

GOD'S SELF-REVELATION IN EXODUS 34:6-8

J. Carl Laney

TO GET ACQUAINTED WITH SOMEONE, a person can ask others about that individual. Or a person can meet the individual personally and ask appropriate questions. In seeking to know God many Christians study what others say about Him. But a better way to get to know God is to ask Him about Himself. This is exactly what Moses did in Exodus 33:18 when he said, "I pray You, show me Your glory." The answer to Moses' request is given in 34:6-7, in which God revealed several of His divine attributes. This passage is one of the most important theological texts in Scripture, because it is the only place where God actually described Himself, listing His own glorious attributes.

The importance of Exodus 34:6-7 as a foundation for biblical theology is evidenced by the fact that this statement is repeated many times in the Old Testament (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Pss. 103:8, 17; 145:8; Jer. 32:18-19; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2). Echoes of this self-revelation also appear in Deuteronomy 5:9-10; 1 Kings 3:6; Lamentations 3:32; Daniel 9:4; and Nahum 1:3. The biblical writers clearly regarded Exodus 34:6-7 as a foundational statement about God.

Strangely, this great passage has received little attention from systematic theologians. For example it does not appear in the Scripture index of Chafer's *Systematic Theology*.¹ Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* cites Exodus 34:6 twice and 34:7 once, but only as proof texts for certain divine attributes, without discussion or comment.² Erickson cites the text in support of the graciousness of

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¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 8:99.

² L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 69, 73, 370.

God and the persistence of God.³ Grudem recommends the text for Scripture memory, but offers no comment or discussion.⁴ Exodus 34:6-7 has fared slightly better in biblical theologies,⁵ but it is seldom given detailed attention as a foundational text for one's understanding of the character and attributes of God.

THE CONTEXT OF THE REVELATION (EXOD. 32-33)

God's self-revelation to Moses is set in the context of one of the spiritual low points in Israel's history. Exodus 32 records how Israel's sin of idolatry resulted in the breaking of the newly established covenant with the Lord. While the Israelites were camped at Mount Sinai, Moses ascended the mountain to meet with God and receive the tablets of the Law. When this took longer than expected, the people approached Aaron with a request, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (32:1).

Three failures can be noted here. First, the Israelites failed to recognize their exclusive allegiance to the Lord, with whom they had entered into covenant. The first of the Ten Commandments stated, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (20:3), but the people demanded of Aaron, "make us gods [אֱלֹהִים] who will go before us." Second, they failed to acknowledge that it was God, not Moses, who had delivered them from Egypt. In his song Moses had credited God with Israel's deliverance from Egypt (15:1-18). Now the Israelites were attributing their deliverance to Moses. Third, the Israelites failed to rely on Moses, their covenant mediator. Moses had not told the people when he would return from his mountaintop meeting with God. So when Moses delayed, they gave up hope and sought someone else to lead them.

Surprisingly Aaron quickly yielded to public pressure by fashioning a golden calf, which he then presented to the people, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (32:4). This calf may be reminiscent of the Apis bull cult, which was

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 321-22.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 209.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1978), 233; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:69, 233; and Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 54.

prevalent in Memphis, Egypt. It may also recall Mnevis bull worship in Heliopolis. But these places were some distance from Goshen, the district where the Israelites lived when in Egypt. Wood suggests that the bull cults connected with the worship of Horus more likely influenced Aaron.⁶ Aaron announced to the people, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD" (32:5). These words suggest that Aaron intended for the image of the calf to represent Israel's God, Yahweh. Cassuto reasons that Aaron's words were an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade the Israelites from worshipping the calf and to encourage them to turn back to the Lord.⁷

On Mount Sinai God informed Moses of the idolatry that had taken place in the camp. God charged the people with having "corrupted" themselves (v. 7). Then He threatened to destroy the Israelites, suggesting to Moses that He could raise up a new nation from his descendants (v. 10). This was a real test for Israel's leader. Would he choose his own exaltation over Israel's preservation? After all that he had experienced with these rebellious people, one can imagine that he was tempted to stand back and let God deal with them. But instead, Moses interceded on behalf of the people, and so God withheld His judgment (vv. 11-13). The words "the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people" (32:14) are not inconsistent with the doctrine of God's immutability. Announcements of judgment are frequently conditional. God sometimes withholds His judgment in response to repentance or intercession because He is unchanging in His compassion and grace (2 Pet. 3:9).⁸

