



(in)

BIBLE
STUDY

CREATE IN ME A HEART OF MERCY

AN
(in)courage
BIBLE STUDY



CREATE IN ME A HEART OF MERCY

Dorina Lazo Gilmore-Young and the
(in)courage Community

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CONTENTS

Introduction 7

WEEK 1

What Is Mercy? 11

WEEK 2

Why Do We Need Mercy? 39

WEEK 3

How Do We Receive Mercy? 67

WEEK 4

How Can We Extend Mercy
in Our Everyday Lives? 101

WEEK 5

How Do Mercy and Justice Coexist? 131

WEEK 6

How Is Mercy Part of Our Purpose? 163

Notes 195

About the Authors 199



INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to have a heart of mercy?

Maybe you don't feel like you are a particularly merciful person. Maybe you desire to cultivate a heart of mercy but aren't sure how. Maybe you've been told you have a gift of mercy but would like to be more intentional about using that gift for God's glory.

I remember years ago when I went on my first mission trip to Haiti. Before the trip, our leader had us take a spiritual gifts test. We spent time as a group talking through each person's top three spiritual gifts and how they might be useful on the trip and with our team.

One of my top three gifts was mercy. Honestly, I didn't really know what that meant. I had a hunch it had something to do with compassion and love, but I was curious to learn more.

That first trip to Haiti helped me begin to understand that God has a heart of mercy. He cares deeply for the widow, the orphan, the single mom, and the immigrant. The plight of these people weighs heavy on my heart too, but sometimes I'm not exactly sure what to do with these feelings. Just how does God want me to extend mercy to others?

This Bible study is designed to meet you in your questions about mercy. You don't have to travel to another country to understand God's heart for mercy or to demonstrate it to others. We will

consider our own desperate need for mercy, how we must first receive it before we are then called to extend mercy to others in our everyday lives and beyond.

For the next six weeks, we're going on a treasure hunt through Scripture to learn more about how to cultivate a heart of mercy. We will study the stories of Old and New Testament characters who were granted mercy and who multiplied mercy to others. Our prayer is that this study will encourage you to learn more about God and yourself. Friend, we are journeying alongside you!

How to Use This Study

Create in Me a Heart of Mercy is designed to be used by individuals or small groups. For groups doing this study, we recommend allowing at least forty-five minutes for discussion (or more for larger groups).

As you're working through this study, we encourage you to take your time and go at your own pace. We believe God has an incredible mes-

sage for each one of us in His Word, and we will find it when we seek to learn more and go deeper into Scripture. We pray this study can be an encouraging, life-giving experience that brings you closer to God rather than being just one more thing on your to-do list. Ask God to reveal His insight and truth to you. Then listen as He speaks to you through His Word.

Enhance your community study experience with our *Create in Me a Heart of Mercy* leader guide. Go to incourage.me/leaderguides to download your free small group resources.

Each week of this study will begin with a personal story from an (in)courage contributor on day 1, following our habit of “going first” with our hard, messy, real stories. Many of these stories begin in deep heartache but inevitably find their way back to God and the great gift of mercy He's given us. We will also provide a memory verse to work on throughout each week that will help root the concepts of mercy in the soil of your heart.

The other four days we will dive deep into God's Word to discover the source of mercy in our lives, how mercy transformed the lives of different people in the Bible, and the impact mercy can have on our lives today.

Are you ready? We at (in)courage are so thrilled to go on this journey with you! Join us as we ask God to create in us hearts of mercy.



WEEK 1

WHAT IS MERCY?

When you think of the word *mercy*, what comes to mind?

Maybe you think about someone raising their hands and pleading, “Mercy!” like a white flag of surrender.

Maybe you think of a person offering forgiveness to someone who has deeply hurt them.

Maybe you think of a child begging for food on the streets, and it pricks something deep inside you.

As we begin this study, we’ll be looking at three key biblical definitions of mercy and the dynamic ways God exemplifies mercy for all of us. *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* defines *mercy* as simply “compassion for the miserable.”¹ This week we will be exploring early examples of God’s mercy in the lives of Adam and Eve as well as Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar.

