

The Compassion of God and the Nation of Israel

“Because they rebelled against the words of God, and condemned the counsel of the most High: therefore He brought down their heart with labor; they fell down, and there was none to help. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death and broke their bands asunder. Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men. For He hath broken the gates of brass and cut the bars of iron asunder” (Psalm 107:11-16).

In the vastness of the universe God chose to pick out a small group of people to be the focal point of His dealings with the race of mankind. It began with Jacob and his twelve sons. Born in the fires of affliction in Egypt, it grew into a mighty nation. For 400 years they toiled in bondage to the Egyptians. It is assumed universally that they were the ones who built the pyramids. There is a considerable question as to exactly what the time frame was, so different pharaohs are possible. But why 400 years? Wasn't that excessive for a people destined to be the "people of God?" This is something of a mystery, but perhaps it took that long to build up the population and the characteristics of this holy nation. In due course God achieved what He wanted in the way of this people, and at the appropriate time, He sent to them Moses, their great deliverer. Through a series of miraculous events, they were finally sent forth on their journey across the wilderness.

Now comes the testing of their mettle. The pursuit by Pharaoh, with the miraculous deliverance; the hunger and thirst; the murmurings and complainings; the idolatrous golden calves; and in the end the collapse of their faith at the Jordan. Meanwhile, God forged the nation together with the laws from Sinai and the Mosaic covenant. They were identified at this point, even in spite of their long series of misadventures as a people destined to be *“a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation”* (Exodus 19:6). An interminable period of time would pass before this prophecy could be fulfilled, but in Romans 11, Paul suggests that *“all Israel shall be saved.”* Exactly how that will come about is not clear, but ultimately it will have to be so.

Meanwhile, God bore patiently with His people through all of their rebellions and unbelief and idolatry, to offer them forgiveness and help, whenever they sought Him. There is a beautiful verse in Psalms 68 which we have lost through mistranslation. The text is—*“Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation”* (Selah). The proper translation should be *“Blessed be the Lord who day by day beareth us as His burden”* (Psalm 68:19). This translation fits more readily in the theme of Psalm 68.

The classic passage on this whole subject of God's compassion on His people is in Psalm 107. *“They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses. And He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation. Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men”* (Psalm 107:4-8). With all of their murmuring and complaining and rebellion, God was always open to their cry and stood ready to deliver them out of their distresses.

But there is more. *“Because they rebelled against the words of God and condemned the counsel of the most High: therefore He brought down their heart with labor; they fell down, and there was none to help. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death and broke their bands asunder. Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men”* (Vs. 11-15).

And yet there is more *“Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near unto the gates of death. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble and He saveth them out of their distresses. He sent His word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men”* (Vs. 17-21).

But there is still more. He has a word for the traveler and those that are engaged in commerce. *“They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep. For He commandeth and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit’s end. Then they cry out to the Lord in their trouble, and He bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm so that the waves thereof are still. Then they are glad because they be quiet; so He bringeth them unto their desired haven. Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men”* (Vs. 23-31).

This Psalm is part of a group of Psalms written by David. They are in many respects prophetic and yet they have a present meaning for all who are afflicted. Surely David knew affliction as well as sin and disaster. But Psalm 51 shows David’s penitent heart and plea for forgiveness. *“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me”* (Psalm 51:1-3). To David’s genuine plea for forgiveness God responds in mercy. And David apparently sensed that he was forgiven. *“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou will not despise”* (Vs. 17). Many passages in the New Testament show the mercy of God toward the penitent sinner. John picks up the theme in his first epistle—*“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (I John 1:9).

We have a beautiful story in the case of Peter, whose sin was as great as any, perhaps greater, in his blatant denial of Christ at the trial. He went out and wept bitterly and obviously sought God’s mercy. When Jesus had risen from the dead and appeared to the disciples on the seashore, they were afraid, but Jesus cried out to them, *“Fear not, for it is I, be not afraid.”* Peter immediately recognized the voice of the Lord and left the ship, running through the surf to the shore where Jesus stood. It was obvious that Peter had really experienced the forgiveness of God and felt that forgiveness in his rush to embrace Jesus.

These lessons ought to be of extreme comfort to all of us today. It is not necessary for us to offer blood sacrifices. These have been done away with by Jesus—*“The Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world.”* In our human failure and sin we come to Jesus who is our Lamb and in the coming to Him, find His forgiveness. We too feel forgiveness because we are given that hope through the whole of the New Testament. Whatever your weakness or failure or sin, you have no need to hold back. Come to Christ in penitence and enjoy the blessing of His forgiveness and restoration. If you hold back from Christ, how will you ever get help?

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