Because of Israel's failure in the matter of the golden calf, the Lord withdrew His presence from among the people in the camp (Exod. 33:1-7). He promised to send an angel to lead them into the Promised Land, but God would not go on in the midst of such sinful covenant-breakers. Moses was no doubt discouraged by Israel's failure. He wanted to be with God, and yet God had left the camp. To resolve this situation Moses set up a small tent some distance from the Israelite camp, where he could meet with God (v. 7).⁹

⁶ Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 118, n. 37.

⁷ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 413.

⁸ See Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October-December 1995): 387-99.

⁹ "Tent of meeting" (אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד) here does not refer to the tabernacle, for it had not yet been built (see Exod. 40). Cassuto concurs with this assessment (*The Book of*

Sheltered there from the desert wind and sun, Moses spent time alone with the Lord. Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud descended to the tent entrance and God spoke with Moses (v. 9). This must have been a very special experience for Moses. Reflecting on this time he spent with God, he wrote, "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (v. 11). The expression "face to face" (פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים) is used five times in the Old Testament to describe close intimacy between God and His people (Gen. 32:31; Exod. 33:11; Deut. 34:10; Judg. 6:22; Ezek. 20:35).

More than anything else, Moses wanted to know and experience God. This desire is clearly reflected in his prayer, "Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways, that I may know You" (Exod. 33:13). By desiring to know God's ways Moses wanted to become better acquainted with His actions, directions, and manner of doing things. He wanted to know God more intimately, more intelligently, more personally than ever before. With this desire in mind he said, "I pray You, show me Your glory" (v. 18). The word קְבוֹד ("glory") is associated with a verb that means "to be heavy." The noun is sometimes used with reference to someone's "weighty" reputation or honored position (1 Kings 3:13). The word refers to being "weighty in the sense of being noteworthy or impressive."¹⁰ Similarly it refers to the reality and splendor of God's glorious presence. Sometimes His glory was made visible in association with the tabernacle or temple (Exod. 40:34; 1 Kings 8:11; Ezek. 9:3-4).

In Exodus 33:18 Moses was asking for a full self-disclosure of God's glorious person--a revelation that would sustain and encourage Moses, enabling him to carry on as Israel's leader. But Moses asked for more than God was willing to grant. The Lord responded by telling Moses that mortal man cannot see God in the fullness of His divine glory and still survive the experience (v. 20; see also John 1:18; Col. 1:15). But God graciously accommodated Himself to Moses by announcing that He would make His "goodness" pass before Moses and would "proclaim" His name in Moses' presence (Exod. 33:19). Durham suggests that "goodness" (טוֹב) here may imply the "beauty" of the Lord and so it anticipated a

Exodus, 430).

¹⁰ John N. Oswalt, "קְבוֹד" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Larid Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:426.

theophany.¹¹ But in this case God gave Moses not a vision of how He appears but a description of what He is. The promise to proclaim His name is probably another way of saying the same thing. In biblical times a person's "name" (שֵׁם) was associated with his or her character and reputation.¹² For Yahweh to proclaim His name meant He would declare or announce His attributes, the essence of His divine character.

God told Moses that He would place him in the cleft of a rock, covering him with His hand until He passed by. Then God told Moses, "I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but my face shall not be seen" (v. 23). This statement is rich in anthropomorphisms, attributing to God the human features of a hand, back, and face. Since God does not have a physical body (John 4:24), these terms reveal how intimately and personally God would disclose Himself to Moses.

