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“Guaranteed to make your love of Scripture grow!”

■ **RONALD D. WITHERUP, S.S.**, *Superior General of the Sulpicians, Paris*

THRESHOLD
BIBLE STUDY

DIVINE MERCY

Stephen J. Binz

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS

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New London, CT 06320

(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411

www.23rdpublications.com

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ISBN: 978-1-82785-114-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015952049

Printed in the U.S.A.

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How to Use *Threshold Bible Study*

Each book in the Threshold Bible Study series is designed to lead you through a new doorway of biblical awareness, to accompany you across a unique threshold of understanding. The characters, places, and images that you encounter in each of these topical studies will help you explore fresh dimensions of your faith and discover richer insights for your spiritual life.

Threshold Bible Study covers biblical themes in depth in a short amount of time. Unlike more traditional Bible studies that treat a biblical book or series of books, Threshold Bible Study aims to address specific topics within the entire Bible. The goal is not for you to comprehend everything about each passage, but rather for you to understand what a variety of passages from different books of the Bible reveals about the topic of each study.

Threshold Bible Study offers you an opportunity to explore the entire Bible from the viewpoint of a variety of different themes. The commentary that follows each biblical passage launches your reflection about that passage and helps you begin to see its significance within the context of your contemporary experience. The questions following the commentary challenge you to understand the passage more fully and apply it to your own life. The prayer starter helps conclude your study by integrating learning into your relationship with God.

These studies are designed for maximum flexibility. Each study is presented in a workbook format, with sections for reading, reflecting, writing, discussing, and praying. Space for writing after each question is ideal for personal study and allows group members to prepare in advance for their discussion.

The thirty lessons in each topic may be used by an individual over the period of a month, or by a group for six sessions, with lessons to be studied each week before the next group meeting. These studies are ideal for Bible study groups, small Christian communities, adult faith formation, student groups, Sunday school, neighborhood groups, and family reading, as well as for individual learning.

The method of Threshold Bible Study is rooted in the classical tradition of *lectio divina*, an ancient yet contemporary means for reading the Scriptures reflectively and prayerfully. Reading and interpreting the text (*lectio*) is followed by reflective meditation on its message (*meditatio*). This reading and reflecting flows into prayer from the heart (*oratio* and *contemplatio*).

This ancient method assures us that Bible study is a matter of both the mind and the heart. It is not just an intellectual exercise to learn more and be able to discuss the Bible with others. It is, more importantly, a transforming experience. Reflecting on God's word, guided by the Holy Spirit, illumines the mind with wisdom and stirs the heart with zeal.

Following the personal Bible study, Threshold Bible Study offers a method for extending *lectio divina* into a weekly conversation with a small group. This communal experience will allow participants to enhance their appreciation of the message and build up a spiritual community (*collatio*). The end result will be to increase not only individual faith but also faithful witness in the context of daily life (*operatio*).

Through the spiritual disciplines of Scripture reading, study, reflection, conversation, and prayer, you will experience God's grace more abundantly as your life is rooted more deeply in Christ. The risen Jesus said: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev 3:20). Listen to the Word of God, open the door, and cross the threshold to an unimaginable dwelling with God!

SUGGESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- Make your Bible reading a time of prayer. Ask for God's guidance as you read the Scriptures.
- Try to study daily, or as often as possible according to the circumstances of your life.
- Read the Bible passage carefully, trying to understand both its meaning and its personal application as you read. Some persons find it helpful to read the passage aloud.
- Read the passage in another Bible translation. Each version adds to your understanding of the original text.
- Allow the commentary to help you comprehend and apply the scriptural text. The commentary is only a beginning, not the last word, on the meaning of the passage.
- After reflecting on each question, write out your responses. The very act of writing will help you clarify your thoughts, bring new insights, and amplify your understanding.
- As you reflect on your answers, think about how you can live God's word in the context of your daily life.
- Conclude each daily lesson by reading the prayer and continuing with your own prayer from the heart.
- Make sure your reflections and prayers are matters of both the mind and the heart. A true encounter with God's word is always a transforming experience.
- Choose a word or a phrase from the lesson to carry with you throughout the day as a reminder of your encounter with God's life-changing word.
- Share your learning experience with at least one other person whom you trust for additional insights and affirmation. The ideal way to share learning is in a small group that meets regularly.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP STUDY

