

Who Is God? | The Doctrine of God | Exodus 34:6-7
To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers
The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican
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This fall we're assessing the structure of our lives. Like a builder inspecting an old house, we're testing the strength of our weight-bearing convictions—the beliefs we don't just assent to but live by.

To do this, our sermon series— *To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers*—poses nine diagnostic questions. Each question, then, draws us toward a tried-and-true Christian doctrine for its answer.

Today we come to our second question, "Who Is God?"

Herman Bavinck, a Dutch Theologian, wrote, over a hundred years ago

It is a remarkable phenomenon that there are no peoples or nations without religion.... the absolute universality of this religious sense puts us before a choice of one of two options: either that on this point mankind generally is suffering from a stupid superstition, or else that this knowledge and service of God, which in distorted forms makes its appearance among all peoples, is based on God's existence.¹

It does seem that all of us, one way or another, need to deal with this question of Who is God. Some believe in a God of traditional religion, others doubt his existence, and still others imagine God as a vague spiritual presence.

Today I want us to consider how Christians answer this question—the Christian Doctrine of God. And how does the Christian answer become a weight-bearing support in life. And another question to pose at the outset—pointing to where we want to conclude—would be: *If you knew the true God, what do you really want from him? Fix your problems? Get you to heaven?*

We'll turn to Exodus 34 to explore these questions, where God himself proclaims his name and character.

Exodus Setting

What makes this passage extraordinary is not simply what God says, but the context when he says it.

God's delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. They are now in the wilderness, waiting for Moses to come down from Mount Sinai with God's instructions. They grow impatient and have Aaron melt their gold earrings and nose rings then fashion the precious metal into a golden calf. They then call this calf god, and credit it with their salvation, dancing and making merry before it.

¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God*, 25.

God burns with anger. Moses intercedes for the people, pleading with God not only to spare them, but to remain present with them. Desperate for reassurance, Moses goes so far as to ask the Lord, in Exod 33:18, “Please show me your glory” (Exod 33:18).

It is in this storm of idolatrous rebellion, wilderness wandering, and fear of the future, that God give us the most detailed revelation about Who He Is thus far in Scripture. Which is worth a point of reflection at the outset: The God of the Bible doesn’t reveal Himself in philosophical reflection, but amid the fears and failures of human life—and for many of us, if we look back at our own life, it wasn’t until some type of hardship that we began to ask with real seriousness, “Who Is God?”

God grants Moses’ request only partially:

I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name...But, he said, you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Exod 33:19-20).

He then orders Moses to cut two more tablets for a re-writing of the Ten Commandments, to wake early, and come up the mountain alone.

Which is where we pick up the story today.

I. God Is Not of Our Own Making but Reveals Himself (33:18-34:6).

God Reveals Himself

The first thing emphasized is that God does the acting in this scene:

The LORD **descended** in the cloud and **stood** with him there and **proclaimed** the name of the LORD (34:5).

God is not Moses’ reflection, or the golden calf Israel fashioned, or a left-over impression from the Temples of Egypt.

God is who God reveals Himself to be.

This is the non-negotiable starting point for the Christian doctrine of God. We do not make God in our own image; God is not a god of our wishes and imagining; God is not the spirit of the age. God is the Lord who reveals himself.

When the topic of God comes up, I wonder if you’ve heard or ever said something like, “Well, that’s not how I think of God; I like to think of God this way, or that way.” As though God is a reality we can shape any way we want.

Imagine if you treated your GPS that way: “That bridge being out isn’t how I see things, so just drive on ahead anyway.”

If we cannot shape the reality of our roadways, why do we think we can do so with God?

God Reveals His Name

And consider how God begins his revelation:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD...” (34:6).

The term “Lord” is a translation of the Hebrew, Yahweh. This is not a generic title, like king, it’s a personal name, Yahweh. God states it twice, for emphasis.

Like most names in the ancient world, it conveys something deep about the identity of the bearer. What does “Yahweh mean?”

Back in Exodus 3, Moses asked God to share His name, and God responded:

“I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exod 3:14).

That’s what “Yahweh” means, “I AM.” It’s like saying “I Am absolute being.” It’s quite a claim. Imagine if someone walked around announcing, “I am power!” or “I am greatness.” That’s my personal name, because that’s my deepest nature.

I AM conveys that God is:

Eternal: God never had a beginning. Nobody made God. God has no end; He will always be.

Self-Sufficient: Unlike the powerful A.I. tools that depend on energy to run and would become a pile of plastic and metal without outside power—unlike that and everything else—God depends on nothing.

