**Session 6: The Lord Merciful and Gracious**

“The Lord said to Moses, “Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. 2 Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. 3 No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain.” 4 So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. 5 The Lorddescended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. 6 The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+34%3A1-9&version=ESV#fen-ESV-2504a)] forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” 8 And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. 9 And he said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance”(Ex. 34:1-9).

**Exodus 34 Is Proof of God's Mercy**

The sheer fact that Exodus 34 exists is proof that God is a God of mercy. This is the second time God has met Moses on the mountain to make a covenant with the people of Israel. When Moses came down from the mountain the first time, the people had fallen in love with the works of their own hands. They were worshiping a golden calf.

The covenant that God made with the people on the mountain that first time went like this: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" ([Exodus 19:5–6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2019.5%E2%80%936)). But instead of resting in the value of God, the people became restless and craved the value of their own workmanship. So they exchanged the glory of the invisible God for the image of their own glory—a golden cow. They had been unbelieving at the Red Sea. They had grumbled against God in the wilderness. So this rebellion with the golden cow should have ended God's patience. Enough with this stiff-necked people!

But here we are on the mountain again, awaiting the revelation of God. The people have not been destroyed. The sheer fact of this meeting is proof that God is merciful.

**God Proclaims His Name to Moses**

But there is something even more amazing than the sheer fact that God is willing to meet Moses again and renew the covenant: namely, the content of what he reveals. [Exodus 34:5](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2034.5) says "The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with Moses there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord."

God cries out in verse 6, "Yahweh! Yahweh!" And then he spells out the meaning of that name in words whose sweetness has never been surpassed, not even in the New Testament: "A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

**Two Problems in God's Self-Description**

God is YAHWEH—the God who is, the God who is free, the God who is almighty, and the God who is merciful. There is a connection between his absolute existence and his sovereign freedom and his omnipotence and overflowing mercy.

**Who God Does and Doesn't Forgive**

First, after declaring the fact that God "forgives iniquity and transgression and sin" (v. 7), the text goes on to say, "But who will by no means clear the guilty." So the problem is: How can he forgive the guilty and yet not clear the guilty? Or: who are the guilty he forgives and who are the guilty he refuses to forgive?

The most fruitful way I have found for answering this is to see how the other Old Testament writers used this passage. Take Joel and Jonah, for example.

**Joel's Use of This Passage**

In [Joel 2:12–13](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Joel%202.12%E2%80%9313) God says to the rebellious people, "Yet even now return to me with all your heart with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." And Joel goes on to encourage the people, "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil."

In other words Joel uses [Exodus 34:6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2034.6) to encourage the people that if they return to the Lord, he will turn away from the evil he is about to bring on them. So the assumption is that the people whom the Lord will not forgive are the unrepentant people who will not return to God with all their heart. That's the way Joel understood [Exodus 34:5–7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2034.5%E2%80%937). Forgiveness is for the repentant. The refusal of forgiveness is for the unrepentant.

**Jonah's Use of This Passage**

Jonah sees things the same way. After he preaches to the Ninevites, they repent, God spares them, and Jonah is angry with God for being so merciful. In [Jonah 3:10–4:2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jonah%203.10%E2%80%934.2) it says,

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "I pray thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil."

Here Jonah quotes [Exodus 34:6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2034.6) to explain why God had turned his wrath away from a sinful people who repented from their evil way. This is God's nature. It is his name. But notice that Jonah agrees with Joel that whether God forgives the Ninevites or not depends on whether or not the Ninevites repent and turn from their evil ways.

**God Forgives Guilty People Who Are Repentant**

Now let's go back to the words of God on Mount Sinai in [Exodus 34:6–7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2034.6%E2%80%937). On the one hand the Lord says he "forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin." On the other hand he says that he will "not clear the guilty." Yet all sinners are guilty. So which guilty ones will he forgive? And which guilty ones will he not forgive?

The answer of Joel and Jonah is that he will forgive the guilty who turn from their sin and turn to God with their whole heart. And the guilty who spurn his offer of mercy he will by no means clear.

