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# The Message of Law and Gospel in the Old Testament

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IN treating this topic the writer purposes to approach his task neither from the systematic, nor from the historical, nor from the practical point of view. He intends to let the Scriptures of the Old Testament speak for themselves. In fact, he will restrict the scope of his work by directing the reader's attention not to the entire Old Testament, but rather chiefly to the Prophets and Psalms; not to all the Prophets and poets, but chiefly to the Prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries B. C. and to those poets who sing especially about God's judgment and grace.

That the essence of the proclamation of the Old Testament is a message of judgment and grace becomes evident when one looks at a number of its key concepts. The concept of the Law (*torah*) is not used only of the accusing and condemning portions of God's revelation, but is frequently used to designate the complete revelation of God in both its judgment and mercy aspects. In the vision of universal peace in Is. 2:3 the Prophet sees *the Law* going forth out of Zion and *the Word* of the Lord going forth from Jerusalem. By the simple rule of parallelism it becomes evident that in this verse Law and Word, or Law and revelation are identical. That the Law sometimes means the entire message of God's truth is also indicated in Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant. There the Lord's promise to put His Law in the inward parts, into the hearts of His people, involves not merely the Sinaitic legislation, but the Word in both its judging and promising aspects, the whole Word whereby the new covenant will be established and maintained (Jer. 31:33).

What holds true of the Law also applies to the great concept of the glory of the Lord. At the first appearance of this phenomenon in Exodus 3 and at every subsequent manifestation, including the climactic vision in Luke 2, it became evident that the holy God was coming down to confront man, not only as a Judge, but

also as a Deliverer. The consuming fire and the cheering rainbow of Ezekiel 1 were the twin symbols which indicated that God was approaching man not only in wrath but also in mercy. Again, the concept of the Word of God itself involves both a destructive and a healing side. The Word that was like a consuming fire within Jeremiah when he tried to put it out of his thoughts (Jer. 20:9) was the same Word which had a power to refresh and revive comparable to that of the rain and the snow, which accomplished the pleasure of God and succeeded in carrying out His salutary purposes (Is. 55:10, 11).

The Word of God not only has such a two-pronged theme, it also speaks to man about a God who comes both in wrath and in love. It speaks of the beginning of God's hatred for His people in connection with Gilgal and the wickedness of their doings there (Hos. 9:15); but it also speaks of the beginning of His love for them when they were His little children and He called them out of Egypt (Hos. 11:1). In His wrath the Lord had in mind to give up Ephraim and to deliver him to a doom like that of Admah and Zeboim; yet His heart was so stirred by love for His unworthy people that He decided against executing His judgment (Hos. 11:8, 9). God did bring all that great evil upon His people which in His wrath He had threatened to bring; but He also gave them the assurance that He would bring upon them all the good which He had promised them (Jer. 32:42).

The servant is no better than his master, and so the Lord's ministers and messengers are called upon to follow the pattern of their divine Lord by including both themes in their teaching: judgment and deliverance. When the Lord put His words in Jeremiah's mouth and appointed him to be a Prophet of nations and kingdoms, He outlined a dual program for his ministry. On the one hand he was to tear out and to pull down, to destroy and to ruin; on the other hand his work was to be crowned by a salutary program of building and planting (Jer. 1:9, 10). Israel as a people, as the Lord's instrument for conveying His will to mankind, was to function in this same dual capacity. In one phase of its activity the remnant of Jacob was to be like a lion among the flocks of nations, who would pounce upon them and tear them to pieces so that there would be no hope of deliverance. But that

same remnant of Jacob was also to be in the midst of many people as a refreshing dew from the Lord, as showers that revive the grass and thus bring new life and hope (Micah 5:7, 8).

