

# MORNING WATCH

A HERALD OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE, AS BRIDEGROOM, REAPER AND KING!

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## Abusing God's Mercy

**"O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth forever." —Psa. 136:1**

*"We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain."—2Cor. 6:1*

When God handed the tables of stone containing his Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, he introduced himself as a God of mercy. The God of justice prefaced his law of justice with the assurance that he is also the God of mercy.

*"And the LORD passed by before him, 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, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."—Ex. 34:6, 7*

How many of us have had occasion to thank the Lord for his mercy? How many of us have needed that mercy when we pleaded for forgiveness for our shortcomings? All of us have only his mercy to thank for the fact of any relationship with him at all. "O give thanks unto the LORD . . . for his mercy endureth forever!"

But precious and enduring and necessary is the mercy of God, it is, like most gifts, subject to abuse. Some fear his mercy. Some take it for granted.

### Fearing God's Mercy

Consider the case of Jonah. He was given a commission to preach the word of the Lord to Nineveh. He refused. He fled that commission by taking a boat from Joppa in the opposite direction. Why? Was it from fear of the perils of the journey? Hardly! The perils of the voyage by trip proved far more perilous. Was it from fear of a hostile reception in a foreign capitol? Plausible! After all Nineveh was the capitol of Assyria, Israel's mortal enemy. But, plausible as this reason was, it was not the main reason. Jonah reveals the reason himself.

*"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live."—Jonah 4:1-3*

Jonah was an Israelite. He loved his people. Nineveh was the capitol city of an enemy country, a country that in a few years would overthrow the kingdom of Israel and take them captive. Jonah knew his own abilities. In a land where prophets of the Lord were seldom heeded, Jonah had successfully convinced King Jeroboam II, the son of Joash,

to do the one righteous act in his reign. (2 Kings 14:25)

Above all, Jonah knew the character of his God, that he was a merciful God. He knew that upon the slightest sign of repentance, God might either cancel or defer the threatened punishment. Jonah did not want that to happen. He knew the basic character of the Assyrians, that they were warlike and cruel. Time proved his fears to be justified.

### **Love Your Enemies**

Do we ever act like Jonah? Do we want God's mercy for ourselves, but resent it when others, particularly those we don't especially like, are recipients of the same mercy? In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."—Matt. 5:44

And again, the Apostle Paul states: "Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."—Rom. 12:21, 22

The love spoken of here is more than passive love. Jesus does not merely say, "Love your enemies," but also "bless them." Paul speaks in the active voice: "overcome evil with good." This is exactly what Jonah was asked to do—to show love for his enemies by preaching to them the message of repentance. True, this message might bring them deliverance. True, this deliverance might not change their character or their attitude toward the one blessing them. No matter ... "bless them."

In a similar vein, we note the unusual words of Romans 12:20, "Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head."

The thought here of "heaping coals of fire upon the head" is not one of shaming them, or doing them harm. The illustration is taken from the custom of a beggar seeking to borrow some food.

Instead of merely giving him the food, "heaping coals of fire on his head" was an idiom for giving him the necessary means to cook the food as well—burning embers which would start a cook fire.

How well do we bless our enemies? Do we communicate with those with whom we are at disagreement? where some point of friction has put us at odds? Do we seek to show them the better way, as Jonah was commissioned to do for Nineveh? Or, on the other hand, do we shun them? go the opposite way when we are commissioned to give them a message from God?

### **Taking God's Mercy for Granted**

Another abuse of the mercy of God is to take it for granted, to use it as an excuse for further sin. Paul addresses this question directly in the sixth chapter of Romans.

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"—Rom. 6:1, 2

"What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?"—Rom. 6:15, 16

Although the above was written in a discussion of the relationship between the Law and the Gospel, its principles are relevant on a larger scale. It is only too easy for us to not only appreciate God's mercy and forgiveness, but to count on it so much as not to work on ridding ourselves of the underlying sin.

This is like a doctor treating the symptom, and not the cause. The symptom is our own guilty conscience, but the cause is our failure to follow righteousness. We can become too dependent upon God's forgiving mercy, relying on such texts as Psa. 103:14:

"For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that

we are dust"

And again, Psa. 139:1-3:

"O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways."

The Lord is a forgiving God—"forgiving iniquity, and transgression and sin."—but he is also a God who "will not clear the guilty."

