

Moses once asked God for *the* best thing about Him: 'Show me Your glory.'

Believe it or not, God did just that, and in Exodus 34:6-7 He introduced Himself to us all. It seems that these two verses are the most quoted in the Bible's Old Testament (some 20 direct quotations and some 80 references to these verses in all of Scripture.)

Let's read:

'The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, [is] slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished . . .' (NIV)

Please note the first word God chooses when introducing Himself. That one word is so filled with good news for us that in effect *it is* the Gospel.

'Compassion' and 'compassionate' are compound words, where the prefix (*com*) means 'with', 'together', 'in association'. With intensive force, it depicts a God who is 'completely passionate'.

Let's explore this word. Its root, in Hebrew, is the word 'womb' (*rachum*).

This sounds somewhat shocking – is God feminine? Is God actually depicting Himself as a nursing mother?

The womb is where a child is carried by the mother. A pregnant mother nurses her baby immediately in front of her and is always aware of the child's presence. It is indicative of the strongest human emotions.

God's compassion is not just an emotion: it is deeply connected with acts that meet the deep needs of someone. If compassion does not act then it is just sympathy . . .

The Bible reminds us of the many pictures of God's compassion – as a parent, a father, and even a nursing mother.

During the Medo-Persian Empire, the governor Nehemiah proclaimed God's character in relation to His people:

'Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them, but when they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion (rachamim) You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors. But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before You; therefore You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to You, You heard from heaven, and many times You rescued them according to Your compassion (rachamim)' (Nehemiah 9:27-28, NASB 1995).

The moral quality of the people doesn't seem to matter – God ALWAYS listens when people cry out to him.

During the Assyrian Empire, when the prophet Jonah was called to proclaim God's judgement on the rebellious city of Nineveh, he was quite reluctant to do it. When the city repented and was spared, he bitterly confessed: 'I knew that you are a gracious and **compassionate** (*rachum*) God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity' (Jonah 4:2, NIV).

Here Jonah is actually quoting the description God gives of Himself in our opening text. How tragic that the prophet wanted revenge rather than forgiveness. That's just one example of a man (indeed, a prophet) who has a hard time allowing the good news about God's love to shine through himself or drive his actions.

What about the New Testament?

The Greek term similar to *racham* is one expressing a father's compassion – *esplanchnisthē*. It appears, for example, three times in the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus sees the widow whose son is being carried out on a bier for burial and is filled with **compassion** (7:13). The Samaritan sees the half-dead man by the roadside and is filled with **compassion** (10:33). Now the father [of the prodigal son, chapter 15] sees his emaciated son and is filled with **compassion**. It matters not what the young man did, how much he squandered, or what shame he brought on the family. Normally a dignified man does not run lest his legs be exposed, but this father sprints, as fast as he can, toward his son. The young man may not even be recognizable, but the father knows his son no matter how dirty, smelly, and sickly he is” (Diane G. Chen, *Luke: A New Covenant Commentary*).

The light of God's love shines through the Samaritan man and the action of the prodigal's father as it does in Nain, through the loving act of Jesus Christ.

God openly asks us: ‘Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have **no compassion** [*rachum*] on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands’ (Isaiah 49:15-16).

This compassion is most clearly seen in that golden verse of the Bible – John 3:16 my paraphrase: ‘For God *soooooo* loved the world that He gave His only son for us that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ God's love gives up His Son for us!

In this very first word that God uses to describe His own character – this **compassion** – lies the reason for Jesus' cross. And that's the Gospel – the **amazing compassion** of God.

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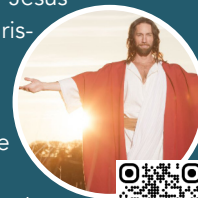
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