

27.07.2019 MERCY AND JUSTICE IN THE PSALMS AND PROVERBS

“Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked” Psalm 82:3, 4

Much of Christendom today disregards the Old Testament. There are many reasons for this – some think it is part of an old dispensation, others claim they are revolted by the tales of apparent cruelty; still others refuse to believe the Creation story. But one who reads the Old Testament sincerely and with an open and seeking heart will find Jehovah, the God of love and justice throughout its pages.

Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.” Exodus 34:5-7

One of the outstanding ways God reveals His compassion is by His concern and care for the poor. There are at least 245 verses in Scripture that directly refer to the poor, the needy and poverty.

This week we look at the mercy and justice of God as revealed in the Psalms and Proverbs.

Psalms: Songs of Hope for the Oppressed

The Psalmists rejoice in the righteous judgement of God. *‘Let the nations rejoice for Thou shalt judge righteously (67:4); ‘let the field be joyful...the Lord cometh to judge the earth (96:12, 13); ‘judge me, O Lord according to Thy righteousness’.*

This is very different from the traditional Christian ideas of judgement, from the requiem music of the judgement day *‘Dies Irae (Day of Wrath)’*, and the Christian art of the terrors of the last judgement. We too often forget that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) and that Christ will stand up to vindicate and give judgement in favour of the saints. The Psalmists knew that, so they call upon God to take up their cause in the judgement.

But the Lord shall endure forever; He has prepared His throne for judgment. He shall judge the world in righteousness, and He shall administer judgment for the peoples in uprightness. The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. Psalm 9:7-9

“It was with great surprise that I first noticed how the Psalmists talk about the judgements of God. They talk like this: *‘O let the nations rejoice and be glad, for thou shalt judge the folk righteously’ (67:4), ‘Let the field be joyful ... all the trees of the wood shall rejoice before the Lord, for He cometh, for He cometh to judge the earth’ (96:12, 13).* Judgement is apparently an occasion of universal rejoicing. People ask for it: *‘Judge me, O Lord my God, according to thy righteousness’ (35:24).*

The reason for this soon becomes very plain. The ancient Jews, like ourselves, think of God’s judgement in terms of an earthly court of justice. The difference is that the Christian pictures the case to be tried as a criminal case with himself in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon; the other hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages. Hence he prays ‘judge my quarrel’, or ‘avenge my cause’ (35:23).

We need not therefore be surprised if the Psalms, and the Prophets, are full of the longing for judgement, and regard the announcement that ‘judgement’ is coming as good news. Hundreds and thousands of people who have been stripped of all they possess and who have the right entirely on their side will at last be heard. Of course they are not afraid of judgement. They know their case is unanswerable — if only it could be heard. When God comes to judge, at last it will.

Dozens of passages make the point clear. In Psalm 9 we are told that God will ‘minister true judgement’ (v. 8), and that is because He ‘forgetteth not the complaint of the poor’ (v. 12). He ‘defendeth the cause’ (that is, the ‘case’) ‘of the widows’ (68:). The good king in Psalm 72:2 will ‘judge’ the people rightly; that is, he will ‘defend the poor’. When God ‘arises to judgement’ he will ‘help all the meek upon earth’ (76:9), all the timid, helpless people whose wrongs have never been righted yet. When God accuses earthly judges of ‘wrong judgement’, He follows it up by telling them to see that the poor ‘have right’ (82:2, 3).” *CS Lewis: Judgment in the Psalms*

God Defends Those who Have no Voice

In addition to the day of Judgement, God is also interested in the cause of the poor and those who have no voice. He defends the poor and the widows and helps the meek. See Psalms 9:8, 12; 72:2, 76:9.

