

Exodus 34:6-7

Character of God Series

VIDEO NOTES

Exodus 34:6-7 is the first description of God's character and the most quoted passage in the Bible. In these two verses we learn that all of God's actions are an expression of these attributes: compassion, grace, patience, loyal-love, and faithfulness. This list of God's character traits has been carefully designed to help us see the meaning and importance of each one in relation to the others. Though it's just two verses, this passage has a literary design that illustrates what God values and explains many of his actions throughout the biblical story.

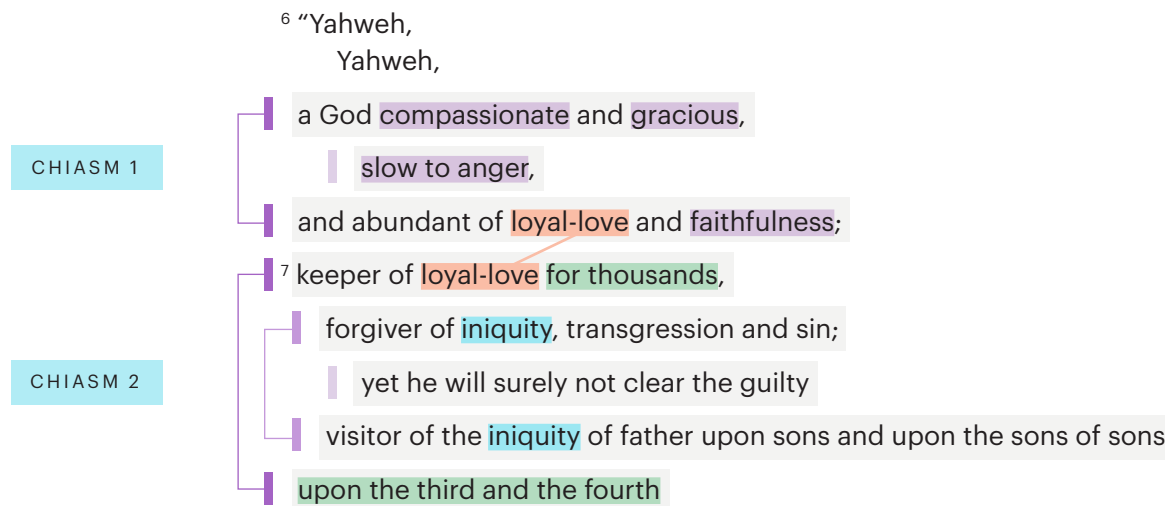
In this passage we see that God's core character traits are rooted in generous mercy and loyal love, which means that God's anger is not a primary attribute. It's a divine reaction to selfish and destructive human decisions, and it's rooted in his love. God's anger and judgment is an important theme in the Bible, but it's not the whole story. God's core character is one of generous love that created the world and longs for its restoration from human evil. Exodus 34:6-7 invites us into a lifetime of pondering the depths and mysteries of the character of God.

Contents

Contents	1	Exodus 34:6-7 as a Narrative Summary	5
The Literary Shape of Exodus 34:6-7	2	Moses as Intercessor	6
Exodus 34:6-7 in Context	3	Generational Accountability	7
The Larger Context of Exodus 19-31	3	References in the Bible	8
Plot Line of Exodus 32-34	4	Exodus 34:6-7 References in the Hebrew Bible	8
Immediate Context: The Golden Calf Story	5	Exodus 34:6-7 in the New Testament	11
		Observations	11

The Literary Shape of Exodus 34:6-7

These two verses are designed as two chiasms. A chiasm is a literary device in which an idea is presented and then repeated in reverse order, a mirror effect that highlights the most important points of the selected text. See the chiastic structure of this passage below.



When we view this passage through the lens of its literary design, we see that this list of character traits is rooted in God's loyal love and forgiveness.

Exodus 34:6-7 in Context

The Larger Context of Exodus 19-31

In Exodus 19-24 Moses mediates the covenant ceremony between God (Yahweh) and Israel. In Exodus 19:4-6, God speaks to Moses from the mountain, telling him to remind the Israelites of their deliverance and promising to bless the nation if they keep God's commands.