THE REVELATION OF GOD'S GLORY (EXOD. 34:6-7)

God fulfilled His promise to give Moses a fresh revelation of His glory. Once again He called Moses to Mount Sinai (34:1-2), and He "descended in the cloud and stood there with him" (v. 5). In its many uses in Exodus and Numbers, the word "cloud" (עָנָן) is associated with and represents God's presence. The last phrase in verse 5, "he called upon the name of the LORD," is somewhat ambiguous. Did Moses "call upon" the name of Yahweh, or did Yahweh "proclaim" His name? Though the Hebrew verb קָרָא can be translated either way, it seems preferable in this context to understand that God proclaimed His name or attributes, for this is what He had promised Moses (33:19). Davies points out that there is no change of subject for the verbs "passed by" and "proclaimed" in verse 6. He translates it this way: "Yahweh passed by before him, and (Yahweh) proclaimed. . . ."¹³ This interpretation has the support of a number of noted commentators.¹⁴ What follows, as Fretheim notes,

¹¹ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 152.

¹² Walter C. Kaiser, "שֵׁם," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:934:

¹³ G. Henton Davies, *Exodus* (London:SCM, 1967), 246.

¹⁴ For example George Bush, *Notes on Exodus* (Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976), 243; Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 603; Casuto, *Exodus*, 436; Durham, *Exodus*, 453; and T. E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 301.

is a "virtual exegesis"¹⁵ of Yahweh's name as God disclosed His character and attributes to Moses.

YAHWEH, YAHWEH EL

God began His self-revelation to Moses by pronouncing His divine name Yahweh (יהוה) twice, followed by El (אל), the biblical designation for Deity. This is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where this precise formula occurs.¹⁶ The translators of the Septuagint apparently took the second occurrence of "Yahweh" as redundant, so they deleted it. Cassuto takes the double tetragrammaton as appositional, translating "The LORD, He is the LORD."¹⁷ Davies interprets the construction as a doubling of the divine name followed by a designation and description, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God. . . ."¹⁸ Durham comments that the double occurrence of יהוה is "a deliberate repetition of the confessional use of the tetragrammaton, emphasizing the reality of Yahweh present in his very being, linking this proof to Moses to the earlier proof-of-Presence narratives that are begun in Exodus 3, and providing an anchor line for the list of five descriptive phrases to follow."¹⁹ It seems clear that the twofold occurrence of יהוה emphasizes God's name, thereby causing the listener to pause and reflect on its meaning and the description that follows.

The meaning of God's name Yahweh was first revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:13-15.²⁰ "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to

¹⁵ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 301.

¹⁶ The abbreviation יה ("Yah") does occur twice together in Isaiah 38:11.

¹⁷ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 439.

¹⁸ Davies, *Exodus*, 246.

¹⁹ Durham, *Exodus*, 453.

²⁰ The meaning of the name Yahweh, a worthy study by itself, is beyond the scope of this article. Many scholars have contributed significantly to the understanding of this name. Among them are W. R. Arnold, "The Divine Name in Exodus iii.14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 24 (1905): 107-65; William F. Albright, "Contributions to Biblical Archaeology and Philology: 2. The Divine Name," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 43 (1924): 370-78; E. Schild, "On Exodus iii 14-'I Am That I Am,'" *Vetus Testamentum* 4 (1954): 296-302; S. D. Goitein, "YHWH the Passionate: The Monotheistic Meaning and Origin of the Name YHWH," *Vetus Testamentum* 6 (1956): 1-9; David Noel Freedman, "The Name of the God of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960): 151-56; R. Abba, "The Divine Name Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 (1961): 320-28; S. Mowinckel, "The Name of the God of Moses," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 121-33; and Roland de Vaux, "The Revelation of the Divine Name YHWH," in *Proclamation and Presence*, ed. John I. Durham and J. R. Porter (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1970): 48-75.

you" (3:14). The words "I AM" translate a first-person form of the Hebrew verb הָיָה ("to be"). The meaning is that God is the self-existent One. As Allen states, "He exists dependent upon nothing or no one excepting his own will."²¹ When God said, "I AM," He was referring to His active, life-giving existence. The words "I AM" express the meaning of God's name, but they are not the name itself. God's name is revealed in verse 15 as Yahweh. The Hebrew name Yahweh is probably best understood as derived from a third-person form of the Hebrew verb הָיָה ("to be"), emphasizing, as in the case of "I AM," that He is the self-existent One.