His forgiveness is great and repetitive. Not only does he recognize that "a just man falleth seven times, and riseth again," but he goes to the proverbial "seventy times seven." (Prov. 24:16; Matt. 18:22) This mercy is a wonderful grace for the believer, but it is no excuse for him to not work on his problems and seek to overcome the underlying sin. To do so is to abuse the mercy of God, to take it for granted.

### **The Limits of Forgiveness**

There is a limit to God's forgiveness. Esau discovered this limit when, repentantly, "he sought it with tears." (Heb. 12:17) True repentance, it is true, will produce a positive reaction from God in every circumstance. It is only those doomed to second death who cannot "be renewed unto repentance." (Heb. 6:6) But this repentance must be accompanied by action, not necessarily a successful reversal of their wrong course, but, at the very least, a sincere effort to overcome.

God's forgiveness does not always require vocalized repentance, but looks for any action which can be interpreted as repentant. Note, in this regard, the rushing of the father to meet the prodigal and his quick embrace before the son vocalized his repentance. Nor need vocalized repentance necessarily be accompanied by dramatic action. Jesus gave a lesson in this regards to his disciples:

"Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in

a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him."—Luke 17:3, 4

A seven-fold repentance in a single day allows little time to demonstrate the fruit of that repentance, yet it calls for the injured one to proffer forgiveness. It does not follow, however, that subsequent days must not show the fruitage of that repentance—a changed life, a new course of conduct.

### **Summary**

In summary then, we cannot be too appreciative of the mercy of a God who is a kind, loving and forgiving Father; but neither can we presume upon that forgiveness. He forgives, not to encourage a continued life of sin, but to give a new opportunity to overcome. The just man who falls is indeed forgiven seven times. But he cannot fall the second time unless he arises the first time. This repetitive rising illustrates the continuing struggle of the Christian to overcome his shortcomings, and develop a character more and more in the likeness of his Lord and his Heavenly Father.

Nor should we ever resent the merciful grace of God extended to others, even our enemies. We should, on the contrary, "bless them"—forgiving them, helping them, edifying them with encouragement to a better way of life.

If we do these things we shall not "take the grace of God in vain," but, properly using it, grow from grace to grace, from "glory to glory," until we are found in his own image. (2 Cor. 3:18)

#### **MORNING WATCH E-NEWSLETTER**

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## Which Mountain Will You Move?

*"If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you." - Matthew 17:20*

Here three of Jesus' disciples had just descended from the Mount of Transfiguration where they had witnessed a picture of Christ's kingdom, seeing, in vision, Jesus in discussion with Moses and Elijah. They found the other disciples at the base of the mountain unable to cast out a demon from a young boy. They wondered why they could not do so. Jesus said it would take faith—like a grain of mustard seed—and they could move the power of this mountain—the Mount of Transfiguration, the kingdom—to "yonder place," where the child was now, and they could accomplish the miracle.

*Mark 11:23—"For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that these things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith."*

In this instance, Jesus and his disciples are on the side of another mountain, the Mount of Olives, where Jesus had shortly before cursed the fig tree. This miracle represented the casting off of the nation of Israel. Like all other prophecies it required faith to believe in the fulfillment of an action yet in the future. So today there are many Bible prophecies still unfulfilled. If we have faith as a grain of mustard seed—infinitesimally small—we can believe that not only the judgment of Israel, but all of God's prophecies—those of blessings as well as those of judgment—will

come to pass.

*Luke 17:6—"And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you."*

Here we find Jesus outside the house of a Pharisee. There was no mountain to point to, so he pointed to a nearby sycamine, or mulberry tree. His lesson had been forgiveness, even as often as seven times in one day. His disciples' response was, Lord, increase our faith. Pointing to the sycamine tree he uttered these words. The sycamine tree has the unique quality that when a branch is cut another grows very quickly in its place. The lesson was that if they were cut—offended—by the words of another, they should forgive and God would quickly heal the wound, and new blessings would branch out in the place of the wound.

Which mountain will you move? Or will you find mountains of your own that faith can move?

Mountains of fear,  
Mountains of doubt,  
Mountains within,  
Mountains without—  
Whatever your mountain,  
**YOU CAN MOVE IT** if you  
only have ....

**Faith As A Grain Of Mustard Seed!**