- Meet regularly; weekly is ideal. Try to be on time and make attendance a high priority for the sake of the group. The average group meets for about an hour.
- Open each session with a prepared prayer, a song, or a reflection. Find some appropriate way to bring the group from the workaday world into a sacred time of graced sharing.
- If you have not been together before, name tags are very helpful as a group begins to become acquainted with the other group members.
- Spend the first session getting acquainted with one another, reading the Introduction aloud, and discussing the questions that follow.
- Appoint a group facilitator to provide guidance to the discussion. The role of facilitator may rotate among members each week. The facilitator simply keeps the discussion on track; each person shares responsibility for the group. There is no need for the facilitator to be a trained teacher.
- Try to study the six lessons on your own during the week. When you have done your own reflection and written your own answers, you will be better prepared to discuss the six scriptural lessons with the group. If you have not had an opportunity to study the passages during the week, meet with the group anyway to share support and insights.
- Participate in the discussion as much as you are able, offering your thoughts, insights, feelings, and decisions. You learn by sharing with others the fruits of your study.
- Be careful not to dominate the discussion. It is important that everyone in the group be offered an equal opportunity to share the results of their work. Try to link what you say to the comments of others so that the group remains on the topic.
- When discussing your own personal thoughts or feelings, use “I” language. Be as personal and honest as appropriate and be very cautious about giving advice to others.

- Listen attentively to the other members of the group so as to learn from their insights. The words of the Bible affect each person in a different way, so a group provides a wealth of understanding for each member.
- Don't fear silence. Silence in a group is as important as silence in personal study. It allows individuals time to listen to the voice of God's Spirit and the opportunity to form their thoughts before they speak.
- Solicit several responses for each question. The thoughts of different people will build on the answers of others and will lead to deeper insights for all.
- Don't fear controversy. Differences of opinions are a sign of a healthy and honest group. If you cannot resolve an issue, continue on, agreeing to disagree. There is probably some truth in each viewpoint.
- Discuss the questions that seem most important for the group. There is no need to cover all the questions in the group session.
- Realize that some questions about the Bible cannot be resolved, even by experts. Don't get stuck on some issue for which there are no clear answers.
- Whatever is said in the group is said in confidence and should be regarded as such.
- Pray as a group in whatever way feels comfortable. Pray for the members of your group throughout the week.

Schedule for Group Study

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION DATE: _____

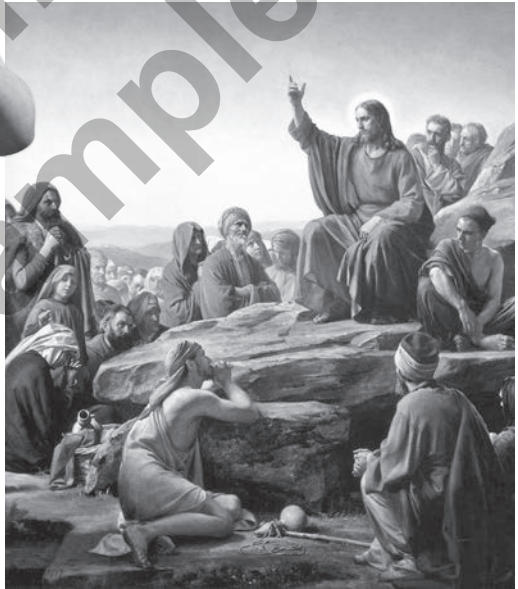
SESSION 2: LESSONS 1-6 DATE: _____

SESSION 3: LESSONS 7-12 DATE: _____

SESSION 4: LESSONS 13-18 DATE: _____

SESSION 5: LESSONS 19-24 DATE: _____

SESSION 6: LESSONS 25-30 DATE: _____





You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. PS 86:15

Divine Mercy

God's mercy is the core of biblical revelation and the expression of God's own heart. When we study the Bible—both the Old and New Testaments—we discover that God's most fundamental attribute is mercy. The God revealed in Scripture suffers with his creatures and has a heart for the poor and the lost.

An abstract and philosophical notion of God describes God as infinite, eternal, almighty, and all-knowing. This understanding of the divine being seems awfully distant from the personal situations and real life of people. When God is conceived so apathetically, it is difficult to imagine much divine empathy for the struggles of human life. Such a God seems alien and ultimately irrelevant in a world with such pressing problems.

But God's historical self-revelation, as understood through the tradition of ancient Israel and the Christian church, presents quite different divine characteristics. This merciful God does not tire of seeking out his beloved ones. God cares deeply about the plight of his people and shows deep compassion in their suffering. When God's people are unfaithful, God responds to their rejection with a merciful love that they will never merit or deserve. Again and again, God demonstrates faithful love for the world and calls people to a joyful and abundant life.