In Exodus 24:15-18 Moses ascends Mount Sinai into a cloud of divine presence (on the seventh day!). He remains on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. It's here that God gives Moses the plans for a heavenly temple, so that Moses can build the tabernacle (see Exodus 25:1-9).

Then Moses went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; and on the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

EXODUS 24:15-18

This is followed by seven divine speeches that reveal the plans for the tabernacle in Exodus chapters 25, 30, and 31.

25:1 "And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying..."	The offering for tabernacle materials The ark of the covenant The table for sacred bread The menorah The tent curtains and poles The altar + screens for outer court + priesly garments + priestly ordination ritual + altar of incense
30:11 "And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying..."	Atonement offering for the census of Israel
30:17 "And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying..."	The bronze bowl for ritual washing
30:22 "And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying..."	The oil of ritual anointing
30:34 "And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying..."	The sacred incense
31:1 "And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying..."	God fills Bezalel and Oholiab with the Spirit of Wisdom
31:12 "And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying"	Sabbath

Plot Line of Exodus 32-34

In chapter 32, Moses goes back down the mountain to relay God's message to the people of Israel.

		Moses is up on the mountain for 40 days and nights. Moses receives the two stone tablets that have the terms of the covenant.	24:15-18 31:18
		The Israelites don't know where Moses has gone, so they make the golden calf.	32:1-6
		Up on the mountain, Moses commits his first act of intercession for the people, saving them from destruction and compelling God to remain faithful to his covenant promise to Abraham.	32:7-14
		Moses comes down the mountain, shatters the tablets, pulverizes the calf, and calls the sons of Levi to execute the idolaters among Israel.	32:15-30
		Moses goes back up onto Mount Sinai to atone for the sins of the remaining Israelites, followed by four more acts of intercession.	32:30-34
		Moses commits his second act of intercession by offering his own life for the whole of Israel. He then goes back down the mountain.	32:30-35
		God says he won't accompany the people anymore. Instead he will send a messenger. Moses commits his third act of intercession [in the tent], saying that the people won't leave without Yahweh's presence to guide them. God says his presence will go with them after all.	33:1-6 33:7-14 33:15-17
		Moses commits his fourth act of intercession. He asks Yahweh to show his glorious presence, which will go with the people on their journey. Moses ascends the mountain and sees a revelation of God's goodness.	33:18-34:8
		Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate and gracious...	34:6-7
		Moses commits his fifth act of intercession. He asks Yahweh to go with the Israelites into the land and to continue forgiving their rebellion and sin.	34:9
		God repeats the terms of the renewed covenant (a restatement of the laws from Exodus 20 and 23).	34:10-26
		Moses is on the mountain For 40 days and 40 nights and makes two new tablets for the renewed covenant.	34:27-28

Immediate Context: The Golden Calf Story

Exodus 34:6-7 is a statement that God gives about himself to Moses on Mount Sinai. God is formalizing a covenant partnership with Israel at this mountain. But right in the middle of all this, the Israelites create an idol statue, breaking the very first command of the covenant agreement. How is God going to respond to people who are so rebellious?

The golden calf story is Israel’s foundational “fail narrative” (in analogy with Genesis 3 and Genesis 9:20-22). This fact was recognized in the history of Jewish interpretation, which viewed the entire history leading up to exile as one long punishment for the sin of the golden calf.

- Midrash Exodus Rabbah 43:2: “There is not a generation [of Israel] that doesn’t suffer at least a particle of punishment for the sin of the golden calf.”
- Babylonian Talmud 102A: “There is no punishment that comes upon the world that doesn’t have at least one-twenty fourth of part of the punishment of the golden calf.”

Exodus 34:6-7 as a Narrative Summary

Exodus 34:6-7 is a condensed statement of God’s character that offers commentary on God’s behavior toward Israel in the narrative context.