The word אֱלֹהִים is an ancient Semitic term used in the Bible as a generic name for "god" and as a designation for the true God of Israel.²² Scholars have debated the root meaning of the term. Frequent suggestions for the original meaning include "power" or "fear," but these proposals are challenged and much disputed.²³ It is rare to find אֱלֹהִים in Scripture without some word or description that elevates and distinguishes the true God from false deities that bear the designation "god." Yahweh, the God of Israel, is "the great אֱלֹהִים " (Jer. 32:18), "the אֱלֹהִים of heaven" (Ps. 136:26), and "the אֱלֹהִים most high" (Gen. 14:18-19). In Exodus 34:6 אֱלֹהִים is used in connection with the double name Yahweh. God identified Himself to Moses with the words "Yahweh, Yahweh God." As the double name provides emphasis, the designation אֱלֹהִים begins to provide a description. The One speaking to Moses was none other than Yahweh, the true and living God.

THE LIST OF ATTRIBUTES

In critical studies scholars have discussed the origin and use of the list of characteristics revealed in the proclamation of Yahweh's name. Dentan concludes that in Exodus 34:6-8 and related passages the entire "formula" was produced by the circle of Israel's sages and inserted into the Exodus narrative by them in their redaction of the Pentateuch.²⁴ Other scholars have assumed a cultic origin and liturgical use for this summary of Yahweh's characteris-

²¹ Ronald B. Allen, "What Is in a Name?" in *God: What Is He Like?* ed. W. F. Kerr (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1977), 122.

²² J. B. Scott, " אֱלֹהִים ," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:41.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:42.

²⁴ R. C. Dentan, "The Literary Affinities of Exodus XXXIV 6f.," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963): 34-51.

tics.²⁵ Others argue that the origin of the "formula" must be found in the narrative context of Israel's first disobedience and Yahweh's judgment. Durham has noted the relationship between God's dealings with Israel in the Book of Exodus and the things He said about Himself in His self-revelation. "Yahweh's compassion had just been demonstrated (32:14), and his tendency to be favorable was in the process of exercise (33:12-17). His slowness to grow angry had been attested from the moment of Israel's complaint at the sea (14:11-12), and his unchanging love and reliability were the reason Moses had still been able to plead after the terrible cancellation made by the people's disobedience with the calf. His keeping of unchanging love to the thousands and the removal of their guilt, their transgression and their sin. . . were in process."²⁶

God had revealed Himself to Moses by His works in relationship with His people. Now in Exodus 34:6-7 He revealed Himself through words.²⁷

Compassionate. The first thing God revealed about Himself is that He is compassionate. The word **חַסְדִּים** describes a deep love rooted in some natural bond.²⁸ This love is usually that of a superior being (God) for an inferior being (a human). The psalmist declared, "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD [Yahweh] has compassion [**חַסְדִּים**] on those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:13). Girdlestone defines it as expressing "a deep and tender feeling of compassion, such as is aroused by the sight of weakness or suffering in those that are dear to us or need our help."²⁹

The Old Testament uses **חַסְדִּים** thirteen times. Twelve of those occurrences refer to God, and one (Ps. 112:4) refers to man. When used of God, the word points up the strong bond He has with those He calls His children. He looks on His people much as mothers and fathers look on their children--with concern for their needs and tender feelings of love.

Another concept associated with God's compassion is His un-

²⁵ W. Beyerlin, *Origins and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 137-38; and J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 322-23.

²⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 454.

²⁷ The discussion of these attributes builds on J. Carl Laney, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better*, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word, 1999), 48-56.

²⁸ L. J. Coppes, "**חַסְדִּים**," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:841.

