

Character of God: Compassion

STUDY NOTES

When God reveals who he is to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, the very first word he uses to describe himself is the Hebrew word *rakhum*.

“Yahweh, Yahweh, **compassionate** and gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with loyal-love and faithfulness.”

This verse is the most quoted and reused verse in the Hebrew Bible. So the question is, why does God refer to himself first with the word compassionate? What is the significance? These study notes will help you dig deeper into the Hebrew word *rakhum* and see the ideas presented in our video Character of God: Compassion.

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Rakhum and Related Words

The Hebrew word *rakhum* is an adjective meaning “compassionate,” or “compassionate one.” *Rakhum* and words related to its root are used 99 times in the Hebrew Bible. These words are all derived from the noun *rekhem*, meaning “womb.”

This connection to the word “womb” evokes an image of tender care of an infant when it is most vulnerable. Compassionate is an emotional word with clear connotations in the Hebrew.

The *rekhem* word group includes the following:

Nouns

- “Womb” - רֶחֶם (*rekhem*) - 31 times
- “Compassion” - רַחֲמִים (*rakhamim*) - 39 times

Adjective

- “Compassionate,” “compassionate one” - רַחוּם (*rakhum*) - 13 times

Verb

- “To show compassion,” “to deeply feel,” “to love” - רָחַם (*rakham*) - 47 times

The Emotional Component of the Word Compassion

In the Hebrew Bible, the word “compassion” seems to signify emotion.

Sometimes, the NASB translators use the phrase “deeply stirred” in their translation.

*Joseph hurried out for he was **deeply stirred** over his brother, and he sought a place to weep; and he entered his chamber and wept there.*

GENESIS 43:30

*Then the woman whose child was the living one spoke to the king, for she was **deeply stirred** over her son and said, “Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him.” But the other said, “He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him!”*

1 KINGS 3:26

Of the 99 uses of the words related to compassion (*rakhamim*, *rakhum*, and *rakham*), about 80 percent of them refer to God, while 20 percent refer to humans.

Compassion is also used in parallel to “stirrings of the heart” (*hamon me’eh*).

*Look down from heaven and see from your holy and glorious habitation;
Where are your zeal and your mighty deeds?
The **stirrings of your heart** and your **compassion** are restrained toward me.*

ISAIAH 63:15

The root is also used in parallel relationship with “to have pity” or *oin* (*khus*).

*...I will not show **pity** nor be sorry nor have **compassion**
so as not to destroy them.*

JEREMIAH 13:14

*[of Nebuchadnezzar]...and he will strike them down
with the edge of the sword. He will not spare them nor
have **pity** nor **compassion**.*

JEREMIAH 21:7

Often, the word is used to describe God’s response when he hears his people cry out, depicting an emotional response to their suffering.

Therefore you delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them,

*But when they **cried to you in the time of their distress**,*

You heard from heaven, and according to your great compassion

You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors.

But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before you;

Therefore you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies...

When they cried again to you, you heard from heaven,

*And many times you rescued them according to your **compassion**....”*

NEHEMIAH 9:27-28

Compassion is also used in contrast to anger, so that having compassion represents a turning away from anger.

*In an outburst of anger I hid my face from you for a moment,
But with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you,”
Says the LORD your redeemer.*

ISAIAH 54:8

*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

*Has God forgotten to be gracious,
Or has he in anger withdrawn his compassion? Selah.*

PSALM 77:9

God as a Compassionate Parent

Throughout the Bible, God is compared to a parent because of his compassion. Sometimes he is described with imagery of a nursing mother who is constantly attentive to and thoughtful of her infant.

*Can a woman forget her nursing child
And have no **compassion** on the son of her womb?
Even though she may forget, I will not forget you.
Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
Your walls are continually before me.*

ISAIAH 49:15-16

*Just as a father has **compassion** on his children,
So the LORD has **compassion** on those who fear him.*

PSALM 103:13

*Is Ephraim not my dear son?
The child in whom I delight?
Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him,
I certainly still remember him;
Therefore **my heart yearns** (hamah me'eh) for him;
I will **surely** have **compassion** on him," declares the LORD.*

JEREMIAH 31:20

In the story of the Hebrew Bible, we also see God nurturing Israel like a parent would a child.

*They will not hunger or thirst,
Nor will the scorching heat or sun strike them down;
For he who has **compassion** on them will lead them
And will guide them to springs of water.*

ISAIAH 49:10

Compassion is often used to describe action towards children. In addition to the examples about God above, the word is used for humans who should have compassion on children.

