



BibleProject Podcast

The Womb of God? Character of God E3

August 31, 2020, 59.52

Speakers in the audio file: Jon Collins, Tim Mackie, Carissa Quinn

- Jon** Hi, this is Jon. Welcome to the BibleProject podcast. 00:00:00
We're in the middle of a series, looking at the character of God, specifically looking at a verse in Exodus 34.
- Tim** This verse, it's the first time God sits back and describes his character.
- Jon** And if you've been following along, you know the context of this proclamation that God makes about His character. It's a really intense moment. God and Israel are forming a covenant relationship, like a marriage of sorts. They're committing to each other. Right after Israel basically signs the marriage contract, they start worshipping an idol statue. Like slapping God in the face. And in that context, God declares of Himself these five attributes. And the first one is that God is compassionate.
- Carissa** The Hebrew word is "rakhum" and it comes in a verb form, a noun form, an adjective form. But the really fascinating thing about all of them is that they're related to the word "rekhem, which is the Hebrew word for "womb." 00:01:00
- Jon** To be compassionate is to care for someone like a mother cares for and nurtures her baby.
- Carissa** "Compassion" is an emotional word. Sometimes the translators use the word "deeply stirred" when they're translating it to express this heartfelt emotion.
- Jon** Throughout the whole Hebrew Bible, Israel continues to rebel against God.
- Carissa** But it's God's compassion, this emotional bond to them that compels Him to respond. And it's a response to their cries, much like a parent to a child.
- Jon** Today on the show, Carissa Quinn walks Tim and I through this rich attribute of God, that He is compassionate.
- Carissa** This is a really amazing characteristic of God to depend on. We can know what His disposition is when we cry out to Him. Even if we've turned away from Him, even if we're hurting and still struggling with something, if we're not perfect or even good, He is depicted as a God who cares deeply and emotionally. 00:02:00

Jon Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

So here we are again. I'm surrounded by two PhD doctorates in biblical studies, Carissa Quinn and Tim Mackie. Hey, Tim.

Tim Hi.

Jon Hi, Carissa.

Carissa Hi.

Jon We've been talking about Exodus 34 the last two episodes, and we're going to jump into the thick of this verse, which is there's five attributes of God that we want to talk about. The first of those attributes is compassion. And Carissa, you wrote a script for us at BibleProject for word study on compassion, and you're going to take us on a bit of a tour guide. 00:03:00

Carissa Yeah, that's right. I'm excited.

Jon I'm excited too. And you guys get to geek out as hard as you want, and then I'll just slow you down when I feel like that might be necessary.

Tim So big picture. This verse is the first time God sits back and describes His character in the Bible. Other big picture, which is in previous episodes of the series was exploring the golden calf narrative where this description appears. So God's describing Himself after being faithful to His people after they broke the terms of their marriage covenant on the altar. Or right after going down the altar. Or maybe after signing the papers. Yes. Okay. So that's context. And then the first word God describes Himself with is "compassionate."

Carissa Yeah. So this is when Yahweh is revealing his glory to Moses and He says, "Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with loyal love and faithfulness. I love that we're talking about this verse because it's all about the character of God. To my mind, this is one of the most important things that we can try to think about or try to understand, you know, who God is how He views us when we fail, or when we're suffering—what He's like in the midst of that. I just think it has a huge impact on our lives, how we view ourselves, and how we view others. 00:04:00

Tim Yeah. There's an interesting analogy just in day to day relationships, where if you're meeting someone for the first time and you don't have any context for them, it's hard to read...you're learning how to read what they say and do because you don't have any backstory for their character. Right? So the same word or expression or even tone of voice can be taken completely differently based on what you

know of that person's character, whether it's much or little. I think that's so true of how people encounter God's portrait in the Bible.

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God have complex character in the Bible. But most of us probably come with some kind of baseline that we've either gotten from the Bible or more likely from somewhere else. And then it's hard for us to actually let the Bible depict God and let that depiction kind of set the agenda. These verses are super important because they're actually giving us that baseline context so that everything else God says or does is somehow always an expression of these five traits in some way.

Carissa Yeah. I've been thinking a lot about our picture of God, how significant it is, but also how I think a lot of us aren't really aware of how we picture God. It's almost just a subconscious assumption. And we can ask this question later in the podcast. But I've been thinking a lot about, do I really picture God in this way? How do I know if I do or I don't? What are the indicators? So maybe that's a question for later, but yeah, I think this is super important to think about how we view God and how He views us.

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So this very first word, I think, is also a really significant word for developing this picture. And it's compassionate. The Hebrew word is "rakhum," and it comes in a verb form, a noun form, an adjective form. But the really fascinating thing about all of them is that they're related to the word "rekhem" which is the Hebrew word for "womb." So that's so cool.

Jon The word "compassionate," if it was anglicized, it would be like womby or something?

Carissa I like to think that. Like God is somehow womb-like in His characteristics.

Tim Womb-ish.

Jon Is that how that word comes across in Hebrew? Womb-ish?

