

Sabbath School Lesson #3 – Justice and Mercy in the OT: Part 1 – 9-15 July 2016

Christ is full of justice and mercy. Let us trust in the Lord “Which executeth judgment for the oppressed: which giveth food to the hungry. The Lord looseth the prisoners: The Lord openeth the eyes of the blind: the Lord raiseth them that are bowed down: the Lord loveth the righteous: The Lord preseveth the strangers; He relieveth the fatherless and widow: but the way of the wicked He turneth upside down” (Psalms 146:7-9).

Some read of the wars God fought for Israel in the Old Testament and think that ‘logically’ wars nations fight today can be ‘correct and holy.’ But the bad logic lies in the presumption that man can, on his own initiative, rightly assume to act as God. The Lord gives life to all, and as Judge of all hearts knows when that life is finally and hopelessly rejected. He may then withdraw it in justice and mercy. The Lord destroyed Sodom by fire, after having delivered the few who had not wholly rejected life; but it by no means logically follows that one may righteously burn down the house of a neighbour who may be considered wicked.

The wars of Israel were but the execution of the judgment of God upon the people of Canaan. Four hundred years before, God had told Abraham that his seed should possess that land, but not then; “For the iniquity of the Amorites,” He said, “is not yet full” (Genesis 15:16). For four centuries the Lord waited in mercy, but when at last their iniquity was full and they had so rejected life that the very land spued them out. And the case of Rahab in Jericho shows that God delivered every soul that had not finally and eternally rejected Him.

Two disciples once thought to imitate Elijah by calling down fire upon the Samaritans. Jesus rebuked them very quickly, showing that their spirit was not of God but of the devil. Thus it always is when men impiously assume to suggest and then to execute judgment for God. They but deify their own lusts. God must deal with sin and sinners. Now is He sending His Gospel to all, and again waiting for the world that rejects His grace to fill up the cup of its iniquity. Then its judgment will surely fall, and in that day “the kings of the earth and their armies” (Revelation 19:19) will be destroyed with all sin by the “brightness of His coming” (2 Thessalonians 2:8). Evidently then there will be no Christians in earth’s warring armies. All will have accepted another Captain and be engaged in a warfare that is not carnal. Every Christian is to see in every human one to whom he owes the Gospel. His duty is regulated by the positive precept, “Do good unto all men” (Galatians 6:10), and by the negative, “Do violence to no man” (Luke 3:14) this last one being spoke to soldiers. The Christian who takes these precepts as the rule of life will not be found in line of battle taking human life.

Now, we turn to read the mercy of God: “O give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good; His mercy endureth for ever” (Psalms 136:1) – read the one hundred and thirty-sixth psalm, and you notice each of the twenty-six verses of the psalm in is in the same manner as this one.

This psalm seems monotonous; it ought not to be so. It is surely a blessed thing to know that the mercy of the Lord is everlasting, and we should never be weary of hearing of it.

In this psalm we read of judgment visited upon certain people. It tells of the destruction of the firstborn of Egypt, the overthrow of Pharaoh and of his host in the Red Sea, and the smiting of famous kings. Now most people have the idea that God’s mercy ceases, or at least is held in abeyance, when He executes punishment upon the ungodly. This, however, shows us that such an idea is a mistaken one. Nowhere does the Bible give the slightest warrant for the idea that at any time there will ever be any less mercy with the Lord than there is now. The common statement that by and by mercy will step down, and justice will take place, is most dishonouring to God. It implies a change in His character and in His dealing with His creatures. It not only teaches that sometime He will be less merciful than He is now, but it also teaches that now He is not as just as He will be at some future time.

In this psalm we are called upon to give thanks “to Him that smote Egypt in their first born; for His mercy endureth for ever.” The fact that He smote the first born in Egypt is given as a proof that God’s mercy endures for ever. He “overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea,” not because His mercy failed, but for the reason that His mercy endures for ever.

The mercy of God for the Egyptians was just as great as for the Israelites. They were most cruelly treating the people to whom they owed their lives, and whom God, in fulfilment of His promise, was about to bring into their own land. But He did not precipitately destroy

their oppressors. He sent His servants to Pharaoh, making known the truth which would save him and his people as well as the Israelites. The promise to Abraham, which God was about to fulfil, included the justification of the heathen through faith, saying, "In thee shall all nations be blessed" (Galatians 3:8). This blessing was offered Pharaoh and his people, and was rejected with scorn. "I know not Jehovah, neither will I let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2), was the reply of the haughty king. Therefore God, in fulfilling the mercy promised to the fathers, was obliged to destroy the Egyptians. He shook them off, as they were endeavouring to stop Him in His work. His mercy did not change in the least, but the Egyptians refused to have it, and when people refuse to accept mercy, there is nothing left for them but destruction.

He "hath redeemed us from all our enemies; for His mercy endureth for ever." This is similar to the song of Zecharias, after the birth of John: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David; as He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the world began: that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant; the oath which He swore to our father Abraham, that He would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life" (Luke 1:68-75).

This does not indicate mercy for a special class. Those Zecharias refers to, as "all that hate us," are they who resist the progress of God's merciful reign over the earth. They despise both justice and mercy. We are delivered from our enemies, only in order that we may serve the Lord in righteousness and holiness all the days of our life. If we were not desirous of thus serving the Lord, we certainly should not be delivered. God's everlasting mercy exists for all, and none fail of receiving its fulness except those who will not have it.

Many, even Christians, misrepresent the Gospel. Do not be carried away with the idea that in the preaching of the Gospel mercy is revealed, and justice in the destruction of the wicked. God's attributes are not thus divided. In the Gospel the righteousness, or justice, of God is revealed (Romans 1:16-17). The righteousness of God is revealed in Christ for the remission of sins of all who have faith in His blood, "that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Romans 3:25-26). If God were not strictly just, He could never justify the ungodly. There is kindness and everlasting mercy in the justice of the Lord.

The repetition of the sentence, "for His mercy endureth for ever," shows that there is need of the dwelling much on the mercy of the Lord. "I will sing of mercy and judgment; unto Thee, O Lord, will I sing" (Psalms 101:1). "The earth, O Lord, is full of Thy mercy; teach me Thy statutes" (Psalms 119:64). In the commandments of the Lord, – the ten commandments, – which are commonly supposed to be the embodiment of stern justice, we learn that the mercy of the Lord endures to thousands of generations. He takes vengeance on them that reject all goodness, but His anger soon ceases in their destruction, while His mercy endures.

The mercy of the Lord not only fills the earth, but it is also "in the heavens" (Psalms 36:5). It "is great, unto the heavens" (Psalms 57:10). The sun, moon, and stars reveal it to us. The exhortation is, "O give thanks unto the Lord of lords; for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him who alone doeth great wonders; for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him that by wisdom made the heavens; for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him that stretched out the earth above the waters; for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him that made great lights; for His mercy endureth for ever. The sun to rule by day; for His mercy endureth for ever" (136:3-8).

Therefore "Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these *things*, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that *he is* strong in power; not one faileth" (Isaiah 40:26). Keep looking up, and meditating on the greatness of the Lord, and you will never more say or think, "My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed away from my God" (verse 27). He is always looking in every part of the earth for an opportunity to exert all His mighty power in behalf of the weak and the oppressed. "He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength" (verse 29). "I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor" (Psalms 140:12). Therefore, to the just and merciful Lord, "give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good; for His mercy endureth for ever" (Psalms 136:1).