

What Does God Say About His Character? A Series on the Character of God: Part 1

To understand who God is, one of the best places to start is to see what God says about Himself. Throughout the entire Bible, there is only one instance where God explicitly talks about His character, and it is when Moses asks to see God's glory.

Then Moses said, "I pray You, show me Your glory!" And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" Then the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." (Ex 33:18-23)

Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, **compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.**" (Ex 34:6-7)

As God proclaims His personal name, His memorial name for all generations (Ex 3:15), to Moses, He reveals the characteristics He wants Moses to know Him by: He is compassionate and gracious; but, He does not leave the guilty unpunished. To help Moses understand the meaning of these principal character traits, God provides an elaboration which can be seen as follows:

1. Compassionate and Gracious

Slow to anger

Abounding in lovingkindness and truth

Keeps lovingkindness for thousands

Forgives iniquity, transgression and sin

2. But does not leave the guilty unpunished

Visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations

Compassionate and Gracious

The Hebrew adjectives associated with "compassion" (raḥûm) and "gracious" (ḥānan) are each found 13 times in the Old Testament. With the exception of Psalms 112:4, all occurrences of these two adjectives were used only in the context of describing God's character.

Because God introduces His character with the pairing of "compassion" and "gracious" together, biblical writers thought it important to use "raḥûm" and "ḥānan" together when describing God, which is seen in 11 of 13 uses of each adjective (Ex 34:6; 2 Chron 30:9; Neh 9:17, 31; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2).

The exception, Psalms 112:4, uses "compassion" (raḥûm) and "gracious" (ḥānan) to describe a righteous man. In accordance to the Mosaic Covenant, the person blessed by God is one who is active in the pursuit of godly wisdom and makes an effort to establish God's righteous kingdom on earth. The Psalmist is saying that the character of the righteous, he who lives as a genuine Believer, is marked by godliness and shares God's character trait of raḥûm and ḥānan.

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The Hebrew adjective “raḥûm,” is not an easy term to define. While it does refer to “love,” it has a strong nuance of “mercy.” Thus some Bible translations will translate “raḥûm” as either “compassion” or “mercy.”

Many scholars see the Hebrew noun, “rechem,” which means “womb” (Ex 13:2) and closely related to “raḥûm,” as indicating that this love is based on a relationship. This imagery provides a meaning that human beings can grasp - a sense that God’s raḥûm is like a mother’s love.

The Jewish scholars involved with the Septuagint translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek used the Greek term “οἰκτίρω” (oiktirmōn) for this instance of “raḥûm.” As an uncommon Greek term, it was understood to mean “compassionate.” The verb forms, “oiktirō” and “oiktizō,” used in the context of human relationships, means “to have pity” in both feeling and active merciful action.

Within the context of human relationships, pity is the sympathetic sorrow one has for another experiencing suffering or distress. In the context of the conditional Mosaic Covenant, God indicates that pity is not to be extended to those who practice idolatry or commit premeditated murder (Deut 7:16; 13:8; 19:13).

The Hebrew adjective “ḥānan,” which is translated as “gracious” refers to an undeserved favor granted by a superior being to an inferior in need. The person in the stronger position is under no obligation to help the weaker which emphasizes the generosity of the giver.

The noun form of “ḥānan” is often translated in English as “grace” or “favor” and with little distinction in many Bible translations. Illustrating the meaning of “grace” at a human level are several examples such as Joseph from Potiphar (Gen 39:4), the people of Egypt from Joseph (Gen 47:25), Joseph from Pharaoh (Gen 50:4), Ruth from Boaz (Ruth 2:10) and David from Saul (1 Sam 20:3, 29).

When used in the context of God, the noun “grace” refers to a supernatural provision. It may refer to a human being receiving “favor” in the form of being chosen of God such as Noah (Gen 6:8), Moses (Ex 33:12), and Gideon (Jud 6:17). Or it may refer to an assistance such as the blessing of children (Gen 33:5), physical salvation from affliction (2 Ki 13:37; Ps 25:16), or healing (2 Sam 12:22; Ps 6:2).

It is important to recognize that God’s grace brings mercy; when He withholds it, it brings judgment (Josh 11:20).

In the instance of Psalms 112:4 where “compassion” (raḥûm) and “gracious” (ḥānan) is used to describe a righteous man, Paul provides some clarity about being “gracious.”

Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person. (Col 4:5-6)

“Grace” here is with the sense of “speaking pleasantly” yet in a manner that might draw others to Jesus Christ.

As theocentric adjectives, “raḥûm” and “ḥānan”, may not be fully understood in human terms. For example, “raḥûm” is about God’s love which in itself is unfathomable to understand: a Father sacrifices His only Son for the sake of lower beings who revile Him. God’s elaboration helps Moses understand the nature of His “raḥûm” and “ḥānan.”

Slow to anger

Anger is usually viewed as a character defect; however, God’s anger, rooted in His holiness, is directed at punishment or vengeance for those who violate His holy standard.

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From the perspective of divine covenants, God's wrath is an expression of rejected or wounded love. It is provoked by unfaithfulness and apostasy by human beings and especially by His covenant people.

In this example, God is patient with the sins of Egyptians and Amorites for hundreds of years before He releases His judgment and wrath.

