

JUNE 28, 2020

LESSON 4

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD

GOD IS COMPASSIONATE AND MERCIFUL (EXODUS 34:6)

The Compassion of God

It is one of the most oft-repeated verses in all of Scripture. Words from the beautiful verse, Exodus 34:6, make their way into several other passages in the Bible.

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

Other verses that use this same language include the following:

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love
and faithfulness (Psalm 86:15).

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster. (Joel 2:13; see also Neh 9:17, 31).

Merciful and Gracious

The first term used to describe God in Ex 34:6 is “merciful” (ESV, (N)KJV, NRSV). Sometimes translated as “compassionate” (NASB, NIV, NLT, CSB), it is derived from the noun for “womb.”³ As you can imagine, this is a tender term to describe God’s character.

The second term, “gracious,” is used only 13× in the Old Testament as an adjective. Of those occurrences, it is paired almost always with the first term, “merciful.”⁴ The reason why is because most of these occurrences are quoting or alluding to Ex 34:6. Appeals to God to be merciful (“Be gracious to me, God,” Ps 51:1) also allude to this beautiful verse.

³ Willem VanGemeren, ed., *NIDOTTE* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 1093.

⁴ Twelve of the thirteen occurrences of “gracious” are paired with “merciful” (Ex 34:6; 2 Chron 30:9; Neh 9:17, 31; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). The only that isn’t is found in Ex 22:7.

Psalm 57:3

He will send from heaven and
save me;
he will put to shame him who
tramples on me.
God will send out his
steadfast love and
his **faithfulness!**

Slow to Anger

The expression, “slow to anger,” translates a Hebrew expression that literally means, “long of nose.” (The opposite—someone who is hot-tempered—is “hot of nose.”)⁵ But God, whose anger is roused against sin (see **Lesson 3**), is “long of nose” toward those who seek his forgiveness.

Abounding In... Faithfulness⁶

Throughout many of the psalms, faithfulness is linked with the “steadfast love” expressed in this verse (the Hebrew word is *hesed*, which we will cover in **Lesson 12**). These two concepts go hand-in-hand: When we need forgiveness, we can count on God, who always “is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9).

The Compassion of Jesus

Mercy and compassion are part of Jesus’ character, of course. Love for us motivated him to come to the earth and die for humanity. Every time Jesus is said to show compassion for someone, he does something for them. He never held the emotion in his heart and then refrained from helping.

- When he healed a leper, he first felt compassion for him (Mark 1:41).
- When he exorcised the demons from Legion, he told him to tell his friends “how...the Lord...has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19).
- Jesus, having compassion on the crowds, fed them (Mark 6:34).

As we imitate Jesus, we will do something to help those in need.

Compassion Doesn’t Mean Blanket Amnesty

As much as we’ve focused on Ex 34:6, we should not ignore the next verse that reminds us of God’s justice:

“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.”

While God and Jesus are quick to forgive, they cannot “clear the guilty,” i.e., those who blatantly sin and refuse to repent. We, like the Prodigal Son, can only return home after acknowledging, “I have sinned against heaven” (Luke 15:18, 21). But when we do, we will find our Father looking for us, feeling compassionate, running to meet us, so that he can embrace us (Luke 15:20).

⁵ Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2014), 652.

⁶ The elided term, “steadfast love,” will be studied in **Lesson 12**.