

**Living the Full Bible**  
**Embracing God's Vision for Your Life,**  
**Your Church, and the World**

**John J. Turner**

Living the Full Bible: Embracing God's Vision for Your Life, Your Church, and the World

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# Chapter 3

## A Compassionate God

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### Introduction

We saw in Chapter 1 that God reigns; that he is absolutely in charge. We saw in Chapter 2 that God is also holy, righteous, and just; that he exercises his sovereignty with total commitment to totally perfect standards. The standard of 100% perfection that we found in Chapter 2 may cause us to consider how far we fall short of that standard and leave us just a bit uneasy. But we also saw that God's perfect standards are part of his love for us, that he cannot fulfill his perfect purposes and promises for us unless we can be set free from the sins that would ruin any perfection.

Our hopes for ourselves may have been nudged forward as we saw that God strongly prefers redemptive justice over retributive justice. This hope will be our focus in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3 we will see that God always exercises both his reign and his high standards in keeping with the divine love which is at his core. Chapter 3 will focus especially on five dimensions of divine love: compassion, grace, slowness to anger, steadfast love, and faithfulness. We will also see that mercy and forgiveness are closely associated with these five dimensions of divine love. Looking ahead, in Chapter 4 we will see that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves to help us meet his perfect standards. Chapter 3 is an important connecting point between Chapters 2 and 4, unveiling the qualities in God that link his perfect standards to his redeeming will.

What is the nature of God's glory? God's *glory* refers to what gives God both *weight (substance)* and *distinctively shining radiance (attractiveness)*. So, what makes God stand out as a worthy Sovereign of all creation and as commander of a covenant people, the One who above all else is to be worshiped and obeyed? That is a question worth asking. We are not the first ones to think so. Moses wanted to understand the nature of God's glory as well. In this chapter we will look at the divine qualities that God revealed to Moses when Moses asked to see his glory. These qualities are God's glory, and they are the qualities that he most wants to

see replicated in his covenant people. (The concept of covenant people is discussed in the Introduction, see pp. xx-xxi.)

Later in this book, most directly in Part 2, Chapters 5-11, we will see that God's glory is available to enter into the lives of God's people and to be expressed through them. The Apostle Paul spoke specifically of the believer's hope of glory in several of his letters, the hope that we would one day share the qualities that give God glory; indeed, that even in this life we should by degrees take on such glory. What a hope! In great part, we worship God because his glory leads the way into exactly that hope of glory for us.

What are these divine qualities that we can take on, qualities that can give us the hope of glory? We could not follow up on holiness, righteousness, and justice, any better than by turning our attention to the list of qualities that God revealed to Moses: compassion, grace, slowness to anger, steadfast love, and faithfulness. There are, of course, other such divine qualities that are not to be overlooked, but no qualities shine with greater substance and attractiveness, with greater glory, than the qualities of divine love that we are considering in this chapter.

These are the qualities God revealed to Moses, the qualities that were later so thoroughly incarnated in Jesus Christ, and then unleashed upon the world through his Spirit-filled followers. When contemplating Jesus' multi-textured love, especially as revealed through the cross, the great hymn-writer Isaac Watts concluded in his hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." That is what we mean by divine glory, something so substantial, so attractive, that it totally captures and transforms us. When we get to know God, we will find that this is exactly who God is.

At the very heart of Christian living is knowing God. While it is important to know that God creates and reigns and that God is holy, righteous, and just, nothing is more important in drawing us to God and in enabling us to represent God than that we comprehend and reflect something of the breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love (**Ephesians 3:14-19**).

The word *love* has been cheapened in common usage, inflated to the point of meaninglessness, but in its proper usage, rightly understood, it remains one of the most powerful words in the English language. Knowing the vastness and power of God's love is the one thing most needful today, the one thing most important to the progress of the good news of Jesus Christ in the world.

At its best, love is not a feeling, not an attraction, but an unshakeable commitment. Love is about a deep caring for another, a comprehensive commitment to seeking what is truly best for the loved one, a willingness to pay a high cost to make that best thing possible. This chapter tells us

that God is the ultimate definition of that authentic kind of love. God in love created us, and God in love is prepared to redeem us so that he can bring us to perfection as his children, heirs of his reign. God's love became flesh in Jesus Christ, and God's love enters our lives through the Holy Spirit.

There is no greater power in this world than the love of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Connecting to that power is what makes all the positive differences that occur in this world.

In this chapter, we will trace the thread of God's loving qualities through the Scriptures.

## Word Study

### Compassionate

The word for *compassionate* (*ra[c]hum*), should be studied alongside the closely related *ra(c)ham* and *ra(c)hamim*. Taken together, these three Hebrew words are used a total of 104 times in the Old Testament. *Ra(c)hamim* most literally means *womb*, but when the word family is used figuratively, it means *compassion*, conveying the deep love rooted in a natural bond, the close nurturing ties ideally typified by a mother for her unborn or recently born baby. That is the kind of relationship God has to his people.

A survey of **Exodus 34:6** in 18 modern translations showed that *compassionate* is preferred by 10, while *merciful* is preferred by seven (four of which are simply following their *KJV* and *RSV* models), and *tender* is part of the translation in one. The assertion of **Exodus 34:6** is not merely that a strong God mercifully pities us in our human weakness, but more that God has a nourishing, nurturing, protecting, providing connection to us.

*Compassionate* better conveys the kind of visceral connection inherent to the *ra(c)hum* word family. This book generally quotes from the *ESV* translation; when dealing with the *ra(c)hum* word family, direct quotes from the *ESV* will be shown as *merciful (compassionate)* or *mercy (compassion)*, and when direct quotes are not being used, this book will simply say *compassionate* or *compassion*.

Just as the *compassion* word group (*ra[c]hum*) in Old Testament Hebrew is based on a visceral connection (womb), so is the word group translated as *compassion* from the New Testament Greek (*splanchnizomai*; *splanchnon*; *eusplanchnos*; derived from the Greek word for *intestines, guts*). Thus the New Testament *compassion* word group is linked to the human experience of a gut-connection (consider our English phrase *gut-tugging*).

## Grace, gracious

The word *gracious* (*[c]hannun*), should be studied alongside the closely related (*c*)*hen* and (*c*)*hanan*. Taken together these three words are used a total of 160 times in the Old Testament. The word group has to do with bestowing favor that has not been or cannot be earned. Sometimes the word group is used in petitioning for such favor, sometimes in noting its reception. God takes the initiative in blessing his human children and does so not so much with their past accomplishments in mind, but with their long run good in mind. Of 18 surveyed translations of (*c*)*hannun* in **Exodus 34:6**, 11 prefer *gracious* while four prefer *merciful* and one prefers *of compassion*; the remaining two respectively opted for *pity* and *kind*. This book will use *gracious*.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *charis* (*grace*) carries a great deal of theological weight in describing the unmerited gift of God's saving favor that has been offered to sinners through Jesus Christ.