*And their bows will mow down the young men,
They will not even have **compassion** on the fruit of the womb,
Nor will their eye pity children.*

ISAIAH 13:18

*Then the woman whose child was the living one spoke to the king, for she was **deeply stirred** over her son and said, "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him." But the other said, "He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him!"*

1 KINGS 3:26

*The hands of **compassionate** women
Boiled their own children;
They became food for them
Because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.*

LAMENTATIONS 4:10

Conclusions

Compassion is an emotional word, often used to describe God's love for his people and how his heart moves him to rescue them. Compassion is depicted as the way a parent views a child, and describes how God views his people.

The Implied Action of the Word Compassion

So compassion is an emotional word often ascribed to God, but it isn't only an emotion—it also motivates action. We see this in the way it is used in parallel relationship with the concepts of forgiveness and deliverance.

Compassion as Forgiveness

The words for compassion are also consistently used in parallel with the idea of forgiveness. So God's compassion is often expressed by his forgiveness of people.

*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 7:19

*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

*Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the LORD,
And he will have **compassion** on him,
And to our God,
For **he will abundantly pardon**.*

ISAIAH 55:7

*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 lovingkindness;
And **you did not forsake them**.*

NEHEMIAH 9:17

*For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the
prophet came to him, after he had committed adultery with
Bathsheba.
Be gracious to me, O God, according to your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of your **compassion blot out my
transgressions**.*

PSALM 51:1

***Do not remember the iniquities** of our forefathers against us;
Let your **compassion** come quickly to meet us,
For we are brought very low.*

PSALM 79:8

*To the Lord our God belong **compassion** and **forgiveness**, for
we have rebelled against him;*

DANIEL 9:9

Compassion as Deliverance from Suffering

The words for compassion are also often used in the context of deliverance or rescue (which may also involve forgiveness). So God having compassion on his people can be synonymous with delivering them from suffering. The words are used repeatedly to refer to his restoration of his people from exile.

*...if you return to Yahweh with all your heart, then the LORD your God will **restore you from captivity**, and have **compassion** on you, **and will gather you** again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.*

DEUTERONOMY 30:2-3

*Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
Yes, our God is **compassionate**.
Then I called upon the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, I beseech you, save my life!"
Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
Yes, our God is **compassionate**.
The LORD preserves the simple;
I was brought low, and he saved me.*

PSALM 116:4-6

*When the LORD will have **compassion on Jacob and again choose Israel**, and **settle them in their own land**, then strangers will join them and attach themselves to the house of Jacob.*

ISAIAH 14:1

*Shout for joy, O heavens!
And rejoice, O earth!
Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains!
For the LORD has comforted his people
And will have compassion on his afflicted.*

ISAIAH 49:13

*For a brief moment I forsook you,
But with great compassion I will gather you.*

ISAIAH 54:7

*Thus says the LORD,
"Behold, **I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob
And have compassion on his dwelling places;**
And the city will be rebuilt on its ruin,
And the palace will stand on its rightful place.*

JEREMIAH 30:18

*But I will **have compassion on the house of Judah and deliver them** by the LORD their God, and will not deliver them by bow, sword, battle, horses or horsemen.*

HOSEA 1:7

*Therefore thus says the LORD, "**I will return to Jerusalem with compassion; my house will be built in it,**" declares the LORD of hosts, "and a measuring line will be stretched over Jerusalem."*

ZECHARIAH 1:16

***I will strengthen the house of Judah,
And I will save the house of Joseph,
And I will bring them back,
Because I have had compassion on them;**
And they will be as though I had not rejected them,
For I am the LORD their God and I will answer them.*

ZECHARIAH 10:6

God's compassion is part of his everlasting covenant promise to his people.

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 13:23

*"For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake,
But my lovingkindness will not be removed from you,
And my covenant of peace will not be shaken,"
Says the LORD who has compassion on you.*

ISAIAH 54:10

Often, God's compassionate deliverance goes hand-in-hand with people turning back to him.

*But from there **you will seek the LORD your God**, and you will find him **if you search for him** with all your heart and all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days **you will return to the LORD your God and listen to his voice**. 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 4:29-31

*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 lovingkindness
And relenting of evil.*

JOEL 2:13

*Nothing from that which is put under the ban shall cling to your hand, in order that the LORD may turn from his burning anger and show mercy to you, and have **compassion** on you and make you increase, just as he has sworn to your fathers...*

DEUTERONOMY 13:17

Compassion in Power Relationships

When used in connection with humans, the words for compassion sometimes occur in the context of power, where someone who has the ability to do harm to another instead has compassion on them. This reinforces the idea that compassion has to do with someone being in a vulnerable position, like a child.

