

Nature and Character of God

What Is God Like?

August 11, 2019

I. What is God like?

- A. Today, we are continuing our study of the nature and character of God.
 - 1. Last Sunday, we looked at God's nature and character from the perspective of **1 John 1:5**, which tells us that God is perfectly and completely holy and righteous.
 - 2. I pointed out that when we speak of God's holiness, we are talking about His purposeful and complete separation from all that is sinful and evil. And when we speak of God's righteousness, we are talking about His justice.
 - 3. And because God is entirely holy and entirely righteous, there is no logical or justifiable reason to judge and criticize the ways and decisions of God.
 - 4. Today, we will look at God's nature and character through God's self-description found in **Exodus 34:6-7**. In this portion of scripture, God is responding to Moses' request that God show him His glory. And in showing Moses His glory, God described Himself in very specific ways. It is this description that we will look at today.
- B. Pray

II. Moses asks God to show him His glory

- A. The scripture gives us a picture of the events leading up to Moses asking God to show him His glory. This picture begins back in **Exodus 24:12**, where the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to Me on the mountain (*Mount Sinai*) and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the law and the commandment which I have written for [Israel's] instruction."
- B. Moses was up there forty days, and when God had finished speaking with Moses, He gave Moses the two stone tablets of the testimony, written by God's own finger (**Exodus 31:18**).
- C. However, the people, thinking Moses was never going to return, asked Aaron to make them a new god (*the golden calf*) who would lead them through the desert to a better life (**Exodus 32:1**).
- D. This created an unplanned set of circumstances that brought Moses down the mountain, and back up the mountain where God and he conversed about God's ongoing dealings with the Israelites.

E. It was in this context that Moses said to God, "I pray You, show me Your **glory!**" [19] And [God] said, "I Myself will make all My **goodness** pass before you, and will proclaim the name (*the nature*) of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion (*not in some arbitrary or caviler way, but as He deems best given the person or people and their situation*). [20] But you cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" (**Exodus 33:18-20**).

1. Though I don't know with certainty why we cannot see God and live, I don't think it is because God doesn't want us to see Him.
2. One possible explanation is that looking at Him would be like looking at the sun with the naked, unprotected eye.
3. As most adults know, if you look at the sun without protecting your eyes, the light from the sun will destroy your eyes because they were not been made to handle such intense light.
4. In other words, the essential nature of the sun in comparison to the nature of our eyes is so superior that it destroys our eyes when we look at the sun without proper protection. And this is possibly why no human can see God and live.

III. God describes His nature and character to Moses

A. **Exodus 34:6-7** . . . Then the Lord passed by in front of [Moses] and proclaimed, "The Lord (*Jehovah*), the Lord God (*Jehovah Elohim*), compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; [7] who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."

B. **The Lord:**

1. God begins by stating His **position of authority**, that is, He is **The Lord** – or the **master** or the **ruler** over all that is, including you and me.
2. I believe this was as important to Moses and Israel as it is to us.
 - a. They had just come out of Egypt where they knew what it was to be under the authority of a master – and the longer they were in Egypt, the more evil and cruel their master became.
 - b. We, too, are born into slavery, slavery to sin – and just as God saved Israel from their Egyptian masters, so God saves us from the evil and cruel master, sin.

3. However, true freedom is not going from slavery to self-rule, for self-rule is just as much an evil master as sin. True freedom is going from serving sin to serving God, for as we just read, God is a compassionate, gracious, loving, and faithful master.

C. The Lord God:

1. After stating His position, God states who He is – for it is who He is that gives Him the right and the power to hold the position of Lord or Master over us.
2. You see, God is not just a powerful master like Pharaoh or the devil or sin or some addiction that has a hold on you or some fear that grips you. God is the eternal supreme being, and as such, He is both the rightful and all-powerful master.
 - a. As our rightful master, God could force us against our will into submission and servitude, but He doesn't. Instead, God invites us to willfully take our place as His servants.
 - b. And as our all-powerful master, we are assured there is no power or force or sin or addiction or fear that He cannot free us from and protect us from, so that you can go forward in freedom and godly living.
 - c. In addition, God uses His power to empower us to do what He commands us to do **and** to provide everything we need to do it.
3. Peter affirms this when he says that [God's] divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. [4] For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them [we] may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust (**2 Peter 1:3-4**).
4. And Paul tells us how we ought to respond to these truths when he says, "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, [13] and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. [14] For sin shall not be master over you" (**Romans 6:12-14**).
5. As we see in **Exodus 34:6**, God describes Himself as **the Lord God**. But on 440 other occasions in the OT and 7 in the NT, God describes Himself as "**the Lord your God**."

- a. In addition to God describing Himself as **the Lord your God**, He is referred to as “**the LORD our God**” 97 times in the OT and 3 in the NT.
 - b. Beyond that, the universality of God’s lordship is affirmed by the words, “**Lord of all**,” which appear 4 times in the OT and once in the NT.
 - c. Finally, in reference to Jesus – who is God with us in human flesh – the NT describes Him as “**the Lord Jesus**” 102 times, and as our “**Lord and Savior**,” 4 times.
6. What I am asking you to see is the Bible’s common pattern of stating God’s position first followed by stating who He is. This is an important pattern because it puts an emphasis on submitting to God, obeying God, and serving Him. And I believe this is important because we live in a religious environment where some believe that submission and obedience are optional or are even made irrelevant by the saving work of Christ and His imputed righteousness.
 7. Moving on from God’s clarification of His position and who He is, we see that states seven things about Himself that reveal His goodness and kindness toward us.

