

Introduction

Tommo thinks God is a pretty understanding, good-natured guy. God knows Tommo's doing his best, and look, none of us are perfect... but when I get to heaven he'll see that I've been trying, he'll see that I'm basically a good person, and everything will be honky-dory.

Sally thinks God is quite cruel and demanding. She's always trying to do the right things in order to stay in his good books. It's pretty exhausting, but Sally's just hoping that one day when she hops on the scales, her hard work will be enough to tip things in her favour.

Tim thinks God is a bit like a divine pinata hanging in the sky. If we just hit it with the right prayers, then candy will rain from heaven and we'll get whatever we want. Tim thinks that if there's sickness or suffering in someone's life, it's probably a sign they lack faith and need to pray more.

Frank is pretty sure God doesn't exist... or that if he does exist, he isn't very involved in the world and clearly doesn't care very much. Frank has reached this conclusion based on his past experiences of hurt and trauma. Surely if there was a God of love and power, he wouldn't have let these terrible things happen.

Beth thinks God is disappointed with her. She's trying to take her Christian faith more seriously, but it's hard, and she can't shake the feeling that God expects more from her, that she's letting him down after all the grace he's given her.

What about you? What do you think about God? We all have a view of God, even those of us who deny his existence... and our view of God makes a huge difference to how we live. That's why it's so important for us to ask, *who is God?* Is he real? If so, what's he like?

That's actually what Moses is wrestling with in our passage this morning. Moses is longing to see God. He really wants to know who God is. Over the past year, he's seen God's power over the mighty Pharaoh of Egypt, he's seen God's salvation as a whole nation of people were freed from slavery and led right through the middle of the Red Sea. But he's also just seen the people of Israel sin and screw up in a spectacularly wicked way, by rejecting God and building an idol of a cow out of their spare gold jewellery.

Now the question for Moses is, how will God respond? What kind of God is he? Will he just overlook their sin? Or will he destroy them? Moses is wrestling with the nature of God, with who God is. And so in 33:18 he says, 'Lord, I want to see your glory.'

I wonder what 'the glory of God' makes you think of? Perhaps you think of incredible power, of a booming voice like thunder? Or maybe you think of God's holiness, of an unapproachable blazing fire of perfection? Traditionally in Reformed churches, we've been careful to emphasize the glory of God. We've been careful not to make God cute and cuddly. We've rightly emphasize that God should be respected and honoured. But who is this God we honour? Why do we honour him? Is it because if we don't, he might just change his mind about us and give us the flick? Are we like Jack, creeping around the giant's castle at the top of the beanstalk trying not to wake the snoring giant, lest he wake in a bad mood and grind our bones to dust?

God's response to Moses doesn't exactly put us at ease. God says 'Okay Moses, I'll grant your request but you can't see my face or you'll die. So, when my glory passes by you, I'll put you in a

cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I've passed by. And then I'll just let you peek at my back, because that's all you can handle.'

So the scene is set. Moses is hiding. And then in verse 5, we're told that this glorious God of the universe 'comes down' - he stoops low so that puny Moses can see him. And then Moses hears God speak. And God begins by saying his name twice. 'The Lord, the Lord,' or in Hebrew, 'Yahweh, Yahweh.' This is God's name, and he's repeating it for emphasis. He's not just giving us his title... he's about to reveal who he *is*, his very nature, his entire being. So what are the first words out of his mouth? What makes this God so glorious? What is most central to who he is?

That's what we want to look at this morning. This sermon isn't going to have three points or anything. Instead, we're just going to work our way through verses 6 and 7, word by word, bit by bit... to learn who God says he is. Think of it like an exclusive, behind-the-scenes interview where we get to see behind the mask. Who is God?

Who is God?

Here's how it begins: Yahweh, Yahweh, *the compassionate and gracious God*. Staggering! The first words out of his mouth! God is setting the terms here, and he doesn't lead with 'supremely powerful', or 'unapproachably holy.' He leads with 'compassionate and gracious'.

Compassionate means he cares deeply about you and me, not just in spite of all our sin and struggles, but because of them. Compassionate means that whenever we're in need, his heart is drawn to help us. He's sympathetic to our weaknesses.

And God says he's **gracious**. That means, he doesn't give us what we deserve. In fact, it means more than that: it means he delights to give us what we *don't* deserve. It's like you just intentionally took a can of petrol and burnt down God's house. And God says, I'm going to let you go free without pressing charges. But that's not all. I'm also going to personally pay to have the house rebuilt, and then I'm going to give it to you for free, and you can keep it. That's what God's shocking grace is like. And God's grace isn't like your mother's fine China that only comes out on special occasions... no, his grace is an everyday, free-flowing commodity. It's comes naturally to him. It's who he is.

