

Knowing God's Mercy

1 Samuel 30:1-31

How many people have heard of the story called Les Miserables?

It is set in France in the early 1800's and the title translated into English is "The Miserable Ones".

That is not exactly a happy title and for the most the play lives up to its name.

There is a fair bit a tragedy throughout the play and while the plot line does get resolved by the end of the story it is not an entirely happy ending.

Generally speaking a story like that is not one that I gravitate towards, but there are definitely parts that I appreciate.

One of the scenes that I like happens near the beginning.

During that period in France's history there were many people who lived in poverty and such was the case for the main character Jean Valjean.

Finding himself in need he resorts to trying to steal a loaf of bread and gets caught.

Stealing a single loaf of bread lands Valjean in prison and because he tries to escape multiple times he ends up spending 19 years in jail.

Upon his release he finds himself with a new problem, no one wants to hire or associate with a convict.

Not being able to work and finding himself in great need he knocks on the door of a local bishop begging for help and the bishop welcomes him and shows him kindness.

Valjean repays the kindness of the bishop by stealing his silverware and running away.

He doesn't get very far before he is once again caught by police and brought back to the bishop to confirm the crime.

If they send you to jail for stealing bread you can be sure that's where you are headed for stealing silverware.

He is completely guilty and deserves to go back to prison, but something unexpected happens, the bishop covers for Valjean telling the police the silverware was a gift.

He doesn't get what he deserves, but instead he receives mercy from the bishop.

That act of mercy sets the stage for the rest of the story. Valjean becomes an honest man, successful in business, a mayor, and a father through adoption.

While he never gets to fully escape his past and he goes through more trial and tragedy, that event at the beginning is a reminder of how showing mercy can alter the course of someone's life.

We find that very lesson time and again in the pages of the Bible.

In fact I believe it is right to say that idea is at the very core of God's word.

[From beginning to end we see time and time again Almighty God showing mercy to people. We can see it in our text for this morning **1Samuel 30:1-31**. In this chapter we find David in trouble. He gets here because he made a choice to live among the enemies of God's people and he did it without seeking God's direction. In that situation the LORD could have said, "That is what you get for failing to trust Me so tough luck for you." God doesn't do that. Instead we find Him extending mercy to both David and the 600 men with him. The fact is we are all in the same situation. We all need God's mercy and this text has some things to show us about knowing God's mercy. Now when I say, "Knowing" I mean knowing in a biblical sense which is much more than intellectual facts in our brains. I mean truly and personally experiencing God's mercy in our lives. I want to show you three things in that regard from this text. Number one is this...]

Point #1 – To know God's mercy we must turn to Him. (Verses 1-8)

Our Maker, the King of all the universe, is constantly showing kindness to everyone who is alive and is willing to pardon us from everything that cuts us off from Him, but in order to enjoy that we need to come to Him on His terms.

It is important to recall a little bit of the background for this text.

David and his men had been living in the territory of Israel's historic enemies the Philistines for a little over a year.

As is often the case the Philistine go to war with Israel and David was supposed to fight with them against his own people under the command of a man named Achish who believed David was his servant.

All the other Philistine kings think Achish is a fool, they are certainly correct, and they demand David and his men go back to the place Achish had given him to live.

That is all important to keep in mind because David never inquired of the Lord about leaving Israel and going to live with the Philistines.

It would have been far better for him to trust the Lord living in the land that God had promised to make him king over, but instead he went to live in Ziklag along with his men and their families.

Verses 1-6a here tell us about their return to the city.

I can't even begin to imagine how those men felt when they saw the city in ashes.

They likely saw it from a distance and we can only imagine what went through their minds as they approached the ruins.

There is a repeated emphasis in these verses on the fact that everyone was taken.

It think it is telling that the emphasis here is on the people rather than on the things that were taken.

No doubt they would have been angry and their property being taken, but with their families gone they are in anguish to the depths of their beings.

It says here that they “wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep”

That kind of grief can lead people to think all kinds of thoughts and often leads people to lay blame at someone's feet.

Whose fault is this? Their answer is it is David's fault.

Why did David lead them there? For safety and what happens instead? They lose everything.

David is in real trouble here as some of them starting talking about stoning their leader for bringing them to such a place.

