

A Great God of Grace and Compassion

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Introduction

In speaking of God's goodness David points out specific qualities of that goodness. Paramount among them, ... , was a pair of Hebrew words that in twelve passages have reference to God's character: grace/gracious and compassion/compassionate. This pair emphasizes both God's undeserved favor and his tender, compassionate heart with regard to man's needs. It should be noted that the Hebrew terms used for compassion/compassionate often have the understanding "mercy/merciful," for they are capable of either meaning. The context alone determines whether the Lord is acting out of a sense of common mercy or whether he has some deeper motive such as heartfelt compassion or sorrow for another's situation.

In this study we shall follow the lead of the NET, which, as in [Psalm 145:8](#), often renders the Hebrew terms involved as "compassion/compassionate."¹ Having established the basic grounds for this study as being built around the coalescence of a pair of words expressing God's grace and compassion, we shall explore the contexts where they appear as a formulaic pattern in order to draw a firmer picture the Lord's great goodness, first from the perspective of the Old Testament and then from their application to Christ in the New Testament. A closing section summarizing our findings and their application to Christian living will complete the study.

God's Grace and Compassion in the Old Testament

God's grace and compassion are well known and often mentioned by the writers of the Old Testament. They often appear individually but are especially effective when they occur together. Thus in [Psalm 103](#) David portrays the Lord as one who grants forgiveness, brings healing, and executes justice and righteousness for all. He then cites the capstone of God's eternal goodness by declaring,

The LORD is compassionate and merciful (Heb. gracious);
he is patient and demonstrates great loyal love. (v. 8)

He goes on to discuss some of the riches of his grace and compassion (vv. 9-10) and subsequently points out the paternal nature of the Lord's compassion:

As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on his loyal followers.
For he knows what we are made of;
he realizes we are made of clay. (vv. 13-14; cf. vv. 4, 17-18)

As Futato remarks, “It is just like God to forgive! It is in perfect accord with the “unfailing love” that fills his heart. He forgives in response to our frailty.”²

In [Psalm 111](#) the psalmist rehearses God’s grace and compassion for his people in providing for them in many ways that are profoundly astonishing:
He does amazing things that will be remembered;
the Lord is merciful (MT, gracious) and compassionate. (v. 4)

Thus his grace and compassion serve as a stimulus for a proper response by all believers (v. 7). A wise believer will therefore be faithful and obedient to the Lord and follow his leading:

To obey the LORD is the fundamental principle for wise living;
all who carry out his precepts acquire good moral insight. (v. 10)

The psalmists’ observations and praise for God’s person, character, and actions are not the sole basis for understanding that the Lord is a great God of grace and compassion. In revealing himself to Moses, God reassured him that he, Yahweh, is a “compassionate and gracious God” ([Exod. 33:19](#)). As Cassuto suggests, these qualities with which the Lord interacts with his people are “first and foremost.”³ A bit later the Lord declared to Moses that these qualities in his character are ever available and manifest themselves in patient, loyal love, and faithfulness ([Exod. 34:6-7](#)). The Hebrew word commonly translated “loyal love” was in earlier days rendered “loving-kindness.” In a sense that understanding remains rather appropriate, for the English word “kind” is ultimately related to a primitive root that lies behind the word “kin” (note also the German word *kind*—“child”). Thus in treating his people graciously and kindly the Lord viewed them “as though they were his earthly family so that his “loyal love” ... takes on a nuance that in his great faithfulness to God’s covenant people there is warmth like that of a father to his children.”⁴ Even when his people are unfaithful, even rebellious, the Lord remains a God of graciousness and compassion. They may be unfaithful but in his loving-kindness he continues to be consistent in his character and actions and, therefore, faithful to his covenant with them and its standards. As Stuart observes, “However fickle and unreliable humans may be in their relationship to God, he is nothing of the sort but can be counted on in every situation and at all times to be completely faithful to his promises for his people.”⁵

