

The Compassionate and Gracious God and His Compassionate and Gracious People

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.*

Psalm 103:8

Introduction

Let's begin with two questions:

How do you really view God?

How do you see yourself and your church?

The four key qualities of God listed in the psalm of David quoted above are referred to individually or altogether many times in Scriptures. He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love. That is a clear description of the way God wants us to understand Him. But the question is: do you see Him that way? Not just when you're reminded of it, but consistently in a very personal and practical way.

And since we are made in the image of God and are called to imitate God, this is also a clear description of the way He made us and how He wants us to live, individually and as a church – a people who are compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love. But again, the question is: do we see ourselves that way? Not that you're perfectly flawless at it, but that you know that God has gifted you with His nature and you know that you can live that way with His help.

In the Scriptures we will study, God shows us the way He wants us to see Him and how He wants us to see ourselves. We will first look at how these four qualities of God were viewed by His people throughout their history. It's clear that the qualities of God as described in this psalm were well-known by God's people. They may not have always followed them completely, but they knew about them.

Our goal in this study of these amazing qualities of God is to know Him better and grow in our goal of being the people created in His image.

(There are seven Scriptures, including the one quoted above, where all of these four qualities are mentioned in the same verse. They are listed below. Read each of them in context and write your thoughts about how the compassionate and gracious qualities of God impacted his people. **NOTE:** this is not meant to be a fast study. Take some time, maybe even a few days, study each passage in its context and reflect on what is being said there.)

1. The Compassionate and Gracious God

a. Exodus 34:6

This is the first reference in our Bible listing all four of these qualities of God. Two of the things that are interesting about this example are:

- (1) This is God's own words as He passed in front of Moses. The other Scriptures listed below are the words of God's people describing Him as having these qualities. But the first time they appear, it is God himself revealing this. In other words, we didn't make this up! That's important.
- (2) The context of that first revelation from God about these four qualities is especially inspiring. The Israelites had just committed the unthinkable sin of making and worshipping the golden calf while Moses was on the mountain of God receiving God's laws. Of course, that's not the inspiring part! What's inspiring is that it was at that moment that God revealed His heart about compassion and grace. That's important also. (We will note later verse 7 which describes how sin still needs to be punished.)

How do you think that might have impacted Moses and God's people at that particular time? (See also **Numbers 14:18**, when a year later Moses quoted some of these qualities when the Israelites sinned again.)

David referred to these four qualities of God three times (and the psalms refer to individual parts of the list many other times). Read each of these carefully in their contexts.

b. **Psalm 86:15**

As you look at this whole chapter, how would you describe David's openness, honesty, and faithful hope as he shared his feelings to God about his needs and his convictions about God's concern about his needs?

Is this the way you see your needs and the way you see God?

c. **Psalm 103:8** (Quoted in the introduction.)

We don't know if David wrote this before or after his sin with Bathsheba. But if it was written before that time, we can imagine that he thought about it even more clearly after he was restored from that sin. As you look at this psalm, how does David's faith in these qualities of God impact his view of sin?

Is this the way you see your sins and the way you see God?

d. **Psalm 145:8**

In this psalm, how does David praise God personally for these four qualities, and how does he show his desire to make sure everyone around him and future generations after him knew God this way?

Is this the way you talk to God and the way you talk to others about Him?

e. **Joel 2:13**

Centuries later, the prophet Joel drew upon these characteristics as a motivation for Israel to return to God in a very difficult time in their lives. Joel described a time when God's people lived in utter despair with a complete sense of helplessness, brought about by their years of unfaithfulness. In view of that, God encouraged them to return to Him, reminding them that He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. They were ashamed of their history of sin and overwhelmed about the challenges they were facing. But God said, "*Come to me.*" That encourages us today to not let shame or the overwhelming difficulty of a situation cause us to forget the truthfulness and the powerful impact of these four qualities of God. They are always true and the reason why God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (*Ephesians 3:20*). How do you think these four qualities of God inspired people of Joel's day when they heard God's appeal to return to Him (verse 12)?