D. **Compassionate** and **gracious**:

1. When God says He is **compassionate**, it means His disposition or His normal inclination is that of pity or sympathy toward those who are suffering in some way – even if their suffering is due to their own foolish or sinful choices and behavior.
 - a. I like **Psalm 103:10,13-14**, when envisioning and pondering God’s compassion – “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. [13] Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him. [14] For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.”
 - b. Paul gives us a similar picture of God’s compassion when he says that while we were yet sinners (*that is, while we were still rebelling against God and suffering the destructive consequences of our sin*), Christ died for us (**Romans 5:8**).
 - c. Truly, we would be lost without our **Lord God’s** compassion.
2. The next word God uses to describe Himself is **gracious** – which is the natural outcome or the logical response of compassion.

- a. You see, God doesn't just feel pity or sympathy for us, He comes to our aid and gives help according to our need – even when our suffering is self-imposed.
- b. When you consider that God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt, and He protected and provided for them as they traveled through the wilderness, and then they turned away from Him to idolatry, you can see how necessary God's compassion driven grace is for sinners – like me – to be saved.
- c. You see, God did not deal with Israel according to their sin, but had compassion on them, and in His compassion, graciously agreed to continue leading them to the Promised Land as their God, their provider, and their protector. And the reality is, God deals with us in this same compassionate and gracious way.

E. Slow to anger:

1. Beyond being compassionate and gracious, God is slow to anger.
2. Many times our anger is a quick, unplanned response to a real or perceived hurt, wrong, or injustice. Often our anger includes aspects of sin that only add to the wrong, or increases the injustice, or in some other way makes the situation worse than it already is.
3. This is never true of God, for He completely separates Himself from every and any sinful or impatient expression of anger. In other words, He does not allow anger to rush upon Him and take control of Him.
 - a. Therefore, God is always in control of His anger and in control of deciding how angry to be and how He will use His anger when dealing with us.
 - b. I see God's slowness to anger as His compassion and grace in action, because it demonstrates His patience and willingness to be long-suffering as He gives me an extended amount of time to come to my senses, confess my sin, and seek His forgiveness as opposed to quickly expressing His anger and punishing me.
4. The marvelous truth here is that God does not allow anger to rule His decisions and His dealings with us – including those times when we have been intentionally sinful, or carelessly sinful, or simply neglectful in doing what we know is right. This too is God's grace.

F. Abounding in lovingkindness:

1. In His compassion, grace, and slowness to anger, God abounds in lovingkindness.

2. To abound is to exist in great quantities. To have lovingkindness is to have a tenderness that is motivated by affection. When we put these two ideas together, what we have is a God who has a huge quantity of **love motivated tenderness**.
3. Therefore, when we connect God's slowness to anger with His great quantities of lovingkindness, what we get is a God whose **anger is restrained or softened by His love driven tenderness**.

G. **Abounding in truth (or faithfulness):**

1. Given the context of Israel's sin while God was giving the Law to Moses, it seems better to translate this phrase as "**abounding in faithfulness**," because even though God wanted to wipe out the current Israelites and replace them with Moses and his descendants, He didn't. He remained faithful to His covenant commitment to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants.
2. However, "abounding in truth" is just as good for several reasons.
 - a. **First**, because God knows the way and the truth that leads to life, and He willingly and abundantly reveals this truth to us.
 - b. **Second**, because God judges people and situations according to truth – truth that He knows about us or the situation which we have not considered, have not seen, or cannot see.
 - c. And **third**, because God speaks truth to us regardless of His compassion, grace, slowness to anger, or huge quantity of lovingkindness. Even though God is patient and sometimes long-suffering with us, He does not hide or sugar-coat the truth. Instead, God tells us the truth as it is so we can respond to the truth as we ought – if we will.

H. **Who forgives:**

1. Even though God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness, and even though Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin in our place and on our behalf, we would still be lost without God's forgiveness.
2. To forgive is to pardon or grant remission for an offense or failure. It includes giving up all claims to a debt owed and letting go of any resentment against the offender or any desire to get even. And always, forgiveness includes **restoring the relationship**.
3. Of all the things that forgiveness encompasses, the restoration of the relationship is its ultimate work – especially between God and us, and between us and those nearest and dearest.

4. After stating He forgives, God lists the kinds of things He forgives.
 - a. God forgives **iniquity**, which is a word that describes gross injustice or wickedness. Another word for iniquity is depravity. And yet as bad as these things are, God forgives the one who has committed them.
 - b. God forgives **transgression**, and a transgression is a violation of God's law. We transgress when we commit a crime or ignore a command or choose self-rule over God's rule.
 - c. And God forgives **sin**, which according to **James 4:17**, is knowing the right thing to do but not doing it.
5. Now I want to remind you here that knowing the right thing to do goes beyond knowing the law, or knowing what the Bible says about right and wrong.
 - a. It includes our judgment and criticism of others, because in our judging and criticizing others, we reveal what we know about right and wrong.
 - b. Therefore, if we do not live according to our judgments and criticisms of others, we are sinning – because we are not doing what we know to be the right thing to do.
6. And yet, God forgives sin, along with iniquity and transgression. And in His forgiveness, He opens the door to a restored relationship with Him – even though we had rejected Him for a false god, or for self-rule, or for some worldly pleasure or temporal power or fleeting fame or earthly riches and earthly security.

IV. Conclusion

- A. Imagine being the Lord God, and being this compassionate and gracious, this slow to anger, this full of lovingkindness and truth, and this forgiving in your dealings with people in your life.
- B. And yet, this is our God! And it is God in Christ who has made the way for us to come out of the darkness and into the light, from iniquity, transgression, and sin into holiness and godliness, from a damaged and even destroyed relationship with God to reconciliation and being loved as God's child.
- C. This is what we celebrate today as we share in eating the bread, which is the broken body of Christ, and drink the cup, which is His blood shed for us. For not only would we be lost without God's forgiveness, we would be lost without our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.