Carissa I don't know. I mean, as a non-native Hebrew speaker...

Tim I mean, you can hear it with the letters. Rekhem (womb), rakhum (compassion.)

Carissa Right.

Jon Oh, I see.

Carissa You could associate them.

Jon And you're saying, that's not a coincidence, though, that those words are so similar?

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Carissa Right.

Jon They have maybe a root?

Carissa Yeah, the root is the three letters of all of these words. The noun rekhem, and the noun rakhamim. So that's a womb and compassion. And then "rakhum" is the adjective or the passive participle. And then the verb or "rakham" to show compassion or deeply feel. So they're all built on these three same letters. So yeah, there's definitely an association there. That is really cool to picture God as one, like I think. That's just the word. That's just the root of the word. But I think the meaning and context also draws out this nurturing image even more.

Section Break

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Carissa So as I've been researching this word, here's the first thing that stands out about it. "Compassion" is an emotional word. Sometimes the translators use the word "deeply stirred" when they're translating it because of the context—to express this heartfelt emotion.

There's this story in the Bible in 1 Kings 3 where two women have both just given birth to babies, and one of the babies dies. And then both of the women claimed the baby that still living is theirs. So they come before King Solomon to settle this dispute. And the story is meant to show I think the wisdom of King Solomon. So his solution is to say, "Cut the baby in half and give each mother a part." The woman who's not the real mother says, "Yeah, that's fine. Divide him." And the woman who is the real mother says...Well, actually, here's what the verse says. "The woman whose child was the living one spoke to the king, for she was deeply stirred." That's how they translate "had compassion" there. "She was deeply moved over her son, and said, 'Oh, my Lord, give her the living child and by no means kill him.'" And this is how the king knows that she's the true mother by this act of compassion. So you can sense how deep and emotional this word is. It's like a gut-wrenching feeling to think about somebody killing your child. And she would do anything to save her baby.

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Tim Can I just also say this is a really strange story.

Carissa It's really strange.

Jon Well, maybe a strange for first-time listener, but I grew up with this story and it was a great story. It was this moment of like, "gotcha."

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Tim Yeah, sure.

Carissa True.

Jon The wicked person got put in his place, and threw a trick of my wise mind as the king.

Carissa That's true. It's a redemptive story in that sense. The true mother's revealed.

Tim Yeah, through her womb-ishness for her child. What's great about that story is that it's connected to the actual child of her womb.

Jon Right. Yeah.

Tim Even though the story doesn't mention her womb on the level of the stories theme, she's having this response of rakhum over the fruit of her rekhem.

Carissa And I forgot to mention, too, that the association of rakhum (compassionate) with rekhem also depicts compassion as centered in the core of a person. And you can sense that here, I think in this story, if you think about how you'd feel if you just had this baby and somebody is taking the baby and killing them. It's like a sick to your stomach. Where your empathy and your compassion is found is deep in the core of your person. I think that's the picture.

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Jon Do you think that's a synonym? Empathy?

Carissa Well, okay, how do you define empathy? Maybe that's a question we can answer as we go through. I'll define compassion and define empathy and tell me if it's the same.

Jon Well, the sense of empathy I can understand and or actually feel the thing that you're feeling and you're experiencing. And because of that, now I can relate to the pain or the joy or whatever it is that you're having. So I guess compassion would be a type of empathy maybe, where you're able to feel someone's pain and plight and want to fight for it because it's affecting you the way that it's affecting them.

Carissa So I think yes, this word rakhum, as I've been researching the word "compassion," it's been very close in my mind to empathy. Even like where empathy is in the body, where this kind of compassion is in the body. I don't know how people typically conceive of compassion on somebody if it maybe is, I don't know, more like pity-focused. I'm not really sure. Or maybe we just don't really define the word; we just have a general idea of what it is.

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Jon I bet in English...I'm going to look it up. I bet there's a couple of different nuances and one's probably more emotional.

Tim That's interesting. Both of our English words are compound words. Compassion is to co-passion-to share in someone's passion. And empathy is "em," which means "with" and "pathos." They are synonyms of each other even in terms of their root words. Now, those are the English words. But you're going to point out some synonyms in Hebrew. But yeah, that's interesting. If you feel something in your core, your rekhem (your womb), but then you are having that for another person

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in their situation, that's...Wow, I've never thought about that. That seems like a very close biblical Hebrew way of our concept of empathy.

Carissa Yeah. And we'll look at this, but that is how God responds to people when they're in pain throughout the Bible. So it's really interesting. Did you find a good definition there, Jon?

Jon Yeah, it's focused on the emotion. It's not just a cerebral sense of pity of like, "Oh, I know you're in bad shape. I'll have compassion because I had some noble thing to do."

Tim Which means that you experience it physically. The physical experience.

Jon Like you said, Tim, *com* is with and Latin, and then "*pati*", I don't know if that's how you pronounce it, is Latin for "to suffer." So it's to suffer with is what the English word comes from via Latin.

