

Reflections on the Mercy of God After the National Day of Prayer

It is true that God is a righteous judge who will one day pour out His wrath on a rebellious world. But the overwhelming emphasis of Scripture is not on the wrath of God but rather on His mercy. As the psalmist proclaimed, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8).

Can you imagine if God's character was the opposite of this? If He was slow to mercy and abounding in anger? We would have been wiped out many millennia ago.

As the psalmist continued, "He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:9–14).

And remember: These words were written long before the cross. Long before God displayed His love for us through His Son. Long before the perfect Savior paid for our sins. Yet the psalmist, David himself, understood the greatness of God's mercy and kindness. And compassion and long-suffering. That is who our God is.

The prophet Micah, who had much to say about divine judgment, also said this about the Lord: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to

show mercy" (Mic. 7:18, NIV).

Our God delights to show mercy.

Similarly, the prophet Ezekiel, who too prophesied about the judgment of God, said this on behalf of the Lord: "Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!" (Ezek. 18:31–32).

Yes, our righteous God looks for opportunities to show mercy. He desires to demonstrate His compassion. And while He will not overlook our rebellion and sin—that is, if we refuse to turn away from it—He is longing to forgive.

The book of Genesis contains a remarkable dialogue between the Lord and Abraham, related as a face to face conversation between the two (see -33).

The Lord is about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. But Abraham's nephew, Lot, lives in Sodom, along with his wife and children. So God, in His incredible condescension, wants to let Abraham know in advance, prompting Abraham to take a bold step in faith.

As Genesis records, "Then Abraham approached him and said: 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?'" (Gen. 18:23–25).

What an extraordinary prayer. And what an outrageous appeal.

To paraphrase, "God, I know that You have every right to judge

these places, but You are a righteous judge. And that means You won't destroy the innocent along with the guilty. So, if you find 50 righteous people there, will You spare the whole population?"

Remarkably, the Lord—the Creator and sustainer of the universe—acceded to Abraham's request: "I will spare the city for the sake of the 50."

But Abraham wasn't done.

"What if there are 45 righteous?"

"I'll spare it," was the reply.

"How about 40?"

Abraham was really going out on a limb!

Amazingly, the Lord said yes to that request as well.

In fact, He said yes to everyone of Abraham's requests, which ended with God agreeing to spare the entire city of Sodom if He could find just 10 righteous people in it.

Sadly, He could not, so judgment was poured out.

Yet we get an incredible glimpse into God's heart toward His creation. He will bend over backward to withhold judgment. He will give us every chance to repent. He will be incredibly long-suffering and patient. Only then will His wrath be poured out.

The ultimate proof of this is found in the cross. There, rather than God pouring out His judgment on all of us—yes, all of are guilty sinners in His sight—He poured out judgment on His Son. Jesus took our place. Jesus bore our guilt. Jesus paid for our sins.

That is the heart of the gospel. That is the heart of God.

As we pray, then, for the Lord's intervention in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, let us appeal to His mercy and compassion. God alone knows what caused this viral outbreak, and God alone can dramatically turn the tide.

So we pray, "Have mercy on us, O Lord! And grant us repentance from our sins. We have no hope outside of You."