While both wrath and mercy thus form part of the message of the Old Testament, it is also evident that mercy will prevail, that the Lord's final purpose is to save and not to destroy. This becomes evident, on the one hand, in the amount of time which the Scripture record associates with these two phases of God's activity. The whole idea of wrath and vengeance in the Old Testament is associated with the concept of a day. The Day of the Lord is the keynote of the judgment message in Amos 5:18 and Is. 2:12. But whereas the Lord speaks of only a day of vengeance, He can tell His people about a whole year of redemption (Is. 63:4). There will be not merely a day, but an acceptable year in which the good tidings of salvation will be preached (Is. 61:2). The Psalmist points out that the anger of the Lord lasts for a moment, but that a whole lifetime is spent in His grace and favor (Ps. 30:5). The Lord tells Israel, His reinstated wife, that He forsook her for a moment, that He hid His face from her in a sudden overflowing of wrath; yet He assures her of His love and mercy that will endure to eternity (Is. 54:8).

After this preliminary survey the reader's attention is directed to a more detailed discussion of the message of Law and Gospel in the Old Testament.

## I

### THE OLD TESTAMENT SPEAKS OF THE DEMANDS AND JUDGMENTS OF GOD FROM WHICH MAN CANNOT ESCAPE

The demands and judgments of God are essentially an accusation of sin. Because Israel was the only nation which God had known, therefore her offenses against God were all the more serious (Amos 3:2). Because of those offenses she forfeited her status as God's chosen people, so that the Prophet was constrained to tell her she was no better in God's sight than the Ethiopians, Assyrians, or the Philistines (Amos 9:7). The Lord said that He had a controversy with His people because there was no truth nor mercy nor knowledge of God in the land (Hosea 4:1). He charged Israel with

bringing disaster and destruction upon herself because she failed to turn to Him for help (Hosea 13:9). The people were bidden to search the streets of Jerusalem to see whether one just man might be found (Jer. 5:1). Micah received the power from God to declare Jacob's transgression unto him (3:8), and Jeremiah indicted the people on God's behalf because they said they had no sin (2:35).

In its ultimate stage this accusation of sin includes the hardening of the people's hearts. The Prophet was bidden to make the heart of his people fat so that they might not repent of their sins and be saved (Is. 6:10). A spirit of deep sleep was imposed upon them to prevent their turning away from their sins (Is. 29:10). Because they were obdurate and vexed God's Holy Spirit, that Spirit was made to be their enemy and opposed them (Is. 63:10). Such withdrawal of the Holy Spirit in turn was recognized by the Psalmist as the equivalent of spiritual death (Ps. 51:11).

Divine judgment upon sin is pictured in the Old Testament in various symbols and illustrations that are taken from everyday life. Amos sees the vision of the plumb line which the farmer is using to repair his stone fences in the off season, and the Lord tells him that the plumb line is indicative of strict justice which will be exercised upon His people (7:8). The girdle is used by Jeremiah to indicate how closely God has attached His people to Himself. But the Lord has the Prophet ruin his girdle as a lesson to the people that they will be subject to a similar destruction (Jer. 13:10, 11). Jeremiah is bidden to smash an earthen bottle as a sign that the people and their city will be broken (19:10, 11) and is told to put a yoke upon his neck to indicate that the Lord has placed Israel and her neighbors under the dominion of the king of Babylon (27:2).

The Prophets love to use pictures from nature to illustrate the Lord's judgment. Hosea visualizes the Lord coming as a destructive moth and lion (5:12, 14). Isaiah sees his people stricken by the Lord like grass and flowers that wither and fade after the desert wind has passed over them (40:7, 8). According to Amos, the Day of the Lord will be like a man escaping from a lion and meeting a bear in his path (5:19). The Lord's coming, Micah says, will be like a violent thunderstorm in which the hills melt

and the valleys are torn asunder (Micah 1:3,4). Jerusalem will be plowed like a field and will be made like a heap of stones (Micah 3:12). In another context the daughter of Zion is bidden to arise and thresh the nations because the Lord has given her horns of iron and hoofs of brass (Micah 4:13).