²⁹ R. B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 108.

conditional choice. "I . . . will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exod. 33:19). God's compassion is extended by His sovereign decree to those whom He chooses. God's compassion is also linked with His faithfulness. "For the LORD [Yahweh] your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them" (Deut. 4:31). And because He is compassionate, He is also forgiving. The psalmist declared, "But He, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them" (Ps. 78:38). Through the exercise of His compassion, God spared a repentant people who were deserving of judgment. Deuteronomy 30:1-3 reveals that repentance from sin will be met with God's compassion and restoration to blessing. A brief survey of prophetic literature reveals that Yahweh's compassion provides the basis for Israel's future restoration (Isa. 49:13; Jer. 12:15), national redemption (Mic. 7:19), and eschatological hope (Isa. 14:1; Jer. 33:26; Zech. 1:16). Anticipating the future blessings for His people, God declared, "For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you" (Isa. 54:7).

God is a compassionate Father. He loves His own, those whom He chose. And He will never forsake them. He will always be available in believers' times of need, seeking their good for His ultimate glory. Although infinitely holy, His compassion allows Him to deal gently with weak and failing people. He is full of tender sympathy for the sufferings and the miseries of human frailty. Because of His compassion He is always ready and willing to forgive sins and to restore people to Himself.

Gracious. The second fact God wanted Moses to know about Himself is that He is gracious. The Hebrew adjective יְנִיב depicts "a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need."³⁰ The verb יָנַב usually refers to a stronger person coming to help a weaker one who has no claim for such favorable treatment. Most of the occurrences of this verb in the Hebrew Bible have Yahweh as the subject. Jacob explained to his brother Esau that his family and property were due to the fact that God had "dealt graciously" with him (Gen. 33:5, 11). In praying and fasting for his dying son, David said, "Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live" (2 Sam. 12:22). Showing such grace seems to be a divine prerogative, for Yahweh declared to Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" (Exod. 33:19). Often God's grace is seen in His delivering of His own from their

³⁰ Edwin Yamauchi, " יָנַב ," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:302.

enemies or from their sins (Pss. 26:11; 51:1; 123:3).

The word "gracious" is used thirteen times in the Old Testament, eleven times in combination with רַחֵם ("compassionate"). Like the verbal form רָחַם the adjective רַחֵם denotes the free favor of a superior given to one who is needy but undeserving. Yamauchi notes that all the occurrences except one refer to Yahweh, who is favorable toward the afflicted and needy (Exod. 22:27; 34:6;-2 Chron. 30:9; Neh. 9:17, 31; Pss. 86:15; 103:8, 111:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2).³¹ The single exception to this pattern, in Psalm 112:4, uses the adjective to describe the God-fearing person, who shares certain characteristics with God. Yet with humankind this attribute is not perfect. The kindness people extend to others may not be unbiased or without hope of reward. With God, things are different. He has no ulterior motives. Because God is gracious, He will hear the cry of the poor (Exod. 22:27). Because God is gracious, He will not turn away from the repentant (2 Chron. 30:9). Because God is gracious, He will not forsake His people (Neh. 9:17, 31).

The grace of God is featured throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, emphasizing the theological basis for God's goodness and kindness toward His people. Ryrie wrote, "Christianity is distinct from all other religions because it is a message of grace. Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God's grace; salvation is by grace; and grace governs and empowers Christian living. Without grace Christianity is nothing."³²

Slow to anger. The Bible reveals that God has a legitimate basis for anger: The sin and disobedience of His people dishonors and displeases Him (Exod. 32:10). But God's anger, though fierce (Num. 25:4; 32:14; Josh. 7:26; Jer. 25:37), is not sinful or evil. It is grounded in His holy character, which is offended by the sinful rebellion of His creatures. God's anger often issues in His chastising (Pss. 6:1; 38:1) and punishing (2 Sam. 6:7; Jer. 44:6) His people. Yet while God may be rightfully angry over sin and disobedience, He is not quick to become angry. The Hebrew expression אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם ("slow to anger") is used ten times in the Bible to refer to God's patience in dealing with those whose sins arouse His wrath. The expression includes the noun אַרְךָ, meaning "long," and אַפַּיִם, a word for "nose." In Hebrew the nose is associated with anger, apparently because when a person is angry, his or her face and nose may involuntarily redden and appear to "burn."

God's being "slow to anger" means that He takes a long time

³¹ Ibid, 304.

