

Just after I became a Christian I went on a young people's mission in Ripon, in North Yorkshire. We were a group of late teenagers, bombing about the countryside in an old mini-bus and bedding down for the week in an old church hall a couple of minute's walk from the town centre. The things you're prepared to do when you're young! Anyway we were on a mission and we wanted to get people talking about God, so that we could explain the gospel to them. So we had a questionnaire asking people what they thought about God and who they thought Jesus was.

Of course we had people refusing to talk, we had people totally denying the **existence** of God, but most **were** willing to listen politely to what we had to say, 'cos we're like that in Yorkshire!

We also had people who said, 'Oh yeah I know all about God, I used to go to church when I was young, and my mam and dad still go. I used to read the Bible, and I know all I need to know.'

And you know there are a lot of people in our country who would say that kind of thing. 'I know all I **need** to know about God – I know what he's like because I've been to church, I've heard the stories about Jesus, feeding the crowds with bread and fish and all that, I've sung Amazing Grace, and I've read Psalm 23. I think they're all very nice. I know what this Christianity's all about. I understand who God is.'

But ask them further and you soon realise what's **really** behind what they're saying – 'I know God – he's religious; I've been to church – to my brother's wedding and my grandad's funeral; I've heard stories about Jesus – at school in a lesson once; I've sung hymns – well stood there listening 'cos I didn't know the tune; and somebody said they'd read Psalm 23 once and said it was good.'

OK, so what they say is an attempt to hide their **ignorance**.

But so-called church-goers – those who go to church quite regularly – might also say they know all about God, just because they **do** go to church. 'Oh yes' they'll say 'I understand the Bible – I've read all about God and I've heard so many sermons now, yes, I think I'm there, I know God.' God is nice and neatly all packaged up, they've got God **all worked out**, **here's** the God I know about in this little box here. I've found out what God is like – **sorted!**

This is such a **dangerous** position to get into – thinking that we know all about God. How can we say we know it **all**? How can God fit into our **little** minds? It'd be like someone trying to cram all they need for a month's holiday into a suitcase one foot square – it's not going to happen. How can we say we know all there is to know about God? Oh yes, we can say we know all we **want** to know about God, but we can never say we know **all there is** to know about God – it doesn't work like that.

Anyone who says that they know all they need to know about God is maybe deluding themselves, but they are **certainly** limiting God – and this is very dangerous. God can't be packed in a neat box labelled 'God' – God is too big. How big is the God **you** know? Don't limit yourself to knowing what you know **now**, what your little mind can understand now – there's so much **more** to God than you will ever know in your lifetime. That's the exciting thing about being a Christian – always learning new things about God.

But God **has** given us the Bible; he inspired men from different backgrounds to write down what **he** feels our minds can understand at the moment in their present state. So we can get to know God in ways that our minds can take in. So what is **your** idea of God at this moment? Do you think you've got him all worked out? You've got him sussed. I want to encourage you not to close your minds – keep them open to learn more about him.

I want us to look at a few verses this evening which tell us something of what God is like. Turn with me, if you will, to the book of Exodus – the second book of the Bible – chapter 33, starting at verse 18. [P.]

You'll remember that Moses was the leader of the people of Israel, God's chosen people; he'd gone to Pharaoh in Egypt where they were captive and had got them released (Exodus 12); God had led them into the desert and to Mount Sinai, where God had given Moses the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus 20; he gave Moses two tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God. But when Moses came back from Mount Sinai, he found that his people had got fed up waiting for him and had turned away from God and had made a golden calf, an idol and were worshipping it (Exodus 32). Moses got angry and broke the stone tablets.

So here in our passage we find Moses has returned up the mountain and is speaking to God. (pause)

We live in a world where what people value is only superficial. Beauty is only skin deep. Celebrity Cheryl Cole's marriage to footballer Ashley Cole is over. 2

So I suppose she'll be looking for a new man. Before any of you get on the phone, thinking of applying, I wouldn't bother. (Sorry to dash all your hopes!) None of us are pretty enough to appear in all those photos they'll have to take. Why do you never see a celebrity's partner who looks normal, like you and me? Why are they all (in the world's eyes) handsome, attractive, pretty, nice teeth, wonderful hair, spotless? Because – second only to how much money they've got – appearance is everything.

Appearance is a **distraction**. Appearance **isn't** the important thing – you ask any happily-married couple who have lasted the test of time – how someone **looks** is not the important thing. Wendy wouldn't have me if it was.

Moses asks in verse 18 to be able to see God's glory. He wants to see almighty God, he wants to see what he looks like, he wants God to stand before him so he can see him.

God says no. God doesn't let Moses see his face when he passes by in front of him. Moses can only see his back. God is saying, 'I can't let you get dazzled by my glory, Moses; know **who I am**.' How God looks is not the important thing. Appearance is a distraction. God says 'Don't worry about how I look, you need to know **who I am**, my character – that's what's important,' and as he passes by Moses, verse 6, he proclaims his name and tells Moses all about his character, who he is and what he is like.