Carissa Well, it's good, because I think that is what it means in this context in the Bible, and also in the story. As the story of the Bible plays out, I think that's how you can see that word working. So what's really interesting about this word, though, is that we just looked at that story of a woman, but 80% of the time...so it's used about 100 times and 80% of the time, it refers to God, and 20% of the time to human. So this is a really important word for understanding what God is like. This isn't the interesting part. He's depicted as an emotional God in the scriptures through this word. I'll show you what I found here. And then we could talk more about that because it's a really maybe neglected point when it comes to who God is.

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Section Break (00:15:25)

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Carissa So, we've already looked at how sometimes it's translated as "deeply moved." It's also used in parallel. So sometimes in poetic structure or just in the same context as these other emotional words. So stirrings of the inner being is used in parallel to compassion. So your inner self being all stirred up because of something that's happening. It's also used in parallel relationship with the emotion of pity. So we have that (*unintelligible*) pity word.

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And then it's used in contrast to the emotion of anger. So to have compassion means to let go of anger. Just interesting, too. But here's the context. Often the word "compassion" is used of God's response when He hears His people cry out, depicting this emotional response to their cries a lot like a parent to a child. Nehemiah 9 is a really good example of this. Nehemiah is leading the people to renew their commitment to God and he's talking about God's actions with the nation of Israel to the people. And the whole story is one of compassion. The word is used multiple times throughout this chapter. And he's talking about how after

entering the land, Israel turned away, even killing God's prophets. Then he talks about this really dark time in Israel's history, the time of the judges, where everyone just does whatever they want. It's this brutal and violent times. Does one of you have that Nehemiah 9:27-28 in front of you?

Tim Yeah, I got it. Is this one of his great prayers, Nehemiah's prayers? 00:17:00

Carissa Yeah.

Tim Is it a prayer of petition to God?

Carissa Yeah.

Tim He says, "Therefore, you God, because the people turned away, you delivered them into the hands of their oppressors who oppressed them. But when they cried out to you in the time of their distress, you heard from heaven, and according to your great rachamim (your compassion), you gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors." Referring to the judges there, like Gideon and Samson, and so on. "But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before you, therefore you abandoned them into the hands of your enemies. And when they cried again to you, you heard from heaven, many times you rescued them according to your rachamim (your compassion)."

Carissa And if you read the book of Judges, this is such a good summary of it. God is moved by the cries and the distress of His people every single time, and He answers every single time. Something I noticed here is that the picture of the people is really negative. They just abandon God over and over as soon as they have rest. But it's God's compassion, this like emotional bond to them that compels him to respond. And it's a response to their cries, much like a parent to a child 00:18:00

Tim It's good. I was just thinking about this. A theme video has been occurring to me as I've sat with a design pattern. It begins with the blood of Abel that spilled on the ground in Genesis 4. Because God says it's crying out from the ground.

Carissa Oh, yeah.

Tim And that's what gets God's attention to come confront Cain. And then that begins a whole series of stories, where people who are suffering oppression or violence cry out. There's an outcry of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Israelites in Egypt. And then it turns into like a cycle of judges. Every generation cries out. It's interesting. 00:19:00

It's sort of like the moral quality, the character quality of the people crying out doesn't seem to matter. It's just the actual cry. Because sometimes it's righteous people crying out, but other times, it's really fickle, unpredictable

people, like in the Judges. And God always listens. That's always struck me. That's good. I've never thought to tie it to this compassion word in such a strong bond. But I think you're pointing that out. That's right.

Jon Didn't we read that passage? Was it last episode where God says of Himself, like, "I got to make sure that they stop crying out," or "I'm going to have compassion." Something like that. That came from the Prophet?

Tim Yeah. God tells both Ezekiel and Jeremiah in different ways to not pray on behalf of the people because when the righteous intercedes, God will pay attention. And so we tell them not to intercede. Yeah, that's right.

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Jon He's that compassionate.

Tim Yeah, that's right.

Carissa So this is a really amazing characteristic of God to depend on, that we can know what His disposition is when we cry out to Him. Even if we've turned away from him, even if we're hurting, and still struggling with something, if we're not perfect or even good, He's depicted as a God who cares deeply and emotionally, like a parent, and is responsive. There are actually quite a few verses that depict God as a parent. So we looked at the one. But God is actually depicted as a nursing mother, which I think right now might be my favorite verse in the Bible because it's so surprising.

Tim And you've recently had this experience.

Carissa Maybe that's why I like it so much because it's like, "Whoa, that is really intense." I don't know.

Jon Really intimate.

Carissa Exactly. Yeah, the image is really, really powerful. A mother holds her baby eight inches from her face, and looks into their big baby eyes, and sustains them with her own life. So this is what God says he is like, but even better.

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Section Break

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Carissa This is Isaiah 49:15-16. Here, Isaiah is prophesizing in a time of Israel's oppression and suffering, and God promises that He'll comfort His people and have compassion on them. But the anticipated response of his people is that they'll say, "No, God's forsaken us. He's forgotten us." So this is His response to say, "No, I haven't." Do you want to read that one? Isaiah 49.