When God saw the suffering of his people in Egypt and heard their cries, God came down to liberate and redeem them. This is not an indifferent God who sits obliviously on a heavenly throne, nor is this a rash and vengeful God who responds from afar. The God described in Israel's Torah is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love. With a heart full of mercy, God intervenes on behalf of slaves, offering them freedom and abundant life.

God demonstrates divine mercy throughout the history of ancient Israel. God's people merited death because of continual transgression, rebellion, and sin. But God, through divine mercy, grants them space for living anew. Biblical history testifies that God takes no satisfaction from the death of the sinner but finds delight when the sinner repents and continues to live.

But we must also understand that the revelation of God as merciful has nothing to do with false familiarity. God is not a chummy companion who is lax toward evil and overlooks our sin. Rather, the truth of God's mercy is indissolubly bound up with the revelation of divine holiness, with God's sovereignty and superiority over everything earthly. God is totally transcendent, yet condescends to draw near to creation.

The message of God's mercy does not stand in opposition to God's justice. The manifestations of God's justice in Israel's history and the assurance of universal divine justice gave hope to the people. Evidence of justice in an unjust world is already a work of mercy for the oppressed and those whose rights have been denied. So the message of God's mercy is not a message of cheap grace. God expects the Israelites to do what is right and just in imitation of God's own nature.

Because of God's holiness, God must offer resistance to evil. In the Bible this resistance is revealed as the wrath or judgment of God. We may dislike this depiction of God, yet divine wrath does not imply angry responses and emotionally surging rage. Wrath is God's resistance to malice and injustice. It is God's dynamic expression of his holiness in the face of evil. On the basis of God's holiness, God can't do anything other than punish evil and reward good. For this reason, mercy does not stand in opposition to the message of justice. Only a God who stands above and not under the demands of pure justice can forgive and pardon. God demonstrates divine sovereignty above all in forgiving and pardoning.

In his mercy, God holds back his justified wrath. God delays divine judg-

ment. He does this in order to provide people the opportunity for conversion. Divine mercy grants sinners a period of grace and desires their conversion. Mercy is ultimately grace for conversion.

In speaking of God's mercy, the Old Testament most often employs one of two different Hebrew words. The most frequently used term is *hesed*. It means unmerited favor, divine grace, and mercy. It is God's free and gracious turning toward his people with loving kindness. *Hesed* flows from God's relationship with Israel, the covenant God established with them. Because of this relationship, God's mercy is faithful love.

But since a relationship is a two-way bond, it seems according to human understanding that faithful love no longer obliges when Israel breaks the covenant and no longer respects its conditions. But here, God's mercy reveals its deeper aspects as love that continues giving, a love more powerful than betrayal, a grace stronger than sin. God, who is all-powerful and all-holy, concerns himself with the self-caused distresses of his people, hears their laments and bends down to them in their needs, and despite their infidelity, continues to care, to forgive, and to offer another chance, despite their deserved just punishment. This is divine mercy. It exceeds human experience and transcends human imagination.

The other frequently occurring Hebrew word for mercy is *rahamin*. It designates tender compassion and deeply felt care. Its root, *reham*, means "a mother's womb." Thus, the term expresses a maternal love that arises from an original bond and unity. The recipient of this tender love can do nothing to deserve or merit it. *Rahamin* arises, we might say, from the necessity of the heart. As a maternal instinct, it suggests patient understanding, protection from danger, and a readiness to forgive.

In summary, the message of God's mercy permeates the entire Old Testament. This divine mercy is the organizing center of God's many other attributes: holiness, justice, fidelity, graciousness, patience, forbearance, condescension, and generosity. God comes to the aid of those who are lost and held in bondage. He is the protector of the poor and those without a voice. Again and again, God restrains his just and holy wrath and shows mercy to his unfaithful people, offering them another opportunity for repentance and conversion. Mercy is the externally visible feature of the divine heart, the effective aspect of God's very essence.

Reflection and Discussion

- What part of the Old Testament most convinces me that God is merciful and not vengeful?

- What is the biblical understanding of divine wrath? How can I reconcile God's just wrath with divine mercy?