Then God goes on to say that he is **slow to anger**. Did you know that 42 times in the Old Testament it tells us that God was *provoked* to anger... but not once does it tell us he was provoked to love. In his book *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund says: 'His anger requires provocation' but 'his mercy is pent up, ready to gush forth.'

Then God goes on to tell us he's **abounding in love and faithfulness**. The word for love here is God's covenant love, *hesed*. As the Jesus Storybook Bible puts it so well, this is God's 'never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.' God isn't loving toward you because he has to be, because he's locked into this covenant contract that he kind of wishes he could back out of. No, the whole reason he made that unbreakable promise to save you and take you to heaven is because *in his deepest heart, in his very nature, he is abounding, bursting with love*. Putting a lid on God's love is like trying to contain a can of coke after you've shaken it up and cracked the seal. I like what Graham Ryken says about this: 'The point is that God always follows through on his love. His love is loyal and steadfast. Since he never goes back on a promise, once God promises to love, he keeps on loving. And his love is boundless. It is love without measure and love beyond degree.'

Then God elaborates on this love. He says that he **maintains love to thousands, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin**. This could also be translated as ‘maintaining love to a thousand generations.’ Ortlund points out, ‘This doesn’t mean that his goodness shuts off with generation number 1001. It is God’s own way of saying: There is no termination date on my commitment to you. You can’t get rid of my grace to you. You can’t outrun my mercy. You can’t evade my goodness. My heart is set on you.’

‘But what if I screw up?’ you say. What if I’m one of those Christians who got drafted to the team in the first-round picks, but then I just haven’t perform as expected? Maybe you’re carrying a burden on your shoulders right now, a stubborn sin that constantly makes you feel unworthy, or a painful regret from deep in your past that haunts you, or just the dull ache of knowing that for large portions of this week, you barely thought about God or read his word or prayed to him. Well, hear what God says, and don’t forget that he’s speaking these words just after Israel have rejected him and worshiped the Golden Calf: ‘I maintain love to thousands, *forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin*.’ What is he willing to forgive? Three words: wickedness, rebellion and sin. It’s another way of saying, anything and everything.

And then we come to those difficult verses that I’ve so often struggled with. ‘Yet, Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. *He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation*.’ I’ve often found these verses to be a bit uncomfortable and harsh. But as I wrestled with them again this week, in the context of everything we’ve just seen about God’s extravagant love and grace, they started to make sense to me. I think there are two misunderstandings we need to avoid.

Misunderstanding 1: ‘God doesn’t care about sin. If God is as compassionate and gracious as you’ve just said, then I guess he doesn’t really care about sin at all.’ And God says, no! I am *not* morally wimpy or spineless. I am perfectly just! And friends, let’s not cringe at that! Let’s not apologize for that. I dare you to look a mother in the eye after the body of her abducted 12 year old daughter has been found in the woods, and tell her that justice doesn’t matter. Tell her it’s a good thing that God mushily loves everyone and holds no one accountable.

Sin is incredibly serious and it has terrible consequences. It is a poisonous weed that spreads from grandparents to parents to children, from church to church, from nation to nation, destroying the world that God loves. And so as a good, righteous, just God, he absolutely must deal with it... and he will. If you’re not a Christian this morning, that should – and I say this with so much love for you – that should give you sweaty pits and an elevated heart rate. It should make you eager to run to Jesus and accept his free offer of grace and forgiveness.

If you are a Christian, this verse is a reminder that God’s grace in your life did not come cheap. It cost Jesus his life. He was physically tortured by asphyxiation on the cross, but that was nothing compared to the spiritual torture of bearing all God’s just and holy wrath that we would have endured in hell for all eternity. So let’s be careful not to belittle our sin or think that God’s grace was cheap.

But there’s another misunderstanding we need to avoid too. It’s the idea that God is an angry, blood-lusting tyrant who get a kick out of punishing people for their sins. How do we respond? We need to read this verse in context. Notice the dramatic contrast between *four* sinful generations being punished, and God’s mercy flowing down through *1000* generations! 1000 to 4. Do you see how mercy and love are the dominant emphasis? It’s grace, not justice, that lies closest to God’s heart.

The living proof

I began by asking you a question: *who is God?* Most deeply, in his heart, what's he like? These verses are like an exclusive interview, the inside scoop, the tell-all autobiography. And if you're anything like me, they reveal something surprising, something that never ceases to amaze.

But maybe you're not convinced. Isn't this cherry-picking to just take one passage and make so much of it? Well, that objection might be fair if it wasn't for the fact that these words from Exodus 34:6-7 are repeated *constantly* through the remainder of the Old Testament. They're like the chorus to the song that Israel sings throughout its life. Just a few examples: King David says in Psalm 86, 'You, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.' The prophet Joel says, 'Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.' When Jonah complains about God showing mercy to Nineveh, he says, 'I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.'

