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Who is God? In His Own Words

Compassionate—Exodus 34:6-7

If you think we have a lot of churches and religions today, you need to know that the ancient world, the world of Moses was hyper charged spiritually, as the people worshipped many gods and goddesses. Apart from Yahweh, the God of their fathers, the Israelites bowed to a number of Canaanite gods such as Baal.

The Egyptians, who Moses and the Israelites fled from, are said to have had over 2000 deities that they worshipped. The Ancient Mesopotamians had a god for every town and village, including Marduk, the patron god of Babylon. These gods were not exactly known for their kindness. They were ready to fly off the handle if the people committed even the slightest of infractions. Can you imagine always living in fear that you have ticked off one of the gods or goddesses, something bad would happen to you?

So do you know what the people did? They offered sacrifices to the gods to appease their anger, keep them pacified or to try and gain favour with them. At first it was a dove, then a goat and then the stakes were turned up a notch to a bull until finally some of the gods were asking for the people's firstborn, a child. Child sacrifice was the most abhorrent practise to appease the angry gods in the ancient world.

Some of you may remember in Greek mythology, the story of the Trojan War. It was waged against the city of Troy by the Greeks after Paris of Troy took Helen, the wife of the king of Sparta. The war is one of the most important events in Greek mythology. It actually takes place within a few hundred years of when Moses was on Mount Sinai with God in Exodus 34 that we talked about last week.

As the Greek king Agamemnon is sailing across the Mediterranean Sea to fight in the Trojan War, his fleet is suddenly stranded because the wind stops, remember this is over 3000 years ago; the ships were propelled by sails and not motors.

Legend has it that Artemis, a Greek goddess, cut the wind because she was angry at Agamemnon over something he had done to embarrass her. So, she gives him an ultimatum. She will allow the wind to pick up again so he can fight in Troy, but only if he sacrifices his daughter to her.

If you lived during this time in the ancient world, you lived in fear and trepidation of the gods. If you were an Israelite however, the one true creator God, the God of Abraham, is quite different. He sends Moses to rescue you from slavery to the Egyptians and leads you on a journey to the land he has provided for you, the Promised Land. He gives you food and water along the way and then has His friend, Moses, stand on a mountain as He reveals His glory to him.

He tells Moses to share with the people that he is *Yahweh*, the unchanging one. The one who is always consistent and always constant. Then in His own words, God describes to Moses and to all of us, who He really is. Let's pick up the story where we left off last week.

Exodus 34:5-6

Then the LORD came down in a cloud and stood there with him; and he called out his own name, Yahweh. The LORD passed in front of Moses, calling out,

“Yahweh! The LORD!

The God of compassion and mercy!

God introduces himself to Moses on a mountainside and He leads with his name, Yahweh. Then, did you notice the very first attribute of His character that God mentions? He is, *The God of compassion and mercy!*

Compassion and mercy from a God! This was unheard of. The people would have been so used to the gods of this day being cold-hearted, aloof and vengeful but when Yahweh comes along and describes who He is, He starts with, *I am compassionate and merciful.*

Have you ever been in a situation where you had to give a brief introduction of who you are? Maybe when starting a new job, a new class at school, a new volunteering opportunity in the community or even a social gathering where people want to know a little bit about you. What do you say?

You probably started with your name, which is good, *hello my name is _____*, but what comes next? Depending on the situation, we usually follow with where we are from and what we do for a living, don't we?

Hi, my name is Paul. I am from London and I am a pastor at North Park Community Church.

Often a resume is our first introduction to someone when we are seeking employment. So we begin with our name then vital information such as an address, phone number and email. Next, we list our credentials that qualify us for the job, such as our education and past experience.

When introducing himself to Moses on Mount Sinai in **Exodus 34**, God could have started anywhere. Let's face it, He has quite a resume. He could have said, *I am Yahweh, the Lord, and everything you see around you, the sun, the moon and the stars—I made it all. In less than a week!* Or He could have said, *Moses, your ability to see these majestic mountaintops, hear the birds sing, smell the flowers in the meadow, taste the fresh baked bread and feel the gentle breeze on your face—I did all that too, when I created humanity.*

But God doesn't begin with his list of accomplishments when introducing himself. No, He starts by describing himself as, *The God of compassion and mercy!*

Now in the Bible, order is important. The order in which things are listed gives you an idea of what is most significant. The fact that *compassion and mercy* are at the top of Yahweh's character traits means that these are the dominant ones. The most important thing God wanted Moses and the people to know about Him is that He is *compassionate and merciful*.