## Slow to Anger

*Slow to anger* comes from the phrase *arek appayim*, *arek* meaning *long* or *slow*, *appayim* literally meaning *nostril*. The contextual meaning of *appayim* is *to snort*. Figuratively, as it is usually used, it means *to anger*. The phrase *slow to anger* is used 14 times in the Old Testament. Seven or possibly eight of those times, it refers back to **Exodus 34:6**. All translators agree that the figurative meaning is in mind here. Most translations prefer *slow to anger*, a few opting for *longsuffering*, *patient*, or *forbearing*.

The New Testament Greek words *makrothymeo* and *makrothymia*, although not referring to the nose or snorting, carry very similar connotations of being *slow to anger*. A word meaning *endurance* (*hypomone*) also conveys patience.

## Steadfast Love

This word for *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*) is used 247 times in the Old Testament, 126 of those times in the **Psalms**. (*C*)*Hesed* is one of the most theologically weighty and important words in the Old Testament, a word closely associated with covenant formation and maintenance. Of the 18 surveyed translations, we will eliminate the four translations that do not include *love* (*great loyalty*, *faithful*, *ready to forgive*, and *goodness*). We will also eliminate the seven translations that do not clarify that we are talking about dependable covenant love (for example, *love*, *great love*, *lovingkindness*, *so much love*). *Faithful love*, chosen by two translations, is adequate taken alone, but is awkward when paired in **Exodus 34:6** and many other passages with *faithfulness*, which is the best contextual translation for *emet(h)*, and so we eliminate those two. That leaves us

with *steadfast love* (*ESV, NRSV*), *unfailing love* (*NLT*), and *loyal love* (*LEB, NET*), the three being essentially synonymous. Since the *ESV* is the main translation being used in this book, we will stick with its choice of *steadfast love* with the understanding that *unfailing love* and *loyal love* are also good translations.

God's love is purposeful, aimed at restoring his faithful children to what human beings were created to be, and God does not waver or give up in his purposes, but is loyal, unfailing, and steadfast in his nurturing, protecting, providing care for his covenant people. There are also elements of *compassion*, *mercy*, and *grace* in *(c)hesed*, but it is the loyal, dependable, covenant love that comes to the fore. My attempt to define *(c)hesed* (*steadfast love*) as a divine quality is "God doing for his children what they cannot do for themselves so that they can become and remain faithful members of his covenant family." I wish to thank a Christview client for calling my attention to a definition of *hesed* that has gone viral on the Internet. I have been unable to find the original source of the definition, "*Hesed* is the consistent, ever faithful, relentless, constantly pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, furious love of our Father God." Of all the sayings that have ever gone viral on the Internet, this has to be my favorite! The only thing I would change is that, rather than saying *Father God*, I would say, *God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)*. Even though *hesed* is an Old Testament word, and the Trinitarian nature of God was not clearly revealed in the Old Testament, the Trinitarian nature of God already existed and *hesed* characterized the Three-in-One from before the very beginning.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the Greek word *eleos* (meaning *mercy*) to translate *(c)hesed*, and this Greek word is used in the New Testament when quoting several Old Testament passages that originally used the Hebrew word *(c)hesed*. This reaffirms how close *mercy* is to three of the five keywords (*compassion*, *grace*, and *steadfast love*) in **Exodus 34:6** without ever being the most precise translation. Furthermore, the Greek word *charis* meaning *grace* is used in **John 1:14-17** when the Old Testament background (**Exodus 34:6**) is *(c)hesed*. So, the five keywords we are examining in this section are closely connected to one another.

In some of the richest New Testament expressions of the concept of *(c)hesed*, the New Testament writers employ the *agapaolagape* family of words, which becomes in many of its New Testament uses almost a technical term for the kind of self-giving, saving love Jesus demonstrated, most potently in his sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus was doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves so that we may become and remain as members of his covenant people; that is what *(c)hesed* exists to do.



## Faithfulness

The word *emet(h)* meaning *faithfulness* (*fidelity, trustworthiness*) and *truth* (*honesty, reliability*) occurs 127 times in the Old Testament, 36 of those times in **Psalms**. *Emet(h)* makes a good companion to (*c*)*hesed* and is often used that way. Of the 18 surveyed translations, in **Exodus 34:6**, 11 prefer *faithfulness* and five prefer *truth*; the other two opt for *can be trusted* and *constancy*. The Hebrew word can mean either faithful or truth, but, in the context of **Exodus 34:6** and related passages throughout the Old Testament, *faithfulness* works better. God certainly is truth, is the measure of truth, and is the revealer of truth, but in English *truth* can too readily be understood as abstract whereas *faithfulness* is relational, which is the point in these passages. The importance of *emet(h)* is in affirming that God as he relates to his people is both a purpose-keeper and a promise-keeper so that his people can trust his will and his word. Old Testament Hebrew words of the same word family as *emet(h)* are *aman* (*faithful*), *emuna* (*faithfulness*), and *amen* (*so be it*).

The New Testament Greek word for *faith* is *pistos*, and for *faithfulness* is *pistis*.

The five qualities we have examined (*compassion, grace, slowness to anger, steadfast love, and faithfulness*) appear frequently together throughout the Old Testament, most often describing the character of God, but sometimes describing the character of godly people.

## Tracing the Thread

### 1. Five Books

**Recommended Reading:** **Genesis 3:16-24; 4:10-16; 6:5-9:17, 11:27-50:26, Exodus 1:1-15:21; 19:1-6; 32:1-34:35.**

God's compassion, grace, slowness to anger, steadfast love, and faithfulness are on frequent display throughout the Five Books of Moses. For **Genesis** I have narrowed the focus to the concept of *grace* – not just the use of the word *grace* – but God's demonstrating the reality of *grace*. In the Five Books, God's judgment and punishment of sin are usually accompanied by signs of his sustaining *grace*. When Adam and Eve violated the covenant terms of their residing in the Garden of Eden, their expulsion from the garden was accompanied by God's covering them with animal skins (**Genesis 3:16-24**). The banishment of the murderer Cain from farming was accompanied by God's giving him a protective mark warning anyone who might contemplate murdering him of the serious consequences thereof (**Genesis 4:10-16**). The great flood representing God's holy judgment against ever-present sin (**Genesis 6:5-9:17**) was

partially balanced by: (1) Noah's ark on which both human and animal life were preserved; and (2) the rainbow covenant in which God bound himself to address the problem of ongoing human sin by slowly revealing his divine nature through human history; God thus bound himself to a course that would eventually result in his taking on himself the cost of overcoming sin through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Many generations later, the LORD chose from a family of polytheists an older childless couple, Abram and Sarai (later Abraham and Sarah), to found a covenant people (**Genesis 11:27-25:10**). Their improbable selection was by God's grace – not just for their benefit, but for the potential benefit of all humanity. Abraham and Sarah put that grace to the test any number of times, but kept fumbling their way toward the promised future. The grace was made effective through their faith, ultimately trusting the LORD's plans and purposes. The LORD said that he would count Abram as righteous through his believing the LORD's promises to him (**Genesis 15:6**). The covenant, formed by grace, was to be sustained through faith. The Apostle Paul later makes much of the fact that Abraham entered a state of being saved by grace through faith hundreds of years before the law was given at Mount Sinai.