Human relations is another area from which pictures of divine judgment are taken. The names of Hosea's children are symbols of wrath and punishment: Jezreel, God-scatters; Lo Ruchama, No-mercy; Lo Ammi, Not-my-people (Hos. 1:4, 6, 9). Judgment is inflicted by the punitive hand of God, which is still stretched out (Is. 9:12), which is upon the sinner day and night like a club that is ready to strike him (Ps. 32:4). Isaiah is bidden to walk barefoot and partly naked for three years to indicate that the enemies will be carried into captivity with such bare feet and bodies (Is. 20:3, 4). Israel's ruin is compared to the falling of a virgin who will not be able to rise again (Amos 5:2). The depraved women of the Northern Kingdom are told that the Lord will come like a fisherman to pick them up with fishhooks (by their posteriors?) and carry them into captivity (Amos 4:2). Jeremiah is forbidden to marry and to have children as a sign that as part of the judgment all wives and children will die of disease; he is forbidden to go into any house of mourning as a sign that in the judgment no one will be mourned; he is forbidden to attend any happy celebration as a sign that the Lord in His judgment will take away the voice of joy and jubilation (16:1-9). The proud king Jehoiakim, who made life so miserable for Jeremiah, is condemned to be buried like an ass, a particular token of ignominy and shame (Jer. 22:19).

Additional pictures have to do with figures of speech which were used by the Prophets to intensify their message of judgment. The play on words is used most effectively by Micah in His announcement of judgment on the little towns of Judah. He sees the enemy invading the Judean territory and uses the names of a number of towns in Judah to illustrate various phases of the judgment that will come upon them. Although the city of Gad means "Tell Town," reporters should not *tell* there how wretched the situation is in Jerusalem. Baca may mean "Weep Town," but people ought not to *weep* there, otherwise the enemy will note

in what distress the city is. Ophrah means "Dust Town"; its people will therefore roll themselves in the *dust* as a sign of mourning (Micah 1:10). The city of Saphir may mean "Fair Town," yet its people are warned that they will *fare* forth with their shame uncovered. Although Zaanan means "Stir Town," its people are warned that they should not dare to *stir* to help any fugitives who might seek refuge there. Bethazel may mean "Near Town," yet there will be such wailing there that it will take away the courage of any refugees *nearby* who might appeal to it for help (Micah 1:11). Lachish suggests the name "Run Town" because the people will harness fast *runners* (horses) to their chariots in order to escape from the enemy (Micah 1:13). Achzib is called "Cheat Town" because it will *cheat* the kings of Israel who come there in search of further manpower for their armies (Micah 1:14). Thus Micah used a series of "puns" in order to emphasize the imminent judgment which would overtake these Judean towns.

Other Prophets devised word plays. During the reign of King *Sballum* the Prophet Hosea announced that *shillum*, i.e., the time of divine visitation, had come upon Israel (9:7). When the Lord asked Jeremiah what he saw, the Prophet answered, "I see a *shaqed*," i.e., an almond branch. Then the Lord told him that He (the Lord) was like that *shaqed*, for He was a *shoqed*, i.e., a Waker, a Watcher, who would see to it that His Word of judgment would be fulfilled (Jer. 1:11, 12). In his vision of the basket of summer fruit Amos used what has been called "the most fateful pun in history." The Lord said, "What do you see, Amos?" And he said, "A *qayiz*," i.e., a basket of summer fruit! The Lord said, "This means that the end (*qez*) is come upon My people Israel" (Amos 8:2).