For its part, however, God's people must also keep God's standards and commands (see for example, [Deut. 13:12-17a](#)). If they do, they can be assured that, "The LORD will...show you compassion, have mercy on you and multiply you as he promised your ancestors. Thus you must obey the LORD your God, keeping all his commandments that I am giving you today and doing what is right before him" ([Deut. 12:17b-18](#)). Although the context is dealing with a specific transgression, its potential penalty and its remedy, the underlying principle is nonetheless true. Indeed, it is no less true even today. Although the precise civil and ceremonial regulations in the Mosaic law were meant for historic Israel, the underlying spiritual and moral principles are timeless, and spring from and reflect God's own nature as a just and righteous God: "For all his ways are just. He is a reliable God who is never unjust, he is fair and upright" ([Deut. 32:4](#); cf. [Dan. 4:37](#)). Today's believers, who have been, "created in God's image, in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth" ([Eph. 4:24](#)) should "stand firm therefore, by fastening the belt of truth around your waist, by putting on the breastplate of righteousness" ([Eph. 6:14](#)).

God's Grace and Compassion in Connection with Sin and Repentance

The Old Testament records many instances of God's consistent grace and compassion in the face of Israel's all-too-frequent waywardness and failure to keep—even deliberately disobey-- his standards. Therefore, Nehemiah could point out the Lord's forgiveness of God's people in past days ([Neh. 9:16-17a](#)), while reminding God that for his part the Lord is well known for his kind and patient spirit: "You are a God of forgiveness, merciful (MT, "gracious"), and compassionate, slow to get angry and unfailing in your loyal love. You did not abandon them" ([Neh. 9:17b](#)). Breneman concludes that such is simply the way matters are: "Despite our sin, God is gracious; despite God's grace, we continue to sin; despite our continuing sin, God continues to be gracious ([Rom. 5:20](#)). God's forgiveness is something no human could devise but can experience."⁶

God's patient grace and compassion for his people continued throughout their history of spiritual infidelity. For example, during the ninth century B. C., Israel had a king named Jehoahaz who could at times display spiritual sensitivity ([2 Kings 13:1-6](#)). Because of his continued sponsorship of an old illicit religious state practice, however, God repeatedly allowed King Hazael of Syria to oppress "Israel throughout Jehoahaz's reign. But the LORD had mercy on (MT, "was gracious toward") them and felt pity for (MT, "showed mercy to") them. He extended his favor to them because of the promise he had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was unwilling to destroy them or remove them from his presence" ([2 Kings 13:22-23](#)). Indeed, God is ever⁴ faithful to the promises in the Abrahamic Covenant, which in turn became the basis for a chain of divinely granted covenants, first in the Davidic Covenant ([2 Sam 7:11-16](#); [1 Chron. 17:10-14](#)) and then in the New Covenant ([Jer. 31:31-37](#); [33:14-16](#); [Ezek. 37:22-27](#)). Although the New Covenant holds

promise for God's Old Testament people, it is already in effect for all believers in the finished work of Christ ([Matt. 26:27-29](#); [2 Cor. 3:6](#); [Hebrews 8](#)).⁷

In a similar vein, Hosea records God's compassionate heart in the continued record of Israel's spiritual history during the eighth century B.C. Although the Lord pronounced judgment on his people for their infidelity, like a loving father he could not bring himself to destroy his child Israel entirely ([Hos. 11:1-3](#)). God's rhetorical questions (v. 8; cf. [Hos. 6:4](#)) illustrate his heartfelt, warm, and tender feelings for his people despite the coldness of their hearts toward him:

How can I surrender you, O Israel?

How can I treat you like Admah?

How can I make you like Zeboim?

I have had a change of heart!

All my tender compassions are aroused!

I cannot carry out my fierce anger!

I cannot totally destroy Ephraim!

I am God and not man-- the

Holy One among you—

I will not come in wrath! ([Hos. 11:8-9](#))

The Lord points out that because of his relation to his people, he could not bring himself to destroy them like the hopelessly rebellious and spiritually dead people of the cities of the plains ([Gen. 19:23-28](#)). Although the NET understanding of the first two lines of verse eight is fully justified, it is of interest to note that something of the great depth of the Lord's feelings for his people is stressed more forcefully in the NLT: "My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows."⁸ To be sure, his justice demanded that he must judge them and that judgment was coming. Nevertheless, he would spare them from complete annihilation.