If the right way to read this is that David lead them to a place they weren't supposed to be and it lead to this trouble, then it is pretty clear David is in need of mercy.

Look at what he does in his need in **verses 6b-8.**

He turns to the Lord for strength and direction.

He uses the means that God gave the Israelites to learn which way the LORD would have them turn.

And God answers.

Why? Because David deserves it?

No, because He is merciful towards the future King and David on account of turning to God for strength and David knows it.

[Just imagine thousands of people dying of thirst standing around a fountain that produces an unlimited amount of cool, clean, refreshing water. Around the fountain there is an indestructible fence with a gate and the only way to get past the gate is to say to the owner of the fountain, “I need help.” Say that and the owner opens the gate and lets the thirsty one come in a drink all they want. The offer is open to everyone standing outside the gate, but who are the only ones who truly KNOW the refreshment of the fountain? The ones who go in to drink.]

That is how it is with God's mercy.

Oh He is merciful, in one sense, to everyone Christian and non-Christian alike.

No one deserves to live another second on account of our sin, but God shows mercy to the living every single day.

Most people, however, do not *know* His mercy in an experiential way because they have never turned to Him.

They think of God as mean, unfair, or unreasonable.

They stubbornly remain outside the gate never tasting the life giving water of God's mercy in Jesus Christ.

Never accepting that what we deserve, on account of our evil, is eternal judgement and suffering under God's wrath.

Never understanding that Jesus bore that punishment for us on the cross and when we turn to Him by faith, the LORD removes the punishment we deserve and gives us life instead of death.

[It is impossible to be a Christian without knowing in the very depths of our souls the mercy of the living God because it is impossible to be a Christian apart from turning to Him and it is impossible to turn to Him without receiving His immeasurable mercy in your life. David gets a taste of that here. Here is a second lesson David points us to in this text...]

Point #2 – To know God’s mercy we must trust what He says. (Verses 9-20)

While it is possible to temporarily benefit from our heavenly Father in ignorance (most people do that every day), faith is the means by which we come to understand, experience, and appreciate the kindness of the LORD in a lasting way.

The Bible tells us here that David received a very clear word from the LORD.

“Pursue them” and “You will succeed in the rescue.”

Let’s look at what he does in **verses 9-10**.

God says to go and he goes. Of course just because God has given a clear instruction does not mean things are going to be easy.

These guys have already be marching for three days just to get back to Ziklag and now they have to continue to march, likely at a quickened pace to try and catch the Amalekites and 200 of the 600 guys simply run out of steam.

With what is at stake I find it hard to believe these 200 guys want to stop.

I believe they want to go, but they have simply come to the end of their ability.

It is important to pause here and ask why? A better question would likely be, how do the 400 have strength to continue?

Answer, God sustains the 400 and lets the 200 run out of energy.

Keep that fact tucked in your mind for a few minutes.

You might think David would start to question whether or not to continue having just lost 30% of his fighting force, but they press on and this happens in **verses 11-15**.

How is it that they happened to come upon this Egyptian?

How is it that while he was so sick his Amalekite master left him for dead, he is still alive after having nothing to eat or drink for three days?

How is it that after having a little bit to drink and some figs and raisins (the ancient world's version of candy) that he revives and is willing to cooperate?

Again the answer is the providence of God.

The Lord is showing David mercy every step of the way here as he believes what God has said.

That leads to this in verses 16-20.

That is incredible. I would even go so far as to say miraculous.

The numbers are very much against David and his men.

Verse 16 describes the Amalekites as being "scattered over the country side" the idea being they covered the ground as far as they could see which suggests a large number.

As many men run away from the battle as David brought in total.

The fight goes on for a full twenty four hours.

Have you ever been in a fight or a wrestling match? To fight for twenty minutes is exhausting let alone a full day.

And yet with all that against them, they prevail and rescue every single person who was captured plus they get all their stuff back and more besides that.

It's amazing and it's all by God's mercy and they experience it because David acts in faith according to what the LORD told him.

