

THEISM

God is Merciful

A merciful person is one who shows kindness and forgiveness to others who are in his or her power. While mercy and grace are similar, mercy differs from grace. Whereas grace is extended to those less blessed, mercy is granted by one who is strong to relieve the weak, needy and distressed (e.g., Psalm 25:16). Mercy is granted to provide a good relationship between persons in power and persons in distress. God is not only gracious, he is also merciful (1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; 2 John 1:3). English translations of the Bible sometimes render Hebrew and Greek terms regarding God's mercy as "loving kindness," or "compassion." Mercy denotes loving and compassionate activity that is expressed in tangible ways. Sometimes pity and sympathy motivate merciful activity (Judges 2:18; Isaiah 63:9; Joel 2:18; Jonah 4:11; Matthew 18:33). Mercy is associated with many virtues including forgiveness, compassion, pity (Matthew 18:23-35), and forbearance (Psalm 145:8-9). "You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth" (Psalm 86:15). God delights in being merciful (Micah 7:18, 20; Psalm 52:8). He is the "Father of mercies" (2 Corinthians 1:3). He is "rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4). "His mercy endures forever" (1 Chronicles 16:34, 41; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 7:3, 6; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; Psalm 106:1; 107:1; 118:1-4, 29; 136; Jeremiah 33:11). Hence, to speak of God as merciful implies first, that God is the powerful one in a relationship, i.e., the one in control who extends mercy; second, that those to whom God extends mercy are weak and in need; third, that God wants a relationship with those who are weak; and fourth, that God seeks that relationship through granting his mercy to them. God is merciful because mercy is integral to his nature (Deuteronomy 4:30-31; Psalm 62:12).

In both Old and New Testament times, the mercies of God were often demonstrated toward individuals. The Old Testament informs about God's mercy to Lot (Genesis 19:19), to Abraham (Genesis 24:12-15), to Jacob (Genesis 32:9-10), to Joseph (Genesis 39:21), to David's son, Solomon (2 Samuel 7:12-16) and others. In the New Testament God is said to have granted mercy to Elizabeth (Luke 1:58) to Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:27) and to Paul (1 Timothy 1:16). The New Testament informs how many partitioned Jesus for God's mercy and received it (Matthew 15:22-28; 17:14-18; Mark 5:19; 10:46-52). God's mercy was made known in practical ways, not just in consoling messages of sympathy.

However, the primary way by which God displayed his mercy is through his covenants. God was merciful to the Israelites because he had chosen them (2 Kings 13:23; Isaiah 54:10). Because of his promise to Abraham, God, in his mercy, brought the Israelites, Abraham's descendents, out from Egyptian bondage and led them through the wilderness (Exodus 15:13; Nehemiah 9:19). Although the Israelites became idolatrous at Mt Sinai, God established a covenant with them (Exodus 34:6-10). Whenever the Israelites resisted God but later repented, God, in his mercy, accepted them back (Deuteronomy 4:29-40; 13:17-18). God's mercy was strongly signified in Israelite worship by the fact that within the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle, at the center and on top of the Ark of the Covenant, was God's Mercy Seat (Exodus 25:17-22) where God said he would meet with the people (Exodus 25:22; 30:6). God is merciful toward the penitent (Proverbs 28:13; Isaiah 55:7; Daniel 9:9; Micah 7:18-19). God keeps his covenant and his mercy with those who love him and keep his commandments (Nehemiah 1:5; Daniel 9:4; 1 Kings 8:23; Deuteronomy 7:9).

The supreme demonstration of God's mercy is through Christ Jesus. God's mercy was demonstrated in the births of Jesus and John the Baptist (Luke 1:50, 54, 58, 72, 78). Jesus

embodied God's mercy in his healing ministry (Matthew 9:27-30; Matthew 15:22-28; 17:14-18; 20:30-34; Luke 17:12-19). Miracles of healing were testimonies to God's mercy (Mark 5:19). Moreover, in his teaching, Jesus portrayed God as merciful, forgiving, and loving (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:36; 14:12-14; 15:11-14). He exhorted people to be merciful (Matthew 5:7; 9:10-13; 23:23; Luke 10:37). But, most of all, the Son of God demonstrated God's mercy by enduring temptation, suffering and being put to death to redeem those who believe (Hebrews 2:17). Through the resurrection of Christ the mercy of God delivers believers from the death of sin (Ephesians 2:1-5), brings new life now (1 Peter 1:3) and enables disciples to look for "eternal life" (Jude 21), i.e., "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven" (1 Peter 1:4). "According to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5-6). God's mercy of salvation is extended to both Jew and Gentile (Romans 1:16-17; 9:15-18; 11:30-32; 1 Peter 2:10). The concept of mercy within salvation was so dominant in the mind of the Apostle Paul that he describes those who are saved as "vessels of mercy" (Romans 9:23) whereas he calls those who are not saved "vessels of wrath" (Romans 9:22). Since the mercy of God is inexhaustible and always available, believers may boldly approach his throne of grace in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Recognizing God's great mercy has a profound impact upon believers. Paul realized that although he had been a persecutor of the church, God had been merciful to him because he had acted in ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13). Moreover, God's mercy toward Paul was considered by him "as a pattern for those who are going to believe on him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1:16). Even Paul's ability to participate in the ministry of God was regarded by him as an act of God's mercy (2 Corinthians 4:1). Realization of God's mercy causes believers generally to be channels of God's mercy. Paul beseeched brethren "by the mercies of God," to present their bodies as living sacrifices, "holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

God is merciful and those who share in God's wisdom should share his mercy with others. The "wisdom that is from above" . . . "is full of mercy" (James 3:17). "Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6:36). "The righteous shows mercy and gives" (Psalm 37:21). That people should be merciful to their neighbors is well illustrated by Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37; see also Leviticus 19:18). Mercy is to be given cheerfully (Romans 12:8). "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7; see also Matthew 25:40). "He who oppresses the poor reproaches his maker, but he who honors him has mercy on the needy" (Proverbs 14:31). "The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in His mercy" (Psalm 147:11).

An awareness of God's mercy will surely result in giving alms to those in need. That's what happened in the Jerusalem church when people sold their lands and houses to provide for needs of disciples who had come from distant places (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 34-35); when the brethren at Antioch took up a collection to send relief to brethren in Jerusalem (Acts 11:28-30); and when brethren in Macedonia impoverished themselves to send their contributions to the brethren in Judea (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; Acts 24:17). When people fail to be merciful, they forfeit the right to receive God's mercy—like the unforgiving servant who was denied forgiveness in one of Jesus' parables (Matthew 18:23-35). "Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).