Tim Oh, I think you should.

Carissa Okay, I will. I've just been talking a lot. Favorite verse. "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion (rakhamim) on the

son of her womb? Even if she forgets,” which is kind of a rhetorical statement, I guess, because she won’t, right, to nurse her child. “... even if she forgets, I will not forget you. Behold, I’ve inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.” It’s just this amazing picture of God being so bonded to His people.” 00:23:00

Tim Oh, I think at that point, Isaiah’s shading from metaphor back into reality. He’s responding to the city of Jerusalem that just said, “Yahweh has abandoned me.” This is after the Babylonian exile. So he’s depicting Jerusalem as an abandoned woman who says, “God forgot me.” And then God depicts Himself as a woman responding to Lady Zion. It’s a very powerful passage. So that’s what the walls are all about—the city of Jerusalem’s walls.

Jon So the ability for Jerusalem to be safe is on His mind. Is that what that means?

Tim Or in particular, the restoration of Jerusalem. So this is in the restoration chapters. So this is about the kingdom of God coming, restoring the kingdom of David, the priests, the temple, the New Jerusalem, all that kind of stuff. 00:24:00

Carissa Yeah, it seems like the two main physical signs of God being with His people and restoring His people were the temple being rebuilt and the walls being constructed. That’s what Ezra and Nehemiah are so concerned about. And that shows that God is with them.

Jon I see. The thing that you care about, I care about. So can I say—it is just a meta reflection really quick—it’s interesting that we’ve had this whole buildup of God rescuing the world to this family, rescuing the family from this ancient evil empire, and then bringing them into this marriage ceremony, and then Israel basically giving the middle finger right in the middle of that, and then God says, “Okay, here’s who I am.” And the first word to describe Himself is this very feminine word. That if you’re the creator of the whole universe, that just strikes me. Maybe it’s because I have a weird problem bias on masculinity. But that just strikes me that someone’s so powerful and someone we think of in masculine terms mostly, the first verb He use of Himself, He God, Yahweh, He uses of Himself is this word. 00:25:00

Carissa Yeah, it’s really cool. I mean, it is surprising, but we shouldn’t be so surprised even because in chapter 1, man and woman are created in God’s image. So we should expect to see both feminine and masculine characteristics of God.

Tim Yeah, it’s interesting that in the Prophets, the poets of Israel, who were also the prophets, are the ones who really bring that forward

the most. Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah. It's not a short list. I've drawn it together once. I don't remember where I put it—of just feminine images for God in the Prophets. But there's quite a few.

Carissa A lot of birth or labor images. 00:26:00

Tim Yes, exactly. Yeah, that's right. But this one is, I think, the most politically powerful. And I think it actually connects all the way back to how fruitfulness of the womb. This is Genesis 1. This is what you were saying earlier, Carissa. The depiction of Genesis 1, the image of God is the male and female ruling together, being fruitful and multiplying is the key part of the image. So the fact that fruitfulness of the womb is one way that humans can image God...Anyhow. Yeah, this passage is really amazing.

Carissa Yeah. I do think the feminine depiction of God is really significant. But even more than that, the parental picture of God and understanding this word compassion. Because it's like a parent to a vulnerable child. And in other contexts, He's referred to as a parent. Don't know if it's masculine here, as a father. In Jeremiah 31:20, this is where Israel's called Ephraim here, is grieving over there rebellion against Yahweh. And Yahweh says through Jeremiah, "'Is Ephraim not my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him, I certainly still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him. I will surely have compassion on him,' declares Yahweh.'" So you can see here, how the yearning of the heart and compassion are used together. And He's depicted as a parent. More significantly a parent than a mother or father. Although the nursing imagery is really interesting. 00:27:00

Tim Yeah, that's right. The other example of compassion connected to parenting uses a masculine image. Psalm 103. "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear him." So the word can run the whole gamut of the human family. 00:28:00

Carissa And the next verse of Psalm 103 is all about how God knows our frame that we are but dust. So I think, again, that brings up the vulnerable nature of the object of compassion, or the childlikeness. Or maybe more that to have compassion is to view somebody like an innocent child almost, or a beloved child or something. A loved child.

Tim That's interesting. Back to the connection you were making to empathy, Jon, that gives us a helpful window. In all these examples, the one having compassion is either somebody who has been...I mean, using authority terminology isn't helpful. But it's somebody who's looking on someone who's at some kind of disadvantage or in some kind of hardship, or is vulnerable

in some way that the other person is not The one having compassion is somehow in a more favorable position in relationship to the one. 00:29:00

Carissa Actually, I did this little study on compassion and power relationships because I was struck by how often the word is used in the captive oppressor and the captive world.

Tim Oh, yeah.

Carissa God would give people favor so that their oppressors would have compassion on them. So I think there is something to the object of compassion being really vulnerable or viewed that way. Anyway.