Mercy Embodied in Jesus Christ

The incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the supreme expression of God's mercy. Each account of healing, exorcism, and forgiveness by Jesus in the gospels is a cameo of divine mercy. In Jesus, God's mercy is extended to the afflicted, the poor, the needy, and the sinners of Israel. Through his public ministry, the primary facets of God's mercy are given a tangible and personal shape. The mercy of Jesus expresses itself in the inclusion of social outcasts in his company, the forgiveness of repentant sinners, the healing of those sick in mind and body, acknowledgment of the needs of the poor, compassion for tired and hungry crowds, and even pardon for those who violently put him to death.

Jesus' demonstration of divine mercy in individual acts throughout the gospels illustrates the redemption that God extends to the whole world through the sacrificial death and resurrection of his Son. The God of mercy has desired the salvation of all people from all eternity. In the cross of Jesus Christ, the mercy of God stands as a sign over the world, over history, and over every human life. In the mercy revealed on the cross, God's power is most clearly displayed.

God does not sit enthroned in majesty over the world, apathetic to the grief and sufferings that fill it. God became human in Jesus Christ so that divine mercy may be felt and expressed as tangible compassion, through a literal suffering with humanity. In the divine incarnation of God's Son, God voluntarily surrendered himself to suffering and death. In the humanity of Jesus, God wills to suffer with us and for us. So, in all our suffering we are joined by the one who experiences and carries that suffering with us. And because the divine Christ, who is immortal and Lord over life and death, suffered and died, he conquered death and restored life.

In the crucifixion of Christ, God expresses divine mercy in the most extravagant way. On the cross, God gives himself completely, the greatest self-gift imaginable. In pouring out his life for us completely, even unto death, God gives to the world the fullest expression of merciful love. When we look to the cross, we can see love to the full, compassion in its most tangible form, and divine mercy to the upmost.

The teachings and actions of Jesus demonstrate that the loneliness, pain, and grief that humans feel—and to which God's mercy is directed—are rooted in humanity's distance from God. But God desires to have us close, to bestow his nearness on us in our adversity. God's mercy, therefore, is directed to our happiness and fulfillment. Divine mercy expands our hearts, offers us hope, restores serenity and peace, and gives us the experience of inner blessedness.

Although God offers everyone the saving effects of his merciful love, we must open our lives to receive it in order to experience its transforming power. Although God desires that his love be reciprocated, God does not force our response or bypass our freedom. We can ignore or reject God's mercy because God treats human freedom with radical seriousness. Our salvation depends on our decision and our response to the offer of God's love. God urges but does not force; he pursues but does not overpower or subdue.

In his mercy, God holds the possibility of salvation open for all human beings who are willing to allow their heart to be changed, even if their guilt is ever so great and their former life ever so messed up. Every person is able to trust in the immeasurable mercy of God. A person's "no" of refusal is always weak alongside the unconditional "yes" that God has spoken to humanity in the death and resurrection of Christ. In ways unfathomable to us, God never ceases to court human beings to the very end of life. God even enlists the intercession

of all the angels and saints of heaven on behalf of every individual so that we might choose eternal life over the rejection that results in unending death.

There is a place for everyone under the mantle of God's mercy. Jesus Christ as judge of the living and the dead is, indeed, the one who has died for all on the cross. The biblical message of mercy assures us that he is a gracious judge. In the salvation of the world, divine mercy has the first as well as the last word. The mercy embodied in Jesus Christ is the uplifting, hope-inducing message on which we can rely in every situation, both in life and in death. It is our refuge, our comfort, and the source of our confidence.

Reflection and Discussion

- In what sense can it be said that mercy is the heart of the gospel?
- In what ways do I experience God having mercy on me and on the whole world?

Works of Mercy as Our Response and Responsibility

The experience of divine mercy encourages and obliges us to become witnesses of mercy ourselves. If God treats us mercifully and forgives us, then we too must forgive and show mercy to one another. In our acts of mercy, God's

mercy for our neighbor becomes concretely realized. These acts of witnessing mercy to others have been traditionally categorized as seven spiritual works and seven corporal works of mercy.

The spiritual works of mercy are acts of compassion by which we help others with their emotional and spiritual needs. These seven are the following: converting sinners, instructing the ignorant, advising the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving injuries, and praying for the living and dead. These works are a kind of preventive medicine for the spiritual poverty of shame, doubt, and despair. This kind of poverty drains life of all energy, joy, and sense of purpose, and it is the kind of poverty that can last forever.