Incomprehensible: Even as God reveals himself to Moses, He remains incomprehensible in His fullness—“man shall not see me and live” (33:20).

Personal: Perhaps most amazing, however, is that by sharing His name with Moses, God reveals that He is *personal*—not a cosmic force, not an abstract spiritual mood, but Yahweh.

If God is not a god of our own making, then we must approach him on his terms, based on how he reveals himself—in Scripture.

And because He is personal, we approach him not merely as an idea to understand, but as someone to know. And knowing a person is not like knowing a machine, where you just put data in and wait for the algorithm to spit back information. To know a person is to respond to what they have decided to reveal about themselves, to treasure this revelation and honor it.

I think this especially impacts how Christians pray. Prayer is not Zen-like meditation where one loses consciousness; it is time with the *personal God*—Yahweh.

[T] That’s the first answer: Who Is God—God Is the LORD, Yahweh, who reveals himself to us. Next, after revealing his name, God extols his character, which brings us to our second point.

II. God Is Good—Good in Mercy and Good in Justice (34:6-7).

God Is Compassionate

Some wonder whether the God of the Bible is good. Some have seen terrible things done in his name. Others struggle to reconcile his goodness with suffering.

But notice what God does when Moses asks to see his glory. He says, “I will make my **goodness** pass before you” (Exod 33:19).

And when God explains that goodness (34:6-7), its extravagant:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (34:6-7a).

God is powerful. But what he chooses to reveal here is that he is also good. This goodness is not something we project onto an otherwise terrifying deity; goodness is of His very nature.

A few things to emphasize about this goodness:

First, remember the context. Israel broke the covenant vows as they were being made. This is like breaking a wedding vow on the honeymoon. And this is the setting where God tells us he is good.

Second, consider some of the weighty and wonderful words God uses to describe his goodness:

God is **gracious**, meaning, he gives to us good things we do not deserve.

God is **slow to anger**—meaning patient with us.

God shows **steadfast love** and **faithfulness**—this is covenant love. It is his loyalty to his promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. He keeps his Word.

And God is **forgiving**.

But I want us to especially note the first term. Rendered as “merciful,” it’s a term that means “full of **compassion**.”² God is *compassionate*. Compassion is the capacity to recognize and be moved by another’s suffering, accompanied by a desire to alleviate it. It is to “suffer with.”

I experienced fatherly compassion with new depths one night this summer. Our three-year-old daughter woke up writing in pain. She could not be consoled. We took her to the ER, and she threw up on the way. She was so scared as she sat there on the doctor’s table in the cold hospital room. My whole being was moved with *compassion* for her.

When Israel turns to idolatry, God is rightfully angry with them. Which is why it is extraordinary that he speaks at this moment of his compassion. What does this tell us?

It tells us that God’s compassion is not the result of our goodness; it is a revelation of his nature.

Who Is God? God is good—and compassionate and gracious and merciful—even when we are bad.

² רַחוּם *rachuwm, rakh-oom* ; compassionate:—full of compassion, merciful. “*Strong’s Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary of the Old Testament*.”

[T] But God's mercy and compassion do sit awkwardly, at least from our vantage point, when we read on in verse 7:

God Is Righteousness

The God who is "merciful and gracious" and "forgiving" is also the God who "will by no means clear the guilty" (7).

Along with being compassionate, God is also Holy. Holiness is God's moral beauty and moral purity. And how God applies His holiness in relationship with us, is known as God's righteousness.

Righteousness is God always acting *right*—right in relation to his character, his law, and our merits.

So, the tension in verses 6-7 needs to be raised: how can God forgive sinful people and also remain righteous?

The tension is only partially resolved in the Old Testament. There is the **sacrificial system** where Israel gives offerings to atone for sin. There is the **exile**, which is a punishment for ongoing rebellion.

But none of these things quite satisfy the depths of God's mercy and justice; nor do they finally transform Israel.

But how God will resolve this, finally, is foreshadowed in the **asymmetry** of this passage. Notice how out of balance it seems:

God keeps steadfast love for **thousands** (understood by Deut 7.9 as "a thousand generations"). But the consequences for sin extend only to the **third and fourth generation**.

Do you see this disproportion? The arithmetic doesn't seem to add up. God seems to pour forth compassion and mercy while only trickling out judgement.

This all points to **the Cross**. On the cross, God does not set aside his righteousness in order to forgive and show mercy. Neither does God set aside his mercy in order to show only justice. He manifests both.

In the person of His Son, God bears the just judgement for sin; in the person of His Son, God compassionately removes that judgment from His people.