Don't get bogged down or distracted by wondering what God looks like – all the pictures and paintings in the world will **never** be able to capture all there is to know about God – coming back to what we were saying earlier – it **can't** be done, so we shouldn't even try. How God looks is not important – who and what he is, is.

Let's spend the rest of our time this evening then looking at what verses 6 and 7 tell us about God – this is what was important for Moses to know God, so it's just as important so that **we** might know God. [Re-read verses 6,7]

This **whole book** [hold up] is inspired by God. The apostle Paul says in his letter to Timothy, '*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*' 2 Timothy 3:16-17. But here we're reading the recorded words of **God himself** – so **surely** we must take notice of this – this is **God** telling us what is important to know about himself so that we can have the personal relationship with him that he created us for.

1. *'the compassionate and gracious God'*: God is compassionate and gracious. These two descriptions are put together 13 times in the Old Testament, and 11 of those occasions are talking about God. Compassionate and gracious. I was saying this morning that one of my Christmas presents was a book which explains the meanings of the words used in the original writings, which I find incredibly interesting, and I pray that the way I use it will help in all our understanding of God.

The word translated as '**compassion**' here was the Hebrew which was used for a mother's love for her newborn child, **powerful** overflowing love for her child at its most vulnerable, most helpless. That child has done nothing to **deserve** this love – it may not be pretty, it cries all night, causes work, needs feeding and fills its nappy – but mum loves it. A consuming love which is gracious, a grace that forgives all that is wrong in that newborn child.

Our English word compassion implies coming alongside someone who is **suffering** in some way, getting alongside them, showing them love and concern – this is compassion, understanding suffering.

God is compassionate; he loves as a mother her newborn child – unconditionally, even sacrificially; when we're at our most helpless and vulnerable, he loves us; when we're suffering, perhaps at our lowest ebb and most needy, God comes alongside us and has compassion – he is close to us when we need him most.

Combined with God's compassion is his **grace**. Over 60 times in the Old Testament we read of God's gracious nature, of his grace. We remember that grace means 'love for the undeserving' 'love for the unlovely'. David says in Ps 103, *'he [God] does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities ...'* God shows love to people despite their neglect and even rejection of him. Someone said 'There is no reason given for grace but grace.'

His love isn't dependent on what **we** do, but it is dependent on God's desire to be gracious, he wants to show grace, undeserved love in ways we can't understand, and to an extent we can't fully imagine with our little minds at the moment. As I said earlier, we mustn't limit the extent of God's gracious nature and love.

We may not understand **why** God is like this to us, but that does not alter the fact that God **is** compassionate and gracious. We don't deserve God's love – he freely loves those who don't deserve his love.

It doesn't matter where you've been, it doesn't matter what you've done, in verse 19 of chapter 33 God says, *'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.'* God is compassionate and gracious. And that's great news, isn't it?

2. Let's move on - '*slow to anger*', God says in verse 6. God is **slow to anger**.

Going back to when we asked people in Ripon what they thought about God, some said that they thought he was like a cruel king, with lots of rules and regulations and as soon as you stepped out of line, were you for it – he'd jump on you like a ton of bricks. Like the old sergeant major going down the line of army recruits just looking for something to shout at them for.

But no, God is **slow** to anger, it says here. He is long-suffering, he isn't short-tempered, he's **long**-tempered. If he was short-tempered, heaven would be empty – **no-one** would make it, because Paul tells us in Romans that *'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'* Romans 3:23, but God doesn't want anyone to perish, there's a wonderful verse in Peter's second letter which says, *'He is patient with you, not wanting **anyone** to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.'* 2 Pet. 3:9.

Of course we must never take advantage of his long-suffering, and say things like, 'Oh it's OK if I'm a bit slow to learn,' or 'It doesn't matter if I keep God waiting before I come to him' 'He's gracious and patient – he'll bear with me.' It's not an excuse to ignore God further. God **can't** and **won't** compromise on what is right, and there will come a day when he says, 'enough is enough', and he'll wind up history and it **will** be too late.

But God is slow to anger, which is great to know, because we all make mistakes, don't we, and it's good to know that God understands us – he made us, after all – and he's patient with us.

Nehemiah tells us that although God's people had rejected him and had made this golden calf we talked of earlier and worshipped it, he didn't just cast them off and choose someone else more deserving of his love: in Nehemiah chapter 9 we read, *'They [God's people] refused to listen ..., they failed to remember the miracles you [God] performed ..., they became stiff-necked ... But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, ...'*

God is a forgiving God and slow to anger – he will give you understanding and consideration as you get to know what is **right** in God's eyes.