The corporal works of mercy are compassionate deeds by which we help others with their material and physical needs. These seven are the following: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, giving drink to the thirsty, and burying the dead. The message of divine mercy is not a theory that is alien to reality, nor does it stop at the level of sentimental expressions of pity. Jesus teaches us to be merciful like God: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

In the Letter to the Ephesians, we read: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1-2). This pattern of *imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God and his actions in Jesus Christ, is foundational for the Bible. Therefore, the message of divine mercy has consequences for the life of every Christian, for the pastoral praxis of the church, and for the contributions that Christians should render to the humane, just, and merciful structuring of society.

Jesus’ family is worldwide, and his brothers and sisters include all who are in need of life’s basic necessities: food, hospitality, clothing, health care, education, counseling, prayer, pardon, and companionship. The radical love of neighbor that Jesus demands is possible for us only because we have first received the love of God in the form of divine mercy. Only by imitating God in his gift of mercy to the world can we make talk about God’s mercy credible and persuasive; only in this way can we make it a message of hope for the world.

Reflection and Discussion

- Why does Scripture describe our works of mercy as an imitation of God?
- In what sense are works of mercy both a response and a responsibility for us?

Prayer

Creating and Redeeming God, you have manifested your presence in the world through your unfailing mercy. We praise you for the ways you have shown your faithful and compassionate love to the world. During this study, teach me the many ways your mercy has transformed the world and how I can respond to your faithful love through works of mercy. Send your Holy Spirit upon me to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I read and contemplate your inspired word.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1

1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide nametags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
 - What drew you to join this group?
 - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:

Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we begin this study of divine mercy. You inspired the biblical authors to express the mercy of God as manifested to the people of Israel and most fully in the life of Jesus. Now stir our minds and our hearts to deepen our understanding and experience of divine mercy and to express mercy to people in need. Motivate us to read the Scriptures, and give us a deeper love for God's word each day. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.
6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don't feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week's group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under "Schedule for Group Study."
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.



**“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt;
I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.
Indeed, I know their sufferings.”** EXOD 3:7

God Has Ears for the Afflicted

EXODUS 2:23–3:15 ²³After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

³Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” ⁵Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to

the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”¹² He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

¹³But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

*This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.”*

Throughout the Scriptures of Israel, God is identified as the God who brought his people out of their slavery in Egypt and entered into a personal relationship with them. This act of divine liberation began as God heard the groaning and cries of the Israelites as they labored under the cruel oppression of their taskmasters. God then looked upon the Israelites and observed their misery. God’s closeness to the people is manifested in direct, first-person speech: I have observed, I have heard, I know, I have come down (verses 7-8). When God said, “I know their sufferings,” God was not speaking about some information he had attained from a distant source. Rather, God has a personal concern for this people and cares for them. For God to “know” suffering means that the suffering has entered into the divine being so that God suffers with the people. This is a living God, who attends to human misery, has a heart for the afflicted ones, and with divine mercy begins to act on their behalf. This merciful God intervenes, liberates, and redeems.

God’s decision to “come down to deliver” the Israelites from their bondage was a personal action. Not only did God free this oppressed people from slavery, but God also enters into a personal relationship with them, joining them in covenant. God’s relationship to the Israelites was rooted in the covenant with

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But God's manifestation to Israel's ancestors had been many generations ago. Now, God would manifest the divine presence to Moses, and then to the whole people, joining them all in a divine relationship.

The revelation of God's name is a key aspect of God's personal action for the Israelites. "I AM WHO I AM" in Hebrew does not at all imply a static, unchanging existence, as it later came to imply in the Greek language. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in around 200 BC in Alexandria, the revelation of God's name was interpreted in the sense of the Greek philosophy of being. Accordingly, the name of God was translated as "I am the one who is." But the name in Hebrew does not simply mean "to exist" but concretely means "to be present there," and, in fact, to be there with and for others.

The divine name enunciates God's innermost reality: God's being is divine presence with and for his people. This is not a God who can be tied down or captured in a name or an image. God's name conveys the reality that this personal God will be with the Israelites in their distress and will accompany them on their way. God will hear their cries and answer their pleas. God's name, therefore, is both a commitment and a promise.

The revelation of God's name, as being present for and with his people in response to their groans and cries, suggests that God's essential nature on our behalf is mercy. And this mercy is not a distant, impersonal handout. God's mercy is present, self-revealing, and oriented toward personal relationship. God "comes down" to free us from oppression and our slavery to sin. But God's mercy wants to do even more for us. God desires to give us the greatest gift we are capable of receiving. This divine gift is union with God; it is ultimately, as the New Testament reveals, sharing in the divine nature. God descended to share our life so that we could ascend to share in divine life.