EXODUS 34:6-7	GOD’S ACTIONS IN EXODUS 32-34
Compassionate and gracious	Moses intercedes by asking “to find grace in your eyes” (Exodus 33:12, 16).
Slow to anger	God is patient with the Israelites’ grumbling in Exodus 15-17, but he eventually gets angry when they violate the terms of the covenant.
Abounding in loyal love and faithfulness	God is compelled to remain faithful to his own covenant promises to Abraham.
Forgiving iniquity transgression and sin	Moses’ last act of intercession is to ask God to forgive Israel’s sins in the future (Exodus 34:9).
Yet he won’t declare innocent the guilty	God allows Moses to send the Levites to strike the 3,000 idolaters.
Repays sinful generations to the third and fourth but keeps loyal to thousands	God will deal with each generation as it deserves.

Moses as Intercessor

Moses takes up a new role in this narrative. In addition to his roles as Israel's deliverer from slavery and priestly representative before God, he is now also the prophetic intercessor for Israel.

Moses performs five acts of intercession that correspond to his five acts of resistance at the burning bush in Exodus 3, where he is presented as an anti-hero who disagrees with God. Here in Exodus 32-34, Moses' disagreement is portrayed positively as he intercedes, not for himself as in Exodus 3 but for the people.

EXODUS 3	EXODUS 32-34
Objection 1: "Who am I? (3:11)	Intercession 1: 32:11-14
Objection 2: "Who are you? What is your name?" (3:13)	Intercession 2: 32:30-35
Objection 3: "What if they don't believe me?" (4:1)	Intercession 3: 33:12-17
Objection 4: "Please, my Lord, I'm not a man of words..." (4:10)	Intercession 4: 33:18
Objection 5: "Please, my Lord, send someone else!" (4:13)	Intercession 5: 34:9

In Exodus 32:10-14, when God tells Moses that he's going to destroy the people, God says, "give me rest" (Heb: *hanikhah liy* / הניחה לי). This word can have two meanings: "leave me alone" (which Moses does not do), or "provide rest for me" (which Moses goes on to do).

- Moses intercedes and asks God to "relent" (Heb: *hina-khem* / נחמה), and he does.
- This interplay between "rest" (*nuakh*) and "relent" (*na-kham*) is a glowing hyperlink back to the flood story. Noah (*noakh* "rest") is destined to become the intercessor on behalf of all creation by "providing comfort" (*nakham*), so that God "relents" (*nakham*) from his judgment of the flood.
- Recall that Moses and Noah are the only two characters in the Bible who are saved through deadly waters in an "ark!"

The point of this narrative is to show that the future of any covenant partnership between God and Israel is going to depend on having a faithful covenant intercessor, who will play the role that Moses does in this narrative. Moses is a human who ascends into the heavens and pleads on behalf of idolatrous humanity and compels God to remain faithful to his eternal covenant promises. This is what the divine revelation of God's character in Exodus 34:6-7 is all about!

Generational Accountability

The most difficult part of this passage is God's promise to "visit the sins of the fathers on the sons, and upon the sons of sons, and on the third and fourth." But what does that mean?

Key points for interpreting Exodus 34:7

The "third and fourth" is an idiom that means "whatever number" (cf. the idiom "for three, even for four" in Proverbs 30:18, 21, 29 and in Amos 1:3, 6, 11, 13, etc.) This is in contrast to the loyal love that God has for "thousands of generations." The numerical disparity drives home the basic point: mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13).

This verse does not mean that God will punish an innocent following generation for the sins of their parents.

- This interpretation goes against other statements in the Hebrew Scriptures.
 - Deuteronomy 24:16: Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers.
- Many statements like the one in Exodus 34:7 are recorded alongside statements about how each person and generation is responsible for its own sin.

I prayed to the Lord, saying: 'Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. You show steadfast love to thousands, but you repay the guilt of fathers to their children after them, O great and mighty God, whose name is the Lord of hosts, great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, **rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds.**

JEREMIAH 32:16-19

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation **of those who hate me**, but showing steadfast love to thousands (of generations) **of those who love me and keep my commandments.**

EXODUS 20:5-6

- Clarification of this commandment shows that the following generations are persisting in the same behavior.

This verse does mean that God will punish successive generations for committing the same sins they learned from their parents. They are not blameless for simply having learned it from a previous generation [Douglas Stuart, "Exodus 20:5-6," *New American Commentary - Exodus*].

This is why other restatements of Exodus 34:7 clarify that the behavior of each generation is crucial to determine God's response.