In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, *compassion and mercy* (or some translations of the Bible say, *compassionate and gracious*) is *raham*

we-hanun. I am borrowing much of this section from John Mark Comer's book, ***God Has a Name***. He describes this well.

Compassion and Mercy, *raham we-hanun* is what is known as a word pairing in Hebrew, which means these two words are laid side-by-side to help explain each other. For us today, we have word pairings such as, *bread and butter, pots and pans or peaches and cream*. Words put together help explain each other. That is what the Bible does with, *compassion and mercy*.

Let's look at what these words mean individually and then put them together. First, Compassion—*raham*- is sometimes translated merciful but it comes from the root word in the original language that means "female womb." The idea behind the word *compassion* that God uses to describe one of His most dominant traits is the feeling a mother has toward her young child. God gives Himself a female trait. Incredible. Right from the top God feels—*raham*—like a mother does towards her young children.

Can I give you two other examples of where this word *raham* is used in the Bible? Do you remember in 1 Kings 3, there is this weird story about two women fighting over a young child?

Both of them claim to be the mother but this was before genetic testing so King Solomon comes up with a rather bizarre solution. "Cut the baby in half," he says. "Give a piece to both of the ladies who claim to be the mother." He knew this would reveal the true mother of the baby. It says in

1 Kings 3:26

Then the woman who was the real mother of the living child, and who loved him very much, cried out, "Oh no, my lord! Give her the child—please do not kill him!"

This woman is so moved by her *raham*; her intense compassion and motherly love for the child, that she would rather see him given away than harmed.

Rahum is also used in **Psalm 103**. The author starts out by quoting **Exodus 34** when he says in

Exodus 34:8

The LORD is compassionate and merciful,

and then in verse 13, he says,

Exodus 34:13

The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him.

So *raham* is the compassion that a mother feels for her child but it is also the compassion a father can feel towards his children. So the most dominant trait that God uses to describe himself in **Exodus 34**, is that he is compassionate in the way a parent feels for their children.

That is a far cry from a god that wants you to sacrifice your child to him, isn't it?!

I have watched my wife as a mother over the last thirty years and I am constantly amazed and inspired by her love and compassion towards our children. Even now as they are adults and out of our house, she continues to dote on them and demonstrate care for them. Yesterday, my oldest son turned 28. Carolyn made a special trip to his home in Kitchener on Thursday with a meal, a cake and a gift from us.

I also see this compassion in her even more pronounced as she is a Nana to our two grandsons. I like to think that I was/am a loving and compassionate father to my children but I have turned into even more of a big ball of mush as a papa to Beau and Forrest. When they come for a visit, I am out of the house and have the back door of the car open, reaching for them, even before my son-in-law has turned off the engine. I can hardly wait to see them!

My grandfather died when I was only about six months old. My mom tells me that before he passed away, he used to walk to our house each day and spend some time just holding me. He would then have a nap on our couch and go home. I like to think that the same love and compassion I feel towards my two grandsons is perhaps what my grandfather, in our brief time together felt for me. Imagine. That is what our heavenly Father feels towards us. The love and compassion of a parent, a grandparent towards their children. Isn't that powerful?

This week, I was on a Zoom call with a group of people and the conversation turned towards the latest government restrictions because of COVID

and how their children will not be returning to their classrooms tomorrow. As our discussion continued, things got really emotional as some of these people shared the pain and hurt they feel for the children, some of whom are really struggling and confused and missing out on so much. I felt and heard the love and compassion of these parents firsthand.

That is the way our heavenly Father feels towards us.

I know for some of you, this analogy doesn't connect at all because you never felt this kind of love from your parents. Maybe they were hypercritical. You were never smart enough, athletic enough, pretty enough or maybe they just were never around. Let me just say that God loves you in a way that your parents should have. With a deep, compassionate, bone-of-my-bones and flesh-of-my-flesh kind of love, *raham*, that is stronger than life itself. Just think about that for a moment.

God says in Exodus 34:6, that He is, ***The God of compassion and mercy!*** Compassion is a feeling word. Contrast that to second part of this word pairing, ***The God of compassion and mercy!*** This is an action word. Compassion is a feeling word and gracious is an action word. In Hebrew, it is *raham we-hanun*. It means to help someone out when they are in need.