A word needs to be said at this point with regard to the confusion of judgment and grace in a number of important passages of the Old Testament. The exegete has devices at his disposal which may be used to change a message of mercy and love into one of judgment and doom. Use has indeed been made of these devices. The familiar words of Isaiah 1:18: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow," have been made to mean exactly the opposite, namely, by putting the statement in the form of a question, to wit: "Though your sins be as scarlet,

shall they be as white as snow? Never!" Both Wellhausen and Guthe advocated the question form in this passage. Duhm and Marti give this beautiful mercy message a cynical or ironical slant as if it stated: "Though your sins be as scarlet, you, of course, know how to make lambs out of yourselves by changing them into white snow."<sup>1</sup> In Hos. 11:9 the Lord states very clearly: "I will not execute the fierceness of Mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim." Here, too, the meaning of the passage has been reversed by reading it as a question: "Shall I not execute the fierceness of My anger? Shall I not return to destroy Ephraim? Certainly." Marti and Hoelscher chose such a question form.<sup>2</sup> In Hos. 13:14 the Lord states: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death." Most interpreters today are of the opinion that this statement must be changed into a question, to wit: "Shall I redeem them from Sheol? Shall I save them from death? Surely not."<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that in 1 Cor. 15:55 Paul quotes this passage with a merciful connotation, it is argued that the question form is imperative because the verse closes with the negative clause, "Mercy is hid from Mine eyes." If mercy is hid, then it must be certain that the Lord will not redeem. That the Prophet, however, can shift abruptly from a theme of mercy to one of judgment is evident in numerous passages in the Prophets and Psalms. After Isaiah, e.g., had shifted from a theme of judgment to a message of mercy in his parables of the sower and the thresher (ch. 28), he added the statement: "This also [mercy] cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts, which is wonderful in counsel" (Is. 28:29).

Metathesis, i.e., the exchange of letters within a word, is another device that is used to change a hopeful passage into one of judgment. Of the Day of the Lord Jeremiah states that it will be a great day, the like of which there has not been before, and it will be a time of distress for Jacob, but he will be delivered from it (*yiwwashe'a*). By merely interchanging the *waw* and the *shin* the last clause is made to mean, not that Jacob will be delivered, but merely that he cries for help (*yeshawwa'*, Jer. 30:7).<sup>4</sup> This is especially confusing because the passage is thus deprived of the dual theme of judgment and grace, which is usually associated with the Day of the Lord.



The reason for changing mercy passages into judgment passages is the fact that many scholars argue that the Hebrew Prophets were only messengers of doom and not of grace and mercy. This view is based on passages like Jer. 26:18, in which Micah is quoted as saying, "Zion shall be plowed like a field." It is alleged that this statement covers all of Micah's message, in other words, that there was no room for grace and mercy in his program. Similarly when Hananiah opposed Jeremiah and said that the Babylonian Captivity would be over in two years, Jeremiah answered him: "The prophets that have been before me and before thee of old prophesied . . . of war and of evil and of pestilence. The prophet which prophesieth of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord hath truly sent him" (28:8,9). This certainly indicates that the prophets were primarily messengers of doom, but it does not preclude the fact that they also had a message of divine love for their hearers. The deletion of Amos 9 and Micah 4 and 5 is deemed necessary largely also because these two men elsewhere preach only messages of doom.

The Old Testament speaks of efforts to escape from God's judgments, but it stamps these efforts as futile. In the vision of the destruction of the sanctuary Amos says that none shall escape the wrath of the Lord. If they dig their way down into Sheol, His hand will reach down for them; if they vault up to heaven, He will get them from there; if they hide on the top of Mount Carmel, He will take them thence; if they dive to the depths of the sea, He will send the serpent there to bite them (Amos 9:1-4). The author of Psalm 139 is so impressed by the distance between himself and his Creator that he feels the impulse to try to get away. But he realizes only too well that any such effort cannot avail: If he mounts up to the heavens, the Lord is there; if he makes his bed in Sheol, the Lord is there; if he accompanies the sun from its rising in the east to its setting in the west, the hand of the Lord will constantly have a hold on him; if he tries to draw the cover of darkness about him, night itself will not be dark enough to hide him from the Lord (Ps. 139:7-12). The Lord does not want to be known only as a God who is near; He is also a God whose control extends to the greatest distances; because He fills the

heavens and the earth, therefore man cannot escape from Him (Jer. 23:23, 24).

