

Mercy.

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY.

BY THE REV. JAMES WELLS, D.D., GLASGOW.

I. The Word.

THE words for mercy in the Bible are not so self-illuminating as is the great word for grace. *Χάρις*, from *χαίρειν*, means that which has charm and gives gladness; that movement of God to man, which brings joy to man and joy to God. Still, in our study of mercy, etymology is to some extent the handmaid of exegesis and theology. We get no help from the most common Hebrew word for mercy, *חַסֵּד*. But one of its synonyms is most interesting. That is *רַחֲמִים*, which means the softest parts of the body, the inwards, the heart and bowels as the physical seat of affection. The verb from which it is derived means to be soft, and then to soothe or cherish, as a mother her infant or a bird her eggs or young. In the *Piel* it means to cherish intensely or to have mercy. In Ps 51¹ it is translated *tender mercies*, that is, mercies that are 'stretched forth' (*tendo*) towards their object. It is used to describe the melting mercy of a father (Ps 103¹³), and of a mother to her suckling child (Is 49¹⁵), and of Joseph when 'his bowels did yearn upon his brother' (Gn 43³⁰). It is thus one of those words that, as Ruskin puts it, open doors, not of robbers, but of the King's treasuries. As it intimates the fatherlike and motherlike love of God, it may be supposed to give us a foregleam of the incarnation. Faber, agreeably to the genius of his own saccharine and caressing theology, puts it thus—

They bade me call Thee Father, Lord!
Sweet was the freedom deemed,
And yet more like a mother's ways,
Thy quiet mercies seemed.

The word *רַחֲמִים* corresponds exactly with the Greek phrase *τὰ σπλάγχνα*, which is used both in the Gospels and the Epistles. The verb *ἐσπλαγχνίσθη* is often applied to Christ: 'He was moved with compassion'; it suggests His ineffably tender and mysterious affection for the suffering. The word is not employed in this sense by classic writers, among them it has only the physical

sense. It is a borrowed vessel, which has been filled with the new wine of the kingdom, and has thus enriched human speech. It is full of force and feeling. We have no equivalent for it in our language. It expresses that thrill of yearning, that melting love which, in life's supreme moments, overflows from the heart upon the whole body; which quickens the pulse, touches every nerve, and, like electricity, agitates the whole frame with new and o'ermastering sensations: such an emotion as a man has when he takes a last farewell of his bosom friend, or a mother when she bends over her agonized child. It intimates not a helpless pity, but the pity that moves the hand to succour to the utmost of its power.

With this exception, the biblical words for mercy do not, by themselves, contribute much towards an exact conception of this divine attribute. *Χρηστότης* and *φιλανθρωπία*, however, are warm homely words, as they suggest kind-heartedness, benignity, sweetness. Delitzsch translates *hesed* by *gnade*, 'grace'; and others suggest 'leal love.'

II. The Conception.

Most people have a vague idea that there is no distinction between love, grace, and mercy. Without love there can be neither grace nor mercy. God's love in presence of our sin, becomes love in action, and the proper name for it is grace. God's love in presence of our misery is mercy. Mercy is thus God's response to man's needs. But in popular speech and in many Bible passages, grace and mercy are two words for the redeeming, satisfying love of God. Mercy thus means God's spontaneous, unearned love, pouring its fulness down upon the sinful and the miserable. It is what the weak ask of the strong; the poor, of the rich; the wrong-doer, of the wronged. Deep calleth unto deep: God's mercy and our misery. Mercy supposes nothing, and seeks nothing in us but misery, and works upon that. It is sometimes represented as the whole of religion: 'Which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy'

(1 P 2¹⁰). 'Thy gentleness (Ps 18³⁵) hath made me great.' Mercy flows low that it may reach the lost. Mercy delights in extremes: the extreme of man's misery and of divine benediction. 'He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifeth the needy out of the dunghill; that He may set him with princes, even with the princes of His people' (Ps 113⁷). The Bible is the Book of Mercy.

III. Mercy, not Mercies.

'Mercies' is a fine old Puritan phrase for the bounties of Providence. Cromwell wrote and spoke of his 'crowning mercies.' It might be fairly and reverently argued that man at first had strong claims upon God, as creatorship implies many responsibilities. The oldest of all the Testaments and Gospels is that inwoven into man's mystic frame by the hand of his Maker. In Scripture both God and man appeal to this primal gospel. 'For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made' (Is 57¹⁶); and 'forsake not the works of thine own hands' (Ps 138⁸). But man, as a rebel against his Maker, has forfeited all these claims and rights. To him, as God's enemy, the earth is represented as unwillingly yielding her fruits. Bounties given to man before he needed mercy, if restored or continued after forfeiture, become 'mercies' in the pious use of that phrase. The angels receive, not 'mercies,' but bounties or benefits. The same feeling has created another kindred word—'spared.' But often mercy is used in opposition to mercies in the sense above explained. For there is one supreme, all-embracing mercy, which is often spoken of as God's mercy. Thus Moses prays, 'O satisfy us in the morning with Thy mercy' (Ps 90¹⁴). This mercy of God, however, is often described in the plural. Thus David speaks of 'the multitude of Thy tender mercies' (Ps 51¹). This we may regard as the plural of excellence and abundance. The Psalmist's baffled speech employs a great variety of phrases and figures, and strains all the powers of language. Usually, however, the sacred writers in both the Testaments present to us the mercy of God in the singular.