We see that grace at work again through Abraham's grandson Jacob (later Israel), a grasping con artist in need of character development, which the LORD graciously provided throughout Jacob's long lifetime of schooling by hard knocks. When Jacob, who had fled the Promised Land with nothing more than he could carry, returned many years later with a large family and wealth, he prayed,

Genesis 32:<sup>10</sup> I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of *steadfast love* and all the *faithfulness* that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps (very prosperous).

That night Jacob engaged in a wrestling match with a stranger who turned out to be the LORD. God gave him a new name, Israel, meaning *wrestled with God*. Jacob left that wrestling match with a new name, a limp, and significantly changed forever. He was not yet perfect by any means, but he was improved. By God's grace, the unworthy Jacob became the father and founder of the people Israel who migrated into Egypt (**Genesis 25:19-50:26**).

Jacob/Israel's descendants, who migrated to Egypt to escape famine, became a powerful, prosperous, and numerous people known as Israel, who lived within Egypt. The people of Israel later sank into oppressive slavery in Egypt. The LORD prepared and called Moses to lead them out of slavery. Through ten plagues and the miraculous crossing of the Red

Sea, the LORD on Israel's behalf graciously defeated the mighty army of Egypt thereby revealing the impotence of all the many gods Egypt trusted. We will see in Chapter 12 of this book that at the foot of Mt. Sinai, when the LORD commissioned Israel as his representative people, he made it clear that their entire deliverance and election were by divine grace (**Exodus 19:1-6**).

The deliverance and calling of Israel was entirely at the LORD's initiative, for the LORD's universal purposes, and not based on any merit of Israel. That is what grace is, the gift of divine favor and assistance not based on any qualities of the recipients. Indeed, grace is designed not to reward recipients, but to help them take on qualities that flow from the LORD's gracious presence among them.

Even under grace, Israel's repeated sin and doubt in the wilderness had serious consequences, and the LORD found it necessary to add layer upon layer of laws and procedures to keep the project on track and to provide a kindergarten level introduction for the Israelites on how they could appropriately relate to a reigning, holy, loving God who was so different from the gods worshiped by the peoples around them. This story is told through the remainder of **Exodus** and on through selected passages of **Leviticus**, **Numbers**, and **Deuteronomy**.

**Exodus 34:6** comes after Israel had worshiped the golden calf, the LORD God and Moses in **Exodus 32-33** had negotiated (or, at least from Moses' perspective, seemed to negotiate) what to do with this spiritually wayward people, and what each the LORD God and Moses would have to do with Israel's future. Moses interceded for Israel, but also sought concessions. First, he asked the LORD to commit to go in person with him as he led Israel toward the Promised Land. Second, he asked for the LORD to reveal his ways to him. Moses then said,

Exodus 33:<sup>13</sup> "Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."

Moses recognized that he had to know the LORD if he was to please, serve, and represent the LORD. In **Exodus 33:14-17**, after the LORD had agreed to go with Moses, Moses repeated his request, and the LORD repeated his assurance. Moses then reworded his second request, changing "your ways," to "your glory."

Exodus 33:<sup>18</sup> Moses said, "Please show me your glory."

Notice the parallelism of Moses' requests: "Please show me your ways," and "Please show me your glory." Apparently Moses assumed that God's ways and God's glory are intimately linked, perhaps even synon-

ymous. *God's ways* describe how and toward what end God does things, what qualities are at the core of all that God does. As stated above, *God's glory* refers to what gives God weight (substance) and distinctively shining radiance (attractiveness). What makes God stand out as a worthy Sovereign of all creation and as commander of a covenant people, the One who above all else is to be worshiped and obeyed? Moses felt that he could not function as the leader of God's wayward people until he could comprehend and represent God's ways and glory, which, it turns out, are one and the same!

In response to Moses' request, the LORD agreed to reveal his glory.

Exodus 33:<sup>19</sup> And he said, "I will make all my *goodness* pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be *gracious* to whom I will be *gracious*, and will show *mercy (compassion)* on whom I will show *mercy (compassion)*."

*Goodness* refers to what is fitting with God's perfect will. God's goodness is especially characterized by the five keywords that he reveals in verse **34:6**. For now, he focuses on two of those characteristics, *grace* and *compassion*. Both words could be legitimately translated as *mercy*, but their distinctive kind of mercy (*grace* and *compassion*) would be lost in so doing. Among the translations I have checked, *grace* and *compassion* are the choices of the majority.

At the burning bush (**Exodus 3**), the LORD had introduced himself to Moses as *Yahweh* (translated *the LORD*), which could be explained as meaning "I Am That I Am," or "I Will Cause to Be What I Cause to Be" or "I'll Show Up Where I Show Up." This seems to declare the LORD's sovereign freedom. But, while preparing Moses for leading his covenant people and without contradicting anything he had earlier said about his sovereign freedom, the LORD gave a new interpretation of the meaning of his name. God retained his sovereign freedom, including the power to judge and to penalize sin, but God's sovereign freedom would most characteristically be exercised as an expression of his *grace* and *compassion*.

The LORD warned Moses that he could not stand to see more than the trailing edge of divine glory. He placed Moses in the cleft of a rock and covered him with his hand until he had passed by. It was during the time that Moses' eyes were covered that the greater part of revealing God's ways and glory took place. Here is the key verse from the *English Standard Version (ESV)* and *Lexham English Bible (LEB)* translations:

*ESV*, Exodus 34:<sup>6</sup> 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*...."

*LEB*, Exodus 34:<sup>6</sup> And Yahweh passed over before him, and he proclaimed, “Yahweh, Yahweh, God, *who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger*, and abounding with *loyal love and faithfulness*....”

The greater part of what God revealed of his ways and glory is found in these keywords. In short, much of God’s glory is to be found in his loving ways.