At times Jeremiah felt so depressed by the messages of doom which he was to proclaim that he decided to put the thoughts of God out of his mind and not to preach any longer in His name. But then he experienced such a burning fire within himself that he was unable to bear it and was on the verge of perishing. Thus the Lord showed him that as there was no escape from His judgment, so there was no escape from proclaiming that judgment (Jer. 20:9). The Psalmists are keenly aware of the fact that there is no possibility of the sinner's escaping the judgment of God. This is shown very clearly in the penitential Psalms and their refrains: "If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Ps. 130:3); "Enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified" (Ps. 143:2).

A number of striking pictures are used to demonstrate the impossibility of escape from the Lord's judgment. In announcing Moab's doom the Prophet compares him to a bundle of straw that is thrown into the pool of a dungpit and is trodden under. Picturing Moab in the dungpit as a swimmer stretching out his arms in an effort to keep himself above the surface, the Lord says that no matter how well he is able to swim, the Lord will nevertheless "duck" him under repeatedly until he stays down (Is. 25:10, 11). Of the enemies who try to escape the Lord's judgment the Prophet says that their predicament is like that of a person lying in bed: the bed is too short for the man who stretches himself out upon it, and the cover is too small to wrap himself up in it. Thus he remains exposed and vulnerable (Is. 28:20). It is therefore obvious that the Prophets conceded no possibility of escape from the Lord's wrath.

Nor can we as a church today escape the demands and the judgments of the Holy God. His wrath is aroused by our many offenses against His will, by our lack of righteousness and mercy and knowledge of Him. He searches our churches the way He searched the streets of Jerusalem, and yet He cannot find even one man who is really righteous: He has bound us as closely to Himself as a man's belt fits about his waist, yet we have been guilty of loosing that band of love by our sins.

Therefore the judgment of the holy God will strike us as certainly as it struck the obstinate people of old. Indeed modern instruments of divine judgment and destruction are far more gruesome than those of ancient times. The lion and the bear are tame compared to our twentieth-century agents of death. The sword and spear must give way to the supersonic jet plane and the increasingly lethal bombs that our civilization has brought forth.

When the Lord's judgment strikes, all of us will be subject to its severity and finality. Then our fair towns will be changed into weep towns and dust towns. No matter where we turn, God in His wrath will stand in the way to prevent our escape. The Day of Wrath is approaching! It may come on this very day! What shall we do then? Our only refuge is the grace and mercy which God offers us in Christ. To this we now direct our attention.

## II

### THE OLD TESTAMENT SPEAKS OF THE GRACE AND MERCY OF GOD TOWARD MAN

In the Old Testament the thought of the Lord's grace and mercy is closely connected with the idea of the remnant which will survive the Lord's judgment. It has been contended, however, that the remnant concept is basically one of judgment and not of grace. It is argued that the Prophets wanted to show the completeness of the destruction which was to come by stating that all that would be left of a great people would be a tiny remnant. The evidence certainly points to the fact that the destruction will be thorough and complete. Still there seems to be ample reason for regarding the remnant idea as essentially one of grace. In the disputed passage, Amos 5:15, the Prophet says that perhaps the Lord will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. The close connection between grace and remnant in this passage certainly suggests an emphasis on mercy rather than on wrath. If it is argued that this passage is unlike Amos because Amos nowhere else refers to the remnant, then it must be said that there definitely are other remnant allusions in Amos. The Prophet says, e.g., that if a city goes out a thousand strong, it shall come back only a hundred strong; and if it goes out a hundred strong, it shall come back only ten strong (Amos 5:3). The word remnant is not used, but the

reference to the idea of sparing a few is obvious. At another point the Prophet speaks of a shepherd retrieving several shinbones and a piece of a lamb's ear from the mouth of a lion; he adds that in a similar way only an insignificant part of the people of Israel will be rescued from the Lord's punitive hands (Amos 3:12). It is, of course, true that there is no life in the two shinbones or the piece of an ear; but still the shepherd succeeds in recovering these portions of his lamb, be they ever so small. Thus the idea of saving a small number is the basic idea of the remnant in Amos.

