

## *What Does That Mean? COMPASSION*

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**Big idea:** We are renewed as our image of God is renewed.

**Purpose:** To invite New Hoppers to see how their image of God impacts their daily lives and to encourage their faith in God's compassion.

**Passage:** Exodus 34:4-7

**Overview:** The primary adjective used to describe God in the scriptures is *compassionate*, but more often than not, there is a devastating disconnect between what we theologically believe about God and how we live out what we believe about God. We are renewed as our image of God is renewed. We must tend to our images of God.

### **Opening - Image of God:**

When I was in college, a guy I liked gave me a theology book for my birthday. I know, it was super romantic. The book was called *The Knowledge of the Holy* and it was written by American pastor & author A.W. Tozer. This book—published in 1961—was named in the *Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals*. I never finished the book, but I did spend the next several years enamored by a simple statement that Tozer wrote:

***“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” (A.W. Tozer)***

After years of pondering this, I couldn't agree more. Our imagination of God is one of the most formative things about us. I'm not just talking about our correct theology of God. I'm not just talking about what we think about God when we're trying to get the answers right. ***I'm talking about our mostly subconscious impressions of God that reveal themselves when the pressures of life get real.*** When worry or stress or shame kicks in. When we're in a season of suffering, or heartbreak, or confusion. How does God see us? Is God looking upon us with disdain and judgement? Is God a critical father ready to jump on us when we make a mistake? Is God for us? Are God's arms crossed? Are God's eyebrows furrowed? Is God irritated or disappointed? Is God even there?

How we imagine God in these moments will dictate how we respond. It will dictate how we relate to God. It will dictate how we relate to ourselves and others. ***What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.***

If that's true—and I'm proposing that it is—I think it'd be a good idea to hear what God has to say about who God is. There's a story in the second book in the Bible, Exodus, where God is working with God's chosen leader, Moses, to establish the Israelites as God's people. God tells Moses to climb up on this mountain so that he can encounter God and get some rules for this new community to live by. Before God says anything about rules or regulations, God tells Moses who God is.

## Public Reading of Scripture

*So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the Lord had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord.*

*And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. 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." (Exodus 34:4-7)*

### Compassion in the Old Testament

We're about halfway through our series *What Does That Mean?* In which we're exploring some of the most important words in scripture. So far, we've talked about *goodness*, *grace*, *justice*, and the word *perfect*. Today we're going to look at the first word God uses to describe God's self. Do you remember what it was? Compassionate.

***The first adjective God uses to describe God's self is compassionate.***

So today, we're taking a deep dive into the word ***compassion***.

The original language of the Old Testament (the first half-ish of the Bible) is ***Hebrew***, and the original language of the New Testament (the second half-ish of the Bible) is ***Greek***. Since we're starting with this passage in Exodus, which is in the Old Testament, we'll begin with the Hebrew word for compassion: ***racham***.

What comes to mind when you think of the word ***compassion***?

The root word of *racham* is *rachem*, which is the Hebrew word for ***womb***. The prophet Isaiah picks up on this mothering imagery when he writes of God:

*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! (Isaiah 49:15)*

Compassion isn't sentimentality. It isn't pity or feeling sorry for someone. It isn't just a nice & squishy emotion that God feels for creation. ***God's compassion is a womb-deep activating emotion, kind of like contractions***—I hope I didn't just get too real for some of the moms in the room. Time and time again, this womb-deep compassion compels God into restorative, healing action.

There's a beautiful tribute to God's compassion in the book of Nehemiah. It was a time of significant repentance in Israelite history and the Israelite priests made a very thorough speech recalling God's compassion toward the people:

*Our ancestors became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands...But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for*

*themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.*

*Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. (Nehemiah 9:16-20)*

***God's compassion always leads to restorative, healing action.***

### **Compassion in the New Testament**

In the New Testament—when Jesus comes on the scene—the primary word to describe compassion is *splagchnizomai*.