Biblical mercy is love reaching out to meet a need without considering the merit of the person who receives the aid.² However, the concept of mercy is much more layered and nuanced than we might think. It encompasses other words in the Bible like grace, pity, love, kindness, hospitality, forgiveness, and favor. The Hebrew word *hesed* is often used to describe God’s abundant mercy and faithfulness toward His children. That includes us! We will explore that definition more deeply in week 3.

In today’s story, Lucretia Berry tells how she experienced God’s compassion and mercy through the divorce of her parents.

A Story of Mercy

You are disposable! The gravitational pull of that false message trapped nine-year-old me in its orbit when my parents divorced. In

the breakup of their marriage, my mom was awarded primary custody of my brother and me, my dad was given significant visitation rights, and nine-year-old me inherited the false message that I didn't matter.

No one actually spoke those words to me. But the upheaval, grief, and wounding from that childhood trauma left me with scars. Like a skillful makeup artist, I learned to hide them. Achievements and accolades were the perfect concealer, and having a boyfriend meant that at least I mattered to someone, even if he didn't truly respect me.

But beneath the homecoming queen crown, the college graduate honors, and the multiple degrees, the fear of being insignificant clung to me. It melded into me. It stayed with me and became seemingly inseparable. It speaks to who I am as a wife, as a mom:

You are disposable! You don't matter!

That fear wants to be my forever song, the score to my life's unfolding. It wants to be the lead vocal, and whenever I experience rejection, it turns up the volume and presses the Repeat button. It gets the spotlight and summons all my attention. Having this fear reverberating in the recesses of my being is exhausting. I lose sleep and agonize over the pain of feeling invisible and invaluable. It's a constant noise, and at times it's deafening:

You are disposable! You don't matter! You are insignificant!

I know God sees me and values me—that's not something I struggle with. My strife is with other people devaluing me. I feel deflated when people treat me like I don't matter. I can tell myself that what others think of me isn't important, that I should only be concerned with how God sees me and knows me. But that doesn't negate the countless times when I've been overlooked or felt like an afterthought or a pawn in someone else's decision-making process.

One particular time the anxiety pushed me to desperation, and I cried out to *El Roi*—"the God who sees." God is the one who not only sees me but sees everything. Through Hagar's story in Genesis 16, I know

that God faithfully holds me when it seems as though I've been abandoned. And in moments like these, I feel like I shouldn't need God to affirm me, that mature faith doesn't need to be coddled. But desperation overrode my ego, and I recalled how Hagar received God's mercy. In my exhaustion, I became like a toddler who crawls into a nurturing lap to be embraced by mercy-filled arms.

As I surrendered, my life's major events unfolded in my mind like a movie recap. But in this re-viewing, I heard a different soundtrack—one resonating the mercy of El Roi. I began to clearly see elements at work that I had not given much attention to before. I grabbed my journal and started writing.

Who saw me when I thought I was invisible?

- During my parents' divorce, my grandma Pearline made sure I knew I was special to her.
- When my mom remarried and it seemed as though her new husband wanted her without her children, my grandma Virginia acknowledged my loneliness and pain.
- When I needed support along my academic journey, several people played key roles in escorting me from being a first-generation college student to becoming a college professor. It was a series of miracles.
- When I was in situations where someone was taking advantage of me, my husband intervened and shut down the whole operation.

Names and events flowed like a waterfall. I journaled for pages. The list went on and on of how mercy manifested through people seeing me, hearing me, and valuing me. As I reflected and recorded in my journal, the volume on the old song, which does not bear repeating, began fading into the background. I was ready to sing a new song:

I matter. I am seen. I am valued. I am heard.

When you feel vulnerable, invisible, or forgotten, remember that El Roi not only sees you but comes alongside you and cares for you.

In Matthew 6:26, Jesus reminds us, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (NIV).

When lies try to deplete you, ask El Roi, the one who sees you, to remind you of your visibility, your value, and your significance. In His mercy, He will bring you back to truth. You matter. You are seen. You are valued. You are heard. Rehearse truth’s song. Turn up the volume and allow it to refresh you.