Is this the way you view God when you are embarrassed about your sin or overwhelmed with your circumstance?

f. **Jonah 4:2**

The prophet Jonah, like the prophet Joel, also knew this truth about God very well. Unlike Joel though, Jonah actually complained about it because he knew God would apply His compassion and grace to despised and dreaded Nineveh. **NOTE:** a century later God spoke through the prophet Nahum that Nineveh's repentance had not lasted and they would have to be punished. But God's actions to them in the days of Jonah applied these four qualities to them, and Jonah was mad about that.

Do you ever despise people so much that you don't want God to be compassionate and gracious to them?
What can you do to avoid that?

Is this the way you want God to reveal himself to people that are annoying you?

g. **Nehemiah 9:17**

This long prayer recounting God's history with his people came on an amazing day that included worship, listening to God's Word, fasting, and confession. The prayer is all about God and the persistence of his love, in spite of our tendency to be unfaithful and difficult to love. What were their convictions about the heart of God in dealing with them?

Do you spend time in prayer and praise, thanking God for his heart for you?

(Note again that most of these references point out the fact that there is still a need to punish sin, which we will summarize later. But for now, make sure these four qualities sink in.)

2. Four Key Qualities about God

We've seen the seven times that these four qualities were mentioned in the same verse. They are also discussed separately in many other Scriptures. So, now look at these four qualities individually in detail. Define and describe each one and list some Scriptures related to them (one or two example Scriptures are given for each one, but you can find many others).

➤ *Compassionate*

Isaiah 30:18 _____

➤ *Gracious*

2 Chronicles 30:9; Hebrews 4:16 _____

➤ *Slow to Anger*

Nahum 1:3 _____

➤ *Abounding in Love*

1 John 3:1 _____

This is who God is. He wants us to know that about Him and not let Satan rob us of the joy that God brings because of who He is. No matter what is happening in your life or in the lives of people you love at any given moment, know that God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love. He's doing something at that moment to help you, or them, get through the situation. Trust Him for that.

3. Punishment for Sin

"Slow to anger" does not mean never gets angry. God is not a pushover when it comes to sin. Letting His people continue to hurt themselves and others would not actually be love. What we learn from these Scriptures and

others is that God's punishment for sin is still characterized by His compassion and grace. Here are two of the ideas that we learn from Scriptures such as the ones in Point 1 of this study, but you can add more.

- a. God does not treat us as our sins deserve. (*Psalms 103:10*)

Ezra's humble prayer in *Ezra 9* is a great summary of that point. Near the end of his prayer (9:13), he said:

*What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt,
and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved
and have given us a remnant like this.*

That could only be because God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love. David knew that, and Ezra knew that. The question is: do we know that? Can we honestly say that God has definitely punished us less than our sins deserved? Not because David and Ezra said it, but because we believe it.

- b. Even though God forgives us, there may still be consequences and punishment for our sins. (*Exodus 34:7; Numbers 14:20 – 25*)

See also *Psalms 99:8* which proclaims this same thought. Forgiveness and punishment can co-exist. Just like parents (hopefully) may make sure that their kids have consequences for wrong behavior but are quick to communicate forgiveness and love. And why is that? For both God and parents, it is all about being compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

- c. What other thoughts stand out to you from the context of these Scriptures, or from others that you know, about the way these four qualities of God apply even in times when He has to punish sins?

Read **Romans 11:22** which is one summary, among many in Scriptures, of this thought.

As you consider both the kindness and sternness of God, what are your convictions about both?

The point is, though, that God himself revealed these four qualities to His people. Not everyone respected God for these four qualities. Not everyone realized that God wanted them to also be that way. But many of them did, and so can we.

Of course, we don't want to abuse these four qualities of God or take them for granted by thinking that unrepented sin won't be punished. But let these attributes of God become a reality to us. The more you understand that about God, the less likely you are to abuse it or take it for granted. (See **Romans 2:4**, for instance.)

4. Applications to God's People

We are created in God's image (*Genesis 1:26 – 27*) and are called to be imitators of God (*Ephesians 5:1 – 2*).