³² Charles C. Ryrie, *The Grace of God* (Chicago: Moody, 1963),9.

before getting angry. It is as if He takes a long, deep breath as He deals with sin and holds His anger in abeyance. In discussing this concept Hamilton suggests that God's nose becomes so long that it would "take forever to burn completely."³³ However, this wrongly seems to suggest that God would never actually become angry and express His divine wrath, a view not supported by Scripture (Exod. 4:14; Num. 11:1; 22:22; Josh. 7:1). Because God is holy, He must respond with wrath and judgment on sin and disobedience. His righteousness demands that He not leave wickedness unpunished. Such lenience would be contrary to His holy character. But God does not hasten to punish the sinner. Instead, He exercises His attribute of longsuffering. God's prolonged and patient dealings with the wicked should not be interpreted to mean that sin is not serious or does not matter. Rather, God's patience gives the wicked time and opportunity to repent. As Peter wrote, God is "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

God is in no hurry to judge sinners. Yet there will be a day when the wicked must stand before God's great, white throne and be judged according to their deeds (Rev. 20:11-15). Meanwhile God continues to demonstrate His patience and grace. Though His anger is being kindled by human sinfulness, it is being kindled very slowly.

Abounding in lovingkindness. The next thing God revealed to Moses about Himself is that He is "abounding in lovingkindness and truth." The word רַב ("abounding") is used to describe what is present in abundant quantity or quality. The phrase רַב־רַחֲמִים וְאֱמֶת occurs thirteen times in the Old Testament.³⁴ Some scholars say this phrase is a hendiadys, a figure of speech in which two words represent one idea. Cassuto, for example, says this phrase speaks of the attribute of "lovingkindness of truth," or "true and faithful lovingkindness."³⁵ Others say the phrase could refer to God's "true love" or "faithful love." However, since there is no absolute certainty that the compound phrase reflects a single idea, and no consensus as to the idea being represented, it seems preferable to treat the words as separate attributes of God.

The Hebrew word רַחֲמִים variously translated "kindness" (JB), "lovingkindness" (KJV, NASB), "love" (NIV), or "steadfast love" (NRSV), has the basic meaning of "unfailing love" or "loyalty." The

³³ Victor P. Hamilton, "רַחֲמִים," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:72.

³⁴ Genesis 24:49; 47:29; Exodus 34:6; Joshua 2:14; 2 Samuel 2:6; 15:20; Psalms 25:10; 61:7 (Heb., 8); 85:10 (Heb., 11); 86:15; 89:14 (Heb., 15); Proverbs 3:3; 20:28.

³⁵ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 439.

Septuagint uses the Greek word ἔλεος ("mercy" or "compassion") in translating **רַחֲמִים**.

Glueck points out that in ancient treaties the term **רַחֲמִים** was used to describe an aspect of the covenant relationship between kings and their subjects.³⁶ As the king was expected to demonstrate **רַחֲמִים** to the people with whom he had entered into covenant, so his subjects were to show **רַחֲמִים** toward their king. This "love" on the people's part suggested loyalty, service, and obedience. As ancient kings entered into a relationship with their subjects, expressed in terms of "covenantal love," so God established His covenant with Israel, promising His loyalty to His people and calling for their loyalty in return.

Not all scholars agree with Glueck's view that **רַחֲמִים** is so closely tied to fulfilling prior covenantal duties. Others hold that **רַחֲמִים** expresses love in a more general sense, emphasizing the freedom of God to love without any sense of obligation. Sakenfeld argues that **רַחֲמִים** denotes free acts of rescue or deliverance, which includes the idea of faithfulness.³⁷ Clearly God's relationship with His people Israel was formalized and defined by a covenant (Exod. 19:5; 24:8; 31:16; 34:10), but there is freedom, initiative, and grace in Yahweh's **רַחֲמִים**. That is, all of God's favor is based on His love (Deut. 7:8). God entered into a covenant with His people because of His love. The covenant simply guarantees the perpetuity of His love.

Yahweh's "loyal-love" is an undeserved, selective affection by which He binds Himself to His people for their sake. He graciously and sovereignly grants gifts and blessings beyond anything they might hope for. And He grants these blessings contrary to what people deserve. His abounding **רַחֲמִים** will never diminish or be exhausted since it is founded on His character and covenant commitment. And so the psalmist wrote, "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His **רַחֲמִים** is everlasting" (Ps. 136:1).