IV. Mere Mercy.

Our physicians prescribe by exclusion: the remedies they recommend are not to be mixed

with any foreign substance whatever. The Bible prescribes mercy by exclusion. The true biblical conception excludes every idea of merit or recompensing justice. It is made very plain that self-righteousness shuts the gate of mercy on mankind. In the penitential Psalms, for example, the appeal is always to mere mercy. The noblest Christian life ever faithfully reproduces this experience of the Bible saints. They live and die, 'looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.'

As I am asked to blend exegesis and illustration, I offer a few illustrations culled from recent reading. 'The only port that in the last storm my shattered vessel can hope to take, or has any desire to take, is that of Sovereign mercy'—that was among the last utterances of Dr. John Brown (senior) of Edinburgh. His favourite text was the one I have just quoted from Jude. 'Sovereign grace is the port I airt at,' wrote Samuel Rutherford. When Dr. Thomas Binney of London retired from the pulpit, one of the two texts which he chose for his farewell sermon was, 'Enter not into judgment with Thy servant; for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified.' That saying he appropriated as an expression of his own deepest convictions. Many famous Christians have died with the publican's prayer on their lips. Archbishop Usher did so. William Wilberforce, the liberator of the slaves, said when dying, 'With regard to myself, I have nothing to urge but the poor publican's plea, "God be merciful to me a sinner."' When Grotius lay dying at Rostock, the minister reminded him of the publican's prayer. 'That publican, Lord, am I,' said Grotius, 'God be merciful to me a sinner,' and then he died.—'Here lies Henry Lawrence, who tried to do his duty. And may God have mercy on him.' That inscription on one of his statues fairly represent his last utterances. Away up among the highest Alps, among the Dolomites and westwards, the peasants have painted in large letters over their cottage doors, *Misericordia, Jesu—Jesus Hominum Salvator, Misericordia*. Mary's name never appears. These peasants represent an older and purer faith than that of modern Rome, and their spiritual superiors have been more or less at strife with the Church of Rome for centuries. I once asked Gavazzi about them, after I had visited them, 'Oh,' he said, 'they are half-Protestants, and I expect them to join us some day.' Many of them are now doing so.

A sensitive conscience and a just conception of the spirituality and universality of God's law should make self-righteousness for ever impossible for us. Am I to believe that any of my poor flawed works are good enough for God? Mr. Morison's new and excellent *Life of Andrew Melville* informs us that Robert Bruce, minister

of Edinburgh, suffered sore trouble of conscience in his youth. At last a crisis came, which he describes as 'a court of justice holden on his soul.' It 'chased' him to God's mercy. The prayer of the saint in all ages has been, *Kyrie eleison*, 'Mercy, Jesu'!

(To be continued.)

The Missionary Methods of the Apostles.

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V.

Practical Methods in Evangelization.

THE men in charge of the missionary work were undoubtedly unique. The success which attended their efforts was largely due to their personal qualities and experiences. But even such men had methods, and their methods should be carefully studied.

I. We see that their energies were directed to great strategic positions, which became centres of an ever-widening process of evangelization. In beginning at Jerusalem, the original apostles were obeying the command of the Lord Jesus. It was not simply that it was the home field, or that it was important that Christ should be magnified, where he had been crucified. Jerusalem was also a uniquely favourable centre of evangelization, the metropolis in a peculiar degree of a world-wide dispersion. From all lands the Jews looked to Jerusalem. The news of whatever happened there was carried by pilgrims or by letters to the ends of the earth. The work of John the Baptist was extended in this way to Alexandria and Ephesus (Ac 18²⁵ 19³), and no doubt to many other places where Jews resided. The sensation which the personal ministry of Jesus created in Galilee and Judea, would be felt in far-off lands before that ministry was completed. Reports of the sayings and doings of the new prophet would find their way to scattered colonies of Jews long before a preacher appeared among them. In a superlative degree words spoken at Jerusalem were 'winged words.'

The first day's work at Pentecost revived and quickened the seed of the word which had been sown in Galilee, Judea, and Samaria. It set the

knowledge of the gospel on its way to circle the earth in the hearts of the men of every nation under heaven who heard 'the wonderful works of God' (Ac 2⁵⁻¹¹). They would reach Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Asia, Egypt, Rome, and the islands of the Great Sea. It is noteworthy that some of the places mentioned in 1 P 1¹,—Pontus, Cappadocia, Asia,—were represented among those who were present on the day of Pentecost. It is therefore not beyond possibility that in the Christian communities addressed by James and Peter, we have companies of believers whose evangelization, directly or indirectly, resulted from the work carried on at Jerusalem, and similar results may have existed in other instances. We think of Paul as carrying the gospel at a later date to Europe, but messengers invisible as the wind had anticipated him. The message would be imperfect, but it would quicken thought and anticipation. This process was repeated as long as Jerusalem stood and the pilgrim multitudes assembled at the various yearly festivals. The numbers thus brought within the reach of the gospel as preached at Jerusalem were very great. Josephus estimates that over 2,700,000 were present at a passover festival in the time of Nero.¹ The great feasts of the Jews were really pilgrimages (פִּיגְרִימָגִים), and corresponded to the *haj* of the Mohammedans. It ceases to be a matter of surprise that the original apostles confined themselves so largely to Jerusalem and Palestine. They could find no better sphere or centre. The part they had in the evangelization of the world has, we think, been

¹ B.J. vi. 9. 3.