For full disclosure, we should note that, in **Exodus 34:7**, the LORD warned that his judgment against sin would extend to the third and fourth generations. Elsewhere (*e.g.*, **Ezekiel 18**), it is clarified that repentance in any generation can break this multi-generational curse (just as spiritual decline in any generation can break God’s blessing). The point is that God’s love removes neither the consequences of ongoing willful sin nor the need for repentance. Nonetheless, God’s loving qualities are the substance and shining radiance of all that God does. Even God’s judgment against sin is in the interest of his love, ideally to bring about repentance and restoration.

## 2. History

**Recommended Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1-29; I Kings 8:1-66; Nehemiah 1:4-11; 9:6-38; Luke 1:26-38.**

The concept of divine steadfast love shows in covenant language throughout the books of history, such as in Nathan’s prophetic announcement of the LORD’s eternal covenant with the royal house of David, beginning with Solomon. The specific covenant language is addressed to David:

2 Samuel 7:<sup>12</sup> When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. <sup>14</sup> I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, <sup>15</sup> but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. <sup>16</sup> And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”

David’s initial heir Solomon turned out to be a major disappointment, but his words at the dedication of the Jerusalem temple were surely divinely inspired. The opening words of Solomon’s prayer of dedication are especially noteworthy.

1 Kings 8:<sup>22</sup> Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven, <sup>23</sup> and said, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart; <sup>24</sup> you have kept with your servant David my father what you declared to him. You spoke with your mouth, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day.

Because of repeated moral and spiritual failure by the Davidic kings, the tree of the Davidic dynasty was sawed down to a stump in 586 B.C. when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. Except for a brief stir of excitement when the Persians appointed David’s descendant Zerubbabel governor to oversee the rebuilding of a more modest Jerusalem temple, there were no signs of David’s dynasty being restored during the Old Testament period. However, fairly early in the time of the restored temple, there was a divine covenant renewal under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Nehemiah’s prayer in **Nehemiah 1:4-11** sets the stage by calling on the covenants of the past and appealing to God’s steadfast love. During a prayer of confession in **Nehemiah 9:6-38**, the Levites pray with awareness of the words the LORD revealed to Moses in **Exodus 34:6**,

Nehemiah 9:<sup>17b</sup> But you are a God *ready to forgive, gracious and merciful (compassionate), slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*, and did not forsake them.

The promise of the righteous Davidic King was at last fulfilled in unexpected ways through Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, now exalted to reign eternally over the universe, fulfills God’s promise to David, as Gabriel made clear to Mary would be the case (**Luke 1:26-38**).

### 3. Prophets

**Recommended Reading: Jonah 4:1-4; Joel 2:12-13; Hosea 2:18-20; 6:6; Isaiah 49:15-16; 54:8-10; 55:7; 63:7; Jeremiah 9:23-24.**

In my estimation, Jonah’s ministry took place in the early eighth century B.C. with the dates of 782 B.C. and 753 B.C. being the outer time boundaries. During this time of Assyrian weakness, the LORD called Jonah to preach repentance in Assyrian Nineveh. Jonah hated Assyria (with some reason) and resisted his calling. When the LORD compelled Jonah to carry out his mission despite the wickedness of Nineveh, and when the Ninevites indeed repented, Jonah sulked and asserted that his knowledge of the LORD’s loving qualities is exactly why he had resisted

his calling, for fear that the Ninevites would repent and that the LORD would relent from punishing them.

When the LORD forgave Assyrian Nineveh, here was Jonah's reaction:

Jonah 4:<sup>1</sup> But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup> And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a *gracious* ([c]hannun) God and *merciful* [*compassionate, ra*[c]hum), *slow to anger* (*arek appayim*) and abounding in steadfast love ([c]hesed), and *relenting from disaster*. <sup>3</sup> Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." <sup>4</sup> And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

Of course, Jonah at some level correctly understood the loving character of the LORD, but he had not yet surrendered to that loving character. The book of Jonah challenges us to surrender to and rejoice in the very divine qualities that so angered Jonah. We could choose to assume that Jonah ultimately repented of his recalcitrance toward God's redeeming love, but the book leaves that question open, perhaps to encourage our own ongoing reflection on this point.

Joel's wording closely matches Jonah's, but was aimed at the opposite effect. Rather than complaining about God's loving, forgiving qualities, Joel found encouragement in God's loving character and readiness to reward repentance. The time of Joel's ministry is not known (estimates range from the 9<sup>th</sup> through the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries), but it is plausible that he was addressing the people of God in the time of Isaiah and King Hezekiah. Assyria had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and, as Isaiah had prophesied, was now threatening the southern kingdom Judah (all that remained of David's and Solomon's Israel). Joel, calling for the people of God to repent, listed four of the five qualities we are tracing.

Joel 2:<sup>12</sup> "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; <sup>13</sup> and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is *gracious* ([c]hannun) and *merciful* (*compassionate, ra*[c]hum), *slow to anger* (*arek appayim*), and *abounding in steadfast love* ([c]hesed); and he *relents over disaster*.

Note that, while Joel warned of punishments for sin that might be coming, his appeal for repentance rested in the fact that the LORD has these loving qualities.

Hosea ministered mostly in the northern kingdom of Israel for an extended period somewhere between 760 and 710 B.C. His message was that God desires his relationship with his people to be like a good mar-

riage; rooted in righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and faithfulness—in other words, rooted in God’s own revealed character.

Hosea 2:<sup>18</sup> And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. <sup>19</sup> And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to *me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love ([c]hesed) and in mercy (compassion, ra[c]hamim)*. <sup>20</sup> I will betroth you to me in *faithfulness (emunah, same word family as emet[h])*. And you shall know the LORD.

God desires a real relationship, not just going through the motions.

Hosea 6:<sup>6</sup> For I desire *steadfast love ([c]hesed)* and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Hosea’s warnings to repent and promises of the blessings that would accompany repentance went unheeded, and Israel fell to destruction at the hands of resurgent and no longer repentant Assyria.

Isaiah, prophesying from 740 B.C. until possibly as late as 681 B.C., spoke to both Israel and Judah until Israel’s fall, and then addressed Judah alone. He also left prophetic messages for future exiled Jews to encourage their return and the rebuilding of Jerusalem following the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. The following quotations are from the writings to encourage the exiles.

Isaiah shows us the roots of the word *compassion* when he rhetorically asked if a woman can forget and have no *compassion (ra[c]ham)* for the son of her *womb*. Isaiah then said that, even if a mother can forget her child, the LORD will not forget his people (even in their exile). The point is that God’s visceral ties of compassion to the people of his covenant are even greater than the ties a mother has for her child.

Isaiah 49:<sup>15</sup> Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no *compassion (ra[c]ham)* on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. <sup>16</sup> Behold I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

When people through sin are alienated from God, they may not be able to experience God’s steadfast love and compassion, but this does not destroy that steadfast love and compassion.