—LUCRETIA BERRY



**Have you ever felt like you didn’t matter or were disposable?
Where do you think those lies might have originated?**

This week we will be exploring the stories of biblical characters who experienced God’s mercy and presence in unexpected ways. It’s important for us to understand how mercy has been part of God’s plan from the very beginning.

Let’s start by looking back in Scripture at God’s first act of mercy toward Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, which we usually refer to as “the fall.” This story will help us build a foundation for what mercy is and how God offers it to all humankind.

Read Genesis 2:15–17. What did God tell Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? What were the consequences if Adam did not obey God?

Read Genesis 3:1–19. How would you describe God’s mercy in this story?

Adam and Eve experienced God’s mercy in a personal way. We often focus on the consequences they faced for their disobedience rather than the profound act of mercy God offered them in this moment. God is setting a precedent for the future when He will send His Son, Jesus, as the ultimate act of mercy.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY MOMENT

This week’s Scripture is Ephesians 2:4–5. Write the verses in your journal from the NIV as printed below or from your favorite translation. Throughout the week, commit these words to memory as you ask God to create in you a heart of mercy.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.



A PRAYER FOR TODAY

GOD, thank You for having mercy on Adam and Eve and all of us. In these next several weeks, help me grow in my understanding of mercy. Thank You for seeing me in the midst of my own challenging circumstances like You saw Lucretia. I am reminded that because of You, I am never alone. I am deeply grateful for the way You redeem all things. Amen.

But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.”

Genesis 16:6–10

Have you had a time when you were feeling miserable and in deep need of compassion? Describe that experience and how compassion was shown to you. If you were not shown compassion, how did that make you feel?

Sarai was Abram’s wife, and at age sixty-five—about the time many of us retire—she joined her husband as they left their homeland and followed God’s leading to the land of Canaan. Sarai had been childless

her whole life, but in Genesis 12 and 15, God promises that Abram's offspring will outnumber the stars and that He will make a great nation through Abram's family.

Fast-forward ten years, and Sarai has grown impatient waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled. Sarai and Abram are now well into their seventies and eighties—far beyond the age of childbearing by human standards. So Sarai takes matters into her own hands and tells her husband to have sex with her servant Hagar so they can have children through her.

Although fathering children by servants or with multiple wives was culturally acceptable at that time, it was not God's plan for this chosen couple. Hagar was an Egyptian who likely had been given to Abram by Pharaoh back in Genesis 12 to serve as Sarai's maid. This young woman of color has no agency in this situation. She is sexually exploited, and when she becomes pregnant, Sarai physically abuses her. Hagar flees to the wilderness, which feels like a better option than staying in an abusive situation. Hagar is an outcast, wandering in the desert alone.

Take some time to read Genesis 16:1–15, which describes the angel of the Lord meeting Hagar in the wilderness. Some scholars say the Hebrew phrase translated as “the angel of the LORD” was used to indicate meeting with God Himself or perhaps that it's a reference to the preincarnate Christ.³

God seeks out Hagar in her misery and asks her two key questions: “Where have you come from and where are you going?” (Gen. 16:8). This is significant because God already knew where she came from and where she was going. He is the all-knowing God of the universe, yet He takes the time to ask her these two personal questions and gives her the opportunity to share her story. He sees her in her misery and gives her a chance to pour out her feelings. God tenderly leans in to engage with her.

Such tenderness would have been foreign to Hagar. She had experienced prejudice, injustice, and abuse throughout her life. Sarai and

Abram do not even call her by name—but God does! There is no greater mercy than to be seen by God Himself.

Brain science shows that telling our trauma stories is incredibly beneficial. Feelings of shame subside, unhelpful beliefs about the event are corrected, and the memory becomes less triggering.⁴ Of course, we know that true healing comes from God, who invites each of us, as He invited Hagar, to tell our stories.

Not only does God care about Hagar's story but He also offers her a promise as a sign of His mercy and compassion.

Read Genesis 16:7–15 again. What does God promise Hagar, and why do you think it is significant?