Tim Yeah, that's right.

Carissa I don't know. This is an interesting implication, maybe. But when I think about human to human relationships and having compassion on someone else who's either really hurt me or who I think is crazy, or just can't understand, something that—I feel like my mom instilled this in me—that has really helped me to have compassion is to just remember, you know what, everyone was just an innocent child at one point in their life. Not in a patronizing way, but in a way that's like, everyone was just fragile. They've struggled, they're wounded. And there's something to activate in the empathy by remembering that people were children. 00:30:00

Tim Yeah, it's interesting. Psalm 103 is a good example. If I remember in the full context, Exodus 34:6, the language reappears multiple times in Psalm 103.

Carissa Yeah. It's like this reflection on Exodus 34.

Tim Yeah, it is interesting. A big part of that too is God considering the weakness and frailty of humanity. That's what draws God to people is their frailty. It's a depiction of just as generosity and abundant compassion. That's a core part of activating it is really coming to see someone else as vulnerable. Thinking of the judges' cycle where God's people are constantly turning away from Him, but somehow, he's always able to find a way to have compassion on them. 00:31:00

Section Break 00:31:49

Carissa Here's the other cool thing about compassion. We've been talking about how it's this nurturing and emotional word, and it's often used of God. But it's not just an emotion, it also involves action. So a lot of times compassion is used in parallel relationship with either forgiveness, or deliverance, or both. So forgiveness, or rescue. So God's compassion is often expressed by His forgiveness of people. And this is really good news since forgiveness implies failure, something we're all very familiar

with. So again, I think the idea is that when we fail and turn toward God, we can depend on His consistent character of compassion.

So here are some examples. Psalm 51 is just really great example of forgiveness and compassion. Here, David has just committed adultery, and to cover it up, murder and sacrificed the lives of his troops in the process, all to cover up the sin. And after Nathan, the prophet confronts him, here's what he says. Psalm 51. "Be gracious to me, O God, according to your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of your compassion, blot out my transgressions." In other words, because of your compassion, forgive me.

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Tim Wow. You know, he just uses three of the five words from Exodus 34:6.

Carissa I know. Yeah.

Jon Maybe he's familiar with it.

Tim Yes, I guess so. Gracious, lovingkindness, loyal love, and compassion. That's right. It's modeling for us what it means to read the golden calf story as about yourself.

Carissa Whooh, yeah, that's interesting.

Tim What's happening in that story is actually about the human condition.

Carissa Yeah. And then God's disposition toward humans.

Tim So he's actually let that story teach him what God's character is like, which allows these first words to be an appeal essentially. An appeal to God's character. So your point is that it's all of that. The compassion specifically is "according to your compassion, blot out my transgressions."

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Carissa Yeah, forgive forgiveness and compassion go together here. And if you look at this Isaiah 55 passage, in verse 7, I love this one, because I think it expresses really well the hope that we have in God's compassion as forgiveness when we fail. Because it's the wicked here. It's the wicked and the unrighteous who are invited to turn to Yahweh. "Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." So those two things are in parallel relationship there. He'll have compassion and He will abundantly pardon or forgive.

Jon What's interesting is there is a little bit of a contingent of thinkers who don't like empathy. They think empathy is dangerous. Because the human condition is such that we have empathy for our friends and our kin, but then we don't for people outside of that. And so if we're going to just make decisions on who to care about and who

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to rescue or forgive based off of an emotion of empathy, then we're going to oppress and marginalize people that aren't in the in-group.

Carissa So emotions can be deceitful, basically.

Jon Right, yeah. That we need to lean on something larger than just how we feel about someone in that given moment. That makes sense. And I know for me, I know I'm guilty of that. Like, if it's someone I really care about, I'm much easier to have compassion. If it's someone who's bugged me for a really long time, and they got what's coming to them, I'm just kind of like little self-satisfied for a moment. So it's a good thing. I'm not God, for one.

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Tim Jon, you've said many wonderful one-liners in the history of these conversations. That is one of them.

Jon This is really interesting passage you just read, though, where the unrighteous man, the wicked who's forsaken his way, God's not going to write off, and he will abundantly pardon. This emotion that God has is not contingent on I suppose how well that person has been in the past or how many promises that persons kept in the past. I suppose God thinks of all of us as His children. So that makes sense. And I don't think that way, I can't think of everyone as my brother and sister in the world because my mind is not that large.

Carissa No, I think, as you're talking, the image that this makes me think of, in addition to this like mother or father of children is that God is perpetually turned toward humanity. And humans do all sorts of things. They turn all sorts of different ways. So this call to turn back to God or turn to God for the first time or whatever is there. But the image of God that I'm getting when I read these passages is that He's always turned toward humans.

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Carissa Yeah. And He's waiting for humans to turn to Him and then He will consistently act in a way which is compassionate and gracious. And all the time to not just in a "I turned to God when I was 15." Which I did. But I mean, on a daily basis to recognize that He's a compassionate God and turn toward Him.