2. **The Father's Sins and the Children's Sins**

The second problem in this text comes from the next words in verse 7. It says that God "visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." But [Ezekiel 18:20](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezek%2018.20) says, "The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son." How can these two texts keep from contradicting each other?

**What Ezekiel Has in View**

The most crucial thing to see is that Ezekiel has in view a son who does not follow in the sinful footsteps of his father, but Exodus has in view children who do continue in their parents sinful footsteps.

[Ezekiel 18:19](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezek%2018.19) says, "When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live." In other words, he won't die for his father's sins because he is not following in his father's footsteps.

**What Exodus Has in View**

But the parallel to [Exodus 34:7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2034.7) in [Exodus 20:5](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2020.5) says that God visits "the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me." In other words, the children share in the father's punishment because they share in the father's sins.

So Ezekiel teaches that any child that turns from the sinful ways of his father and obeys God will not be punished for the sins of his father. And Exodus teaches that any child that goes on sinning like his father will share the father's punishment.

When God visits the sins of the fathers on the children, he doesn't punish sinless children for the sins of their fathers. He simply lets the effects of the fathers' sins take their natural course, infecting and corrupting the hearts of the children. For parents who love their children this is one of the most sobering texts in all the Bible.

The more we let sin get the upper hand in our own lives, the more our children will suffer for it. Sin is like a contagious disease. My children don't suffer because I have it. They catch it from me and then suffer because they have it.

**God’s Name, Yahweh!**

God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” ([Exodus 3:15](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%203.15)). God’s name is almost always translated LORD (all caps) in the English Bible. But the Hebrew would be pronounced something like “Yahweh,” and is built on the word for “I am.”

So every time we hear the word Yahweh, or every time you see LORD in the English Bible, you should think: this is a proper name (like Peter or John) built out of the word for “I am” and reminding us each time that God absolutely is.

There are at least 10 things the name Yahweh, “I AM,” says about God:

1. He never had a beginning. Every child asks, “Who made God?” And every wise parent says, “Nobody made God. God simply is. And always was. No beginning.”

2. God will never end. If he did not come into being he cannot go out of being, because he is being.

3. God is absolute reality. There is no reality before him. There is no reality outside of him unless he wills it and makes it. He is all that was eternally. No space, no universe, no emptiness. Only God.

4. God is utterly independent. He depends on nothing to bring him into being or support him or counsel him or make him what he is.

5. Everything that is not God depends totally on God. The entire universe is utterly secondary. It came into being by God and stays in being moment by moment on God’s decision to keep it in being.

6. All the universe is by comparison to God as nothing. Contingent, dependent reality is to absolute, independent reality as a shadow to substance. As an echo to a thunderclap. All that we are amazed by in the world and in the galaxies, is, compared to God, as nothing.

7. God is constant. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He cannot be improved. He is not becoming anything. He is who he is.

8. God is the absolute standard of truth and goodness and beauty. There is no law-book to which he looks to know what is right. No almanac to establish facts. No guild to determine what is excellent or beautiful. He himself is the standard of what is right, what is true, what is beautiful.

9. God does whatever he pleases and it is always right and always beautiful and always in accord with truth. All reality that is outside of him he created and designed and governs as the absolute reality. So he is utterly free from any constraints that don’t originate from the counsel of his own will.

10. God is the most important and most valuable reality and person in the universe. He is more worthy of interest and attention and admiration and enjoyment than all other realities, including the entire universe.

**Hope for the Downcast in God's Self-Description**

The Lord comes down and proclaims his name: "Yahweh! Yahweh! A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

There are two kinds of people who are hard to help in pastoral counseling. One thinks he is too far gone to be forgiven. The other thinks forgiveness is a snap. One thinks he is utterly disqualified for the kingdom. The other thinks he is a shoe-in. The one thinks God is unbendingly wrathful. The other thinks God is a pushover. One is blind to the magnificence of God's mercy. The other is blind to the magnitude of his own misery.