When we read the Bible carefully, we simply can't say that God is angry and judgmental in the Old Testament, and then Jesus comes along in the New Testament and says, 'Guys, I'm sorry about my father. I know he can be a bit prickly, but I promise he's got a heart of gold.' Not at all! The same, eternal, never-changing God is revealed throughout the whole Bible... and he is, by his very nature, overflowing with compassion and love.

And Moses knew this. He knew it very well actually, because this wasn't the only time that Moses got to see the glory of God. Hundreds of years later, long after Moses had died, he reappeared on another mountain, and he saw another revelation of God's glory. Except this time, his face wasn't hidden in a cliff, and the revelation didn't just come in the form of words. This time, he got to stare at God right in the face – the face of Jesus Christ. And in that moment, he met the same glorious God that he'd met on Mount Sinai.

We call this amazing event *the Transfiguration*, and you can read about it in Matthew 17. As his disciples watch, we read that Jesus 'was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.' And then the voice of God the Father comes from heaven: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'

What's happening in this incredible story? Christmas is happening. God's voice is booming from heaven to clarify beyond a shadow of a doubt that this man Jesus *really is none other than God himself*. The invisible God from Mount Sinai has appeared in 3D. The Word has become flesh. Think about that. God's words have become embodied, visible, touchable, huggable. When you see Jesus, you are *seeing* the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. When Jesus touches you and heals you, you are *feeling* the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. He *is* the glory of God.

And he is the incontrovertible proof that the God we meet in the Old Testament isn't just talk. *Is God really compassionate?* Here is the eternal creator of the universe who has become a crying baby in a barn, because he cares so deeply about our desperate plight. *Is God really gracious?* Here is he who had no sin, becoming sin for us on the cross, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. *Is God really slow to anger?* After humanity has been piling up offense after offense like a pile of excrement the size of Mt. Everest dumped on God's doorstep, insulting his nostrils for thousands of years... here is God sending his Son into the world, *not* to condemn and destroy it, but to save it! *Is God really abounding in love and faithfulness?* Here is the most

generous and costly gift anyone has ever given, the perfect fulfillment of hundreds of promises made by God over thousands and thousands of years.

Conclusion

Here's the thing. Here's what I want to end with. The issue with this description of God in Exodus 34 is not whether it's accurate or not. Right? The real issue is that we struggle to really believe it, to accept it, to receive it into our hearts and lives as true. Consider this, see what you think. Could it be that the biggest problem in your life is not that sin you're trying to fight, or that difficult circumstance that you're suffering through? What if the biggest problem is that in the midst of all of this, your view of God is impoverished and shriveled? Could it be that there are dark thoughts of God in our hearts? Thoughts that make us cool towards him. Thoughts that make us doubt his power to do immeasurably more than we ask or think (Ephesians 3). Thoughts that make us think his grace toward us is drying up like an old texter.

Dane Ortlund argues, 'The Christian life, from one angle, is the long journey of letting our natural assumption about who God is, over many decades, fall away, being slowly replaced with God's own insistence on who he is.' This is what we need, more than anything else as Christians. We need to know who God really is: compassionate and gracious and loving. When we really grasp this, it changes everything.

It provides you with amazing comfort when you're going through times of hardship and suffering in your life, when you're anxious about Covid, when you're despairing about the political landscape in Australia, when you're struggling with a health crisis.

It also provides great comfort for those who are bruised and battered and wearied by sin. Whether it's our own sin that we're struggling to deal with, or whether we've been sinned against and experienced hurt and betrayal. What wonderful reassurance to know that our God is a gracious and compassionate God, and for Jesus to say, A bruised reed I will not break and a smoldering wick I will not snuff out.

But where I particularly want to land today is that this view of God drives us to worship. It gives us a view of God that actually warms our hearts. Now don't underestimate the significance of that. There are many millions of religious people in the world today, and there have been billions before them... but how many people have enjoyed a *relationship* with the god they worship, a relationship full of intimacy and joy and love? As the Father's heart goes out to us with love, it stirs in us a response of love. You might have noticed during this Gentle and Lowly sermon series that the emphasis hasn't primarily been a list of things that we have to go away and do after each sermon. And that's significant. That's not, 'Oh, that sermon didn't have any application.' No, it's an incredibly important application, to say 'Here is God. Delight in him! Just marvel at him. Come and taste again, taste and see that the Lord is good.'

Dane Ortlund illustrates this by saying, if an Inuit from the Arctic 'wins a vacation to a sunny place, he doesn't arrive in his hotel room, step out onto the balcony, and wonder how to apply that to his life. He just enjoys it. He just basks.'

Of course, our worship of God will also involve lives of action, *but it starts with hearts that are set on fire with genuine warm affection for our God*. That's my prayer this Christmas, that that's where our joy would ultimately come from. That we would know and experience again the amazing blessing of the Christian faith, which says, 'Here is a God, full of grace and compassion, who you can know! A God who loves you and will be in your life now and forever. Enjoy that.'