

## Part 59 The Compassionate and Gracious God (34:5-7)

**Moses' praying – the first four of five parts**

(i) No destruction - answered

(ii) Forgiveness – partially answered

(iii) To know God's ways – answered

(iv) To be shown God's glory

• Yahweh – redeemed by the blood of a lamb

**God speaks of His character****1. His compassion**

• He is moved when He sees how much we need His help

**2. His Grace**

• Help for the helpless

**3. His long-suffering****4. His loving kindness**

• A mixture of mercy and chastening

Moses' praying in Exodus 32–34 has five parts to it. (i) He prayed first that the people would not be destroyed<sup>□1</sup> and God answered his prayer<sup>□2</sup>. Then (ii) Moses asked for the forgiveness of the people<sup>□3</sup>. His prayer was partially answered but God said He would not go with the people<sup>□4</sup>. (iii) Then Moses uses a tent outside the camp to pray more<sup>□5</sup>. He wants to know who will go with him to the land of Canaan. He wants to know God's ways. He prays for the nation<sup>□6</sup>. Again God hears his prayer<sup>□7</sup>. (iv) A further request comes in 33:18. 'Show me your glory.' (v) We shall find a fifth and final part to his praying in Exodus 34:8–9.

God is willing to partly answer Moses' prayer that he might see God's glory. Moses will be given a glimpse of the glory of God<sup>□1</sup>. God will sovereignly choose the ones He sends with Moses<sup>□2</sup>. Moses will be allowed to see the 'after-glow' of the passing glory of God<sup>□3</sup>, and God will renew His covenant with Israel, giving them His law again<sup>□4</sup>.

So Yahweh comes down visibly and audibly to Moses, although the cloud largely prevents His being seen<sup>□1</sup>. Then Moses hears the words 'Yahweh, Yahweh'<sup>□2</sup>. He is reminding Moses of what He said at the time Moses was first sent to Egypt. God is Yahweh, the God who redeems by the blood of a lamb.

God is revealing Himself to Moses. It is the greatest thing that can happen to anyone. There can be no greater blessing in this world than to have God show us what He is like.

**1. God speaks of His compassion.** God is 'the compassionate . . . God.' Moses hears the words. 'Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow in wrath and great in mercy and faithfulness<sup>□1</sup>, keeping mercy to thousands, forgiving iniquity and rebellion and sin, but He does not clear the guilty, and He visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations<sup>□2</sup>.'

'Compassionate' represents the Hebrew word *rachum*. It is found twelve times in the Old Testament, and means 'compassionate', 'merciful' or 'pitying'. It is the kind of feeling which is roused by small babies<sup>□1</sup> or other needy people. God looks upon our sinful ways and is moved when He sees how much we need His help.

**2. God speaks of His grace.** He is 'Yahweh, the ... gracious God'. The Hebrew word here is *channun*, a word used thirteen times in the Old Testament, in eleven of which it is combined with *rachum* – 'compassionate'. If 'compassion' stresses feeling for the miserable, 'grace' stresses help for the helpless. 'Compassionate and gracious' is a twin description of God's concern about those who are in distress because of their sins and who are helpless to find a way out of their distress.

**3. God speaks of His long-suffering.** God is 'slow in wrath'. He does not react immediately when He sees our sin. He waits to give us opportunities to recover, opportunities to amend our ways.

**4. God speaks of His lovingkindness.** He is 'great in mercy'. The word here is *chesed*. It may be translated 'mercy' or 'lovingkindness' when used of God. Consider the word as it refers to God in Genesis and Exodus. Lot was shown kindness by God when God rescued him from Sodom<sup>□1</sup>. He showed 'steadfast love' in leading Abraham's servant to Isaac's wife<sup>□2</sup>, and lovingkindness to Joseph when he was in prison<sup>□3</sup>. God guided Israel in 'lovingkindness'<sup>□4</sup>. Often we are not deserving of 'the least of all God's mercies'<sup>□5</sup>, yet God's lovingkindness it is not always sheer, unconditional mercy, because it is specially given to those who keep God's command-

□1 32:11–13  
□2 32:14  
□3 32:31–32  
□4 32:33–33:3  
□5 33:7  
□6 33:13  
□7 33:17

□1 33:19a  
□2 33:19b  
□3 33:20–23  
□4 34:1–4

□1 34:5  
□2 34:6

□1 34:6  
□2 34:7

□1 see Isaiah 13:18

□1 Genesis 19:19  
□2 24:12, 14, 27  
□3 39:21  
□4 15:13  
□5 Genesis 32:10

mercy, because it is specially given to those who keep God's commandments<sup>□6 a</sup>. It is a mixture of mercy and chastening which results in a kindness which is just as well as kind. That particular mixture is visible here in Exodus 34:6, 7.

□6 20:6  
 □1 34:6  
 □2 Genesis 24:27; 32:10  
 □3 Genesis 24:48  
 □1 Romans 11:28  
 □1 34:7

5. His faithfulness

• He fulfils his promises accurately

• 'To thousands', even distant generations

• Forgives iniquity, rebellion and sin

• Yet this does not mean that God leaves sin unpunished

• But grace is bigger than sin

• These two aspects fit together because

(i) God punishes by sacrifice

(ii) God chastens

5. **God speaks of His faithfulness.** He is 'great in faithfulness'<sup>□1</sup>. The word here is 'emeth. It has ideas of accuracy, honesty, sincerity, reliability, faithfulness, steadfastness. It often refers to God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises or His commitment and loyalty to men and women<sup>□2</sup>. God led me in a way of 'accuracy', said Abraham's servant. He was taken to exactly where he needed to be<sup>□3 b</sup>.

Verse 37 develops the thought of God's mercy and faithfulness. He gives 'mercy to thousands'. The **number of people** to whom He shows mercy is great. Even distant generations of people are blessed when their ancestors are shown mercy by God. Israel was 'beloved for the sake of the fathers'<sup>□1</sup>.

The **sins that are covered** are great. He is great in forgiving iniquity, rebellion and sin. The first word here, 'iniquity', seems to mean 'twistedness' or 'crookedness'. The second word is 'rebellion' or 'rebelliousness'. The third word, sin, means 'failure to reach a standard or a goal'. The three words together stress the varied aspects of sin. Men and women are gripped by 'crookedness', 'rebelliousness', 'failure to reach God's appointed standard for our lives'. Yet God's mercy and grace and slowness to anger leads to His forgiving all manner of wickedness and blasphemy.



Yet all of this **does not mean that God leaves sin unpunished**. There is a contrast here. Despite the greatness of God's mercy it is **also** true that He 'does not clear the guilty, and He visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations'<sup>□1</sup>. Sin will have consequences for the three or four generations that lived near to it in a Hebrew family. Yet grace is bigger than sin. Grace reaches thousands of generations; sin affects a few generations.

How does this latter part of the description fit with the earlier part of the sentence? Although God reveals His amazing love, yet He also says that He will not leave the guilty unpunished. It means, surely, two things. (i) God punishes by means of sacrifice and atonement. He uses substitutionary punishment, in order to punish and yet forgive. Also (ii) God uses purifying and chastising punishment. His mercy is great but it takes our sins into account. He deals with us in a mixture of mercy and chastening in a way that leads us tenderly but powerfully into the pathways of righteousness. These are 'the ways' of God that Moses so much wished to know.

**Notes**

a Other references in Genesis 20:13; 21:23; 24:27, 49; 40:14; 47:29 refer to human kindness.

b Others references in Genesis 24:49; 42:16; 47:29; Exodus 18:21 refer to human faithfulness.

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