[I've had the opportunity to teach a variety of different things to a variety of different people over the years. One of things I have found common to that experience is students who do not trust/believe the teacher. Have you ever run into that trying to show someone how to do something? They say something like, "That can't be the right way to do it!" or "I don't want to try that!" It doesn't happen for everyone, but more often than not the student will change their mind and come back and say, "Can you show me again?" Do you know what they need at that moment? They need some mercy from the teacher. When they are given mercy and they decide to listen they find success and understanding and usually some joy along the way.]

The exact same thing happens with God doesn't it?

How many times in life do we say to the LORD, no thanks I'll do it my way?

You know the best thing that can happen when we do that is we fall flat on our face and feel the pain of it right away.

That is the best thing that can happen because if we don't feel it we will often persist in living contrary to what God wants which only makes things worse and worse over time.

However, when we come to God for mercy He gives it and when we start to trust in what He says we experience His mercy first hand.

[David goes here from losing everything, from his men wanting to stone him, to gaining everything back and then some. In fact his men call everything “David’s plunder” in verse 20. Talk about a huge turn of events and it happens because of God’s mercy which David enjoyed by faith. That brings us to one more lesson from this chapter. This is both very good and essential for us as believers. It helps us to assess whether or not we truly know God’s mercy. Here is the lesson...]

Point #3 – Knowing God’s mercy is a blessing to others. (Verses 21-31)

When our eyes are opened to how much the LORD does for us despite the fact that we don’t deserve anything good, we can’t help but see ourselves as abundantly blessed which in turn overflows into the lives of people around us.

With the fighting over and everything in hand they begin to make their way back and we read this in verses 21-22.

I find it interesting that the meaning of the word “Besor” is *cheerful*.

When the 200 were first separated they were probably feeling pretty far from cheerful, but as they get to witness the triumphant return and see their families rescued they must have been overjoyed.

Some in the crowd though seem intent on being a dark cloud on the celebration.

Verse 22 describes them as “evil men” and “troublemakers”.

We are not told how many there are, but we all know it only takes a few to make a big mess of things.

Their basic argument is, “The 200 hundred that stayed behind don’t get a share of the spoils because they did not do any of the fighting.

The only way they can speak like this is if they have no regard for the mercy of the LORD.

In talking like this they must honestly think that it was their own strength and skill that carried the day.

Considering everything that happens here, that is just about as foolish as it gets.

They give credit to themselves instead of God and it makes them self-centered.

Do you ever wonder why so many people in our world think about themselves, or do you ever wonder why so many people act like they are entitled and ungrateful?

It’s because they have no idea about the mercy of God.

David sees things very differently. Let’s look together at what he does in verses 22-31.

Who does David give credit to for all the good that happens to them?

The LORD. It is amazing the Amalekites didn't just kill everyone. Instead not one person is lost.

They were not kept safe because David chose a good place to live. They were safe by God's mercy.

It is amazing they had the strength to fight and amazing they won considering they were outnumbered likely by a significant margin.

Who gave them the strength and the victory?

David knows it is the LORD and so he refuses to be tight fisted with the abundance that he has been given.

The 200 will get a share. Not only them but the people of God throughout Judah will enjoy the blessing as well.

It's true nothing is said directly here about David's motives.

Some might argue that this is purely political, that David is trying to shore up support in order to become king.

While that is not impossible, I think it is unlikely because he so clearly understands in verse 23 that this is all from God.

[A few years ago I saw a short video of some children in what looked like very poor conditions. They were sitting down to eat bowls of rice. Another child appeared in the video looking on clearly in need of some food. Seeing the other child, the children with rice all took some from their own portion to make another portion for the one looking on and invited her to sit down and they all ate together. I don't know what motivated those kids but I can't help but think that since they all knew what real hunger was and they appreciated where their food came from it made them willing to share.]

I think a similar sort of understanding is driving David here.

He knows he does not deserve any of these abundant blessings he has received and that humility moves him towards generosity.

If we truly understand what God does for us every single second of every single day and if we can even begin to scratch the surface of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and that we don't deserve any of it, then how can we be anything but the most humble and generous people in the world.

That is simply the natural outworking of knowing God's mercy.

Do you know His mercy today? The only way to know it is to turn to Him.

Do you know His mercy today? The only way to know it is to trust what He says?

Do you know His mercy today?

If you do it will be a blessing to those around you.