*He also made them objects of **compassion** In the presence of all their captors.*

PSALM 106:46

*O Lord, I beseech you, may your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and the prayer of your servants who delight to revere your name, and make your servant successful today and grant him **compassion** before this man. Now I was the cupbearer to the king.*

NEHEMIAH 1:11

*Now God granted Daniel favor and **compassion** in the sight of the commander of the officials...*

DANIEL 1:9

*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 30:9

Conclusions

For God to have compassion on someone is often expressed as forgiveness and/or deliverance. The “object of compassion” is typically someone in a vulnerable position, where someone else has the ability to do harm or have compassion on them.

Compassion in the Story of the Bible

The Hebrew Bible

Compassion is a really significant word for the story of Israel, where all of the aspects described above—especially compassion as emotion, forgiveness, and deliverance—come into play. God is consistently moved to respond to the cries of his people, and this is portrayed as an emotional response that consists of acting on their behalf.

Many times throughout the biblical narrative, Israel fails their God and worships other gods. The golden calf story of Exodus 34 is the paradigmatic fail narrative, and it also shows us God’s compassionate response. This story is on repeat throughout the Scriptures. When the people fail—whether with the golden calf, with their grumblings against God in the wilderness, during the period of the judges, in their worshiping of other gods once they enter the lands, in the killing of God’s prophets, in their calling good evil and evil good, or in doing violence and oppressing the poor—God continually looks on them the way a parent does with a loved child and responds to their cries.

Ultimately, the people’s rebellion against God lands them in exile, and they are scattered among the nations (2 Kings 17, 25). This is a state described as God not having compassion on them (Isaiah 27:11). Yet the compassionate God cannot leave his children in this state of suffering and estrangement from him. This is why we find so many messages of hope in the prophets to the people in exile.

*Can a woman forget her nursing child
And have no **compassion** on the son of her womb?
Even though she may forget, I will not forget you.
Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
Your walls are continually before me.*

ISAIAH 49:15-16

*Is Ephraim not my dear son?
The child in whom I delight?
Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him, I certainly still
remember him; Therefore **my heart yearns** (hamah me’eh) for him;
I will **surely** have **compassion** on him,” declares the LORD.*

JEREMIAH 31:20

As the Hebrew Scriptures close, the people are encouraged to continue to hope in Yahweh's compassion, that he will rescue his people.

*I will strengthen the house of Judah,
And I will save the house of Joseph,
And I will bring them back,
Because I have had compassion on them;
And they will be as though I had not rejected them,
For I am the LORD their God and I will answer them.*

ZECHARIAH 10:6

*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 30:9

The New Testament

When we come to the New Testament, we see the story of Yahweh's deep compassion continue to play out through a particular individual, Jesus. He is Yahweh's deep compassion embodied as a human.

The Hebrew words for compassion most often get translated into Greek as *oiktírmōs* (οἰκτιρμός). In the New Testament, this word is found in the following forms and with the following meanings.

Noun

- "Compassion," "pity" (*oiktírmōs*) - five times

Adjective

- "Compassionate" (*oiktírmone*, οἰκτίρων) - three times

Verb

- "To have compassion," "show pity," "show mercy" (*oiktíro*, οἰκτίρω) - once

There's another word in the New Testament that often gets translated into English as compassion, *splángnon* (σπλάγχνον). It's used very few times in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), but it seems to have become more widely used to express the idea of compassion by the time the New Testament was written. It carries the connotation of being "deeply moved."

Noun

- "Compassion," "inner parts" (*splángnon*, σπλάγχνον) - 11 times

Adjectives

- "Compassionate" (*eúsplangnos*, εὐσπλαγχνος) - two times
- "Full of compassion" (*polúsplangnos*, πολὺσπλαγχνος) - once

Verb

- "To feel compassion," "to have affection," (*splangnizomai*, σπλαγχνίζομαι) - 12 times

The idea of God's compassionate care, forgiveness, and rescue from suffering is seen repeatedly in the person of Jesus. He embraces the sick, cares for the outcast, and is deeply moved by human suffering. Here are just a few examples.

*Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, **he felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited** like sheep without a shepherd.*

MATTHEW 9:35-36

*And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching him and falling on his knees before him, and saying, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." **Moved with compassion**, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed."*

MARK 1:40-41

*...[Jesus] withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by himself; and when the people heard of this, they followed him on foot from the cities. When he went ashore, he saw a large crowd, and **felt compassion for them and healed their sick**.*

MATTHEW 14:13-14

***Moved with compassion**, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed him.*

MATTHEW 20:34

*And Jesus called his disciples to him, and said, "**I feel compassion for the people**, because they have remained with me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way."*

MATTHEW 5:32

*Now as he approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, **he felt compassion for her**, and said to her, "Do not weep." **And he came up and touched the coffin**; and the bearers came to a halt. **And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!"***

LUKE 7:12-14

Jesus also uses the imagery of motherly compassion that we found in the Hebrew Bible to express his care for his people. He compares himself to a mother hen who uses her wings to shield her chicks from danger.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!

LUKE 13:34

And, in the ultimate expression of compassion, Jesus is moved to take humanity's suffering on himself, unto death, to rescue and bring us near to God.

And he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by his wounds you were healed.

1 PETER 2:24

As followers of Jesus who have received the compassion of God, we are called to live out the same kind of self-giving and others-oriented compassion.

Be **compassionate** just as your Father is **compassionate** (οἰκτιρῶν).

LUKE 6:36

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any **affection** (σπλάγχνον) and **compassion** (οἰκτιρμός), make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-2

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of **compassion** (οἰκτιρῶν) and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God .

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4

So as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on **a heart** (σπλάγχνον) **of compassion** (οἰκτιρμός), kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-13

Be kind to one another, **compassionate** (εὐσπλάγχνος), forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

EPHESIANS 4:32

Conclusions

God's compassion is a heartfelt response to the pain of his people. Our compassion is a heartfelt response to having experienced the compassion of God. His compassion throughout the Hebrew Bible is expressed as forgiveness and rescue. The ultimate expression of God's compassion is Jesus's self-sacrifice, where he enters into our suffering and takes on death, and offers us forgiveness and rescue.

To hope in God's compassion means to trust in his deep care for his people and that he responds to the cries of the hurting with deliverance and forgiveness.

“Gracious and Compassionate”

We’ve been studying the use of various words in the *rekhem* word group related to compassion: *rakhum*, *rakhamim*, and *rakham*. The word occurs in Exodus 34:6 as the adjective *rakhum*, meaning compassionate. What’s really interesting is that in this description, compassionate is linked with gracious, or *khanun*. And this isn’t the exception! Of the 13 times that compassionate (*rakhum*) is used in the Hebrew Bible, 11 of them occur with the word gracious.

Most often, the order is “gracious and compassionate” (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Psalms 111:4; 112:4; 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17, 31; 2 Chronicles 30:9). Three times—most notably the first time—the order is “compassionate and gracious” (Exodus 34:6; Psalms 86:15; 103:8). Seven of these 11 uses also quote the phrases from Exodus 34:6 “slow to anger” and “abounding in lovingkindness.” One verse (Psalm 86:15) also adds “truth” from the Exodus 34 verse, and two replace “truth” with “relenting of evil” (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

More often than not, the context is the people’s failure. The reminder that Yahweh is compassionate serves to compel them to turn back to him.

*Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed,
“The LORD, the LORD God, **compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth;***

EXODUS 34:6

*The LORD is **compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.**
He will not always strive with us, nor will he keep his anger forever.*

PSALM 103:8-9

*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

*For if you return to the LORD, your brothers and your sons will find compas-
sion 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 30:9

*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 lovingkindness;**
And you did not forsake them.*

NEHEMIAH 9:17

*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 lovingkindness
And relenting of evil.*

JOEL 2:13

Nevertheless, in your great compassion you did not make an end of them or forsake them, For you are a **gracious and compassionate** God.

NEHEMIAH 9:31

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

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 lovingkindness**, and one who relents concerning calamity.

JONAH 4:2

Other times, these characteristics are simply praised as lovely.

But you, O Lord, are a God **compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.**

PSALM 86:15

The LORD is **gracious and compassionate; Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness.**

PSALM 145:8

He has made his wonders to be remembered;
The LORD is **gracious and compassionate.**

PSALM 111:4

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

PSALM 112:4

Conclusions

The adjective compassionate (*rakhum*) is most often used in verses that are looking back to Exodus 34:6-7 and in contexts that are similar to it—the people fail and God responds with compassion and grace

Compassionate and gracious are often used in parallel construction and can function as synonyms describing God's care for his people. So the two words compassionate and gracious are somewhat synonymous. But what's the difference in meaning between them? Check out our resources on the word gracious to learn more!