

Compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love

Ps. 103:1-17, Jn. 1:9-18

David C. Dixon

Introduction: Do you ever talk to yourself? Self talk? The psalmists often do that as they address their “soul,” but prayer converts the inner monologue into a dialogue. I think that’s healthy, just what God intended. *“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name”*, wrote King David in Psalm 103. And in the middle of that beautiful psalm, we find this description of God: *“Compassionate and gracious is Yahweh, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness”* (v. 8), which we want to meditate on long and hard today: a portrait of the God of the Old Testament.

Our sense of life’s fragility and transience (like the grass or the flower of the field, says David in this psalm) is heightened when we observe the passing of great personalities that have accompanied us for many years, such as was the case of Queen Elizabeth. Tomorrow England celebrates her long life and reign with a state funeral. What an amazing testimony she has had through the decades: *“For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life.”* The teachings of Christ – who He was and is, what He did for us, how He enables us to live and face challenges – were the essence of her faith. And her sense of personal accountability meant she knew that this life is not all there is, death is not the end; we will stand before the King, to whom we are responsible for what we do with this opportunity! We desperately need to recover these two solid biblical emphases! And who was this God whom she professed so faithfully? Regularly refreshing our understanding of God, that inner portrait of Him that we carry around in our heart and mind, is one of the best ways to stay on track in this new academic year: our aim today is to renew our vision of Him from Scripture.

1) The simple creed embedded in the words of Psalm 103:8 represents the Old Testament portrait of God. But where did David get those words he used to describe God? Actually God was the One who revealed Himself to Moses in these very terms, His self-definition, also emphasizing again the sacred name of Yahweh (*“the One who is”* Ex. 34:4-7). But in this passage, why does God go on to mention punishing the children for the sins of the parents? We must understand this spiritual principle in context: parents’ sins do impact the lives of their children! They influence them in the same evil directions, creating a sinful aura in the

home that can dominate their children's whole lives, so they truly suffer the consequences of their parents' moral failures (although the opposite is also true!). But this isn't the only spiritual principle at work! In Jer. 31:29-30, God clarifies that people should quit using the old saying: **"The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge,"** because, in fact, everyone will die for their own sin; **"whoever eats sour grapes, their own teeth are set on edge."** These two principles may seem to be in tension, but there is no contradiction between them; both are true!

A second concern in this passage regarding the Old Testament God comes up in verses 8-11, where the peoples living in Canaan were supposed to be exterminated, another deep concern for some, regarding whether the God of the OT was truly compassionate and gracious. Yet we know from history that these peoples were utterly corrupted and perverted; if allowed to persist, they would only contaminate Israel and any others they came in contact with (as, in fact, it happened). The awful depravity of their pagan culture had been getting worse with the centuries and needed to be completely eradicated, as surely as a malignant cancer must be removed if the patient is to survive. This too was God's mercy in action.

This self-portrait of God was basic to the Jewish faith and later to Christian revelation as well. Whenever we find a passage repeated frequently like this in Scripture, we should pay close attention to it, because repetition denotes importance! Later in Num. 14:18, Moses will repeat these words in the face of Israel's rebellion; in the Psalms (86:15, 103:8, 145:8), David will sing God's praises using these words. Then they will be brought to mind again by the prophets Jonah (4:2) and Joel (2:13), and after the exile, by Nehemiah (9:17). This description represented the faith of the Jews in the God of the covenant.

2) Biblical word studies are one of the best ways to go deeper in the message of Scripture. Words and their etymologies show us the roots underlying our speech, the history of the language behind our words and conversations, and the deeper meanings of ancient writings. I fell in love with words back in high school actually, then began to pursue their study more seriously as a university English major. That's when the mystery of **"The Word"** (*Logos*) began to loom large on my horizon (Jn. 1:1-5). Today I confess it dominates my mental processes and influences all my emotional, psychological, and spiritual growth. So we're going to do a small word study this morning on Ex. 34:6 (just the hem of the garment, the tip of the iceberg). Exploring these particular Hebrew words is like **sounding the depths of God's character**, which opens up many new facets of trust in our relationship with Him!