Paul explains this in Romans 3, declaring that God is both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus"

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's **righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at

the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:23-26).

God's goodness, then, is not sometimes mercy and sometimes justice. God is always righteous. And the cross is the most intense revelation of his righteousness, mercy, and love.

Here, on our second point about God's Goodness, we have seen that God is *compassionate* and *righteous*. Two ways this impacts our relation to him.

First, God's innate goodness means we should come to him on the basis of His character, not our merits. We all can think of people in our lives who are simply so kind and giving. It's easy to come to them with our troubles. God is this, but infinitely so.

Second, seeing how seriously God takes sin, don't let his grace be an occasion for you to minimize it. Stop treating it as a small thing.

[T] There is yet one more thing to learn about Who God Is, and this, from Moses' response (34:8-9).

III. God Is the Lord Whose Presence We Need (34:8-9)

⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. ⁹ And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance (34:8-9).

Moses ends this theophany on his face in worship and then with prayer. He asks that God would go with Israel, and forgive them, and take them as their inheritance.

His response begs a fundamental question for us: When confronted with the revelation of God, we need to ask ourselves: *What do I really want from God?*

Do I want him to give me the promise land? Or forgiveness? Or a good life?

Moses seems to want something more.

Remember that surrounding this passage is Moses' desire for God's presence. On the one hand, this means assurance of God's favor in procuring the Promise Land, and assurance of forgiveness. But at the end of this prayer, Moses seems to be asking for something more than God's gifts; He seems to be asking for God Himself.

We see this in the almost strange conclusion, "take us for your inheritance." What does that mean?

When spoken of people, it means in this context, permanent covenant love. Moses is asking God to take Israel as his **treasured possession**—to claim these stiff-necked, sinful people as his own. It's like a marriage. Moses wants God.

John Calvin once wrote that we cannot know ourselves unless we know God. He is correct.

What this revelation of God tells us, long with Moses' response, is that we are people who desperately need to be the object of real love.

- And not just imperfect human love, which can fade.
- And not just sentimentality, which can only affirm.
- And not just machine love—which is functional, not personal; computational process not embodied passion.

We need to be loved for real.

As the story of redemption unfolds, we discover just how far God's determination to love us, to take us as his inheritance, goes—and what it finally means.

Through Jesus Christ, God suffers for those He loves, and God brings sinners into his family, he **adopts** them as sons and daughters.³

This summer I began the process of adopting two children. I feel at times the incredible responsibility that comes with deciding that I will be their dad. Whom am I to do this?

But when God adopts us, we are getting the perfect father. The great I AM, the Eternal One, the All-Sufficient and All-Powerful One; the Compassionate One; The Righteous One; Yahweh—this God claims us as his own!

But now thus saith Yahweh, that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine" (Isaiah 43:1, KJV).

So we come to a final revelation about Who God Is: God is not only the great I AM, not only the compassionate and righteous one; God is the **heavenly Father**—who in Christ not only understands suffering; he experiences it. He not only speaks forgiveness; he accomplishes it; he not only promises presence; he comes. And takes imperfect people, like you and me, as the object of his eternal love.

This is our God! Let us, like Moses, fall down and worship.

³ Paul links all this together in Romans: "you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow **heirs** with Christ (Rom 8:15-17).

Who Is God? | Small Group Questions

Exodus 34:6–9

1. God is not a god of our own making.

Read Exodus 34:5–6.

God comes down and proclaims his own name and character. What is the difference between allowing God to reveal himself to us and fashioning a god of our own making—which Israel does with the golden calf in Exodus 32? Where do you see the temptation to shape God according to our own preferences, fears, or desires?

2. God's compassion is not the result of our goodness, but a revelation of his nature.

Read Exodus 34:6–7, remembering the golden calf incident in Exodus 32.

What strikes you about God's description of himself, especially given Israel's rebellion? Which of these attributes do you find most difficult to believe or receive in your own relationship with God? Why?

3. God is merciful and forgiving, yet he will by no means clear the guilty.

Read Exodus 34:6–7 and Romans 3:23–26.

How can God forgive guilty people while remaining perfectly righteous? How does the cross help us understand the relationship between God's mercy and justice? What difference should this make in how we think about our own sin and approach God for forgiveness?

4. What do I really want from God?

Read Exodus 34:8–9.

Moses asks God to go with Israel, forgive their sins, and take them as his inheritance. What does his prayer reveal about what he most desires from God? If you examined your own prayers and desires, what would they reveal about what you most want from God? How might knowing God as your heavenly Father change the way you approach him?