*Splagchnizomai* means *to feel in the inward parts*, the internal organs, deep in the bowels. You know that feeling when you get a cramp in your lower intestines and all of a sudden you have got to GO. Like an, *out of my way, there's no holding this back* kind of go?

This is a totally *TMI* (too much information) moment, but here we go: I've had the gift of getting to go to Kenya a few times and the first time I went, I ate or drank something that did NOT sit well with me. On the last morning of our trip, we were getting ready to drive to the airport and, yup, my stomach churned and my intestines cramped and there was no stopping me. I had to go. I remember my horrified 18-year-old self, calling out to my trip leader, Andy, from the pit toilet: "Andy! What do I do!? It's coming out both ends!"

As graphic as that is, that's the kind of language that's being used here to describe Jesus' compassion!

Over a dozen times in the stories of Jesus we read that Jesus was *splagchnizomai*: moved in the bowels with compassion. It's the primary word used to describe his interactions with others. Jesus got compassion cramps. Jesus' compassion wasn't just a nice emotion. ***It always led to restorative, healing action.***

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9:36-38)*

Directly after this experience of compassion, Jesus organizes his disciples and sends them out to heal the sick and proclaim the good news of God's kingdom. A few chapters later, Jesus is out on a boat trying to get some peace and quiet when he is met by another crowd:

*When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14)*

Jesus' compassion wasn't just a nice emotion. It always led to restorative, healing action.

Compassion in the Old Testament scriptures is *racham*: It is deep, motherly affection that flows from the womb of God. Compassion in the New Testament scriptures is *splagchnizomai*: It lives in God's guts. Compassion is not just a nice, sentimental emotion. It's not just feeling bad for someone else's circumstances. ***The compassion of God always leads to restorative, healing action.***

***We are renewed as our image of God is renewed:***

Remember a little bit ago when I quoted A.W. Tozer, that *the most important thing about us is what we think about God?* The longer I am a follower of Jesus, and the longer I have the privilege of pastoring people in their lives with God, the more clear it has become that there is a *devastating disconnect between what we theologically believe about God and how we live out what we believe about God.* It happens on a broad scale (why are Christians known for being critical or judgmental when the primary adjective used to describe our God is *compassionate*?) and it happens on a very personal scale.

***Our attitudes and actions, worries and choices reveal that deep down, in some secret and some not-so-secret places, there are parts of us that have yet to be convinced of a God who is overflowing with womb-deep, intestine-level compassion that leads to healing, restorative action in our lives.***

How do we even begin to address that gap? I believe that to close that gap we must ***tend to our images of God.***

I want to do a little activity together. Today is going to be full of imagination, are you ready for it? Imagine with me:

Imagine God thinking about you. *What are God's thoughts about you?*

Imagine God talking to you. *What is God's tone of voice toward you?*

Imagine God looking at you. *What expression is on God's face?*

Imagine God sitting next to you. *What is God's body language toward you?*

It's not something we commonly think about or reflect on. But here's the thing, I promise that whether you are actively aware of it or not, ***your image of God—your imagination of God's thoughts toward you, God's face toward you, or God's body language toward you—is fundamentally shaping the way you interact with your life each and every day.***

We are neurologically wired to care about this. Since we were born, we have learned to attune and orient ourselves to the people around us based on their facial expressions and body language. We 'read' our primary caregivers when we were young, our friends, our family, even people at the grocery store, or the people we meet when we walk into a room for the first time. ***Imagine your experience if you were to see me in the lobby and I had my arms crossed, looking stern.*** I'm pretty sure that would impact the way you approached me...or maybe just avoided me. ***But now imagine you saw me in the lobby and as soon as I saw you, my face lit up. I waved my hands. I opened my arms.***

Our whole body can feel one thing or another based on the way we perceive someone looking at us. ***Imagine how much more powerful this is with our images of God.*** More often than not, our image of God is shaped by our culture, our inherited beliefs, and our family of origin more than it's shaped by the scriptures or the Spirit. It's so important that we tend to our images of God. It's so important that they align evermore increasingly with what's true.