Jon Yeah

Tim Yeah, it's also interesting to think because compassion is linked with forgiveness, those we saw in the earlier passages, like from Nehemiah, it doesn't mean that God won't let people experience the consequences of their actions. He will. He does regularly. I actually think that's part of what God getting angry is about, which we'll talk about in a couple of episodes. So, compassionate and God's justice are not opposites. They're different expressions. But the compassion more has to do with

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once He's let somebody sit in the mess that they've made, He still turn towards them for when they respond to Him. That's your point.

Carissa Yeah. I don't think there's a relational turning away. So the point here is that, yeah, compassion can be expressed as forgiveness. And there's one other main way that it's expressed in action. And that's deliverance or rescue. And a lot of times those things go together. So even in the verses we've already read, we've seen that. But this example here from Deuteronomy 30, at the very end of Deuteronomy, after laying out the law and the blessings and curses that will come upon the people, one of which is exile, verses 2 and 3, say, "If you return to Yahweh with all your heart, turn back to God, then Yahweh your God will restore you from captivity and have compassion on you and will gather you again from all the peoples where Yahweh your God has scattered you."

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So what I notice here is that having compassion is equivalent to delivering from exile or bringing back into the land. It's this active deliverance. It means something so God has emotion and He also acts out of that emotion.

Tim Yeah, in a way, this is kind of the deep logic underneath that nursing mother metaphor that we looked at earlier in Isaiah. Isaiah is exploring it in a more creative, poetic way. God's compassion is what will bring about the restoration of Israel after exile. And then Isaiah takes that image and runs with the metaphor, so to speak, if compassion is restoration. And that's a core womby kind of response. Then he turns that into this beautiful metaphor. But they're both the same idea is that God hasn't forgotten His people and His compassion will bring about the New Jerusalem.

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Jon Wombful?

Tim I like womby.

Carissa Womby sounds like roomy, which it is not. Womb-like. How about that? I don't know. But all of this brings out something about God. He's deeply invested in people emotionally and He's also responsive, so emotionally invested and responsive to people. I think that's a really complex concept. It's not formulaic, but it's something true about the character of God as compassionate and responsive.

Tim This brings up a bigger issue that we can't resolve. I know we want to keep looking in the biblical story. But it's the God's self introduces here with a word describing a deep emotion. It has been challenging throughout Jewish and Christian tradition and people trying to understand the nature of God. Because the emotions are so much a part of the changing physical, mental state of a human. And thinking of God as an

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adaptive, changing emotional being has been really hard, especially when people want to think about the nature of God in philosophical terms.

Jon Yeah. Unchanging.

Tim It's a long standing...I'll just flag it. We don't have to talk about any more. But I'm just flagging it, that if you're really trying to fill out a robust, comprehensive view of God's nature, and as much as we can know it, people have had to wrestle with what seemed like two opposite ways of thinking about God's being. Is He unchanging and unmoved or is He genuinely moved by emotion? And how those two go together is they both seem to be true

Carissa Maybe the one thing this word reveals is that He is consistently moved by compassion.

Tim Correct.

Carissa So there's something you can depend on even if He is responsive. Not that that answers the question but...

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Jon And this circles back to we were talking a lot about the tension in these two verses, which is God uses these five attributes that are all warm and fuzzy, and then He says, "But I will not clear the guilty, and someone who does iniquity, I will hold them accountable." And to supercharge that, He says, "Generation after generation. Every generation that continues in the spirit of turning away from Me, I will hold accountable."

Here, when we look at compassion, it's so connected to that turning back, that really helps me understand how important that is to those two verses, which is you have two dispositions. You could be turned towards me or you'd be turned away from me. And when you're turned towards me, I'm compassionate. I don't know. Does that make God emotional? Yeah, I guess He's full of this desire for us. But it doesn't feel like wishy-washy.

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Carissa Yeah. Not moody or capricious.

Tim Capricious would be you are turning towards God and seeking His favor and you hope that He just might favor you back.

Jon Is he in a good mood today?

Tim Totally. That's right. That's not the kind of character trait. Yeah, that's good.

Jon Can we catch God after a good nap? Which is how some people think of being emotional, right? It's just being driven by how you feel in the moment. Did I have a good meal? And now I feel good and so I'm chummy. Ask me a favor and I'll do it for you versus when I had a bad day.

Tim That's interesting.

Jon That seems like a different thing then. Do I feel things deeply? And does that matter? The way that my heart is built, that I want relationships with people and I desire intimacy with others. That's also what we would call emotional. And God seems to be that way for sure. 00:44:00

Tim Yeah. You could say God's emotional in the sense of having deep feelings, but not emotional in the sense of fickle or unpredictable. He's very predictable. That's, in fact, what these two verses in Exodus 34 are all about.