Hanun is used in other parts of the Old Testament. In **2 Kings 13**, a foreign King was oppressing the Israelites.

2 Kings 13:23

But the LORD was gracious and merciful to the people of Israel, and they were not totally destroyed. He pitied them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Here, God's mercy towards His people is demonstrated as He takes action. He protects them from their enemy.

In Psalm 86, David prays to God and notice, he starts by quoting:

Psalm 86:15-16

But you, O Lord, are a God of compassion and mercy, slow to get angry and filled

*with unfailing love and faithfulness. Look down and have **mercy** on me. Give your strength to your servant; save me.*

This prayer for God's *hanun*, (mercy and grace), is David asking God to rescue and save His people from danger. It is calling upon God to do something.

A few years ago, my son was finishing up the last year of his program at Western. In the midst of writing some final papers for his courses, his computer crashed and he was in a bind. He had so much to do and now to have this happen was stress-inducing to say the least—not just for him but for those who lived with him, us, his parents!

Like most parents, when we saw our child in some distress, we felt compassion for him and we naturally wanted to help in any way. It ends up that he was going to need to go to the Apple Store at Masonville to see if someone could fix his computer. That meant standing in line and waiting for an appointment, which could take a few hours. That was time he didn't have.

So, I volunteered to go. I was doing some reading for a course I was taking at the time, so it was no problem for me just to take the book and read while I waited. My heart for my son prompted me to want to help and I found out later that the gesture meant a lot to him. It was an action that practically demonstrated my love and concern for him.

So let's just summarize what we have talked about to this point.

When describing who He is to Moses on Mount Sinai in **Exodus 34**, God's begins by describing Himself as, *The God of compassion and mercy!* Compassion and mercy, is a word pairing.

Compassion is a feeling word which indicates that God loves and cares for us like a parent. Mercy is an action word which means that just like a parent, God comes to the aid of His children when they need help.

This word pairing, *compassion and mercy* come together to show us Who God is, in His own words. He feels and He acts. He loves and He rescues. He cares and He saves. Do you see that?

God is not all words and no action.

God doesn't say, "Hey if you ever need anything at all, let me know," and when we finally muster up the courage to ask for something, He responds with an excuse of why He is just too busy, right now. Do you know anyone like that? That's not God.

God is also not all action and no words. On occasion, I have had people describe to me their fathers. They tell me that their dad didn't really say, "I love you," to them much but instead demonstrated his love through practical actions. Again, that is not God.

The Bible is full of passages of God proclaiming His love for His people and then acting on that love through His actions towards them.

So, when we come to God; whether it is in a quiet morning devotional time, or in a church building when we sing songs of worship to Him, or when we are taking a walk in nature or in the midst of a personal crisis or a dilemma at work, we come before a God who feels and cares for us. And, we come before a God who acts, who wants to help us do something about our circumstance.

Do you see why this is so important? Do you see why when God describes Himself to Moses in **Exodus 34** and says He is compassionate and gracious, this would have been stunning to the people of the day? This attribute was so much different than all the anger and oppression of the other gods and goddesses that saturated that society.

But let me take this idea even a step further.

Yahweh, our God is full of compassion and mercy and we like that, don't we? When it is directed at us. But what if it is also directed at our enemies? What if God asks us to demonstrate this same kind of compassion and mercy to the people in our lives that we dislike?

Let me explain this with a familiar story from the Bible. In the Old Testament, there was a prophet named Jonah. Do you remember this guy? God commands Jonah to:

Jonah 1:2

“Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are.”

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire that had been at war with God’s people the Israelites for years. They were notorious for their brutality towards their enemies. Let me give you a few examples. (warning; this is graphic). The Ninevites burned women and children alive. They flayed people. Do you know what that means? It means took the skin off of people, while they were still alive. They put chains on people and treated them like dogs, but instead of the leashes going around their necks, they pierced a hole in a person’s jaw with a dagger and passed the rope through there.

These were not nice people.

If you are Jonah, Nineveh wasn’t exactly the place you wanted to go and plant a church. So he runs away. In the exact opposite direction. To the furthest place he could go—Tarshish.

It would be like God asking me to leave London to plant a church in Ottawa because we know there are some iffy characters there and instead, I turn and run to Tofino, BC, until I run out of land in Canada.

It is interesting that as we read the story, we find out that Jonah is not running away from the Ninevites as terrifying as they could be. No, Jonah is running from God. Why? We don’t find out until the end of the story.