3. *'The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,'* . **Abounding in love and faithfulness**. Love is a much used word nowadays, and has a range of meanings to different people at different times. You love your mum, you love your husband, you love your dog, you love bananas! But the word used here is a very strong word, often translated as 'steadfast love' – God's love is steadfast, it's firm, unshakeable, loyal.

Not like the love we see so often nowadays, which is strong today but gone tomorrow. Not just in the soaps on telly, but in the newspapers in reality. I see among the teenagers at school that love for someone today can suddenly turn into hatred of that person tomorrow, because of something that has happened or been said.

No, God's love is **unfailing** love. He loves us with a love which will **never** fade or die – we sometimes sing 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,' and that's what his love is like – firm, loyal, unceasing, unfailing, abounding – oh, latch onto just **one** of these words and catch a glimpse of how **great** God's love for you is. It's not weak love, it's not 'Oh, I'll love him if I have to,' – God is **abounding** in love, in fact John's first letter tells us that God **is** love – everything he does is motivated by love for you. God loves you with an abounding love – do you know that? This is what God wants you to know.

But he's also abounding in faithfulness. 2 Timothy 2:13 says, *'if we are faithless, **he** will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.'* God has made promises to his people that he will **love** them, he will **protect** them, he will be **with** them in all situations and he will complete the work that he has begun in them until they reach heaven – God has **promised** these things to those who believe in him through Jesus Christ. He cannot break his promises because that would be unfaithful, and God cannot be unfaithful because he **is** faithful, he cannot disown himself. Part of his character **is** faithfulness – he can't go against part of his character.

John Terry, Ashley Cole, Tiger Woods – just recent celebrities to show their unfaithfulness to their wives – man's faithfulness is so weak, only when it pleases us. **God** is abounding in faithfulness. He will keep the promises he has made to you – you can depend **totally** on him.

I remember there used to be an advert on telly for wallpaper adhesive, and they stuck this man's clothing to a board, put him in it and took him up over London suspended underneath a helicopter. Stickability.

God has stickability – his life and those of his people are **welded together**, nothing can separate us from God if we are his through Jesus Christ. God's story and man's story (our story) are **intertwined** – both stories are incomplete without the other.

This is what God wants us to know – he is abounding in love and faithfulness.

4. *'forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin'* God is a **forgiving** God.

You may have seen that programme on telly called 'Supernanny', where this woman Jo Frost works with parents of out of control children, and gradually she brings in strategies to help the parents regain control. The parents really want a stable family life because they do love their children and want the best for them. But part of the healing programme is that the children have to see what they're doing wrong, have to spend time on the naughty step, thinking about it, and eventually they have to say sorry, and give their mum or dad a hug and a kiss. Everything's forgiven and forgotten. **Amazingly**, it works.

God loves **us** with abounding love, but we've gone our own way, we've rebelled against him and rejected his ways. It's God's nature to love, but if he allowed rebellion and rejection to continue, he wouldn't be **showing** that love – the children would be out of control. So he wants us to come to him, accept what we've done wrong and say we're sorry. Then he can forgive us, and love us like he wants.

Look at those wonderful words in verse 7: *'maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.'*

We've all done it – we've all wanted to go our own way – we've **all** rejected God in our lives – and God has to draw us to the position where we **recognise** it. Some may have to go further off the rails than others, but we all have to realise sooner rather than later that we've gone wrong.

You see, this proclamation by God of who he is starts off with the words 'The Lord' – God is almighty, powerful, holy, righteous, just – and we haven't got time to go into all these things – but suffice to say, there can be no wrong thing in God – he can't **tolerate** wrong – it has to be made right. So his people, believers, Christians have to be made right too. God has done it.

The apostle Paul writes to Titus, [read Titus 3:4-7].

There was no compromise here – God can't just overlook our rejection – but he wants to **forgive**, because he is loving and faithful. **Jesus** has made it possible by taking upon **himself** the punishment for our wrongdoing – the price is paid – we can be forgiven.

But there is a warning here because of these words in verse 7, '*Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished;*' God has to punish wrongdoing; for those who believe in Jesus and trust that he died for them – Jesus has taken the punishment for them; but for non-believers it's different – they **refuse** to accept that they need to be forgiven, they refuse the forgiveness that Jesus has brought, so **they** will have to face that punishment themselves.

We have to ask ourselves this evening, where do we stand? Either we have God's forgiveness, or we don't. Don't be like the German poet Heine who on his deathbed said, 'God will forgive me – that's his job!' Unless you ask, you will not receive.

I pray that we have all come to this point, and know God's forgiveness. Because God wants us to know him as he really is. There is so much contained in these words we've looked at this evening – we've only scratched the surface. But these are the things that are important. God wants you to know him, **right now**, and more and more as you go on with him.

Tim Keller wrote, 'The living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the cross, is the only Lord. If you find him, he can truly fulfil you; and if you fail him, he can truly forgive you.' Get to know him – there is no more important thing than this.

'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.'