Carissa Right. But to have an unemotional God who doesn't love or care deeply or suffer with. So I think it's really cool to view God in this way. Really comforting, really encouraging when we do fail to remember what His disposition is, that it's He is a consistent responder with compassion. I mean, we've read a lot now from the Hebrew Bible that shows that God responds, that He will rescue His people. So that's kind of the story, that it's a repetitive one. That people turn away, they cry out, He rescues. And ultimately, by the end of the Hebrew Bible, the people's rebellion lands them in exile, and they're scattered among the nations. 00:45:00

This is actually a state described as God not having compassion on them. But at the same time, the compassionate God can't leave them in the state of suffering. He cares too much. So this is why we find so many messages of hope in the Prophets to the people in exile. And we've read a lot of those already. Both of the parenting ones from Isaiah and Jeremiah are from that time. So by the close of the Hebrew Scriptures, there's this hope of God's compassion and this exhortation that the people would trust in this characteristic of God.

Then when we come to the New Testament, we see the story of Yahweh's deep compassion continue to play out through the person of Jesus. And I think the person of Jesus might just be a more accessible way for us to imagine compassion, because He so tangibly had compassion on the poor and the hurting, and the sick and the suffering. And we see that all over the Gospels especially. 00:46:00

Section Break 00:46:48

Carissa So that's expressed with the Greek word "oiktirmos", and its different forms. And then this one's a really fun related word that doesn't exactly translate. It's translated as "compassionate" in English, but it's not translated from *rakham*. It's *splagchnon*. That word actually refers more to the inner parts or again, that deep feeling. 00:47:00

Tim Your guts.

Carissa Yeah, exactly. Inner intestine.

Tim So you're pointing out there's two different families of Greek words connected to when we see the English word "compassion" in our Bibles. One of them is oiktirmos. Then this other one is essentially the word for guts in Greek.

Carissa Yeah. Which now makes sense I think. It's like that's the same idea as womb.

Tim Yeah, that's right.

Carissa The inner part of you that feels compassionate.

Tim That's right.

Jon Which word is used in the Septuagint?

Carissa Oiktirmos. Oiktirmos. That one means compassion, pity, to have compassion, or show mercy.

Tim And the Greek word is not tied to a body part. Oiktirmos is not.

Carissa In the New and Old Testament that's used in parallel with inner parts—the movings of the inner being. So I think in that sense, it is. But yeah, not in its root or anything. 00:48:00

Tim Whereas this other word splagchnon is a body part that is used as an image for the emotion of deep compassion.

Carissa Right. This word describes Jesus a lot. When he comes across a leper, He's moved with compassion and he heals him. Or he comes across two blind men, and he's moved with compassion and He gives them their sight. Or a young man dies, and He feels compassion for the mother and raises him from the dead.

One of my favorite stories, actually in the New Testament, it's Lazarus in John 11. Because Jesus loves Mary and Martha, so the story says. He says that Lazarus will die, but He'll raise him from the dead. But when Lazarus does die and he sees how devastated Mary and Martha are, He weeps. He's deeply moved. And it's a different word for "deeply moved" there. But I think just this picture...like Jesus knows that Lazarus is going to live. In a few minutes, He's going to raise him from the dead, but He still weeps with the women and over the suffering of His own friend. I just think that picture that deep emotion of Jesus suffering with people is really powerful. 00:49:00

Tim Along the same lines, I think what's interesting, at the end of Matthew 9, he's just looking at a big crowd, and he says, they were distressed, dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. So here, it's not necessarily sick. It might be

poor. I guess it highlights before that there were a lot of sick people there. But here's it's there are people without a leader. They're Israelites without...

Carissa They're vulnerable.

Tim ...without a Moses. And so they're vulnerable. It's like sheep without a shepherd. Yeah, they're vulnerable. That activates compassion. He sees a crowd again in chapter 14, He compassion. In chapter 15, He's looking at the group of hungry people that He feeds with the loaves and the fishes.

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Carissa He doesn't want them to faint on the way.

Tim Yeah. "I don't want to send them away hungry; they might faint on the way." I'm just thinking in Matthew, which begins by introducing Jesus as Emmanuel - God with us. So Jesus becomes the incarnation of God's womb. Like this is how God so consistently is in the Hebrew Bible. And then when the one who is God with us comes, then, of course, it's like follows that He would behave in exactly the same kind of way that Yahweh does.

Carissa I'll just end with a summary of the main points here and including some of what we talked about earlier. So God's compassion is a heartfelt response to the pain of His people. And then our compassion is also a heartfelt response of having experienced the compassion of God. We didn't get to look at this, but that's one example. In Ephesians 4:32, it says, "Be kind and compassionate, and forgive each other just as God has also forgiven you." So there's this kind of reciprocal responsiveness.

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Tim Actually, that's good. That's Ephesians 4:32. And once again compassion and forgiveness are joined.

Carissa Yeah, right. Right.

Tim That's good. Just like in a number of those passages we looked at in the Psalms and Prophets.

Carissa Yeah, throughout the Hebrew Bible, compassion is expressed as forgiveness and rescue. And then the ultimate expression of this is Jesus self-sacrifice, where He enters into our suffering, which we've been talking about that meaning of compassion, entering into our suffering and offering us forgiveness and rescue through His death. So I think all those things we've talked about in the Hebrew Scriptures come together in that act of Jesus.