In the meantime, Jonah ends up in the mouth of a big fish and consequently has a change of heart. So he goes and preaches in Nineveh and surprise, surprise these despicable people are convicted and end up repenting of their behaviour and turning to God. We are told:

Jonah 3:10

When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.

God relented. Why? It is because He is a God of compassion and mercy. He feels and He acts. He was going to destroy Nineveh but He sees the

genuine change in the people and He changes His mind.

Jonah is overjoyed, right? He has just seen God transform the hearts of an entire city. Not so quick. Instead, Jonah does just the opposite. He has what amounts to a giant temper tantrum. Look what he says to God. Now we find out why he ran in the beginning.

Jonah 4:2-3

That is why I ran away to Tarshish!

Jonah then quotes Exodus 34. Remember, Exodus 34 is the most quoted passage in the Bible, by the Bible.

I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, LORD! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.

Jonah is mad. He is foot-stomping, fist-slamming, I would rather be dead, mad. Why? It is not because God is full of compassion and mercy, but that God is full of compassion and mercy towards his enemies!

That is one of the main points of the story of Jonah. We all love that God is compassionate and merciful to us, or our friends or the people who are like us, but what about when He is compassionate and merciful to our enemies? To the people we dislike. The people who hurt us, gossip behind our backs, betray us, divorce us or abandon us.

That is the problem with our God, Yahweh. Oh, we want His compassion and mercy for ourselves but we want justice for everyone else. That is not who God is. He shows compassion and mercy to everyone.

Have you ever been deeply hurt by someone in your life? I can think of only a handful of times it has happened to me, but when it does, it stings for sure.

In one particular situation I had to confront someone who was a leader in my church (not this church). He was leading a double life and behaving in ways that were detrimental to himself, his family and the

mission of the church. I agonized over this situation. I had anxiety and sleepless nights. I spent weeks meeting with him, organizing support and help for him and he eventually left the church, which was probably the best thing at the time.

Then I discovered that he was badmouthing me behind my back and twisting the facts about what really happened. I became the bad guy in his scenario. People who didn't know all the details were criticising how I handled the situation. That really hurt.

I have to confess to you, there were times when I prayed to God, "Get him back Lord. Mess up his life. May people really see who he is and the double life he has been living. Redeem me in this circumstance, Lord."

From outward appearances anyway, this guy has gone on to live a pretty good life. He and his family seem to be doing well but, I still have those moments when I think, *that is just not fair*. That was one of the worst times of my life and he seems to have skated through it, scot free.

In preparing this message this week, I have come to realize something very important about who God is. He is compassionate and merciful. He goes around blessing all sorts of people, even those who don't deserve it.

My life is living proof of that, and so is yours. None of us deserve the compassion and mercy of God. None of us. But He offers it anyway.

That is what brings us to Jesus. Do you know that the word mercy is used all throughout the gospels? This shouldn't surprise us because Jesus is God in the flesh, the very incarnation of Yahweh's compassion and mercy.

In Luke 17, ten men afflicted with leprosy come upon Jesus and cry out,

Luke 17:13

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

In Luke 18, a blind man on the side of a road, shouts out

Luke 18:38

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

In Matthew 17, a man kneels before Jesus and begs,

Matthew 17:15

"Lord, have mercy on my son."

Time after time, people come to Jesus, beg for his mercy and then go away healthy and healed. Jesus doesn't just heal and extend his mercy on people because he is a nice guy but because it comes from within. It is part of his DNA. It is part of his character as God, Yahweh in the flesh.

Probably the most well know story in all the Bible that reveals the compassion and mercy of God is one that Jesus tells in **Luke 15:11-32**. It is about a Father and his two sons.

The younger son dishonours his father by asking for his inheritance early. He then abandons the family and goes off to a foreign land to squander away the money with wild living and partying.

The inevitable happens: he runs out of money and is forced to make a difficult and humbling decision. Does he live in poverty where he is, or return to his father with his tail between his legs, asking for forgiveness and mercy and perhaps a low-level job in the family business?

When the son gets close to home, the text says in

Luke 15:20

His father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

Do you think you have a rebellious child? This son has done everything he possibility could to break his dad's heart and shatter his trust but the father's compassion for his boy is steadfast and unshakable.