God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." (Gen 15:13-16)

The apostle Peter provides a reason why God is slow to anger – it is to allow sinners to come to repentance.

But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2 Pet 3:8-9)

In the process of understanding the adjectives "compassion" and "gracious" as God's self described character, "slow to anger" adds depth and insight to what God intended for Moses to understand.

Abounding in lovingkindness and truth
Keeps lovingkindness for thousands

Arising from His compassionate and gracious character, God exhibits lovingkindness and truth, which God presents as a pair. The pairing is significant, because it is repeated elsewhere (Gen 24:27; 2 Sam 2:6; Ps 25:10; 26:3; 40:10-11; 57:3, 10; 61:7; 85:10; 86:15; 89:14; 108:4; 117:2; 138:2; Prov 16:6). Additionally God uses the phrase "lovingkindness for thousands" elsewhere (Ex 20:6; Deut 5:10) and a prophet repeats it as well (Jer 32:18).

"Lovingkindness" is a loyal steadfast love that takes place between two parties that have a significant relationship between them, which in this case is the covenant relationship (to learn more, see the article: What does lovingkindness mean? at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/CovenantLovingkindness.aspx).

The covenant God made with Abraham and its subsets (Land, King and New) was unconditional and a promise that God made with Himself. This covenant illustrates God's loving response to Abraham's faith.

The Mosaic covenant was a conditional agreement between God and the nation of Israel: if the nation did this, God would bless them, if they did otherwise, God would punish them. This covenant illustrates God's fidelity to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 15:13-16) and love for Abraham's descendants (Ex 19:5-6) that included teaching them the meaning of being holy (Rom 7:7-12).

The Hebrew term for "abounding" literally means "great." It seems that God is indicating that His lovingkindness is great in depth and extent; His deep loyal steadfast love is just not to Abraham but to all of His people.

"Truth" means that something is trustworthy and when in reference to a person, it means honest, with integrity and in contrast to deceit and falsehood. Proverbs 12:17-22 speaks of truth as a contrast to deceit.

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When associated with “lovingkindness,” the meaning of the Hebrew term for “truth” has the nuance of “faithfulness.” Etymologically the root words for the Hebrew term for “truth” suggest the idea of firmness, stability and reliability. With this background and in the context of “lovingkindness,” the Hebrew understanding of “truth” can be understood as “of things that had to be proved reliable” or “that on which others can rely upon.”

Truth, as expressed in Hebrew, does not appear to be an abstract notion but rather something that has been experienced as factual. For the Hebrew, a person’s word is true and reliable when it accords with reality; truth is the correspondence of word and deed.

With an understanding of “lovingkindness,” only Yahweh is the God whose word is true, because His work accords with reality.

With the Exodus, the invisible God makes the reality of His presence known:

And He said, “Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” (Ex 3:12)

Furthermore I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am the Lord.’” (Ex 6:5-8)

The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today. The Lord spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, while I was standing between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain. He said, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut 5:2-6)

With the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, the invisible God makes the reality of His presence known:

Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.” (John 6:29)

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:24-25)

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But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled." (Acts 3:12-18)

Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. (Gal 3:16-18)

When God describes Himself as One "abounding in lovingkindness and truth," it is a statement that He is absolutely trustworthy, because His loving actions to His people are characterized by a steadfast and loyal commitment to the covenant that He made unconditionally and unilaterally with Abraham. This elaboration provides a deeper understanding to God's self described character of compassion and graciousness.

Forgives iniquity, transgression and sin

The image of God's graciousness is extended with His capacity to forgive – to pardon or release one from guilt or punishment. God makes a point to mention what He forgives, "iniquity, transgression and sin," which may appear redundant. However, in God's eyes, sin is more than just grossly wicked behavior or an offense against a moral code but is rooted in the very nature of a human being.

Through the Mosaic Covenant, God provided the nation of Israel a way for atoning for the crimes against God and fellow human beings. And through the bilateral conditional covenant, the nation of Israel was under the obligation to carry out the will of God as a holy nation and as a being made in the image of God.

In light of the inherent sinful nature of human beings and the failure of Mosaic legislation to make one holy, forgiveness adds depth to God's compassion and graciousness. Despite the apparent impossibility, God forgives and provides a way for a relationship with a human being to be restored.

But does not leave the guilty unpunished

Visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations

As God describes His compassion and graciousness, He leaves no doubt that it is defined by His character of righteousness and justice. In stating that He does "not leave the guilty unpunished," God indicates that judgment and punishment go together.

The phrase, "visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations," is mentioned earlier when God speaks of the second commandment. Here He indicates the basis of His judgment as "those who hate Me."

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“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Ex 20:4-6)

The second commandment is about substituting an object that represents the invisible God, and it becoming the object of worship. It addresses all forms of idolatry, whether intentional or not, that competes for the worship, honor and glory due to God.

Children who follow the practices of their father share the same motive of hating God and are punished likewise.

Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin. (Deut 24:16)

God self revelation about His character is a statement of His sovereignty (Rom 9:15), which should cause all human beings to humble themselves and come to faith. Moses, in the presence of God, just did that which God would note (Num 12:3).

Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship. He said, “If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession.” (Ex 34:8-9)

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