First, the Hebrew *rachum* (רַחֵם), translated as compassionate: this word is related to *rechem*, from the same three-letter root, which means "womb." So God's "mercy" toward humanity points to the same kind of divine protection that a baby enjoys in its mother's womb. Moses had just asked in the previous chapter, **"What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"** The only distinction would be that the LORD would go with them, take them as His own and be merciful to them, in spite of what a wayward, stiff-necked people they were. The Lord's answer to Moses: **"I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world"** (Ex. 34:10).

Second is the word *channun*, from the verb *chanan* (חָנַן), to act or deal graciously, to grant mercifully; the noun form (חֲנּוּן) means grace or favor; this is what Noah found in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8). How does God respond to our desperate situation of lostness,

selfishness, and idolatrous enslavements? He responds with favor and benevolence! This second characteristic of God means He is the God who helps those in need, the strong One who helps the weak. So we need to realize that God is not out to “get us”; His longing is to help you become all He created you to be. But we are all such sinners that we have gotten badly off course, and we don’t even have sense enough to recognize it, apart from the Gospel and the Holy Spirit.

Yet in spite of this, God is “*erek appayim*”, meaning He has a “long fuse,” and is slow to manifest *aph* (אף), which in Hebrew is usually translated as anger; but the word literally refers to the nostrils! Flared nostrils and heavy breathing were associated in the Hebrew mind with anger, whether God’s or man’s.

Next we come to the key Hebrew word *chesed* (חֶסֶד), translated as mercy, love, or kindness (appearing some 250 times in the OT). Other attempts to capture the meaning of this word include steadfast love, unfailing love, and lovingkindness. The Septuagint (early translation of the Hebrew OT to Greek) translates it sometimes as mercy, but other times as righteousness, grace, glory or hope (*chesed* has a huge semantic range). David sings, “**How precious is your chesed, O God**” (Ps. 36). “**Surely goodness and chesed shall follow me all the days of my life**” (Ps. 23). And in Ps. 136, the Jews sang, “**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His chesed endures forever.**” This word represented more than any other God’s covenant loyalty to Israel, refusing to give up on them even when they proved so untrustworthy.

The final word in this OT portrait (Ex.34:6) is *emeth* (אֱמֶת), meaning truth, but often translated also as faithfulness, because one who is true remains faithful. It’s from the Hebrew root *aman*, meaning to support or make firm; so this is what should be the foundation of our existence. In fact, this root gives rise to the Hebrew word *emunah*, meaning faith, as well as our word *amen*, with which we affirm our active solidarity and identification with truth. The Greek sense of truth was more of a static property pertaining to rational propositions and essences, whereas the Hebrew concept was much more dynamic, having to do with the formation of character. The Greek understanding of truth focused on *being*; the Hebrew, on *doing*.

3) So why does this Old Testament “creed” not show up in the New Testament? (The closest thing we have is a brief fragment in Jas. 5:11.) In other words, what has happened to that OT portrait of God when we come to the NT? It has now been **enfleshed in a real human being!** When John 1:14 says that the Word became flesh, we should understand it as that self-revealing Word given when God defined Himself as compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth/faithfulness. *That* is what Jesus incarnated, because in Him **that Old Testament portrait came alive** and walked among us!

John’s summary says He was “**full of grace and truth**”, exactly the last two terms in the OT creed translated into Greek: Hebrew *chesed/emeth* becomes the Greek *charis/aletheia*, but still full of the Hebrew meaning. Jesus showed us how these qualities are not rational and static, but personal and relational, God’s own character faithfully reflected in His Son Jesus. From the beginning of His life till His very last breath, Jesus was perfectly representing His Father, and never more intensely than on the cross: enfleshing divine compassion and graciousness under the worst possible human circumstances; reflecting that slowness to anger even when faced with the most outrageous human rebellion; historicizing that

everflowing abundance of lovingkindness and faithfulness at the expense of His very life, making it all available to us as He reigned on that cross. He is the essence of the good news – won't you let this King reign? And thereby you allow God's grace and truth to make the difference in your life! You just have to call on Him ... which is also what we do in partaking of the symbols of communion, which He left for us as reminders of this living portrait.