Isaiah 54:<sup>8</sup> In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with *everlasting love ([c]hesed)* I will have *compassion (ra[c]ham)* on you,” says the LORD, your Redeemer....<sup>10</sup> For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my *steadfast love ([c]hesed)* shall



not depart from you, and my covenant of *peace* (*shalom, peace and comprehensive flourishing*) shall not be removed,” says the LORD, who has *compassion* (*ra[c]hum*) on you.

Between God and his people, the ties of *steadfast love* and *compassion* ultimately outweighed momentary divine wrath. This is not to excuse people from their need for repenting, nor from the ongoing real world consequences of their sins. However, the LORD counts repenting as allowing the relationship to be restored, thus opening the way for him to express his compassion anew.

Isaiah 55:<sup>7</sup> Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have *compassion* (*ra[c]ham*) on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

It is important to see the close connection between steadfast love and compassion. Because God’s love for his covenant people is steadfast, they may trust that his compassion is available if they will avail themselves of it by turning to God.

Isaiah 63:<sup>7</sup> I will recount the *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*) of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his *compassion* (*ra[c]ham*), according to the abundance of his *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*).

Jeremiah ministered from 627 B.C. until sometime well after 586 B.C., roughly a century after Isaiah. According to Jeremiah, what ultimately counts is not human achievement, but human relationship with the LORD.

Jeremiah 9:<sup>23</sup> Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches,<sup>24</sup> but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love (*[c]hesed*), justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

#### 4. Worship Literature

**Recommended Reading: Psalm 103:1-22; 86:15; Lamentations 3:17-33.**

The five qualities on which we are focusing in this chapter show up repeatedly in **Psalms**: the *compassion* word group, 21 times; the *grace* word group, 39 times; *slow to anger*, 3 times; *steadfast love*, 126 times; and *faithfulness*, 36 times. Taken together, nearly 30% of the uses of these

words in the Old Testament are in **Psalms**. Thinking of that another way, the language of Old Testament worship and prayer would be greatly impoverished without reference to the divine qualities that the LORD revealed to Moses.

**Psalm 103** is worthy of careful reading with attention to God's reign, God's righteousness and justice, and the loving and faithful qualities the LORD revealed to Moses in **Exodus 34:6**. Of the five qualities, only *faithfulness* is not directly named, and one could claim that it is implied. Italicized words include those that expand on the five qualities showing how the five qualities work out in human experience and in relation to God's other qualities. **Psalm 103:7-8** is the only passage in the Scriptures outside **Exodus** that directly attributes our knowledge of the qualities we are considering to God's revelation of these qualities to Moses (**Exodus 34:6**).

Psalm 103:<sup>1</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! <sup>2</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, <sup>3</sup> who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, <sup>4</sup> who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*) and *mercy* (*compassion, ra[c]hamim*) <sup>5</sup> who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. <sup>6</sup> The LORD works *righteousness and justice* for all who are oppressed.

<sup>7</sup> He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD is *merciful* (*compassionate, ra[c]hum*) and *gracious* (*[c]hanun*), *slow to anger* (*arek appayim*) and abounding in *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*).

<sup>9</sup> He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. <sup>10</sup> He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*) toward those who fear him; <sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

<sup>13</sup> As a father shows *compassion* (*ra[c]ham*) to his children, so the LORD *shows compassion* (the translators have filled in an implied repetition) to those who fear (worship and revere) him. <sup>14</sup> For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. <sup>15</sup> As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; <sup>16</sup> for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

<sup>17</sup> But the *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*) of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his *righteousness* to children's children, <sup>18</sup> to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. <sup>19</sup> The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,

and *his kingdom rules over all*.<sup>20</sup> Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word!<sup>21</sup> Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will!<sup>22</sup> Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his *dominion*. Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Despite the *womb* connections implied in *compassion*, it can be used for human fathers as well as for human mothers and the LORD.

Psalm 103:<sup>13</sup> As a father shows compassion (*ra[c]ham*) to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.<sup>14</sup> For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.”

**Psalm 86** lists all five qualities from **Exodus 34:6**.

Psalm 86:<sup>15</sup> But you, O Lord, are a God *merciful (compassionate) and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness* (with the same Hebrew words as in **Exodus**).

In the **Psalms** attributed to him, David focused closely and repeatedly on these qualities. David especially focused on God’s graciousness and steadfast love as the basis for petitioning God when faced with powerful opposition or with the weight of sin.

The book of **Lamentations**, as the name implies, is filled with bitter prayers of lament, traditionally and plausibly assumed to be the words of Jeremiah. The occasion was when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, its temple, and its population – slaughtering many, carrying others into exile, and causing many others to become refugees. The total loss of a homeland, many loved ones, the temple and all that they had seen as holy was emotionally and spiritually devastating. The book of **Lamentations** pours that out with full expression. As we near the structural center of the book, Jeremiah’s despair reaches its low point.

Lamentations 3:<sup>17</sup> My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is;<sup>18</sup> so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD.”

But then, at the structural center of the book, we glimpse Jeremiah’s one ray of hope, based on what God had revealed to Moses of his character.

Lamentations 3:<sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:<sup>22</sup> The *steadfast love ([c]hesed)* of the Lord never ceases; his *mercies (compassions ra[c]ham)* never come to an end;<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning; great is your *faithfulness (emet)*.<sup>24</sup> “The Lord is my portion (a share.)” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”<sup>25</sup> The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.<sup>26</sup> It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord....<sup>31</sup> For the

Lord (*Adonai*) will not cast off forever, <sup>32</sup> but, though he cause grief, he will have *compassion* (*ra[c]ham*) according to the abundance of his *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*) <sup>33</sup> for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.

The qualities of God's character that had been revealed to Moses served to offer the one hope to which devastated former citizens of Jerusalem could cling. Hope in these divine qualities was no minor thing for them, nor are these divine qualities a minor thing for us when we are in despair at the course of events in our lives.

## 5. Wisdom Literature

**Recommended Reading: Job 10:12; Proverbs 3:3-4; 14:21-22, 29, 31; 15:18; 16:6, 32; 19:17, 22; 20:6, 28; 28:8.**

Job, in the midst of his long complaints to the LORD about the injustice he is suffering at God's hands, occasionally offers balancing statements acknowledging God's goodness, of which this is one example,

Job 10:<sup>12</sup> You have granted me life and *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*), and your care has preserved my spirit.

Proverbs sees that divine qualities are echoed in the human qualities of wise people. The divine quality of *grace* (*[c]hanan*) shows up in four verses as *human generosity* (**Proverbs 14:21, 31; 19:17; 28:8;** and possibly **3:4**). Three verses address *slow to anger* (**Proverbs 14:29; 15:18; 16:32**). Six verses address *steadfast love and faithfulness* (**Proverbs 3:3-4; 14:22; 16:6; 19:22; 20:6;** and **20:28**).