God stands in the congregation of the mighty; He judges among the gods. How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked. Psalm 82:1-4

Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God, Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; Who keeps truth forever, Who executes justice for the oppressed, Who gives food to the hungry. The Lord gives freedom to the prisoners. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord raises those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; He relieves the fatherless and widow; but the way of the wicked He turns upside down...Praise the Lord! Psalm 146:5-10

Understanding Circumstances from God’s Perspective (the Perspective of eternity)

Psalm 73 is titled ‘The Perspective of Eternity’. Here the psalmist (Asaph) wrestles with the ever present dilemma of why evil seems to prosper and the righteous suffer. He was vexed and envious (73:2-12) until he went into the sanctuary and understood life from God’s perspective, the perspective of eternity (73:17-28). The sanctuary reveals to mankind the God of the Everlasting Covenant. Because of sin, God has made an unconditional covenant with man that He is able to save to the uttermost all who come to Him through faith in the finished work of Christ.

From the perspective of eternity therefore, what does it matter if evil and evildoers seem to prosper? They live only for a short time (70 years) and have refused eternal life. Evil itself will ultimately be destroyed. We who have passed from death to Life (John 5:24), should rejoice in every circumstance of our lives, whether it be good or evil, for our life on earth will be as a short sleep past, from the perspective of eternity.

Leaders Must Reflect the Mercy and Justice of God

I will sing of mercy and justice; to You, O Lord, I will sing praises. I will behave wisely in a perfect way. Oh, when will You come to me? I will walk within my house with a perfect heart. Psalm 101:1, 2

Now these are the last words of David...“The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spoke to me: ‘He who rules over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be like the light of the morning when the sun rises, a morning without clouds, like the tender grass springing out of the earth, by clear shining after rain.’” 2 Samuel 23:1-4

Proverbs: Mercy on the Needy

We are called not only to have compassion for the poor, but to respect the poor as well for God is their Creator and Defender (Proverbs 22:2, 23). We are not to rob them either of their worldly goods or their dignity.

He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, and He will pay back what he has given. Proverbs 19:17

Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard. Proverbs 21:13

He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who honours Him has mercy on the needy. Proverbs 14:31

He who has a generous eye will be blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor. Proverbs 22:9

Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses. Proverbs 28:27

Do not rob the poor because he is poor, nor oppress the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD will plead their cause, and plunder the soul of those who plunder them. Proverbs 22:22, 23

The righteous considers the cause of the poor, but the wicked does not understand such knowledge. Proverbs 29:7

Do not remove the ancient landmark (boundary), nor enter the fields of the fatherless; for their Redeemer is mighty; He will plead their cause (case) against you. Proverbs 23:10, 11

'The cross is a revelation of God's justice as well as of his love. That is why the community of the cross should concern itself with social justice as well as with loving philanthropy. It is never enough to have pity on the victims of injustice, if we do nothing to change the unjust situation itself. Good Samaritans will always be needed to succour those who are assaulted and robbed; yet it would be even better to rid the Jerusalem-Jericho road of brigands. Just so Christian philanthropy in terms of relief and aid is necessary, but long-term development is better, and we cannot evade our political responsibility to share in changing the structures which inhibit development. Christians cannot regard with equanimity the injustices which spoil God's world and demean his creatures. Injustice must bring pain to the God whose justice flared brightly at the cross; it should bring pain to God's people too...' *JW Stott: The Cross of Christ. pp. 292*

Whatever you may possess above your fellows places you in debt, to that degree, to all who are less favoured. Have we wealth, or even the comforts of life, then we are under the most solemn obligation to care for the suffering sick, the widow, and the fatherless exactly as we would desire them to care for us were our condition and theirs to be reversed... Search heaven and earth, and there is no truth revealed more powerful than that which is made manifest in works of mercy to those who need our sympathy and aid. This is the truth as it is in Jesus. When those who profess the name of Christ shall practice the principles of the golden rule, the same power will attend the gospel as in apostolic times. *EGW. Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing. pp. 136-7*

The Lord executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. Psalm 103:7

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them. Psalm 103:17, 18