Hagar responds to this promise by ascribing to God a name that honors the way she feels seen by Him: *El Roi*, “the God who sees.” Hagar becomes the first person in the Old Testament to ascribe a name to God. Let that sink in. She names Him *El Roi*, “the God who sees.”

Hagar also names a well or spring in the place where she met God, calling it *Beer-lahai-roi*, meaning “a well of the Living One who sees

When God sent His Son to earth as a human child, it was a profound act of mercy. He sent Immanuel to be *with us* as a physical presence here on earth.

me.” The imagery here illustrates the way God refreshed and ministered to Hagar like a spring in the wilderness.

Similar comparisons are used in many places throughout the Bible. Psalm 23:2 talks about how God leads us beside quiet waters to restore us. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and offers her “living water.”

Being close to water is somehow both physically and spiritually refreshing. Have you ever hiked to a waterfall or spent the day on a river or lake? How did that place refresh you? Describe what it was like.

Read Isaiah 43:16–21, which is a prophecy to the nation of Judah living in Jerusalem before the Babylonian conquest about God’s mercy. As you read through these verses, what similarities do you see to the language in Genesis 16?

In this passage from Isaiah, God’s mercy is marked by something unexpected: a well in the desert. In the same way, God’s mercy toward Hagar was unexpected. When she fled from Abram and Sarai, Hagar

was miserable. After meeting with God, she possesses a new sense of courage. She fled to the desert in a state of utter despair but returns to Abram and Sarai's tent as a new woman known and loved by God. She carries with her the promise God gifted her, and when she later gives birth to her son, Abram names him Ishmael, which means "God hears."

Has God ever done anything unexpected in your life that you might call an example of His mercy? How did that make you feel?

SCRIPTURE MEMORY MOMENT

Write out Ephesians 2:4–5 on a sticky note or index card and hang it somewhere you will see it often. You might post it on your bathroom mirror, your car dashboard, or the refrigerator door so you can read it throughout the week and remind yourself that our God is "rich in mercy."

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

DEAR JESUS, *please help me hold on to Your promises even when I feel discouraged or in despair. You are like a well in the wilderness—a source of comfort and compassion—for me today. Thank You for the unexpected ways You have shown me mercy. Give me courage to navigate whatever trail You have me on today. Amen.*

DAY 3

The 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, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

Exodus 34:6–7

Who has shown you mercy in the past? What were some of the person’s actions toward you or words spoken to you that revealed their gift of mercy?

Many key events led up to the conversation between God and Moses in Exodus 34. God had shown His faithfulness and steadfast love for the people of Israel over and over again. In Exodus 14, God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and helped them cross the Red Sea. In Exodus 16, God provided manna from heaven and quail for them to eat in the wilderness. In Exodus 17, as they journeyed through the wilderness, the people cried out for water, and God commanded Moses to strike a rock that poured out water. In Exodus 20, God gave them the Ten Commandments as loving instructions on how to live during chaotic times. Later, in Exodus 32, as Moses

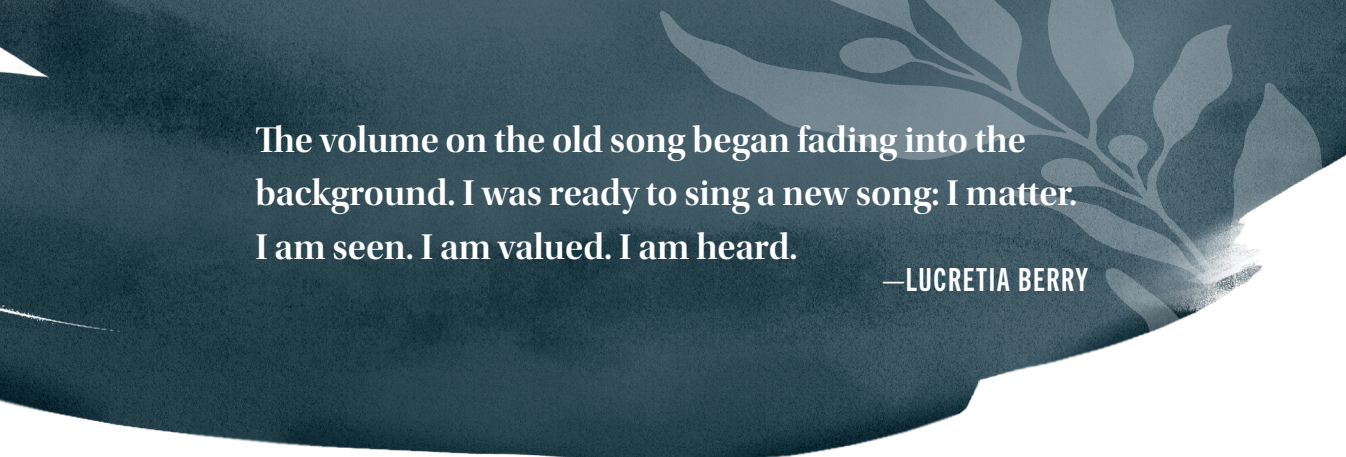
returned after meeting with God on Mount Sinai, he caught the impatient people worshiping a golden calf idol. Angry and frustrated, Moses broke the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.