Here is one sample:

Proverbs 3:<sup>3</sup> Let not *steadfast love* (*[c]hesed*) and *faithfulness* (*emet*) forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. <sup>4</sup> So you will find *favor* (*[c]hen, grace*) and good success in the sight of God and man.

## 6. Gospels

**Recommended Reading: Matthew 5:44-45; 9:13, 35-38; 12:7; 14:13-21; 15:29-39; 18:21-35, esp. v. 27; 20:29-34; Mark 1:40-45; 6:30-44; 8:1-10; 9:14-29; Luke 7:11-17; 10:25-37, esp. v. 33; 15:11-32, esp. v. 20; John 1:14-17.**

### Compassion

In Jesus' parables, godly compassion is shown by the Samaritan for the wounded traveler (**Luke 10:33** within **10:25-37**), the father for his

prodigal son (**Luke 15:20** within **15:11-32**), and the king for his hopelessly indebted servant (**Matthew 18:27** within **18:21-35**). That is the kind of nurturing relationship God has toward his people. It is the kind of relationship that Jesus incarnates in his ministry. Jesus expresses *compassion* for crowds and individuals in need of:

- saving good news and spiritual guidance (**Matthew 9:35-38; Mark 6:30-44**)
- relief from loss and grief (**Luke 7:11-17**)
- healing from illness and affliction (**Mark 1:40-45; Matthew 14:13-21; Matthew 15:29-39; Matthew 20:29-34**)
- deliverance from evil spirits (**Mark 9:14-29**)
- feeding (**Matthew 14:13-21; Matthew 15:29-39; Mark 6:30-44; Mark 8:1-10**).

The above list includes only the passages where the word *compassion* is used (sometimes disguised by being translated as *pity*). Of course, we could list many times this number of passages where Jesus shows similar compassion without its being named.

## Grace

We are told repeatedly in the New Testament, both directly and indirectly, that our salvation is not by our own efforts, but by the *grace* of God alone. Actually, this pattern of *grace*-based salvation also characterizes the Old Testament. But, though *grace* comes first, we must receive the *grace* with the appropriate responses of faith and gratitude, responses which include our becoming *gracious*, God-glorifying people ourselves.

The word *grace* comes front and center in only one Gospel passage, **John 1:14-17**, and there it is standing in for *steadfast love*, just as *truth* is standing in for *faithfulness*. But *grace* was a major underlying assumption of Jesus' ministry. He came for the undeserving, the sick, the afflicted, the persecuted, the poor, the foreign, the women and children, and the moral and religious outcasts, all of whom need a reason to hope in the reigning power of God to provide the kinds of transformation they need. So, although the word *grace* does not get much use in the Four Gospels, the concept of *grace* is everywhere in Jesus' ministry. He lived, ministered, died, and was raised for *grace*! We will discuss *grace* more fully in Chapter 8, but we will discuss **John 1:14-17** below in the section on *steadfast love*.

## Slowness to Anger

Divine anger and human anger both have an appropriate place in our lives, for bringing about the confronting of injustice, unrighteousness, and the like. God may accomplish good through angrily confronting sin. We may find through anger the courage, strength, and focus to

stand up against wrongdoing. But once anger has served its purpose of alerting and motivating us, we need to make sure that we do not extend it beyond its useful time. Jesus taught non-retaliation against enemies and even love for enemies (which is different from surrendering our stand for truth and right, which Jesus does not counsel). What is important for our understanding right now is that these teachings about the need to restrain anger and hatred are grounded in the character of God. Loving our enemies is a major way to imitate God.

Matthew 5:<sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

### Steadfast Love

As noted above, when the Greek version of the Old Testament translated *hesed*, it generally did so with the Greek word *eleos* (*mercy*); the New Testament sometimes follows that pattern as in **Matthew 9:13; 12:7**.

Furthermore, as noted in the section on *grace* above, **John 1:14-17** uses *charis* (*grace*) to translate *hesed*. While there are certainly strong elements of *mercy* and *grace* in *hesed*, *hesed* is properly associated with covenant relationships and refers to the *loyal, steadfast, unfailing love* of one member for other members, most importantly of God for his covenant people, but also of the covenant people for God and for others. This love among Jesus' followers is a major theme in John's Gospel.

**John 1:14, 17** is a description of how God's Word and glory became flesh and dwelt among us through Jesus Christ.

John 1:<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.... <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

This is a clear reference back to **Exodus 33-34** where God's answer to Moses' desire to see his glory was to reveal to Moses his compassion, grace, slowness to anger, steadfast love, and faithfulness. It is important to note that God's glorious grace and truth (steadfast love and faithfulness) were inherent to God's character and were part of his purpose for humanity from the very beginning of the Old Testament. God did not suddenly acquire these qualities with the arrival of Jesus. God's faithful people knew about these qualities at least from the time of Moses on and clung to them in times of trial.

In Jesus Christ these glorious divine qualities, which were present throughout the Old Testament, became flesh so that we could see them

in operation among us. By his atoning work, Jesus also paved the way for the Holy Spirit to come into the lives of Jesus' disciples and build these glorious qualities, degree by degree, into their lives.

We may have been taught in our churches that Moses brought an inferior legalism, while Jesus brought the superior freedom of grace, but that is not John's point. John's point is that Moses could bring no more than fading glory, although he longed that all God's people would receive God's Spirit (**Numbers 11:29**), but that Jesus brought a glory that was fully embodied in himself as he dwelt among us. Those who believe in Jesus will receive the Spirit who will gradually actualize the glory in them. His point is much like Paul's in **2 Corinthians 3:18**. The main contrast is not so much between legalism and freedom (although that is a sub-point), as the main contrast is between no indwelling of the Spirit and full indwelling of the Spirit who causes God's glory to be embodied in his people through divine qualities such as steadfast love and faithfulness. What Jesus brought was a way for God to live within his people, just as Moses had desired.

John (the English form of his name) must have known the meaning of his name from its Hebrew roots, *the LORD's grace*, which in the Hebrew may be variously rendered *Yehohanan*, *Yohanan*, *Jehohanan*, or *Johanan*. It is easy to trace that from the Hebrew through the German *Johann* to the English *John*. It delights me that his and my name point back to the Old Testament's frequent references to *the LORD's grace*. It also delights me that *hanan* and *grace* are so closely linked to *hesed* and *steadfast love*. We need to see how frequently the Old Testament refers to the Lord's *grace* and *steadfast love*, and how fully the Old Testament's *grace* and *steadfast love* were incarnate in Jesus Christ and were imparted to and through his followers by the Holy Spirit.

