

God Delights in Mercy

On the Heart of God Toward His People, from Judges to the Throne of Grace

We often read the Old Testament as a story about human failure. Israel sins. Israel is judged. Israel repents. God relents. And then, inevitably, Israel sins again. We read the cycle in Judges and shake our heads at a stiff-necked people who never seem to learn. We walk away feeling the weight of it, maybe even a kind of exhaustion on God's behalf, as though He were putting up with His people rather than delighting in them.

But what if we have the emphasis in the wrong place? What if the point of the cycle is God's joy in delivering His people? What follows is an attempt to trace a single thread through Scripture: that God's delight in showing mercy is an eternal expression of who He is, rooted in the decree of redemption before the foundation of the world. This idea is deeply embedded in the Reformed tradition and grounded in the theology of the Puritans, but more importantly, it is the testimony of Scripture itself. My hope is that it changes the way you read your Bible, and even more than that, the way you approach the throne of grace.

I. The Eternal Decree and the Joy of Christ

Scripture tells us a story about a God who delights in showing mercy to His people. Human failure is recorded honestly throughout, but the emphasis falls on God's character, and specifically on His joy in pardoning sinners. The Puritan theologian Thomas Goodwin writes that "Christ's own joy, comfort, happiness, and glory are increased and enlarged by his showing

grace and mercy, in pardoning, relieving, and comforting his members here on earth.”¹ This disposition predates the incarnation. It flows from the eternal being of God, who purposed the redemption of His people before the foundation of the world. (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; Revelation 13:8, ESV)

The cross was the eternal decree executed in time. The Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world, and every act of mercy in the Old Testament was grounded in a sacrifice that, from God’s eternal perspective, was already accomplished. When God showed mercy in Judges, He did so on the basis of a sacrifice that, in the eternal counsel, was already settled.

II. Mercy as God’s Wealth

Stephen Charnock confirms and deepens this point. Writing on Micah 7:18, Charnock says that God delights in pardoning mercy as a father delights in his children.² Consider the weight of the text: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.” (Micah 7:18) According to Charnock, we never took as much pleasure in sinning as God does in forgiving, and no penitent ever took as much pleasure in receiving a pardon as God does in giving one. God counts mercy as His wealth: riches of grace, riches of mercy, glorious riches of mercy. No other attribute is given that title.

Charnock draws a striking contrast between how God relates to judgment and how He relates to mercy. He sighs when He must draw His sword: “How shall I give thee up, O Ephraim!” (Hosea 11:8) But when He blots out iniquity, the tone shifts entirely: “I, even I, am he

¹Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ in Heaven Towards Sinners on Earth*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), 93–150.

²Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 440.

that blots out your transgressions for my name's sake.” (Isaiah 43:25) Charnock concludes that God's delight in pardoning is equal to the delight He has in His own name.³ This does not mean that judgment is alien to God's nature. His justice is as essential to His being as His mercy, and divine simplicity means the two are never in tension. God does not delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23), but He does execute justice as a genuine expression of His holiness. What Charnock is showing us is where God's delight terminates with respect to His elect: in mercy. And that mercy is particular. It is covenant mercy, directed toward those whom God has chosen as His own.

III. Judges: God Doing What Brings Him Joy

If Goodwin and Charnock are right, then the entire book of Judges reads differently. The repeated cycle of sin, oppression, crying out, and deliverance has more to say about God's character than about Israel's stubbornness. Every deliverance is an echo of the cross. Justice was already satisfied in the eternal decree, which means that through all those centuries of Israelite rebellion, God was actively delighting in showing mercy.

The patience on display in Judges was the overflow of who God is. And because God is simple, meaning He is not composed of parts, His patience does not operate as a separate attribute independent from His love or justice or mercy. It is His entire being expressed toward His people in sustained, delighted forbearance. “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” (Malachi 3:6) The immutability of God guarantees that He who delights in mercy will never cease to delight in mercy. That is the ground under every deliverance in the book of Judges.

³Charnock, *Works*, 5:440.

The wilderness period tells the same story. When the Hebrews groaned and complained, God did not groan and complain back. He provided. Nehemiah gives the retrospective summary: “You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing.” (Nehemiah 9:20–21) Forty years of daily provision for a people who grumbled constantly. Deuteronomy gives us God’s own interpretation of the arrangement: “And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna.” (Deuteronomy 8:2–3) He let them hunger so He could feed them. The full verse makes the purpose explicit: God was teaching Israel that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The hunger served both Israel’s good and God’s glory. He ordained the conditions of dependence so that His people would learn to trust Him, and He met those conditions with provision because that is who He is.