Isaiah speaks of the remnant in a similar vein. Israel would have been as bad off as Sodom and Gomorrah, the Prophet says, had not the Lord seen fit to spare a few people in the midst of the judgment (Is. 1:9). Isaiah demonstrated his faith in the survival of the remnant by naming one of his boys Shear-jashub, which means: a remnant shall return (7:3). Those who will be left in Zion after the destruction of the Day of the Lord will be called holy, even everyone who is written among the living (Is. 4:3). Thus the holy survivors of the judgment will form the nucleus of the Lord's future flock. That the remnant will be very small indeed is indicated by the Prophet's suggestion that if there be a tenth of the people left, that tenth in turn will be destroyed like a tree that is chopped down and only the remaining stump will be the living seed (Is. 6:13). As there are only two or three olives left on the tree after the crop has been gathered, so there will be only a few people left who will survive the divine judgment (Is. 17:6). As one says of a cluster of grapes in which there is still some juice to be found: "Don't destroy it, for there is a blessing in it," so the Lord says that He will not destroy the grape cluster of Israel as long as there is a hope of finding at least some juice in it (Is. 65:8).

In general, divine grace is described in the Old Testament as God's favor and kindness to man. Receiving God's favor is compared to the drawing of water from the wells of salvation. (Is. 12:3). Israel receives the assurance that she is to be comforted by her Lord, that He is to speak over her heart the way a lover whispers to his beloved (Is. 40:1,2). One of the favorite prophetic pictures of God's favor is the picture of the shepherd and his flock. As the shepherd seeks and gathers the sheep that

have strayed from his fold, so the Lord will gather His own from all places where they have been dispersed (Ezek. 34:12). Such divine grace is a favor that is more stable and enduring than the mountains; these may totter and fall; but the Lord's favor will never be removed (Is. 54:10). As the heavens are higher than the earth, so the gracious ways and thoughts of God are far above those of men (Is. 55:9). The Lord knows the thoughts which he thinks toward man, namely, plans for man's good, rather than evil, that He may give him a future in which there is hope (Jer. 29:11). The Lord's joy in finding and favoring Israel is compared to the joy of the man who finds grapes in the wilderness and who discovers the first ripe fig in its season (Hos. 9:10). The Lord looks upon Ephraim as a palm tree planted in a green meadow (Hos. 9:13).

Divine grace is also compared to various close relationships within the human family. The Lord said, e. g., that He loved His people the way a husband loves his wife (Is. 54:5,6). That the wife, however, is unworthy of the love of her divine husband is shown by the symbolism of Hosea's marriage. The Lord said to the Prophet: "Go, take a whore to wife" (Hos. 1:2); "Go, love again an adulteress" (Hos. 3:1). As Hosea loved Gomer despite her unworthiness, so the Lord loved His people despite their sins. He said that He would woo them again and lead them out into the desert and speak romantically to their hearts (Hos. 2:14). He promised to betroth His people forever in righteousness and justice, in grace and mercy and faithfulness, so that they in turn might know Him (Hos. 2:19,20).

The Lord's favor is compared to the love of a mother. It may happen that a woman will forget and abandon her sucking infant; that is hardly conceivable, yet even if such a thing did happen, the Lord would never forget His own people (Is. 49:15). The Lord says that He will comfort His people the way a person is comforted by his mother (Is. 66:13). When the Psalmist prays, "Have mercy upon me, O God" (Ps. 51:1), he uses a word (*choneni*) which suggests the plaintive cry of the mother camel when she is separated from her young. Thus the tenderness of the Lord is compared to that of the mother camel. When the Psalmist says in the same verse, "According to the multitude of thy tender mercies," he uses a word for mercy which is identical

with the word for a mother's womb. This again suggests the idea that the poet is appealing to the love of God as to the love of a mother.