You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth [generations] of those who hate me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands [of generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

EXODUS 20:5-6

(REPEATED IN DEUTERONOMY 5:9-10)

The disproportionate numbers are key to understanding the meaning of this statement. The lower number "third and fourth" is associated with God's judgment, while "thousands" is associated with God's covenant loyalty. This results in a picture of God's character that shows liberal generosity that is eternal and endless. But this generosity will not be at the expense of God's justice, which will work itself out as much as necessary. But it is clear in this statement that God's judgment is only a means to a greater end, which is covenant loyalty.

References in the Bible

Exodus 34:6-7 is the most referenced passage in the Bible. The biblical authors return again and again to this rich description of God's character. Passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as one in the New Testament, quote or reuse language from Exodus 34:6-7, making clear how important this passage is to the story of the Bible and to the people of Israel.

Exodus 34:6-7 References in the Hebrew Bible

But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as you have declared, "The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations." Forgive, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your lovingkindness, just as you also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.

NUMBERS 14:17-19

David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead, and said to them, "May you be blessed of the Lord because you have shown this kindness to Saul your lord, and have buried him. Now may the Lord show loyal love and faithfulness to you; and I also will show this goodness to you, because you have done this thing."

2 SAMUEL 2:5-6

For the Lord your God is a compassionate God; he will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which he swore to them.

DEUTERONOMY 4:31

You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a passionate God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love me and keep my commandments.

DEUTERONOMY 5:9-10

Now Hazael king of Aram had oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz. But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them and turned to them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them or cast them from his presence until now.

2 KINGS 13:22-23

I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the Lord,
the praises of the Lord, According to all that the Lord has
granted us,

And the great goodness toward the house of Israel,
Which he has granted them according to his compassion
And according to the abundance of his loyal love.

ISAIAH 63:7

And rend your heart and not your garments.
Now return to the Lord your God,
For he is gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger, abounding in loyal love
And relenting of evil.

JOEL 2:13

Who is a God like you, who pardons iniquity
And passes over the rebellious act
of the remnant of his possession?
He does not retain his anger forever,
Because he delights in loyal love.
He will again have compassion on us;
He will tread our iniquities under foot.
Yes, you will cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea.

MICAH 7:18-19

Remember, O Lord, Your compassion and Your loyal love,
For they have been from of old.

PSALM 25:6

For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive,
And abundant in loyal love to all who call upon you.
Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer;
And give heed to the voice of my supplications!

PSALM 86:5-6

He made known his ways to Moses,
His acts to the sons of Israel.
The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in loyal love.
He will not always strive with us,
Nor will he keep his anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

PSALM 103:7-11

Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the
earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm!
Nothing is too difficult for you, who shows lovingkindness to
thousands, but repays the iniquity of fathers into the bosom
of their children after them, O great and mighty God. The
Lord of hosts is his name;

JEREMIAH 32:17-18

But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He
prayed to the Lord and said, "Please Lord, was not this what I
said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to
forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a
gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and
abundant in loyal love, and one who relents concerning evil."

JONAH 4:1-2

A jealous and avenging God is the Lord;
The Lord is avenging and wrathful.
The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries,
And He reserves wrath for His enemies.
The Lord is slow to anger and great in power,
And the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.

NAHUM 1:2-3

For their heart was not steadfast toward him,
Nor were they faithful in his covenant.
But he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did
not destroy them; And often he restrained his anger
And did not arouse all his wrath.

PSALM 78:38

But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger and abundant in loyal love and faithfulness.

PSALM 86:15

Nevertheless he looked upon their distress
When he heard their cry;
And he remembered his covenant for their sake,
And relented according to the greatness of his loyal love.
He also made them objects of compassion
In the presence of all their captors.

PSALM 106:44-45

I give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples,
And I sing praises to you among the nations.
For **your loyal love is great** above the heavens,
And **your faithfulness** reaches to the skies.

PSALM 108:3-4

Light arises in the darkness for the upright;
He is gracious and compassionate and righteous.

PSALM 112:4

For the Lord will not reject forever,
For if he causes grief,
Then he will have compassion
According to his abundant lovingkindness.