IV. The Rejection of the God Who Delights

All of this is what makes 1 Samuel 8 so devastating. When Israel demanded a king like the nations, God said to Samuel, “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you.” (1 Samuel 8:7–8) They rejected the One whose joy it was to be their deliverer. They looked at a God who had shown them grace after grace, gladly and without reluctance, and told Him they would rather have a king “like all the nations.” The problem was not kingship itself. God had always intended to give Israel a king; the promise runs from Genesis 49:10 through Deuteronomy 17 to the Davidic covenant. (cf. Genesis 49:10; Deuteronomy 17:14–20)

The problem was wanting a king on the world's terms, a king who would replace their dependence on Yahweh with the security of human power.

And that is exactly what the monarchy, as Israel practiced it, gave them: a buffer between themselves and God. During the Judges period, when things went wrong, Israel had nowhere to turn but Yahweh. The crying out was forced by the absence of any human institution capable of absorbing the crisis. A standing army, a palace, a system of taxation, and alliances with foreign powers gave them a hundred ways to solve their problems without ever crying out to God. The monarchy did not directly cause the idolatry that followed, but as Israel corrupted the institution, it created the conditions under which idolatry could flourish unchecked. The immediate consequences of abandoning God were cushioned by human infrastructure, and so the abandonment deepened until it became total.

And yet God used even this corrupted institution to advance His purposes. The Davidic covenant is the vehicle through which the promise of a Messianic king develops. The trajectory of the whole narrative runs through the monarchy, not around it: God as direct King, then God establishing a royal line through David that would ultimately produce the Christ, even as the kings who occupied that throne failed catastrophically. Perfect King, imperfect kings, Perfect King. It is the pattern of creation, fall, and redemption embedded within the monarchy narrative itself.

V. The Mirror of the Law and the Mercy That Meets Repentance

The law was never given as a ladder to climb. Paul is explicit: “By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

(Romans 3:20) The law functions as a mirror. It shows us what we are so that we turn to the One who delights in showing mercy. The whole point of the law, and really the whole point of the biblical narrative, is to expose our sinful nature and drive us to repentance. And repentance is itself nothing more than reliance on God to show us mercy.

David understood this. “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Psalm 51:5) That is not a confession of behavior. It is a confession of nature. David does not say “I did bad things.” He says “I am the kind of creature that does this.” It is precisely that depth of recognition that produces the kind of repentance God receives, because it leaves David with nothing to stand on except mercy. He does not ask God to help him try harder. He asks for something far more radical: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10)⁴

And the mercy that meets that kind of repentance has never once failed. Search the Scriptures from beginning to end, and you will not find a single instance where genuine repentance was answered with silence. Adam and Eve sin, and God’s first act after the fall is a promise. He clothes them with a sacrifice they did not ask for and could not provide. David commits adultery and murder, confesses his sin, and Nathan’s immediate response is that the Lord has put it away. Even Manasseh, the worst king in Judah’s history, the man whose sin sealed the exile, humbled himself greatly before God in captivity, and God received him. This

⁴The Hebrew verb *bara* is the same word used in Gen. 1:1 for God’s act of creation ex nihilo.

does not mean that mercy always removes the temporal consequences of sin. David was forgiven, but the sword did not depart from his house. (2 Samuel 12:10–14) Moses was forgiven for striking the rock, but he did not enter the Promised Land. “The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” (Hebrews 12:6) God’s mercy sometimes takes the form of sanctifying discipline that persists even after pardon. But the pardon itself never fails. Repentance is simply the means by which God brings His people into the thing He was always going to do: show them grace. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) Faithful, because He is immutable. Just, because the cross has satisfied His justice.

VI. The Throne of Grace

This mercy reaches us through a mediator who is both fully God and fully man. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15–16) The throne of grace and the throne of justice are the same throne, occupied by the same God, who chose to meet His people there as Father. Charnock calls this “pure mercy, to change the tribunal of justice into a throne of grace, to bestow pardons where he might inflict punishments, and to put on the deportment of a father instead of that of a judge.”⁵

The One seated on that throne is the single Person of the Son, who sympathizes with our weaknesses according to His human nature and exercises divine mercy according to His divine nature. He knows what we need because He has experienced human weakness. And He delights

⁵Charnock, *Works*, 5:440.

in giving it because showing mercy to His people flows from the eternal character of the God He is. His love is not a mood. His mercy is not a policy that can be revised. These things flow from His being, and His being does not change. This is who He has always been, and it is who He will always be.

*“Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.”*

Micah 7:18