Abundant in truth. Besides being "great" (**גָּדוֹל**) in His loyal love, God also abounds in **אֱמֶת**. The word **אֱמֶת**, which can be translated "truth" or "faithfulness," is associated with the verb **אָמַן**, "to confirm, support, or establish." The basic idea of both the verb and the noun is that of firmness, certainty, and dependability.³⁸ This word is frequently applied to God as a characteristic of His divine na-

³⁶ Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, ed. Eleas L. Epstein, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1967).

³⁷ K. D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978), 1-13.

³⁸ J. B. Scott, "אָמַן," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:51-52.

ture. The chronicler used it in describing the "true God" (2 Chron. 15:3). The term is fittingly applied to God's words (Ps. 119:142, 151, 160). As a characteristic of God, אֱמֶת is the means by which people come to know and serve Him (1 Kings 2:4; Pss. 25:5; 26:3).

In Exodus 34:6 the word may emphasize "truth," or it may focus on "faithfulness." Both, of course, are equally true of God. But reliability, stability, and faithfulness seem to be fundamental to אֱמֶת when applied to God. And because He is reliable and faithful, His words can be trusted. As Scott comments, "As we study its various contexts, it becomes manifestly clear that there is no truth in the biblical sense, i.e. valid truth, outside God. All truth comes from God and is truth because it is related to God."³⁹ God's Word is as sure as His character. Jesus affirmed this when He said, "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17).

Keeping lovingkindness for thousands. God's attributes are not revealed merely to be discussed and admired. They reflect the nature of God who extends Himself and His divine mercies to those in need. The word translated "lovingkindness" in verse 7 is רַחֲמֵי, used already in verse 6. Once again God was revealing His steadfast, loyal love frequently exhibited in terms of covenant loyalty toward His people. But here He declared that He does not limit the exercise of His רַחֲמֵי, but that He extends this abounding love to the multitudes. The participle נֹצֵר, translated "keeping" or "who keeps," does not mean "retaining." Rather it means that God extends His רַחֲמֵי to those in need. Cassuto says the word "thousands" means "thousands of generations."⁴⁰ This fits the context, which mentions "generations" at the end of verse 7. God extends His loyal love to thousands of generations, the distant descendants of the Israelites who were with Moses at Mount Sinai. God keeps on working to extend His loyal love to the thousands of people who need His help and deliverance.

Forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. Another great truth God wanted Moses and His people to know about Himself is that He is willing to forgive. Although this is not the last of the divine attributes God noted in this passage, Bush regards this statement as "the climax of the present proclamation."⁴¹ The word נָשָׂא ("to forgive") means "to lift up, carry, take away." The verb is used figuratively here and elsewhere of God's "taking away" sin (Ps. 32:1, 5),

³⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁰ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 440.

⁴¹ Bush, *Exodus*, 2:246.

so that the guilty receive pardon and forgiveness. This use of אָשָׁא appears often in requests for forgiveness (Gen. 50:17; Exod. 10:17; 32:32; Num. 14:19; 1 Sam. 15:25; 25:28). As Kaiser notes, "Sin can be forgiven and forgotten, because it is taken up and carried away."⁴²

Three words are used to describe the actions and attitudes that God forgives. The first word, יָצַח ("iniquity"), refers to an action that involves crooked behavior, a turning away from the straight and narrow way. The second word, עֲשָׂוֹת ("transgressions"), refers to a breach of relationships, civil or religious, between two parties (Gen. 31:36; Isa. 58:1). In the context of international relationships the cognate verb designates a revolt against rulers. In a religious sense it refers to a rebellion against God's authority. Livingston regards it as a "collective which denotes the sum of misdeeds and a fractured relationship."⁴³ The third word, חַטָּאת ("sin"), is related to the verb חָטָא, "to miss the way." Missing God's standards or failing to fulfill His requirements constitutes an act of sin. Cassuto is not convinced that Moses intended to differentiate between three varieties of sin; he says that the three are synonyms that are used to cover "the entire range of wrongdoing."⁴⁴ While this may be the case, there are significant differences in nuance between the words.