His sentence against His people was thus a matter of the necessary carrying out of the requirements against a wayward child (cf. [Deut. 19-23](#)) and not a matter of human vengeance. Indeed, Yahweh is a holy god--One who desires to see that holiness resident and active in His people.⁹

Moreover, his "compassion overflowed with a desire for his people to come to him" (cf. vv. 10-11).

In the later eighth century B.C. after the fall of the Northern Kingdom because of its infidelity, King Hezekiah came to the throne of Judah. Hezekiah was noted not only for his faithfulness but also for his godly character. Thus the author of Kings records that:

He trusted in the LORD God of Israel; in this regard there was none like him among the kings of Judah either before or after. He was loyal to the LORD and did not abandon him. He obeyed the commandments which the Lord had given to Moses. ([2 Kings 18:5-6](#))

As such he was a great reform minded king. Accordingly, the authors of Kings and especially Chronicles provide many details concerning Hezekiah's reform policies. For example, in connection with the reinstatement of the Passover Hezekiah and his officials sent an edict throughout Israel and Judah summoning the people to come to Jerusalem for its observance, "for they had not had not observed it on a nationwide scale as prescribed in the law" ([2 Chron. 30:5](#)). In the edict itself all of God's people were urged to submit to the Lord and serve him:

for if you return to the LORD, your brothers and sons will be shown mercy by their captors and return to this land. The LORD your God is merciful (MT: "gracious") and compassionate; he will not reject you if you return to him. ([2 Chron. 30:9](#)).

Truly God's great grace and compassion would surely be exercised, even toward his hitherto unfaithful people. Although he had to judge Israel for infidelity, in accordance with his promise in the Mosaic Law, there could be forgiveness and restoration ([Deut. 30:1-5](#)). Indeed, that which the Lord had pledged himself to do, could be applied to the situation in Hezekiah's day.

The message in Hezekiah's edict is in harmony with the words of the somewhat earlier eighth century B.C. prophet Joel to his people to return to the Lord with heartfelt repentance, for they were already beginning to experience God's chastisement ([Joel 2:12](#)): for he is merciful (MT. "gracious") and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love—often relenting from calamitous punishment. Perhaps he will be compassionate and grant a reprieve, and leave a blessing in his wake: a meal offering and a drink offering for you to offer to the LORD your God ([Joel 2:13-14](#)).

Through the late seventh-early sixth century prophet Jeremiah the Lord gave assurance of the continuance of his compassion for his people saying,

Indeed, the people of Israel are my dear children.

They are the children I take delight in.

For even though I must often rebuke them,

I still remember them with fondness.

So I am deeply moved with pity for them

and will surely have compassion on them.

I, the LORD, affirm it! ([Jer. 21:20](#))

The message of the Lord's loving, compassionate response to his people who call upon him in true repentance can even be seen during the exilic period. Through the prophet Zechariah the Lord declares that he will, "bring them back because of my compassion for them. They will be as though I had never rejected them, for I am the LORD their God and therefore I will hear them" ([Zech. 10:6](#)). Although he had judged his people, God remained available to the repentant cry of a righteous remnant.

In the light of the above passages, which reveal so clearly God's character, it is comes as no surprise that many of the psalmists give testimony to God's grace and/or compassion. Thus after his sin with Bathsheba David cried out to the Lord,

Be gracious to me, God,
according to your faithful love;
according to your abundant compassion,
blot out my rebellion.
Wash away my guilt,
and cleanse me from my sin. ([Ps 51:1-2](#); HCSB)

God's Grace and Compassion in Times of Suffering, Oppression, and Danger

Elsewhere David testifies to the Lord's gracious compassion to the prayers of an oppressed and suffering believer in the midst of his painful experience ([Ps. 86:7](#)). Faced with oppression by some ruthless, godless men who are seeking his life, David cries out: But you, O LORD, are a compassionate and merciful God. You are patient and demonstrate great loyal love and faithfulness. Turn toward me and have mercy on me! Give your servant your strength! Deliver your slave! ([Ps. 86:15-16](#))

Of a similar sentiment are the psalmist's words in [Psalm 116:3-5](#):

I was confronted with trouble and sorrows.
I called on the name of the LORD,
"Please Lord, rescue my life!"
The LORD is merciful and fair;
our God is compassionate.

