



mercy is the ability to get right inside the other person's skin until we can see things with his eyes, think things with his mind, and feel things with his feelings (Barclay).
Mercy imitates God and disappoints Satan (Chrysostom).

May 5th The Shofar Acts 10

Acts 10 and God's saving plans

Chapter 10 of Acts stands as a watershed moment in the New Testament. This was the moment when the Apostles understood that the person, mission and ministry of Jesus was not to be limited to the Jewish people. God was bringing the gift of salvation to the entire world. In the words of the Book of Revelation... *from every nation, tribe, people and language*. There were to be no exceptions to this divine act of loving mercy... *So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life (11:18)*. We tend to take this understanding of divine universal mercy for granted but at the time it would have been a shattering insight. God wants and uses "even them"?

Most of the Jews listening would have understood things very differently. They were used to treating Gentiles as though they were unclean. They were dogs. The Mosaic Law spoke of something as "unclean" if it was unfit to use in the worship of God. **Leviticus 10:10** taught, *you are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean*".

Nothing was worse than being "unclean"

There were many things and circumstances capable of rendering a person or a thing "unclean" thus rendering them unworthy of standing in the presence of God to offer sacrifice. All sacrifices had to be without defect and the person offering the sacrifice "clean" before the Law. This was impossible for anyone outside of the nation of Israel.

The dangers of cross contamination between God's chosen people and the gentiles were an ongoing fear for the Jews. Without great care being exercised, the people of the nations would make them unclean. And yet they yearned to be among them. As one of them. But while the people wanted to be *like the other nations (1 Samuel 8:20)* when they entered the land of Canaan, God was demanding that he had called them into being because he expected them to be different. They were to model what life was to be like living under divine covenant with the One True God (Yahweh). This was the message understood from **Exodus 19:6**... *And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation [consecrated, set apart to the worship of God]. These are the words you shall speak to the Israelites*.

Israel is more than just a strip of land. It was also a small, insignificant group of people commissioned by God to

change the world. God regularly referred to Israel as "His people" (**Deuteronomy 7:6**); His "treasured possession" (**Psalms 135:4**), and even the "apple of His eye" (**Zechariah 2:8**). It is essential to keep in mind that God chose Israel when they were small and weak, a people without a land. They are His story.

God began to unravel the disaster wrought by Adam and Eve through the calling of a single man Abraham. From that one man God built a great nation. In **Genesis 12:2-3**, God promised, *I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*. Their witness was to **all** peoples.

Israel was a people called out of the nations

They were chosen and blessed by God, not only for their own sake, but to be a blessing to all nations, for all time. God's plan for Israel stretched beyond their borders. In a world darkened by sin and chaos, God chose Israel to be a **light to the nations**. Through Israel, neighbouring peoples or nations discovered what obedience to God would bring. God chose Israel to be a people who would showcase both His redeeming grace and righteous judgment. *I Yahweh have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness (Isaiah 42:6-7)*. God's saving works were never just about Israel. From the beginning, God wanted the divine legacy of mercy to shower down upon all peoples, *that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*. As with the act of creating, salvation was to be a gift for all.

This point can never be over-stressed. Solomon petitioned God to hear the prayers of immigrants within Israel's border *so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel (1 Kings 8:43)*. The Psalms too prayed that *all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to Yahweh (22:27)*... *and your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations (67:2)*.

God implemented His saving activity through Israel transforming them as they sought to live lives of covenantal faithfulness. They became His servants delivering Good News to the world, proclaiming God's salvation for all. The mission of God has always been for

the world to know Him as God, to serve Him as the Almighty and to delight in His presence.

One lecturer of mine expressed this succinctly as *God wanted a 'flagship' nation that was an example to the world – not of how they behave, but of how He behaves.*

Stewards of God's Truth

As part of His blessing, God gave Israel a gift. They were *entrusted with the very words of God (Romans 3:2)*. Long before Paul preached those words, the Psalmist wrote, *God has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation (Psalm 147:19-20)*.

But once again, this gift was not for Israel alone. As stewards of God's Truth, Israel was given the privilege of guarding God's Word and sharing it with the nations. The blessing extends to us today. Through the Jewish Scriptures — the law, the promises, and the patriarchs — God pointed the world to Jesus the Messiah (**Luke 24:44**).

Line of the Messiah

As the ultimate mark of His blessing, God chose Israel to be the human line of the Messiah. Through the Old Testament, we read detailed prophecy, down to the Messiah's birthplace and gender, that confirm Jesus as the promised Savior. Beginning with Abraham, Jesus' genealogy can be traced through the Jewish nation, the tribe of Judah, and narrowed to the family of David. Through the miracle of the virgin birth, God fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy (**Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22-23**). At just the right time, He delivered humanity from the curse of sin through Jesus' substitutionary death (**Galatians 4:4**).

Once more, the world was blessed through God's blessing to Israel. While salvation comes through a Jewish Messiah, the Bible makes it clear He is also the Saviour for the whole world (**John 4:42**).

When we wonder, "Why did God choose Israel and not the other nations?" we can answer that God chose Israel "for" the other nations. Through a single people, God reflected His character and delivered His Word to the world. And by keeping an ancient promise, He extended salvation to all people for all time. One was chosen for the blessing of many. It was not that God hated the Gentiles or thought them to be unworthy of bearing forth his Son. For reasons known only to Him, God chose one people to be a servant of all people that all may dwell in Him and Serve Him.

Who are the Gentiles today?

In today's world there are no people we can dismiss as being the equivalent of the biblical gentiles. In Christ all are one... ²⁷ *for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* ²⁸ *There is neither*

Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27-28). **Note: all one in Christ**. Each of these words is key. *Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.*

Unity in Christ means that all believers are in a relationship with Christ and, by extension, to every other believer. All believers are united with each other whether they know it or not, like it or not, or feel like it or not. The challenge of Christian unity is to live up to the truth of that reality. Since we are all members of one body, we need to live like it. This means subordinating our individual needs to the needs of the body at large and using our individual gifts for the good of the whole body. Especially the wounded parts.

There is another thing Paul adds to this: *I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love*. The importance of this is beyond our comprehension. On a human level, we can so easily imagine an array of things and people who make it difficult, if not impossible to share the divine love that makes us who we are. We are Christians but we so readily see the "Gentile" in others.

Nothing separates the ones **we** reject as being "unclean sinners", people impossible to love, veritable pains in the neck and people to be avoided at all costs, from the love of God. We might separate ourselves from them, but this separating is not something God chooses to do. We do it in defiance of God, at the risk of our own eternal souls.

Acts 10 is pivotal for Church history

God is rich in mercy (**Eph 2: 4**). But what is mercy? Mercy is the face of God's love turned toward sinners, searching them out, and offering them pardon and salvation. It is the divine attitude which embraces the "other". Mercy is God's self-giving. His, accepting of us, sinners though we are. For Christian it is an act of humbling oneself so that forgiveness can be given. God's mercy is the expression of His fundamental, immeasurable love.

God is not merciful *at the expense of his justice*. Mercy does not exclude His justice, nor is it opposed to it. God's justice is his mercy given to everyone. It is not about giving to another what we feel they deserve. Mercy requires us to temper justice with mercy, just as God does for us

Is this not what makes Christians stand out from the rest? That we are Christ-like enough to show mercy even to those we do not feel deserve such a gift? Even when it costs us enormously to take up our cross in that way?

With Pentecost approaching we should be prayerfully reflecting on the way we channel the mercy God has shown to us. Like Israel, we are called so that others – all others – can come to know God. The mercy we show to them is the same level of mercy God promises to show to us.