At his wits' end, in Exodus 34 Moses again ascends Mount Sinai to meet with God. There God appears to Moses in a cloud and proclaims who He is.

Read Exodus 34:1–9. What particular character qualities of God are named in verses 6–7? How do you think these are related to mercy?

Theologian Tony Evans writes, “The Lord’s words here tell us that God’s love is not permissive. He is righteous and can overlook sin. That is, in fact, what makes the gospel such good news. In the cross of Christ, God’s justice and God’s love met.”⁵ We will be unpacking the intersection of justice and mercy in week 5, but it’s important to acknowledge here that God is both just and merciful.

Read Exodus 33:19 in the English Standard Version. What do you think the phrase “I . . . will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” means?



The volume on the old song began fading into the background. I was ready to sing a new song: I matter. I am seen. I am valued. I am heard.

—LUCRETIA BERRY

The apostle Paul quotes this verse in Romans 9 as he answers hypothetical objections that God has acted unjustly:

What should we say then? Is there injustice with God? Absolutely not! For he tells Moses, I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then, it does not depend on human will or effort but on God who shows mercy. (vv. 14–16 CSB)

Paul emphasizes that to act unjustly would be outside of God’s character. Showing mercy doesn’t contradict that. Rather, God’s mercy demonstrates that He is a good and caring Father.

Just a chapter earlier, Paul reminds us that we are adopted children of God. “But you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:15–16).

What is your relationship like with your father? Has he been an example of mercy to you? Does that make it harder or easier to think about God as the Father of mercy?

When I was a child, I didn't see my father express a lot of emotion unless he was angry. He would praise me on the soccer field or if I got good grades, but he didn't always tell me he loved me or shower me with affection. I still remember the day my dad drove me to college for my freshman year. I was filled with excitement and nervousness as I anticipated moving away from home.

As we were driving, I looked over at my dad and saw tears streaming down his face. I was stunned because I had only seen my dad cry maybe once or twice in my eighteen years of life. Although he was very supportive of my attending college, he was overcome with emotion that day at the thought that I was moving away. I realized in that moment the depth of my dad's love for me. His tears expressed far more than words ever could and gave me a deeper love and gratitude for my daddy.

Whether or not we have a good relationship with our earthly father, we are invited to connect with God as the Father of mercy. As we saw on day 1 through Lucretia's story and on day 2 through Hagar's story, God shows Himself to be a compassionate Father over and over again. He doesn't always give us what we want or wish for, but He offers us His very presence, which is a gift of mercy.

Read Psalm 84 in the translation of your choice. Pay particular attention to verse 11. How does this psalm speak to you about God being a good and merciful Father?

SCRIPTURE MEMORY MOMENT

Read Ephesians 2:4–5 two or three times. See if you can start memorizing the first few phrases of the passage. Say them out loud to yourself or a family member for accountability.

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

DEAR LORD, *I am grateful for Your grace, patience, steadfast love, and faithfulness. No matter what my relationship looks like with my earthly father, thank You for being a perfect example to me of a father's love. Help me to be like You and to show compassion and mercy to others around me. Amen.*