Tim It's like the Bible's a unified story that leads to Jesus. Imagine that.

Carissa That's right. And then I think the final thing here, the final takeaway is that to hope in God's compassion means to trust in His deep care for people as His disposition. That He responds to the cries of the hurting, He's present, He's grieved, and He's moved to respond with deliverance and

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forgiveness. That's kind of the main picture of God thing. If we can take that in, I think that's the point of understanding the compassion of God.

Tim It strikes me an implication of that is we all have differing degrees of emotional awareness and sensitivity. Emotional intelligence is the phrase. Actually, Jon, you wrote a book with your wife about this, that emotions matter. It strikes me that if we are made in the image of this kind of God and are called to reflect that image well, part of that is a call to really develop my emotional awareness, especially in the area of empathy. I'm so grateful you brought that up, Jon. That's a corollary concept here. Because some people might say, "Well..." You know, maybe for some people that's important. But I think what you're pointing out, Carissa is that that really to let my own life and character mirror Jesus really, a big part of that is learning how to cultivate empathy that leads to compassion.

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Jon Carissa, the thing you said earlier about your mom teaching you to look at people as the baby they once were, I think what's beautiful about that, actually, is that we're all always acting out of our needs. And it's the human condition for us to do that in a really destructive way, often. But ultimately, I'm not bummed on how someone's acting because of the thing they need. It's because of the way they're trying to fit their need. So the empathy is really about getting to that underlying human condition of you are human like I am human, you have needs that you're trying to fulfill just like I have needs, and we're all trying to figure it out, and we're bumping into each other.

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I think what I kind of hear from the Apostle Paul, in Ephesians, is if we received so much compassion, if God can look past all of our destructive ways to try to meet our needs, and then Him come and truly meet our needs, then, yeah, that should be the way that we look towards others. And there is, like I mentioned, some people who think empathy is dangerous because it's going to only be applicable to the people that you love. But in the story of the Bible, we are all one human family, and so empathy should drive us towards a true compassion for every human no matter who they are.

I'm saying this for myself because I am such a rationally driven person who is so bad at empathy. I'm so bad at empathy. I got in trouble for it this week a number of times. It's just something about my wiring that I really have to work at it. And I think it is worthy. It's the first attribute that God says about Himself, is that He suffers with, or He feels deeply stirred with the things that we need and desire. That He wants to fill that for me.

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Carissa Yeah, that's right. I started this whole thing talking about how important our picture of God is, and that it affects how we view God, how we view ourselves, and how we view others. And with this word, I think we

can see it now. That when we aren't viewing God as compassionate, it's really hard to, one, approach Him as a human, it's really hard to have self-compassion, because why would we be viewed with compassion? And then it's really hard to have compassion on others. 00:56:00

So I think, for me, if I experienced those things in myself, I want to notice them as indicators that I'm not trusting that God really is compassionate when I feel those self-judgment or judgment of others, and then be able to meditate on this image of God turned towards me as like a mother as a compassionate mother and change my picture of God. I think that's what this compels me to do.

Tim It is. That's the end right there. That's perfect.

Carissa All right.

Jon Thank you, Carissa. The video on compassion will be out in fall of 2020 I believe. And the next attribute of God we're going to look at is gracious.

Tim Yeah, gracious. In fact, these two words, compassionate and gracious, are often quoted together throughout the...Remember Exodus 34:6 is the most requested verse within the Bible itself. And it's usually compassionate and then that next one, gracious. They're not identical, but they're related. That's what we'll explore next. 00:57:00

Jon Cool.

Thanks for listening to this episode of the BibleProject podcast. Next week, we're going to continue in the series and look at the next attribute of God in Exodus 34, which is that God is gracious.

Tim Biblical vocabulary has worked itself into the English language at such deep levels, we forget it. We forget that it's there. "Grace" is a very common English word. Hebrew has that same kind of dual nuance of meaning that we use it in English. In other words, in Hebrew, you can use this *khanun* root in that sense of graceful just like you can in English. It can describe somebody's character - gracious. It can also describe how something is perceived as being elegant, or charming, or graceful.

Jon Beginning in September, we're going to begin releasing our seventh season of videos. As you might know, these podcast episodes are really in preparation for writing a script, which will then become a short animated video that condenses all of this into a visual explanation. We put those up on YouTube, youtube.com/thebibleproject. And you can also find all these videos on our website, thebibleproject.com. The first video in season seven is a word study video on compassion, narrated by our very own, Dr. Carissa Quinn. 00:58:00

This episode was produced by Dan Gummel, show notes by Camden McAfee, and the theme music is by the band Tents. The BibleProject is a nonprofit. We're in Portland, Oregon. We exist to help us all experience the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. Everything we create is free because it's already been paid for by a growing number of patrons that have joined us in this mission. Thank you so much for being a part of this with us.

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