Micah contemplated God's marvelous attribute of forgiveness when he said, "Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession. He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love" (Mic. 7:18).

Not acquitting unrepentant sinners. The next attribute features the other side of God's forgiving grace. Although He delights in forgiveness, His grace cannot abrogate His justice. Those who refuse to repent are responsible before the holy God.

The Hebrew text could be translated, "He will most certainly not acquit [the guilty]." The word translated "acquit" (נָקָה) means "to be clean, pure, or spotless." Fisher and Waltke note that of the forty Old Testament occurrences of this verb the vast majority have an ethical, moral, or forensic connotation.⁴⁵ In a judicial context it takes on the meaning "to be acquitted" or "to go unpunished." A

⁴² Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "אָשָׁא," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:601.

⁴³ G. H. Livingston, "עֲשָׂוֹת," in *ibid.*, 2:741.

⁴⁴ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 440.

⁴⁵ M. C. Fisher and Bruce K. Waltke, "נָקָה," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:597.

husband is "acquitted" of any guilt if he, in declaring his wife unfaithful, follows the legal procedures required by law (Num. 5:31). The word is sometimes used with a negative particle, thereby yielding a strong warning of accountability and judgment. Proverbs 6:29 declares that the one who commits adultery with his neighbor's wife "will not go unpunished" [יִקָּוֶה]. In Exodus 34:7 the verb is used with the negative אֵל, to affirm that God will not regard the unrepentant sinner as innocent. Because God is holy and just, as well as loving and forgiving, the unrepentant will face the most serious consequences of their sin and rebellion. God does not leave sinners unpunished (Exod. 20:7; Job 9:28; Jer. 30:11).

Not erasing the consequences of sin. The last phrase in God's self-revelation to Moses reflects on the consequences of sin. While it is in God's nature to forgive the repentant, it is not in His nature to remove the natural consequences of foolish and sinful behavior. Some people assume that the words, "visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations," mean that God *punishes* children for the sins of their parents and ancestors. But Ezekiel 18 shows that this is not the case.

Of course it would be unjust for God to punish children for the sins of their parents. Yet this is exactly what some people were saying in Ezekiel's day, as expressed in their proverb, "The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek. 18:2). They were saying that in allowing the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem, God was punishing the people for the sins of their ancestors. God responded by saying that they should not use that proverb any more (v. 3). Then He announced, "The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself (v. 20). It is also evident from Deuteronomy 24:16 that God does not hold children responsible for the sinful actions of their parents.

The fact that God will visit "the iniquity of the fathers on the children" means that children can expect to experience the *consequences* of the sinful behavior of their parents. While God is willing to forgive and pardon, He does not interrupt the certain and natural consequences of sinful behavior. And some of these consequences are experienced by children and grandchildren. When a parent goes to prison, the children suffer loss. Sadly, many children have suffered the tragic consequences of growing up in a family with an alcoholic or abusive parent. God does not interrupt the natural consequences of foolish and sinful actions. Children do reap

what sinful parents sow. Yet the influence of evil is limited to a few generations ("to the third and fourth generations"), while God extends His אַהֲבָה ("loyal love") "for thousands."⁴⁶

THE RESPONSE OF MOSES (EXOD. 34:8)

Earlier in his encounter with God, Moses had prayed, "Show me Your glory" (Exod. 33:18). In response God revealed Himself to Moses in a most unique and memorable way. God passed in front of Moses and proclaimed His own attributes. How did Moses respond to the Lord's self-revelation? He "made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship."

When Moses saw God in the light of His self-revelation, he saw himself with new insight. No longer could Moses stand in God's presence. And it did not take him a long season of deliberation to decide what response was appropriate. Having heard God proclaiming His attributes, Moses "made haste" (מָהֵר) to prostrate himself on the ground in worship. Good theology is the foundation and impetus for God-honoring worship. May all who aspire to proper theology be as quick to understand and practice its implications.

⁴⁶ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 440.

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