Being confident about God's 'face toward us' is so important that in the Old Testament, God instructed the Israelite priests to regularly bless the people with this blessing:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;*

*the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;*

*the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

*(Numbers 6:22-26)*

In the New Testament, when the apostle Paul is guiding the early followers of Jesus in this new way of life, he instructs them to live according to *the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator...therefore, Paul says, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourself with compassion...*

Did you catch that line?

***We are renewed as our image of God is renewed.***

As followers of Jesus, as the body of Christ here on earth, it's our job to reflect the image of God to all of creation. But as I mentioned earlier, we haven't done so good with God's PR. ***Christians tend to be perceived as critical and judgmental, and therefore they reveal to the world a critical and judgmental God.***

Here's the thing though...I don't think the solution is that followers of Jesus need to just be more compassionate. I think the solution is that followers of Jesus need to know and experience in ever-deepening ways, just how compassionate our God is. Compassion begets compassion. ***We are renewed as our image of God is renewed. We must tend to our images of God.***

Have you ever wondered why Jesus primarily told stories? Stories shape our imagination. They get under the surface of our literal, concrete brains and capture our hearts, our minds, our bodies even, in fresh, visceral ways. They give us new imagery for orienting ourselves in the world.

I want to give us an opportunity to let Jesus shape our imaginations here together today. Are you ready for our imagination work to continue?

***Lectio Divina Practice:***

There's this historical practice in the Church called ***Lectio Divina***, which is Latin for *Divine Reading*. ***So often, especially in western Christianity since the Enlightenment, we read scripture for study, for mastery, for knowledge and understanding.*** All that is fine and well. But doing that exclusively is like only working out only one side of your body. You'll

get strong and fit in on one side but your alignment is going to get way off. ***Lectio Divina is like a workout for the other side.*** In Lectio, you take a small portion of scripture and read it multiple times slowly, pausing to imagine, to recreate the story in your mind's eye, to wonder, notice, reflect, and to pray. It's not about mastery. It's about encounter.

Here's what we're going to do, and to be honest, it will be a little awkward and maybe challenging if this is the first time you've done something like this. That's okay. It will give you an opportunity to try it and perhaps do it again on your own sometime.

***I'm going to take the next 5 or so minutes and read through one of Jesus' stories, and I'm going to read through it 3 times.*** Each time I read the story, I will ask you a question or two to guide your reflections. I'll also pause for few seconds in between each round. It'll be quiet in here so you'll probably hear little sounds, maybe someone sniffing, or shuffling in their pew. It's all good. Here's my biggest request of you: Don't worry about doing this wrong. You can't. Just be present to the story.

***As I read the story this first time, use your imagination to recreate the scene. What do the characters look like? What do you smell, hear, see? If you're comfortable, I encourage you to close your eyes.***

*Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

*"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father.*

*"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

*"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

*(Pause for 15 seconds)*

***As I read the story a second time, what word or phrase captures your attention or grabs your heart? What questions do you have for God?***

*Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

*"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

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*(Pause for 15 seconds)*

***As I read the story a final time, notice what feelings arise in you. Ask God, "What do you want to show me through this story? What are you offering me?"***

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*"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.*

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***Take 30 more seconds or so now. How is this story shaping—or reshaping—your image of God? Maybe revisit the questions from earlier about God’s thoughts, God’s face, God’s body language toward you.***

### **Closing**

***We are renewed as our image of God is renewed.*** Are there places in your life that feel cut off from God’s compassion? Places where you are living more like a hired hand than a beloved child? Places where judgment and criticism reign—toward yourself or others?

What would it look like to imagine God’s face of compassion shining on you there?

What would it look like to so radically receive the compassionate action of God, that we might, too, become an image of it?