**Five Expressions of God's Nature**

If I wanted to make clear to my sons that I intended to be their father and take care of them and treat them with mercy, I might use two or three different expressions and perhaps repeat myself to stress the truth of what I was saying. So God condescends to use our devices and make his mercy crystal clear. He piles phrase upon phrase to lay open his heart of love.

**They fall into five expressions**:

1. a God merciful and gracious
2. slow to anger,
3. abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
4. keeping steadfast love for thousands,
5. forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

**The Triangle of God's Mercy**

Picture a triangle: at either side of the base are the first and last statements about God, namely, that he is merciful and gracious (on the left side of the base) and that he forgives iniquity and transgression and sin (on the right side of the base).

Then, half way up the sides of the triangle on either side, picture the second and fourth statements about God, namely, that he is slow to anger (on the left side) and that he keeps steadfast love for thousands (on the right side of the triangle).

Finally, picture at the top of the triangle in the middle the third statement about God, namely, that he is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Now the point of this picture is to suggest that the first and last statements go together and the second and fourth go together and the third is central to all five. Let's start with the center and top of the triangle.

**Abounding in Steadfast Love and Faithfulness**

God abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness. Two images come to my mind. The heart of God is like an inexhaustible spring of water that bubbles up love and faithfulness at the top of the mountain. Or the heart of God is like a volcano that burns so hot with love that it blasts the top off the mountain and flows year after year with the lava of love and faithfulness.

When God uses the word "abounding," he wants us to understand that the resources of his love are not limited. In a way, he's like the Federal government: Whenever there's a need, he can just print more money to cover it. But the difference is that God has an infinite treasury of golden love to cover all the currency he prints. The U.S. government is in a dream world. God banks very realistically on the infinite resources of his deity.

[God is who he is](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1984/451_I_Am_Who_I_Am/) , [God is free](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1984/453_I_Will_Be_Gracious_to_Whom_I_Will_Be_Gracious/) , [God is almighty](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1984/454_My_Name_Is_God_Almighty/) , and God is merciful. The connection is that the absolute existence, the sovereign freedom, and the omnipotence of God are the volcanic fullness that explodes in an overflow of love.

The sheer magnificence of God means that he does not need us to fill up any deficiency in himself. Instead his infinite self-sufficiency spills over in love to us who need him. We can bank on his love precisely because we believe in the absoluteness of his existence, the sovereignty of his freedom, and the limitlessness of his power.

So at the top of the triangle stands the infinite abundance of God's love, spilling over down each side for the good of his repentant people.

**Slow to Anger, Keeping Steadfast Love**

In the middle of each side are the second and fourth statements about God in [Exodus 34:6–7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod%2034.6%E2%80%937). He is slow to anger, and he keeps steadfast love for thousands. When God says that he keeps steadfast love, the focus is on the durableness of his love. It lasts. It perseveres. It keeps on flowing.

And I see a connection between that perseverance of God's love and the statement that God is slow to anger. Love cannot last where anger has a hair trigger. If God's anger had a hair trigger, his love would not last one day in my life. If rockets of wrath shot out from God's eyes every time I sinned, I would be blown to smithereens before I got out of bed in the morning.

But he shouts on Mount Sinai, "I am slow to anger!" He holds back his wrath by the reigns of his love. He is long-suffering. He is extraordinarily patient. And so he keeps steadfast love. He guards it and preserves it by being slow to anger.

**Merciful and Forgiving**

This leads us to the final pair of statements about God at the base of the triangle. If God is slow to anger even though we give him ample reason to be angry with us because of our sin, then he must be very merciful and forgiving—"merciful and gracious—forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." The reason God is slow to anger is not that he doesn't notice our sin but that he forgives it.

And not just some kinds of sin. For those of you who feel that there is a category of sin that is beyond God's forgiveness please submit your own opinion and feeling to the Word of God. The reason God used all three Hebrew words for sin here is to show that all sorts and degrees of sin are forgivable. He forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. He piles them up to make plain what he means. There are no categories of unforgivable sins. The only sin that is unforgivable is the sin that is unrepentable. If you can repent and turn from your sin, you can be forgiven.