Jesus' view of God that he is describing in this story is of a compassionate and merciful parent, who feels deep love for his children and acts to rescue them from their predicament. It is feeling and action. This sentiment of God's feeling and action is summed up beautifully in that oh so familiar passage in

John 3:16.

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

The greatest demonstration of the compassion and mercy of Yahweh was when He came to earth in the

flesh as Jesus and died a death we deserved for our sin. He saved us and restores us back into relationship with Him. This is our God.

Who God is, has a profound implication on our lives. There is this ancient idea that goes all the way back to the time of Moses on Mount Sinai. Early rabbis used to talk about how the Israelite people were to “image” God. In other words, the way that the world can truly know what He is like, is by looking at His people.

In **Exodus 34:5-7**, when God in His own words describes who He is, it does not just shape our theology of God. It is a declaration of how we are to live. In verse 6, He begins by describing himself as *The God of compassion and mercy!*

So, if God is compassionate, we should be compassionate as well. If God is merciful/gracious, we should be merciful/gracious as well. As Christians, our calling is to properly represent our heavenly Father to the world by the way that we live and I think you would all agree, our world desperately needs more compassion and mercy. Thankfully, we have the help of the Holy Spirit in us to live this way.

So as we think about the way that this message applies to our lives, do you mind if I ask you a question? Who are your enemies? Who are those people who hurt you, gossip about you, lie about you, take advantage of you, backstab you? In short, who makes your life a living hell? Are there some names that come to mind?

What would it look like for you to demonstrate compassion and mercy to them? Can you release them from your desire for justice and instead pray for them? Not prayers of vindication like, “God may they get what is coming to them or destroy their lives, Lord,” but prayers for compassion and mercy towards them. Then watch as God answers your prayer.

Secondly, can you invite God to help you to demonstrate compassion and mercy to those you interact with every day? These are the people that you do life with. Those you live with, work with, go to school with, live in your neighbourhood, worship with. These are the people that can tend to get on your nerves the most. Do some names come to mind?

If you are married, do you offer mercy and compassion to your spouse? If you are a parent, then one of the most important tasks we have is to demonstrate to our children the character of God. If you love them well, it is much easier for them to believe that God is compassionate and merciful but if you are always nitpicking and critical, it is just confusing.

If you’re single, then maybe it is a roommate, a sibling or a friend that is the recipient of God’s compassion and mercy in you.

We live in a harsh world, where the false gods and goddesses that our society worships—such as money, power, beauty, technology, sex and independence, can be so demanding. They can be so ruthless. They can suck the life right out of us.

In contrast, there is Yahweh. When asked by Moses to reveal his glory and describe who He is in His own words, God starts by describing Himself as *the God of compassion and mercy! I feel like a parent loves their child and I act like a parent who comes to the aid of their child when they are in need.*

That is the God that we worship today. He invites us to receive His compassion and mercy and to share it through His spirit at work in our lives, to those, friend or enemy, that we come in contact with each day.

Can you imagine, if those who proclaim to be Christians, actually did that? What a hope-filled and caring world it would be!

Points to Ponder
Sunday, April 18, 2021
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The God of Compassion: Exodus 34:6-7

your life? In what ways would you find this difficult to do? In what ways would it be meaningful and even therapeutic?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Invite God to give you opportunities to share His compassion and mercy to those people in your life. Pray specifically for the way that God's compassion and mercy can be shared through you to someone who has hurt you in the past.

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you been in a situation recently when you had to give a brief introduction of yourself? What did you say? If someone asked you to describe yourself, what would be the first thing you would say (besides your name)?
2. The first thing God says when describing Himself is that He is, *The God of compassion and mercy!* How does this description reinforce what you know about God from your personal experience? Do you think the people you know who are not Christians would describe God in this way? Why or why not?
3. God is compassionate in the way that a parent loves their child. How does this analogy resonate with you? God is merciful in the way that a parent takes action to help their child in need. How does this analogy resonate with you? Why do you think this analogy of God as a parent may not be as helpful for some people?
4. What experiences have you had with people who are all talk and no action? What experiences have you had with people who are all action and no talk? Why is it so important that God describes Himself as being all talk and all action?
5. If you feel comfortable, share a situation where you have been truly hurt by someone. God is full of compassion and mercy towards us but He also demonstrates those qualities towards people we don't like or people who have hurt us. Discuss how you feel about this quality of God.
6. How is Jesus the epitome of God's compassion and mercy?
7. What would it look like for you to demonstrate the qualities of God's compassion and mercy to those people in