In some of the richest New Testament expressions of the concept of *hesed*, it employs the *agapao/agape* family of words. Two of the best known examples are in John's Gospel:

John 3:<sup>16</sup> "For God so *loved (agapao)* the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 15:<sup>12</sup> "This is my commandment, that you *love (agapao)* one another as I have *loved (agapao)* you. <sup>13</sup> Greater *love (agape)* has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

The flow of costly, steadfast, self-giving love begins from the Father and flows through the Son and the Spirit in order to touch, save, fill, and transform us. That is how God's glory takes up residence in us!

## Faithfulness

Jesus makes a great point of God's faithfulness in urging his disciples to seek the reign of God above all worldly blessings. For Jesus, our faith in God's faithfulness is what frees us from being controlled by anxiety.

Matthew 6:<sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?<sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?<sup>27</sup> And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?<sup>28</sup> And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin,<sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.<sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?<sup>31</sup> Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'<sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.<sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

It is important to see that this teaching rests on the faithfulness of God to care for his children. Our faith is the only appropriate response to God's faithfulness. Our faith in God's faithfulness is able to set us free from debilitating anxiety and stress.

A strong biblical case can be made that John's phrase, *full of grace and truth*, is intended to translate Moses' phrase from **Exodus 34:6**, *abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*. I contend that John in his Gospel uses *truth* more in its Hebrew *relational faithfulness* sense than in its Greek *philosophical fact* sense. In biblical theology, *truth* and *faithfulness* are too tightly linked to one another to be fully separated (Support for this view may be found in Keener, 2003, pp. 416-21, and to a lesser extent in many other commentaries on John's Gospel). Try reading **John 1:14, 17** with *truth* being understood as *relational faithfulness*. Does it not deepen our understanding of Jesus as the one who embodied God's relational faithfulness?

John 1:<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of *grace and truth* (*steadfast love and faithfulness*) ....<sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; *grace and truth* (*steadfast love and faithfulness*) came through Jesus Christ.



To understand John's point, we need to step out of our culture's way of viewing truth as rational and relative, and to view truth, as Jesus and John saw it, as revelational and relational. For Jesus and John, truth is grounded in God's word that became flesh in Jesus Christ and that speaks into our lives through the Spirit of truth. God is purpose-oriented and promise-keeping. God's truth, revealed through Jesus and the Spirit, sets us free from directionless, dead-ended, fear-driven living. In my opinion, we would not be wrong to read the word *truth* in our English translations of John's Gospel as though it were instead translated *faithfulness*.

John 8:<sup>31</sup> So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know *the truth* (*God's faithfulness*), and *the truth* (*God's faithfulness*) will set you free."

John shows Jesus tying together the Trinity as the source of the glorious living truth, his practical, real-to-life faithfulness to his purposes and promises. The Holy Spirit helps us know that promises of God in Christ are sure because they are grounded in divine truth/faithfulness that became flesh and dwelt among us through Jesus Christ.

John 16:<sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup> All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Remember John's awareness of **Exodus 33-34**, where Moses sought to know God's glory and received the revelation that God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and full of steadfast love and faithfulness. Remember John's claim that this glory became flesh in Jesus Christ. Now consider Jesus's great final prayer for his disciples following the Last Supper, but before Gethsemane. The relational and revelational nature of the glory and the truth (divine faithfulness) is even clearer as Jesus prays in **John 17**. Notice the italicized portions that connect the dots between knowing God through Jesus as Jesus has embodied God's steadfast love and faithfulness and has imparted that steadfast love and faithfulness to his disciples:

John 17:<sup>1b</sup> Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, *that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* <sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do....<sup>6</sup> "*I have manifested your name* to the people whom

you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word....<sup>11</sup> And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one....<sup>14</sup> *I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.*<sup>15</sup> I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.<sup>16</sup> They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.<sup>17</sup> *Sanctify them in the truth (divine faithfulness); your word is truth (divine faithfulness)....*<sup>26</sup> *I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*

In short, according to Jesus and John, a disciple is one who has seen the glory (the steadfast love and faithfulness) of God in Jesus Christ and who is now consecrated to represent that revelational, relational reality to the world. To be sanctified in divine truth is to be grounded in God's faithfulness to his purposes and promises.

## 7. Acts

**Recommended Reading: Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35.**

Luke, both in his Gospel and in **Acts**, tends to write, not in abstract terms, but through describing the examples of Jesus and his faithful followers in a largely unfaithful world.

### Compassion, Grace, Steadfast Love, Faithfulness

All these qualities of God show up in the experience of the faithful people whom Luke describes. Two summary passages will provide food for reflection on this theme. The extraordinary courage, boldness, and generosity of early believers rested on their regular experience of God's compassion, grace, steadfast love, and faithfulness in taking care of his obedient servants. Two passages set the tone for the entirety of **Acts**. We will look further at these passages from **Acts** in **Chapters 15, 18, and 19**.

Acts 2:<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.<sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.<sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common.<sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.<sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,<sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 4:<sup>32</sup> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. <sup>33</sup> And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great *grace* was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold <sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

We discussed **Acts 4:34-35** in Chapter 2 regarding justice for the poor, and we will discuss both of the above **Acts** passages again in Chapter 15 regarding Christian Jubilee. But, for now, the point is that the early church took God's loving character as defining the values of their covenant communities. If God is generous and loving, then his people are to be the same, and they are able to do that because they trust in God's provision and protection. Although **Acts** may not frequently name the qualities we are examining in this chapter, it may be one of our best sources of creative examples of demonstrating God's loving qualities.

Although the early disciples were stunningly generous, nothing indicates that they were naively undiscerning. They acted according to the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit rather than according to an attempt to meet some external legal standard of generosity. If we would be like them, rather than simply imitating their specific actions, we need to seek the Holy Spirit's leading and empowerment as we shape communities of faith that stunningly demonstrate God's qualities of love in our own time.

## 8. Paul's Letters

**Recommended Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 11:17-34; Romans 2:4; 5:1-11; 12:1-21; Ephesians 2:8-10; Philippians 1:6; 2:1-11; 2 Timothy 1:8-12.**

### Compassion

Paul did not employ the word *compassion* in his letters except in a word translated *tenderhearted* in **Ephesians 4:32**, literally *good guts*, closely related to the word for *compassion*. However, the compassion God showed through Jesus Christ, as a model for the kind of love to be shown by believers, was a frequent theme in Paul's letters. **1 Corinthians 11:20-22, 33-34; Romans 12:9-13; and Philippians 2:1-4** provide examples.

## Grace

Paul understood that God's grace is the force behind all of the following:

- the initiation of our salvation
- our covering with Christ's righteousness
- our gradual transformation into the likeness of Christ
- our empowerment by the Holy Spirit to serve effectively in the world.

