

Romans 12:1 The mercies of God

In a book called *Experiencing God's forgiveness*, Luis Palau gives the following illustration,

A mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death.

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."

"Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.

Paul opens the practical section of Romans with the words, *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice ...* (Romans 12:1). God has granted mercy to sinners and the only appropriate response is to present our bodies, our whole lives, to Him.

Young Christians are very often full of enthusiasm. Yet it is easy to lose our enthusiasm (or zeal) for the Lord and we withdraw from the frontline (see Romans 12:11). We have been hit by one discouragement after another, often by our own failures. We need to hear again the words of Romans 12:1, *by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice*. It is through the mercies of God that we will be motivated to allow the Holy Spirit to renew us and get back on the frontline. This teaching today will also give an opportunity to review some material in Romans 1-11.

1. The mercies of God at Sinai

In Romans 9:15 Paul referred to the mercies of God in Exodus 34. It was in this context that God revealed His mercy to Moses after the golden calf incident,

Exodus 34:6 *And the LORD passed by before him [Moses], and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.*

This revelation of God's mercy, (known as the 13 attributes of God's mercy) shaped the thinking of the prophets. For example in Psalm 103 David declared God as the one, *Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies ... He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy* (Psalm 103:4,7-8).

If we want to know the character of God we need to look first to Sinai, which of course is quite opposite to the usual view these days of the "Old Testament" God as an angry and vengeful God. This week Stephen Fry was investigated by Irish police for blasphemy, for saying that God is, "a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world ... full of injustice". This is a fairly standard comment from the present day atheists. The problem is that so many people including Christians believe it. The police have since dropped their investigation. But one thing is for sure: Stephen Fry and others like him haven't encountered the God of the Bible, because when we do we can only meet the God who is *the Father of all mercies*.

2. The mercies of God in the life of Jesus

Jesus was the living incarnation of the mercies of God. He exercised mercy and compassion in His ministry and in His dealings with people. He had compassion on the crowds, *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd* (Matthew 9:36). Jesus always dealt with individuals with respect and he had compassion on those in need. When Jesus met a leper Jesus was *moved with pity* (Mark 1:41 ESV), and then He cleansed the leper. Jesus taught about the mercies of God in His Sermon on the Mount, mercies that extend to

everyone, *He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust* (Matthew 5:45).

However I think one of the most vivid illustrations of the mercy and love of God in the life of Jesus was illustrated as Jesus approached Jerusalem and He wept over the city He loved, *And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."* (Luke 19:41-44). This passage reveals the love and mercy God desires to show to every human being. At the same time it stands as a warning to sinful human beings of the inevitable consequences of continuing to reject His mercy. Our part is repentance. In Romans 2 Paul eloquently links God's kindness (or mercy) with our need for repentance, *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?* (Romans 2:4). Repentance needs to be a part of our lives – not just something that happened when we came to Christ – if we are going to continue fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.

3. The mercies of God in the death of Jesus

The death of Jesus on the cross was a demonstration of the full extent of God's mercies. There is one passage in particular in Romans that helps us understand the mercy of God in the death of Jesus, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith* (Romans 3:23-25).

According to the dictionary propitiation means: "the act of appeasing or making well-disposed a deity, thus incurring divine favour or avoiding divine retribution." The only other place where the Greek word for *propitiation* is used in the New Testament is in Hebrews 9:5 where it is translated as *mercy seat*. The mercy seat was the lid or covering of the Ark of the Covenant, which was housed in the Holy of holies in the Tabernacle. It was hammered with pure gold with two golden cherubim at both ends with their wings spread out. The Holy of holies was entered just once a year on the Day of Atonement by the High Priest. He sprinkled the blood of bulls and goats on the mercy seat in order to make atonement for himself and for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16:14).

We can see that there is a close connection between *propitiation by His blood* in Romans, and the *mercy seat* which was sprinkled with blood on the biblical Day of Atonement. We should however note that the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). Indeed we know from Romans that Abraham was justified by faith (Romans 4:3), not by killing a goat or two. Forgiveness has only ever been through repentance and faith in Messiah. The sacrifices were efficacious in regard to purification of the flesh for the man or woman who went to Jerusalem to worship God in His holiness. But they were not effective in regard to the cleansing the conscience from sin (Hebrews 9:9:13-14) – nor were they ever intended to be. The sacrificial system in general and the Day of Atonement in particular were like a signpost pointing to Calvary, the suffering Messiah, whose blood would touch the heavenly mercy seat to make atonement for the sins of the world. As soon as the blood touched the mercy seat God's wrath was immediately conciliated and God was able to hold out His hand of friendship. J.I. Packer in his book "Knowing God" distinguishes between pagan and Christian ideas of propitiation: "In paganism, man propitiates his gods. In Christianity, God propitiates his own wrath by his own action. He set forth Jesus Christ... to be the propitiation of our sins." John Stott writes that propitiation "does not make God gracious...God does not love us because Christ died for us; Christ died for us because God loves us."

When we receive this propitiation by faith we will meet the immeasurable mercies of God! Pray that He would renew you today by His Spirit, leading you to repentance if necessary, so you are fully alive in Christ!