It should be noted in passing that in both of the above psalms the familiar formula of gracious and compassionate occurs in the Hebrew text (cf. HCSB).

In the troublesome and dangerous times following the fall of Jerusalem, Gedaliah, whom the Babylonians had installed as governor of the area, was murdered by a certain Ishmael ben Nathaniah ([Jer. 41:1-3](#)). Nethaniah did also other atrocities including multiple murders and the taking of many captives, taking them with him toward Ammon (vv. 4-10). Members of the surviving Judean army, headed by Johanan ben Kareah, managed to overtake Ishmael and his men and freed the captives (vv. 11-16). Hoping to avoid the Babylonians he and his forces headed for Egypt (vv. 17-18). On the way they met the prophet Jeremiah ([Jer. 42:1-2](#)) and said to him, “Pray that the LORD your God will tell us what to do” (v. 3).

When Jeremiah had received the answer to his intercessory prayer, he informed the people of God’s instructions in the situation. Johanan and his followers were to remain in the land and attend to its welfare (vv. 4-10). If they did so, God would see to their protection and welfare: Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon whom you now fear. Do not be afraid of him because I will be with you to save you and rescue you from his power. I, the LORD, affirm it! I will have compassion on you so that he in turn will have mercy on you and allow you to return to your land. (vv. 11-12)

Thus Huey observes, “The Lord would show them ‘compassion’ (*rahām*, a word that suggests tender, motherly love; cf. [Gen 43:14](#); [1 Kings 8:50](#); its root is associated with the womb...). Because of the Lord’s compassion, ‘he’ (i.e., Nebuchadnezzar) would have ‘compassion’ and would restore them to their own land.”¹⁰ Under the existing conditions it was only natural for Johanan to fear a Babylonian reprisal against them because of all that had taken place. Yet as we learn here, we can realize that the Lord’s compassion is available and can be relied upon even in the most dangerous times and places. What is needed is for people to follow his will and trust in him. Unfortunately, God’s instructions and Jeremiah’s advice were not heeded. Johanan not only fled to Egypt but took with him several members of the royal family, and even Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch ([Jer. 43:1-7](#)). It was to prove to be a severe miscalculation.

God’s Grace and Compassion in Everyday Affairs

God’s grace and compassion are not limited to occasions of repentance, suffering, oppression, and danger. They are readily at hand at all times. Accordingly, Nehemiah could call upon the Lord for his compassion to be present and operative as he went before Artaxerxes I, the king of Persia. He wished to ask the king’s permission to journey to Judah so as to oversee the work of rebuilding Jerusalem (Neh. 1:11-2:5). Doubtless under God’s supervision and direction, Nehemiah’s request was granted. As Fensham remarks, “The Lord of history makes the decisions, not Artaxerxes.”¹¹

God's grace and compassion for his people did not expire with Israel's past or then present conditions, however. Isaiah revealed that the Lord had plans for his people's future as well. Indeed, in the Lord's appointed time and way, "The Lord will certainly have compassion on Jacob; he will again choose Israel as his special people and restore them to their land" ([Isa. 14:1](#)). As the Lord had once rescued his people out of Egypt, he would bring them out of their captivity and back into their land. To be sure, his judgment was coming, but this was not to spell the end to his covenant commitments. As Oswalt observes: "Here the prophet reminds his hearers, both present and future, that whatever punishment may come, it need not mean abandonment. God will once again choose. So it is with the church."¹² Indeed, even the people of other nations will join them and nations once their superiors will become subservient to them (vv. 2-3). Although the time period for [Isaiah 14:1-3](#) would appear to relate to exilic times, God's compassion for his people extends far into the distant future. Elsewhere Isaiah records God's declaration that despite Israel's seemingly ceaseless infidelity, his compassion never ends: "I have seen their behavior, but I will heal them and give them rest, and I will once again console those who mourn" ([Isa. 57:18](#)). Although a different Hebrew term is used here, as we have seen above in connection with [Hosea 11:8](#) (NET), it does in some contexts have the stronger force of compassion. The Lord thus informs his people that despite their wickedness that had brought his judgment upon them, he will yet comfort them.

