

# There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

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Author Frederick Faber

Composer Lizzie S. Tourjee

1 Chronicles 21: 13

Ephesians 2: 4-7

Psalm 86: 1-17

Psalm 103: 1-22

Deuteronomy 4: 29-31

## Thoughts on the Text

We spend a great deal of time trying to wrap our heads around the vast mystery that is God's love for us. Indeed, the love of God is at once the most frequently spoken and most elusive idea in Christianity. We speak, sing, paint, and write that love often, knowing it to be inclusive, expansive, salvific, and yet we continue to reword and reimagine that love in ways that help us to feel and to live what we know to be true. With each new idea we feel like we get it a little more, like we have found the definitive metaphor that captures both our theology and our experience, and we feel a little more comfortable.

This hymn warns us, however, that settling on a definition of God's love is dangerous. In our inability to understand the enormity of God's love, we set "false limits" that suggest that such love is "narrow," when in fact it is "wider than the sea." Despite our knowledge of God's expansive grace, despite the warm, familiar ideas we find in the first two stanzas, we exclude people from the body of Christ by "magnify[ing]" God's "strictness with a zeal He will not own." When we lose sight of the "wideness in God's mercy," when we forget that "[t]here is welcome for the sinner," we misrepresent the gospel.

The remedy to our narrowing, the writer suggests, is to lean into the unknowableness of God. By accepting that, like the ocean that stretches beyond the horizon, God's love stretches beyond the limits of our sight and understanding, we can eliminate our need for precise definitions. Our task is to "take [God] at His word," to trust that God's mercy "is broader than the measure of one's mind." The hymn charges us with over-complicating something that is actually quite basic, and suggests that we could better accept and understand God's limitless grace if our own "love were but more simple."

We should continue to search for metaphors and images that help us live out the love of God, but we cannot ignore the warning of the hymnist. When we approach exclusive definitions, we must pull back and remember God's radical inclusivity. Let us remember the "wideness in God's mercy" as we keep exploring the immense mystery of God's love.

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