

Exodus: What We Mean When We Say God (Part 17)

By Ricky Stephen

Hide and Seek with the Divine

The search for God has taken people many places, sometimes over the brink of madness.

By contrast, Moses does not search. He just asks. He asks to see God's glory—which is the word *kevod* which means 'weighty' or 'heavy'.

Yahweh responds:

"The Lord [Yahweh], the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

God is putting an APB out on Himself here. He is saying, if you are looking for me, this is what to look for: compassion and grace, patience and love, forgiveness, and justice.

In Exodus 3, at the same fire on the same mountain, Moses asked for God's name. God responded with the name that was not a name, Yahweh. Through Exodus, we see that name has come to mean four things.

Yahweh is the God who sees and hears the suffering of His people.

Yahweh is the God who delivers people from evil.

Yahweh is the God who keeps His promises.

Yahweh is the God who is *with* His people.

The God Who Sees and Hears the Suffering of His People

In Luke 7, a woman who works in the sex trade starts touching Jesus' feet in the home of a Pharisee. The Pharisee scoffs and Jesus asks: "do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44)

The insinuation, since Jesus says it while looking right at her, is that Jesus sees this woman and Simon the Pharisee does not.

Classic Jesus, *making* visible the invisible, not just by being deity on display in the flesh, but by drawing attention to the pariahs, the outcasts, and the unlovable.

This is the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God.

These are two rhyming words in Hebrew, *rahum wehanun*.¹

¹ See John Mark Comer, *God Has a Name*, pg.126ff

Compassion, *raham*, is a feeling word and the word for a womb. It's a word about how a parent feels for their child. Isaiah says of God's love in chapter 49:

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

Gracious, *hanun*, is a doing word. It's a word for those who do good things for other people.

Exodus started with a compassionate God hearing and seeing suffering people and *doing something about it*.

²³ During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. ²⁵ So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. (Exodus 2:23-25)

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes of the Old Testament:

"All of human history as seen by the Bible is the history of *God in search of [humanity]*... Israel's faith is not the fruit of a quest for God. Israel did not discover God. Israel was discovered by God. The Bible is a record of God's approach to [humanity]."²

To say that He sees, and He hears, to say that He is compassionate and gracious, is to say that He is looking. He is searching. He is more preoccupied with finding us than we are with finding Him.

He roams the earth looking for those who are suffering and longs to lift them back up.

What do we mean when we say God?

We mean the Father who sits at the roadside looking for His children to come home.

We mean the Son, the Good Doctor, out seeking and saving the sick and the lost.

We mean the Spirit hovering over the chaos at the beginning of creation, ordering and filling. The Spirit hovering over us to fill us with compassion to do His works of grace.

We mean Yahweh, compassionate and gracious, the one who sees and hears the suffering of His people.

² Heschel, *The Prophets pt. II*, pgs. 218-219.

The God Who Delivers People from Evil

The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is not wrath. The opposite of love is *indifference*.

Jurgen Moltmann writes:

"[God's] wrath is injured love and therefore a mode of his reaction to [humanity]. Love is the source and basis of the possibility of the wrath of God. The opposite of love is not wrath, but indifference. Indifference towards justice and injustice would be a retreat on the part of God from covenant. But his wrath is an expression of his abiding interest in [humanity]..."³

So, when Yahweh tells us that he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. He is telling us that He is *not* indifferent.

Yahweh says he does not leave the guilty unpunished but punishes the children and their children to the third and fourth generation.

But He says, through Ezekiel, that this does not mean what it seems to mean.

² "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:

"The parents eat sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge"? [IE: why do you say that when parents sin the children suffer?]

³ "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. ⁴ For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die. (Ezekiel 18:2-4)

The statement in Exodus 34:7 seems to be about the fact that Israelite households had three or four generations under one roof. Sin is social. If a grandfather sins, the sons and the sons of the sons probably sin.

Epigenetics has shown us that if a father or mother is traumatized it increases the sensitivity of an unborn child to trauma.⁴ A person is four times more likely to struggle with alcoholism if their parent did.

Sin, all by itself, passes along to the third and fourth generation.

Sin and evil are social problems, not just personal problems and...

Yahweh is the God who delivers us from evil.

³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God 40th Anniversary Edition*, pg. 407

⁴ See Hilary McBride, *The Wisdom of Your Body*, Ch. 3.

The Israelites are saved from *Egypt*. Pharaoh represents a whole nation willing to kill children, abuse workers and demand impossible standards. Yahweh delivers them.