Among other things, that would mean that individual followers of God and his church as a whole have inherited these four qualities of God as well as many others and should treat ourselves and others accordingly. We have been given each of these traits (consider the fruit of the Spirit in *Galatians 5:22 – 23*, for an example of a similar, but longer list), and we are commanded to grow in them (see the charge in *Colossians 3:12*, for instance).

Take each of these four traits and describe how they should look in us as individuals and as the church, along with some of the Scriptures that instruct us and enable us to do so (some example Scriptures are given for each one, but you can add many more).

➤ *Compassionate*

Zechariah 7:9; Ephesians 5:32; 1 Peter 3:8 _____

➤ *Gracious*

Psalms 111:4 _____

➤ *Slow to Anger*

James 1:19 _____

➤ *Abounding in Love*

John 13:34 – 35 _____

This brief study has only looked at a few Scriptures and focused on only these four qualities of God. Of course, there are many other amazing characteristics of God. The Bible shows us over and over again the qualities of God as He wants us to see Him and the qualities of His people as He wants us to be. Two of the concepts that stand out in the numerous times in God's Word when the qualities of God are applied to His people (*Galatians 5:22 – 23; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:12 – 14; and 2 Peter 1:3 – 9*, for instance) are:

- (1) These qualities are God's gifts to us. It's a part of the DNA we inherit from being made in His image. It is the fruit (i.e. result) of God's Spirit living in us. Because He has given some of His own attributes to you, such as these four qualities for instance, you have the ability to be compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love. Remind yourself of that on a daily basis.
- (2) He commands us to use these gifts and grow in every one of them. We do not have to create these attributes or just work on them by our own power – that can be very frustrating. We also can't brag about being the way God made us – that can be very frustrating to others. But we do need to make every effort to grow in these qualities. Focused, deliberate, practical effort. Clearly, there is a tremendous need for individuals and churches to be compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

Another way of stating these two concepts is to focus on God's part and our part.



Always realize the difference
between God's part and our part
in everything we do.



- God's part is giving us everything we need, as we see in *Ephesians 1:3* and *2 Peter 1:3*. We obviously cannot do that; that's God's part. These qualities are God's gift to us. So, thanks to God, you have the ability to be compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.
- Our part is to believe this and put it into practice.

It's also hopefully clear to us that this is the way we really want to live. For instance, we all want to be compassionate and slow to anger. God is not trying to manipulate us into a certain type of behavior. This is who we are because of who He is. He made us that way, and that is really how we all want to live. He wants us to know that about ourselves and not let Satan rob us of the joy that God brings because of the way He has made us in Christ.

This is who God is, and this is who we are because of Him:
He is compassionate, and He has given us the ability to be compassionate.
He is gracious, and He has made us to be gracious.
He is slow to anger, and, because of Him, we can be slow to anger. (Believe it! It is possible.)
He is abounding in love, and He has passed on to us the ability to abound in love.

Conclusions

After studying and meditating on these Scriptures, what are your convictions about the questions asked in the introduction?

1. Is this the way you view God?
 - **Personally.** Do you believe that He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love towards you?
 - **Practically.** In the moment, is this on your mind? Do you typically apply this truth in the "*right now*" situations, thinking that God who is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love is working in the situation right now?
 - **Apply to others.** Do you accept His compassion and grace for others (or, like Jonah, do you get upset thinking that God could be this way towards some people)?
2. Is this the way you see yourself and your church?

Do you believe that God has given you individually and your church as a whole these gifts? (In other words, do you believe what is said in **2 Peter 1:3** quoted on the right?) Do you also see how important it is that you individually and your church as a whole continue to grow in these gifts?

*His divine power has given us everything
we need for a godly life through our
knowledge of him who called us by his own
glory and goodness.*

2 Peter 1:3

If you're not happy with your answers to any of the above questions, don't be discouraged or overwhelmed. Go to God's throne of grace (*Hebrews 4:16*) and ask Him for help. Share your feelings with others also, and pray for one another. Just don't doubt that this is who God is and who He has made you to be.

Compassionate, Gracious, Slow to Anger, Abounding in Love.

This is the way God is and the way He has made us in Christ.

Let's believe that about God and also believe that we can, with God's help, live that way ourselves.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

Numbers 6:24 – 26

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