Although the precise time period intended is not distinctly mentioned, based on matters of context Smith's explanation appears to be correct in saying,

"Everything that caused heartache, pain, violence, oppression, and loss in the past will be removed so that God's healing power might transform this evil world and create a new world based on his grace. This is all the work of God. Thanks be to God! ... Although on this present world the righteous may suffer and die (57:1-2), in the end the righteous will be revived, healed, comforted, and given eternal peace (57:18-19) in the presence of God at his Holy Mountain (56:7; 57:13)." ¹³

The Lord's inclusion of non-Israelites in his concern and compassion for all humanity is also clearly seen in his dealings with Jonah and the Ninevites. Not only did the Lord restore a stubborn and disobedient Jonah to his prophetic mission (cf. [2 Kings 14:25](#)), but he fulfilled his present assignment by bringing the king of Assyria and the people of Nineveh to a dramatic change of behavior. Therefore, God did not bring the harsh judgment against them that Jonah had warned would happen. Rather than being pleased with the success of his mission, however, Jonah was greatly disappointed and displeased. Sharing his reactions,

He prayed to the LORD and said, "Oh, LORD, this is just what I thought would happen when I was in my own country. This is what I tried to prevent by attempting to escape to

Tarshish – because I knew that you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and one relents concerning threatened judgment.” ([Jonah 4:2](#))

Here we have the twelfth example of the combination formula of grace and compassion (cf. [Exod. 33:19; 34:6](#); Neh. 9:17, 31; [2 Kings 13:23](#); [2 Chron. 30:8](#); [Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 116:5; 145:8](#)). This formulaic expression is remarkable in that it illustrates the fact even in Old Testament days God’s tender mercies, and heartfelt grace and compassion could be extended to the gentile world. In [Jonah 4:11](#) the Lord goes on to press this point to Jonah. He is not only a compassionate God who cares for his own chosen people Israel, but one is concerned for the welfare and good of all people. Since this is true of the Lord, should that not be a concern for today’s believers as well? The answer is a resounding, “Yes!” As we shall see, this concern is confirmed by Jesus and the writers of the New Testament.

¹ All texts in this study will be based upon the NET.

² Mark D. Futato, “The Book of Psalms,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2009)7:327.

³ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 439.

⁴ Richard D. Patterson, “[Psalm 145](#): A Song in ‘G Major,” (Biblical Studies Press, 2009), 3.

⁵ Douglas K. Stuart, “Exodus,” *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 716.

⁶ Mervin Breneman, “Nehemiah,” in *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 239.

⁷ For fuller details, see Andreas Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 178-87.

⁸ For a discussion of translation possibilities here, see the NET note. It should be noted as well that the Hebrew word rendered “tender compassion” is a different one from that which we have seen in the formulaic expression “grace and compassion.” It does occur, however, together with that formula in [Joel 2:13](#) and [Jonah 4:2](#). See further, Mike Butterworth, “*n̄hm*,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 3:81-83.

⁹ Richard D. Patterson, *Hosea* (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 20-9), 108.

¹⁰ F.B. Huey, Jr., “Jeremiah, Lamentations,” in *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 360. See further, the word of Mike Butterworth, “*r̄hm*,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A, Van Gemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 3:1093-95.

¹¹ F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1982), 157.

¹² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 312. See also the NET text note.

¹³ Gary V. Smith, "Isaiah 40-66," *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, (2009), 566, 567.