

PEOPLE OF GOD'S MERCY

What 14 figures from Scripture
reveal about Divine Compassion

MARCI ALBORGHETTI



**TWENTY-THIRD
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DEDICATION

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FOR GOD.
To Charlie;
and to my friends on death row
in Florida and California.
GOD is Merciful.

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INTRODUCTION

CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN TEACHING PROMOTES WHAT WE CALL A CULTURE OF LIFE, particularly in contrast to the secular, political world, which can often seem to promulgate a culture of materialism, selfishness, war, and vengeance.

According to the world's view, we can't buy enough, eat enough, wear enough, earn enough, destroy enough enemies, maintain enough military advantages, produce enough gadgets, boast enough, or consume enough. The world trumpets: more, more, more!

And in seeking more, more, more, we are at risk of thinking we can assume the role of mega-consumers, each for his or her own, each pursuing what is best according to his or her own personal "gospel." We even hear of some religious leaders teaching a gospel of prosperity, based on the rather incongruent notion that God *wants* us to have, own, and possess more

money, more stuff. We are evidently to believe that the God who lived in deliberate poverty among us wants us to feel we deserve all the best, all the time, because we belong to him who emptied himself of everything to save us.

But even those of us who are wise enough to question the premise of such teachings, even those of us who try to embrace the asceticism and understand the material poverty of Jesus, are in danger of supporting culture-of-life tenets that we approve of while rejecting those that are more challenging for us. We may, for example, find it easy to donate food to a soup kitchen, but we resent prisoners getting “three full meals a day.” We donate our old clothes to the Salvation Army store but are appalled when a mentally ill person walks through downtown in smelly rags. We want our children to have the best possible education, even if that means that other children may be denied the same opportunity. We advocate for oppressed Christians by seeking war against their oppressors. We proclaim the Torah’s call for “an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth” but conveniently ignore Jesus’ rejection of that call. We loudly decry our government’s spying on its citizens but make no sound of protest when it executes its prisoners. We have great compassion for crime victims while closing our eyes to the societal crimes that create criminals.

It is easy for us, in our frail human nature, to forget that God’s mercy knows no bounds. We have only to look as far as the first few pages of the Bible to see this. God grants selfish, petty, brother-killing Cain protection from his enemies for all his life, wherever he goes. Rahab, a prostitute, shrewdly shows mercy and is granted mercy through every generation. Murderers like Moses and David, who would be subject to the death penalty in the United States, are shaped by God’s mercy

into two of the most revered and important men in history. A girl possessed by a prophetic spirit that has kept her in bondage is compelled by that spirit to recognize Christ in Paul, and is thus freed.

Paul, himself, a confessed murderer of Christians, makes the point again and again—that only God, in his vastness and omniscience, is judge and jury. He tells the Romans in Romans 9:14–15: “What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy; and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’”

When it comes to God’s mercy, then, without which none of us could take the next breath, indeed, *what then are we to say?*



One



CAIN

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

GENESIS 4:6-7

I DID NOT ALWAYS HATE MY BROTHER. It was not always like this. From the time he grew in my mother's womb, I loved him. When I understood, just a young child myself, that he would come into the world, I couldn't wait to see him. He would be my brother! I would watch over him and teach him.

When he was born, so it was. He was so small, so helpless, and when my mother told me that I had been the same way, I could not believe it! I could not comprehend how quickly he would grow, how close we would become, how much of my mother and father's love would be shed upon him. But I did not mind when my mother's milk was reserved only for him. "You are a boy now," she told me. "You old enough for the sheep's milk and the grain mash. Abel needs my milk now."

So I was banished from my mother's tent, but I did not mind, for it meant that I would spend time with Adam, my father. Soon, though, I realized that my father did not want to be with me as much as I wanted to be with him. Though he taught me how to seed the land and bring forth its bounty, it seemed to me that he did not love me as my mother had loved me before Abel. I worked as hard as I could to please my father, but he was stern with me, hardly speaking except to teach and chastise me when I made a mistake. Though still a boy, I understood that my father was unhappy with me. But not only with me—he was miserable about his lot in life, sorrowful for what was lost. It was some time before I could understand exactly what he had lost, and then I knew that he had great reason to be downhearted. My parents had squandered everything in disobeying one commandment. And they bore both the guilt and the burden of that loss.

Adam and I would return to the tents when darkness fell to be with Eve and Abel. My father was a strong, rugged man, and he protected us from the beasts and the dangers of the world he and my mother had been cast into. It was during those long, dark nights that I learned little by little, in the words that passed between them, what they had done, what they had given up, and what I had lost because of them.

They spoke between them in low tones of the Creator who had made them and given them everything. Thinking that I could neither hear nor understand, they astonished me with talk of how the Creator made the land to produce fruit and food *with no toil!* They never had to work for food, for the Creator God gave it freely from the garden he had provided for their home. How my parents yearned for that garden now; and when I heard them describe it, I yearned with them. They

murmured of a place where the sun shone almost always, and where when the rain fell from God's sky to nourish them and the land, it was warm and gentle, and they were able to bathe in it even as it caused the fruit and food to grow abundantly. They sheltered under the thick green canopy of trees so lush and beautiful I could barely imagine them—and not in rough tents painstakingly sewn of skins from animals, some dangerous, that had to be hunted and fought and killed and carried back to this rough place where we now lived.

In those days my parents whispered of, hardly comprehensible to me, there were never cold or dark storms that soaked and frightened us and made us shiver in terror and discomfort. There were no thorns or brambles to choke the seedlings and wound the hand that reached for food. The ground was not rocky and unfriendly to either seed or human. They walked among the lesser creatures of the Creator God and lived amiably with the animals, even speaking to some of them! There was no hunger, no fear, no anger, no sorrow. I struggled to believe that such a place existed.

But it was when they spoke of God that I truly heard their grief over what they had forfeited, and I grieved for myself as well. When they talked of God, their voices became more hushed, reverent, joyful in memory, rending in loss. He had walked in the garden with them, spoken to them, taught them, given them everything! God had not instructed them the way my father instructed me, with quick anger and impatience. No, the Creator had instructed them with love. He had given them to each other for love, and wherever they went in Eden, his love could be felt, his presence sensed. From time to time, he even visited and talked with them, and yet despite his greatness, they felt no fear! Here was I, afraid of my own human

father, but they had not feared the magnificent Creator.

Their voices grew brittle when they remembered how the serpent had seduced them, telling them they could be as God is if only they disobeyed his one law, which was not to eat from that one tree. The serpent spoke first to my mother, and then she convinced my father.

"If only I had not listened to him!" my mother moaned in despair.

"If only I had not listened to you!" my father muttered in anger.

And then my parents would draw apart, unhappy with each other, no longer living in the love the Creator had made them for.

I grew bitter. Bitter because of what my parents had done to forfeit the companionship of God and his gift of a life of ease, and bitter because I understood that they saw me as the product of their disobedience—while Abel, the second child, was enough removed from that sin for them to love him. I saw that he had my mother's milk for longer than I, and what little joy my father had was given to Abel. As we grew together, so did my bitterness, and the love I felt for Abel soured. It was hard not to love Abel. He was a beautiful child, sweet-natured because of the love my parents gave him, handsome and strong as he grew up. Adam was patient and kind when he taught Abel husbandry, and my brother became our shepherd, tending the sheep that provided us milk and cheese, wool and meat; and thus he became even more valuable to my parents. I kept myself from all of them, especially Abel; if I was not loved, why should I love the one who was?

I worked hard upon the land, thinking that if I brought forth a healthy bounty, my parents would look more favorably upon