LAMENTATIONS 3:31-32

Men shall speak of the power of your awesome acts,
And I will tell of your greatness.
They shall eagerly utter the memory
of your abundant goodness
And will shout joyfully of your righteousness.
The Lord is gracious and merciful;
Slow to anger and great in loyal love.
The Lord is good to all,
And His mercies are over all his works.

PSALM 145:6-9

However, you bore with them for many years,
And admonished them by your Spirit
through your prophets,
Yet they would not give ear.
Therefore you gave them into the hand
of the peoples of the lands.
Nevertheless, **in your great compassion**
you did not make an end of them or forsake them,
For you are a gracious and compassionate God.
Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the
awesome God, who keeps covenant **and loyal love,**
Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before you,
Which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our
priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all your people,
From the days of the kings of Assyria to this day.

NEHEMIAH 9:30-32

He has made his wonders to be remembered;
The Lord is gracious and compassionate.
He has given food to those who fear him;
He will remember his covenant forever.

PSALM 111:4-5

Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
Yes, **our God is compassionate.**

PSALM 116:5

I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed and said, "Alas,
O Lord, the great and awesome God, **who keeps his**
covenant and lovingkindness for those who love him and
keep his commandments,

DANIEL 9:4

They refused to listen,
And did not remember your wondrous deeds which you had
performed among them; So they became stubborn and
appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you
are a God of forgiveness,
Gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger and abounding in loyal love;
And you did not forsake them.
Even when they made for themselves
A calf of molten metal
And said, "This is your God who brought you up from Egypt,"
And committed great blasphemies,
You, in your great compassion,
Did not forsake them in the wilderness;
The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day,
To guide them on their way,
Nor the pillar of fire by night,
to light for them the way in which they were to go.

NEHEMIAH 9:17-19

Now do not stiffen your neck like your fathers, but yield to
the Lord and enter his sanctuary which he has consecrated
forever, and serve the Lord your God, that his burning anger
may turn away from you. For if you return to the Lord, your
brothers and your sons will find **compassion** before those
who led them captive and will return to this land. **For the**
Lord your God is gracious and compassionate, and will not
turn his face away from you if you return to him.

2 CHRONICLES 30:8-9

Exodus 34:6-7 in the New Testament

Exodus 34:6-7 appears one time in the New Testament. John 1:14-18 claims that God's glorious temple presence (Exodus 33:18-23) and divine attributes (Exodus 34:6) are revealed in the humanity of Jesus.

JOHN CH. 1	EXODUS 25, 32-34
<p>And the Word became flesh, and dwelt (Grk. ἐσκήνωσεν) among us, and we saw his glory (Grk. δόξα), glory as of the one and only from the Father...</p> <p>JOHN 1:14A</p>	<p>Have them make a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell (Heb. <i>shakan</i>) among them. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle (Heb. <i>miskhan</i> // Grk. τῆς σκηνῆς) and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it.</p> <p>EXODUS 25:8-9</p>
<p>...full of grace and truth (Grk. πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας)... For from his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Torah was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.</p> <p>JOHN 1:14B, 16-17</p>	<p>Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and full of covenant love and truth</p> <p>EXODUS 34:6-7</p>
<p>And we saw his glory (Grk. δόξα), glory as of the one and only from the Father... No one has seen God at any time; the one and only God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained...</p> <p>JOHN 1:14B, 18</p>	<p>But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory (Heb. <i>kavod</i> // Grk. δόξα) passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by.</p> <p>EXODUS 33:20-22</p>

Observations

- The most referenced parts of the statement are God's "gracious and compassionate" character and his "loyal love."
- These are precisely the character traits of God that compel him to keep his covenant relationship with a faithless people who continually violate their covenant with him.
- Notice how many texts invoke these character traits in contexts about Israel's unfaithfulness or stories about their rebellion.
 - Numbers 14:17-19: The rebellion of the 10 spies and the people's desire to go back to Egypt
 - Joel 2:2-3: Israel facing the Day of the Lord because of rebellion
 - Jonah 4:1-2: Nineveh facing judgment because of their evil
 - Micah 7:18-19: Israel and Judah in exile
 - Nehemiah 9:17-19 and 9:30-32: Retelling Israel's story, focusing on the golden calf narrative and later the exile to Babylon