The love of a father is the most common picture that is used in the Old Testament to describe the Lord's favor and kindness. The depressed Israelites appeal to the Lord and say: "Doubtless Thou art our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us . . . this has been Thy name from everlasting" (Is. 63:16). The people thought of God as their Father in whose hands they were as the clay that is molded by the potter (Is. 64:8). God was so kindly disposed toward His children that in all of their affliction He, too, was afflicted out of sympathy for them (Is. 63:9). One of the most beautiful descriptions of a father's love is found in the early verses of Hosea 11. There the Lord speaks of the affection which He showed His little boy when He taught him how to walk, when He took him upon His arm after he had stumbled, when He healed him after he bruised his little knees, when He led him on a leash of love, when He pressed the infant to His cheek, when He stooped down to give the little fellow his food (Hos. 11:1-4). The Lord is a Father in whom the fatherless children find mercy; He loves them freely because His anger has been turned aside (Hos. 14:3,4). "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. 103:13). God thinks with kindness of Ephraim, His dear son, His favorite child; He remembers how lovingly He spoke to him; His heart breaks within Him, He must have mercy upon him (Jer. 31:20). He is anxious to give Ephraim the status of a son, He is eager to have Ephraim address Him as My Father; but Ephraim has become faithless as a treacherous wife (Jer. 3:19, 20).

Divine grace as the forgiveness of sins is described in some of the most remarkable pictures in the Bible. God's grace means that the Lord has "not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10). Grace means that though our sins are as red as crimson cloth, God will make them as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson itself, God will make them look like wool (Is. 1:18). The glowing coal which the seraph placed on the Prophet's tongue was a symbol that all of his sins had been purged away by the Lord's grace (Is. 6:6, 7). When Hezekiah recovered from his illness, he re-

joyed that the Lord had been gracious to him by casting all of his sins behind His back (Is. 38:17). The Lord assured His people that He had swept away their transgressions like a cloud or a mist (Is. 44:22). To be in God's grace means to be clothed in the robe of God's righteousness, which is comparable to the adornment of a bride (Is. 61:10).

Such divine favor cannot be achieved by human effort; it must be imputed to man by a divine act. The Lord told Noah that He looked upon him as a righteous man (Gen. 7:1). The Psalmist calls that man blessed unto whom the Lord does not impute iniquity (Ps. 32:2). Both Abraham and Moses prefaced their requests to the Lord with the words "If I have found grace in Thy sight" (Gen. 18:3; Ex. 33:13).

Such forgiving grace is complete and sufficient. The Psalmist asserts that the Lord removes our transgressions as far away from us as the east is from the west, that His mercy toward those who fear Him is as great as the heaven is higher than the earth (Ps. 103:11, 12). Micah sings the praises of the God of Israel, who is unlike every other god in this, that He casts the sins of His people into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18, 19). Jeremiah makes the forgiveness of sins one of the essential marks of the new covenant with Israel (Jer. 31:33, 34).

Can it be said of divine grace that there is ever a condition attached to it? This question is raised because of a number of passages that occur especially in the Prophets. After Amos has admonished his people to seek the good that they may live, he adds that it may be that God will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph (5:15). When Moses takes the case of the Israelites before the Lord after the golden-calf incident, he tells the people that when he goes before the Lord, peradventure he will make atonement for their sins (Ex. 32:30). After urging his people to repent of their wickedness the king of Nineveh asks: Who knows whether God will repent and turn His anger away from them? (Jonah 3:9.) And from Joel comes the statement "Who knoweth if He will return and repent and leave a blessing?" (2:14).