Of course, like a good parent, Yahweh is *slow to anger*. He is not easily provoked and, more than that, the justice is always proportional to the crime.

Even more so, He is *forgiving*. Forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.

Wickedness is often translated 'iniquity' and it means 'crookedness' or 'injustice'. Rebellion refers to the breaking of trust within a relationship. Sin refers to missing the mark and failing morally.

The word for 'forgive' is the word for 'carry'. For those who love Him and keep His covenant, Yahweh literally *carries the responsibility for their evil actions for them*.

What do we mean when we say God?

We mean the Father who still judges the earth with equity.

We mean the Son who carried the sins of the world for those who will let Him carry theirs.

We mean the Spirit who guides, convicts, and corrects those who are the children of God.

We mean Yahweh who delivers us from evil.

The God Who Keeps His Promises

Promises are more than just a commitment; they are a way of making our internal world external. They are your way of saying, no matter what it looks like, or how much you doubt, this is the way I feel about you.

Yahweh promised Noah He'd never destroy the whole world in anger. He promised Abraham children and that one day his children would bless all nations. He promised that Abraham's children would be taken into a foreign land but that they'd be regathered and given a place of their own.

He promises, more importantly, to love them.

"Yahweh, Yahweh...abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands..."

Love and faithfulness are another word pairing that define each other: *hesched and emet*. *Hesched-Love* can mean kindness and carries the connotation of loyalty. *Emet-Faithfulness* literally means *firm*. Perhaps this is why the Lord is so often referred to as a rock, strong tower, or refuge. Because He loves with a solid and reliable kind of love.

Dallas Willard once wrote:

"So, we must understand that God does not "love" us without liking us- through gritted teeth- as "Christian" love is sometimes thought to do. Rather, out of the eternal freshness of his perpetually self-renewed being, the heavenly Father cherishes the earth and each human being upon it. The fondness, the endearment, the unstintingly affectionate regard of God toward all his creatures is the natural outflow of what he is to the core- which we vainly try to capture with our tired but indispensable old word *love*."⁵

What do we mean when we say God?

We mean the Father who has been on a mission since Abraham to bring the world into a covenant-love with Him.

We mean the Son who God so loved the world enough to send for our salvation, as a kept promise to Abraham and David.

We mean the Spirit, the downpayment and foretaste of the final fulfillment of those promises.

We mean Yahweh, the God who keeps His promises and His greatest promise is to *love* us.

The God who Is with Us

A final essential feature to 'what we mean when we say God' is His presence.

Yahweh is the **God Who is With Us**.

The end of the whole book of Exodus is about Presence:

³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

³⁶ In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; ³⁷ but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. ³⁸ So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

Often, Christians search for an experience of God but they have strict criteria. It needs to be something new; it needs to be irrefutably God; it needs to make life easier and take away doubt forever.

I was in a service where a woman volunteered to stand at the front and the congregation prayed for a word to share with her. When they shared the words, they sounded banal and cliché.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, pg 64.

Two weeks later, she had given a letter to the pastor saying she was struggling with suicidal ideation and self harm, her coming to church that morning was a last-ditch effort. She felt God like she never had that morning.

For her, those plain and boring words were the difference between life and death.

Moses doubted. Moses questioned. Moses failed. Moses asked for more. Even though *he saw one of the greatest movements of God ever recorded in human history*.

God has given us an idea of what to expect when we come to meet with Him.

Look for compassion and grace—the one who sees and hears you.

Look for patience and justice—the one who delivers you.

Look for an abundance of love—the one who is committed to you.

Look for the one who is already there, waiting for you. The one who has been looking for you.

And, afterward, ask yourself. Has this experience left me looking more like that? More compassionate, more gracious, more patient and just?

If so, no matter what it feels like, you have just met with God.

Discussion Questions

Open Up

What has 'the search for God' been like in your life? How have you arrived where you are now?

Dig In

1. Read Exodus 34:6-7. Which of these statements about Yahweh are most important to you? What examples from scripture and experience have solidified those character traits for you?
2. How do you feel about the idea that God *feels* a certain way towards you?
3. What do you feel God has delivered you from? What do you still need delivering from?
4. What are your criteria for an experience of God to be legitimate? How have those criteria helped or hindered your experience of God's presence?

Prayer

Consider spending time praying for an experience of God's presence. Take into account whatever your hindrances and hang-ups may be. Praying God's character back to Him as you make your request is a good place to start.