

THE PURPOSE OF THE LORD

James 5:11

I had an opportunity to talk with a friend the other day who was struggling with a common question about the Bible - how can anyone claim the goodness and love of God when the Bible's record of His activity seems to contradict those claims. Those questions become even more pointed when placed against James' claim that Job's story reveals that God's purposes are "compassionate and merciful"¹ (*James 5:11*). While we will not explore all of the issues connected to that tension, this lesson will offer an overview of the God's purposes in the Bible that reveal His compassionate mission of mercy and consider what that mission means for us.

"I desire mercy"²

- The Bible opens with a picture of God's intentions for humanity - He placed them in a "very good" world designed for them (*Genesis 1-2*). More significantly, Genesis' account reveals that God placed humankind in a special place - the Garden of Eden - that He created to host His relationship with them and from which He intended to partner with them in ruling over His creation (*Genesis 1:26-28; cf. Genesis 3:8*).
- Humanity, however, responded to God's plan by rejecting His sovereign will to pursue their own selfish interests (*Genesis 3:1-6*).
- Genesis moves from its compacted account of God's intentions for humankind to a longer narrative of the consequences of humanity's selfishness - their rebellion introduced sin into God's very good world, which quickly overran and perverted the world and required God to cleanse and re-create it (*Genesis 3-9*).
- Humanity returned to its rebellion despite God's efforts to restore His creation (*Genesis 11:1-9*), which created a dilemma - *how would God respond to sin's reconquest of His world?* He responded with a promise rather than another cataclysm, a promise to bless the world through a man named Abraham (*Genesis 12:1-3*).
- God's promise introduced a plan the Bible's story gradually unfolds and that reveals God's "compassionate and merciful" purposes. Consider, for example, some of the things featured in that story:
 - God made known His unique, sovereign identity to Israel, the nation Abraham's descendants formed, and entered into a covenant relationship with them (*Exodus 6:2-8; 19:1-20*).
 - God's self-revelation emphasized His merciful, gracious, patient, loving, faithful, and forgiving character (*Exodus 34:5-7*).
 - God expected Israel to mediate between Him and the world, helping the world to understand the things He had revealed about Himself to Israel (*Exodus 19:5-6; cf. Deuteronomy 4:5-8*).

¹ All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016), unless otherwise noted.

² *Matthew 9:13*

- Israel, however, failed to fulfill its responsibilities, yet God not only remained committed to His purposes, He even escalated the rhetoric of His promises (*cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:22-37:28; Isaiah 19:16-25*).
- Moving from the Old Testament into the New Testament introduces readers to Jesus and his announcements that he fulfilled God's purposes (*Matthew 5:17*).
 - God commissioned Jesus to perform a mission of mercy rather than judgment (*Matthew 9:9-13; John 3:16-17*).
 - The mercy of Jesus' mission, however, did not focus merely on escaping the punishment humanity's rebellion deserved; it instead focused on restoring God's relationship with humanity (*Romans 5:6-11*).
 - The goal of Jesus' merciful mission centers on restoring the relationship God created humanity to enjoy with Him in Genesis 1-2, but in a greater way than it existed in God's "very good" garden (*Revelation 5:10; 22:1-5*).

Applications

- James summarized God's mission as being "compassionate and merciful" (*James 5:11*). We can most clearly see those characteristics through Jesus, whose divine identity embodies God's character and therefore offers a template for the compassion and mercy that should define our lives (*Romans 5:6-11; 1 John 4:7-11; John 1:1, 14, 18; 14:8-9*). Consider, therefore, some of the things we can learn from Jesus' life and teachings about the place of compassion and mercy in our lives:
 - We must show compassion and mercy without thinking of ourselves (*Matthew 18:15-35*).
 - Our practice of compassion and mercy expresses itself through things like love-motivated, selfless service to others that elevates them and their concerns above our own self and our own concerns (*John 13:3-17, 34-35; Philippians 2:1-8*).
 - We must show genuine love-motivated compassion and mercy even to enemies (*Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 5:6-11*).
 - Our compassion and mercy must especially focus itself on the disregarded and powerless people in our world (*Jeremiah 22:3; Ezekiel 18:5-9; Zechariah 7:8-10; James 1:27*).
- We must remember that God chooses to act in the world through the lives of faithful individuals (*cf. Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:5-8; 1 Peter 2:9-12*). Our failure to be compassionate and merciful people dishonors God (*Romans 2:17-24*).

God is compassionate and merciful and desires to draw us into a relationship with Him. But God expects His compassion and mercy to reshape our lives in ways that cause us to reflect His compassion and mercy through the relationships we have with others. We should therefore ask ourselves whether our lives reveal a growing godliness that leads people to praise God because of our presence in their lives.