What is to be said about this "who knows"? this "perhaps"? this "maybe"? Does this word (Hebr., *ulai*) imply conditional grace? Does it suggest that God might withhold His grace? It does

not seem likely that the Prophets were doubtful whether God would be gracious. By using this "perhaps" they wanted to show that God indeed was sure to be gracious, but that under no circumstances would Israel deserve or merit such grace. The word "maybe" stresses the unworthiness of Israel rather than the uncertainty of God's grace. No one has a right to the Lord's grace, no one can lay a legitimate claim to it, no one can plead for a modified sentence, no one merits deferred or alleviated punishment. That and no more is what the Hebrew word *ulai* suggests.<sup>5</sup>

Divine grace constantly in operation is called faithfulness. This is the uninterrupted activity of God's favor and kindness toward men. It is not only of the Lord's goodness that we do not perish, but it is reassuring to know that His mercy has no end, that it is new every morning, and that therefore God's faithfulness is great (Lam. 3:22, 23). In his words to Israel Moses assures his people that the Lord is the faithful God who keeps mercy for a thousand generations (Deut. 7:9). The shortest Psalm in the entire collection speaks of the grace and truth of God which endures forever (Ps. 117:2). The Lord appeared unto Jeremiah and assured him of His faithfulness, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn you" (Jer. 31:3).

The purpose of divine grace is that God may be glorified by the God-fearing lives of His followers. The author of the *De Profundis* states confidently that there is forgiveness with the Lord so that as a result of this forgiveness men may live in pious fear of Him (Ps. 130:4). The theology of Psalm 51 is so sublime because the author pleads with God not only for the remission of past guilt, but also for the grace to lead a sanctified life in the future. He asks God for a heart that will be free from the love of all things, for a spirit that will serve God willingly without constraint, for a spirit that will serve God steadily, consistently, without further lapses into sin. All of these prayers for a sanctified life are based on the Lord's forgiveness (Ps. 51:10-12). Even as Enoch walked with God (Gen. 5:24), as David walked after the Lord with all his heart (1 Kings 14:8), so it is the Lord's will that His people should walk after Him (Hos. 11:10). In the Old Testament version of the theme of the vine and the branches the Lord tells His people that after they have been restored and



forgiven, He will be to them like a green fir tree from which all of their fruit will be found (Hos. 14:8).

It is a source of comfort to the church today that it is the remnant, that it is that small group which the Lord in His grace and mercy delivers from the terrible Day of Wrath. We should have been as bad off as Sodom and Gomorrah had not the Lord spared the few, the tenth part, the two or three olives or grapes that are left hanging. By the Lord's favor we have been accepted as the flock of the Good Shepherd, as the bride of the beloved heavenly Bridegroom, as the dear children of a kind and affectionate heavenly Father.

The church thus favored is the church fully forgiven. Our scarlet sins have been made white; sins that weighed heavily because they were so near have been far removed. They are behind God's back, they are in the depths of the sea, they are beyond east or west. There can be no question about that; there should be no fear that possibly God will not forgive our guilt. Just as little as we as a church merit the Lord's forgiveness, as little as we can say that we have any right or any claim to His grace, so certain it is, on the other hand, that God has forgiven all the iniquity of our sin.

He not only has forgiven us, He will continue to forgive and pardon His people in an endless display of His faithfulness. He bestows all of this grace in order to sanctify us in our daily life, to enable us to serve Him with a willing, steady spirit, to teach us to walk with Him and after Him in holy obedience. The question: How can God forgive? How can the holy God simply cancel guilt? will be taken up in the next section that has to do with the Servant of the Lord.

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(To be concluded)

#### NOTES

1. E. Koenig, *Das Buch Jesaja eingeleitet, uebersetzt und erklart* (Gütersloh, 1926), p. 47.
2. Sydney Lawrence Brown, *The Book of Hosea* (London: Methuen and Co., 1932), p. 103.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 115. See also Julius A. Bewer, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, I, 60.
4. Julius A. Bewer, *The Book of Jeremiah*, II, 18.
5. Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*; English ed. by William Heidt (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1950), p. 103.