Yet, this revelation of God who descends to draw near to his people is not a close acquaintance or a false familiarity. God is revealed in a fire that does not consume, telling Moses to remove his sandals, for the ground of their encounter is holy. Moses hid his face and is unable to look upon God. While God's self-revelation is the essence of mercy, God remains the all-holy one. God's mercy is indissolubly bound up with God's indescribable sovereignty. This God of mercy has qualities of both transcendence and immanence: God is holy and personal, distant and close, above the earth and descending to be present with people in need.

Reflection and Discussion

- What does God's self-revelation to Moses at the burning bush make known to me about divine mercy?
- God said to Moses, "I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them." How did the Israelites experience God in this way? How do I experience God in this way?
- In what ways does the church's worship of God express both divine transcendence and immanence? Is God more sovereign or familiar in my personal prayer? Why is it important to maintain both?

Prayer

God of our ancestors, you look upon the misery of your people and you hear their cries in distress. Look upon me with mercy and listen to my prayer today. I trust in your personal care and compassion for me.



“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” EXOD 34:6

A God Rich in Mercy

EXODUS 34:4-9 *⁴So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone. ⁵The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, “The Lord.” ⁶The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,*

*“The Lord, the Lord,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
⁷keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth generation.”*

⁸And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. ⁹He said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”

Shortly after God's people had been liberated from slavery and entered into covenant with God at Mount Sinai, they became unfaithful and sinned against the Lord. While Moses was with God on the mountain for forty days, the people below experienced the time as an intolerable delay. The Israelites displayed a serious act of disloyalty to God by erecting and worshipping an idol in the form of a golden calf. God's just anger flared, and Moses shattered the tablets of the covenant at the foot of the mountain as a sign that, from his point of view, the covenant had been terminated.

But when everything appeared to be lost, Moses pleaded for the Israelites, and his persuasive arguments led to the amazing reversal of God's intentions. God's ability to be persuaded demonstrates that the divine nature is not static, unchanging being but is, rather, personal, totally free, and responsive to the changing needs of a vital relationship with people. God pronounced the divine name again and said to Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (33:19). God cannot be limited to any human understanding of just compensation. So God commands Moses to prepare two tablets for writing the words of the covenant and to again ascend Mount Sinai. Despite the people's sinful infidelity, God does not let them fall into ruin but gives them another opportunity to be covenant partners.

God descended in a cloud to meet Moses on the mountain and gave him a new revelation of the divine name and the divine nature. God is "merciful and gracious," "slow to anger," "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness," and having steadfast love that extends hundreds of times farther than his just punishments (verses 6-7). The word translated "merciful" comes from a Hebrew word whose root means "womb." The word connotes the compassion of a mother for the child in her womb. The word translated "steadfast love" is often translated as "mercy." It implies both tenacious fidelity to a relationship and unrelenting love. It describes God's constant and tender love for Israel as God's children, and it expresses God's absolute resolve to continue in loving commitment to those who share the relationship of covenant.

As in God's revelation to Moses at the burning bush, this association of God's name and God's nature indicates that mercy is an essential expression of God's sovereignty, freedom, and fidelity. Mercy is at the heart of Israel's central affirmation of the essence of their God. By acting with mercy, God

is not only faithful to the Israelites despite their infidelity but also faithful to himself and his own divine name.

This declaration of God's nature—proclaiming that God is gracious, merciful, faithful, forgiving, and just—is repeated throughout the Old Testament, especially in the psalms. Its proclamation of God's gracious and merciful essence is not a speculative statement or a poetic description of God; rather, it is a statement of faith based on God's own historical self-revelation. In fact, God's mercy is most manifest in dealing with the repeated sins of the Israelites. Divine mercy is shown precisely to those who do not deserve it. This formula, in fact, serves as the summary of God's self-definition in the Old Testament. It became the primary way that God was addressed and announced in Israel's public liturgy.

Reflection and Discussion

- Verses 6-7 are the heart of the Old Testament. What is astonishing about the way the Israelites describe their belief in God?
- After God's self-revelation of the divine nature, Moses could only bow his head to the ground in worship. How do I respond to God's merciful love in my worship and prayer?

Prayer

Lord our God, you are merciful, gracious, and filled with committed love. As I bow in your presence, teach me to plumb the depths of your love as you reveal yourself more fully to me. Open my heart to you as your word continually gains access into my life.