobedience: “You were patient with them for many years, and Your Spirit warned them through Your prophets, but they would not listen. ... However, in Your abundant compassion, You did not destroy them or abandon them, for You are a gracious and compassionate God.” (Nehemiah 9:30a, 31; HCSB)

3. GOD IS SLOW TO ANGER. This is the third trait of God cited in Psalm 103:8. God is patient and does not act hastily. Today, the fact that the second coming has not yet occurred is due to God being longsuffering and wanting everyone to be saved. Peter said it this way: “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9; TNIV)

One of the most eloquent passages of Scripture declaring that God is slow to anger, and that sets forth the nature or character of God related to His compassion and grace, is recorded by Moses in the Book of Exodus. God spoke to Moses and proclaimed of Himself that He is: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” (Exodus 34:6b-7a: TNIV)

In one of his recorded prayers, King David said: "But You, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth." (Psalm 86:15; TNIV)

The fact that the return of Jesus for His own, usually referred to as The Rapture of the Church, has not yet occurred, is due to God being patient or slow to anger, and His desire for people to be born again into His family, the family of the blood-bought, blood-washed redeemed.

4. GOD IS FULL OF FAITHFUL LOVE. David declared this plainly: God is "full of faithful love." As noted earlier, the Hebrew word here, is **חֶסֶד**, - *hesed*. This adjective focuses on the compassionate love of God. It is often referred to as "the unlimited, steadfast, loyal love of God," and is also very often translated by the English word "lovingkindness." By whatever English word one chooses to translate the Hebrew word **חֶסֶד**, - *hesed*, the true fact is that there is an abundant, inexhaustible supply of this gracious love, resident in the very character of our God.

This is what one may want to call the "capstone" for God's declaration to Moses, as noted above: "The LORD, the Lord God (is) compassionate and gracious..."

One of the most beautiful Scripture references to the fact of God's enduring, abundant, inexhaustible supply of mercy, is in one of the great Hallel, or Praise Psalms, Psalm 136. In this Psalm the Psalmist speaks of the many great acts of God, and then concludes each of the 26 verses with a little three-word Hebrew phrase: **יְדוּם לְעוֹלָם** - "Forever endures His mercy." We probably want to put that into more acceptable English, as "For His mercy endures forever." That little three-word phrase in Hebrew assures us that God will never cease being merciful. He abounds in mercy. He is loving and compassionate.

Now, what does this really mean to us? In this Devotion, we are dealing with "mercy" and "grace." A very simply definition of these two words from the hearts and minds of many Bible scholars may be of help. Mercy: Because of, and out of His love, in His mercy, God withholds what we as sinners deserve - judgment. Because of, and out of His love, by His grace, He gives to us as repentant, trusting believers, what we do not deserve - salvation.

The New Testament word for "mercy" is **ἔλεος** - *ēl ē ōs* - "the unmerited gift of God in withholding from us the judgment we deserve." Technically, this word is used to identify an attitude or emotion roused by the affliction of another person. At times we think of it as "pity." In Scripture, when used to describe God's relationship to us, it defines His gracious action of lovingkindness. Therefore, "mercy" is solely God's act of unmerited favor, or divine love extended to us by withholding deserved judgment.

The New Testament word for "grace" is **χάρις** - *charis* - "the unmerited gift of God by giving to us what we do not deserve." It is the goodwill and favor of God given to all who repent of their sins and place their faith in and reliance on Him. Used 131 times in the New Testament, it is easily seen as God's free and unmerited favor, including first of all, salvation from sin and its eternal penalty. It includes every act of Divine love poured into the lives of those who are "saved by grace through faith." (Romans 6:23)

The Apostle Paul wrote it this way: "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding." (Ephesians 1:7, 8; HCSB)

We cannot earn God's mercy or His grace. Both are gifts from God. Often the Bible speaks of "grace" and "mercy" as companion words. Even though the words are often used together, they are not synonyms. Yet, they are similar because they both are free gifts from God. King David was given a defining statement and stated it clearly: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love." That is mercy and grace combined. It was his plea to God to withhold the judgment he deserved. Instead, he wanted forgiveness that he didn't deserve. We too, must remember that there is a big difference between grace and mercy. Grace is a blessing from God that we do not deserve. Mercy is God not giving people the punishment that we do deserve.

In 1905 Charles H. Gabriel penned the words and created the music score for a familiar hymn that needs to be sung much more frequently in the Church today. Join me in singing it. It is familiar!

HE LIFTED ME

1. In lovingkindness Jesus came, my soul in mercy to reclaim;
And from the depths of sin and shame, through grace He lifted me.

CHORUS after each verse

From sinking sand He lifted me; with tender hand, He lifted me.
From shades of night to planes of light – O praise His name, He lifted me.

2. He called me long before I heard, before my sinful heart was stirred;
But when I took Him at His word, forgiv'n, He lifted me.

3. His brow was pierced with many a thorn; His hands by cruel nails were torn,
When from my guilt and grief, forlorn, In love He lifted me.

4. Now on a higher plane I dwell, and with my soul I know 'tis well;
Yet how or why, I cannot tell, He should have lifted me.