Paul usually employed the word *grace* in the greetings and closing of his letters. He used the word at least once in every one of his thirteen letters, over twenty times in **Romans**. Perhaps the most significant use of *grace* is in **Ephesians 2:8-10**, which will occupy our attention in Chapters 8-10. In anticipation of the theme of those chapters, let us now note that Paul asserted that we are saved by *grace*, through faith, and for good works. But clearly he believed that salvation starts with God's *grace*. For Paul, *grace* is a key concept for Christian faith and life, and we are to understand it as a central characteristic of God.

## Slowness to Anger

Paul, while warning us not to presume upon God's patience, at the same time acknowledged it.

Romans 2:<sup>4</sup> Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and *forbearance and patience*, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

## Steadfast Love

Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross for our salvation is the ultimate evidence of how God's gracious steadfast love works.

Romans 5:<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— <sup>8</sup> but God shows his *love (agape)* for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

## Faithfulness

For Paul, the faithfulness and trustworthiness of the Lord are major parts of his message. Because God is a promise-keeper, we can entrust our lives to serving God's message and mission through Jesus Christ, even in cases in which our serving Christ brings us into suffering. At the time Paul wrote **2 Timothy**, he was anticipating soon being executed for his faith in Christ and his service to the gospel. This expectation did not dim

his faith. He was no doubt hoping to help Timothy to live with such bold faith in God's faithfulness.

1 Thessalonians 3:<sup>3</sup> But the Lord is *faithful*. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

1 Corinthians 1:<sup>9</sup> God is *faithful*, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Philippians 1:<sup>6</sup> And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

2 Timothy 1:<sup>8</sup> Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God,<sup>9</sup> who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,<sup>10</sup> and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,<sup>11</sup> for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher,<sup>12</sup> which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.

## 9. Other Letters

**Recommended Reading: 1 Peter 3:8; 5:10; Hebrews 4:14-16; 10:34; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 3:16-18.**

### Compassion

**Hebrews** notes that assurance of our eternal destiny helps us risk both showing compassion and undergoing persecution.

Hebrews 10:<sup>34</sup> For you had *compassion* on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

Peter used the same compassion-related *good guts* word that Paul used in **Ephesians 4:32**.

1 Peter 3:<sup>8</sup> Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a *tender heart* (*compassion, good guts*), and a humble mind.

Peter was very interested in encouraging his readers to show godly qualities. It is God's compassion that is the basis for human compassion.

John also had God's compassion through Christ in mind when he encouraged his readers to display this quality.

1 John 3:<sup>16</sup> By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. <sup>17</sup> But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart (*guts, compassion*) against him, how does God's love abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

## Grace

The Letter to the **Hebrews** sees God's grace as the help we need for facing down temptation.

Hebrews 4:<sup>14</sup> Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace (charis), that we may receive mercy (eleos) and find grace (charis) to help in time of need.*

Like Paul, Peter uses *grace* in the openings and closing of his letters. Among other things, he sees spiritual gifts as flowing from the grace of God (**1 Peter 4:10**). The following perhaps is his richest use of the term,

1 Peter 5:<sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all *grace (charis)*, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

The grace of God includes God's restoring, confirming, and strengthening work in our lives.

## Slowness to Anger

Peter apparently acknowledges in **2 Peter 3:15** the statement by Paul in **Romans 2:4**, and expresses his view in **2 Peter 3:9** that God's patience (longsuffering, slowness to anger) is the reason that the end-times have been delayed.

2 Peter 3:<sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Peter is suggesting that the final return of Christ in judgment has been delayed so that more people might come to repentance. Considering the history of human sin, if God's delay in calling for final judgment is not slowness to anger, what is?

## Steadfast Love

As in his Gospel, John in his First Letter roots his calls for us to love one another in the kind of self-giving love that God has shown for us in Christ. One who does not love is not abiding in God.

1 John 4:<sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us *love (agapao)* one another, for *love (agape)* is from God, and whoever *loves (agapao)* has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not *love (agapao)* does not know God, because God is *love (agape)*. <sup>9</sup> In this the *love (agape)* of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is *love (agape)*, not that we have *loved (agapao)* God but that he *loved (agapao)* us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, if God so *loved (agapao)* us, we also ought to *love (agapao)* one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we *love (agapao)* one another, God abides in us and his *love (agape)* is perfected in us.... <sup>16</sup> So we have come to know and to believe the *love (agape)* that God has for us. God is *love (agape)*, and whoever abides in *love (agape)* abides in God, and God abides in him.

## Faithfulness

Likewise, the writer to the **Hebrews** roots his call for his readers to be faithful in the assurance that God is faithful.

Hebrews 10:<sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is *faithful (pistos)*.

John reminds us that our faith in God's faithfulness includes God's promise to forgive our sins and to purify us from our sins.

1 John 1:<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is *faithful (pistos)* and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

## 10. Revelation

### Grace, Steadfast Love

Like Paul and Peter in their letters, John uses *grace* in the opening and closing of Revelation. The greeting is worth noting because it not only uses the grace greeting formula, but spells out the grace in terms of God's self-giving, steadfast love in Jesus Christ.

Revelation 1:<sup>4</sup> John to the seven churches that are in Asia: *Grace* to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood

<sup>6</sup>and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

If the seven spirits refer to the Seven-fold Holy Spirit, then this greeting is Trinitarian, as is appropriate when speaking of divine grace and love (Beale, 1999, pp. 189-90; Keener, 2000, pp.69-70; Osborne, 2002, p. 61; and many others). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in grace and steadfast love for all believers.

## Faithfulness

The entire book of **Revelation** is devoted to showing the long-term faithfulness of God to his faithful people. In the end, there will be great thanksgiving from faithful people to the faithful God who brings all his purposes and promises to fulfillment.

Revelation 11:<sup>17</sup> saying, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. <sup>18</sup>The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

## Chapter Conclusion

The God who introduces himself to Moses is the same God who is known to us through Jesus and the apostles:

- a God who reigns
- a God who is holy, righteous, and just
- a God who is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness

Those are the key components of the revealed character of the God who is the source of our calling. It is to this God that we are answerable. It is to this God that we look with hope for our own restoration and renewal as called children and servants of God. It is the qualities of this God that we want to see grow in our lives. All the qualities of God are important, but when God wished to reveal his ways and his glory to Moses, he chose to focus on the many dimensions of his love for his Sinai covenant people, the people who had accepted his call to enter into the plans and purposes he revealed through Moses. That is because these are the qualities that are most distinctive in representing God to the world. These are the qualities that God’s covenant people in Christ most need to know in order to carry out their mission, the qualities that make the most



worthwhile difference in life in this world. These are the qualities that make us most effective in reaching the hearts and minds of our neighbors with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Before we leave the question of who God is, what his qualities are, and what his love is like, we need to look at one special role in which he makes his love effective in our lives, the role of Kinsman Redeemer. That is the subject of Chapter 4.