

A Favorite Saying about God – Gracious and Merciful, Slow to Anger and Abounding in Steadfast Love

I am sure that we all can remember sayings that we grew up with in our family. And even today we may use those sayings that were often repeated and so learned. In my home when I was growing up if Dad would get upset about something, he could say, 'oh for crying out loud.' As I got into the Bible more and more I found myself saying statements from God's Word repeatedly on different occasions. One of my favorites and used often is 'The Lord provides.' This comes from Mt. Moriah where God ultimately provided the sacrifice. The saying in the title of this study is found in at least seven places in the Old Testament and can be considered a favorite saying about our Lord. The wording is from the English translation I use. The order of 'gracious and merciful...' is in Ps. 145:8, Neh. 9:17, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2. In Ex. 34:6, Ps. 86:15, and Ps. 103:8 the order is reversed to 'merciful and gracious...' But in all seven passages the four expressions about God are found together. In some cases there are other words added, but this study is just in connection with the four in their context applied down through the years.

The four expressions can obviously stand alone as to who and how our God is. By looking at the context we see the consistency of our God going from the days of Moses in Exodus to the return of Judah from exile in Nehemiah. We also by looking at the context of all seven see how we can say that of our God in our context today and in that of believers through the ages. It could be a time of trouble personally or a time for praise as we see our God operate in our lives.

The Exact Words

As we look at the meaning of these expressions we see there is an overlapping at times. But when you put them all together they give the exquisite picture of who our Lord is. To try to understand the difference between the first two words: gracious would be bestowing His favor, while merciful is His reaching down to lift us up in tenderness from the mess we made. Slow to anger is pretty self-evident. The last expression which my English translation has 'abounding in steadfast love' is one that has so much to it as you see in the way it is translated variously. It is a diamond with many facets to it. You hold it up one way and you see one part of its beauty, then in another facet you see more of its beauty. Such is chesed.

- חַנּוּן (channun) to be gracious, merciful, compassionate, to bestow favor upon
- רַחוּם (rachum) to love, love tenderly, pity in the sense of be merciful, used only of God
- אַף anger
- אַרְךָ slow, long, longsuffering
- רַב abundant
- חֶסֶד (chesed) kindness, mercy, grace, beauty, steadfast love

The Context

Ex. 34:6 “The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.’” This happened after the second two tables of stone were cut by Moses. The Lord descended in the cloud to Moses and said this. When Moses previously had come down from Sinai and beheld the people in their idolatry, he broke the two tables. And judgment fell on the people. We see how God is faithful though the people are faithless. He has Moses cut two more tables. God's law would be given in this visible way to the people

again. To the four expressions is added “faithfulness”. This is the word from which we get 'amen.' It means stability, firmness, fidelity, faithfulness. The people were stiff-necked, but God bent down to them. Our God was slow to anger in that when the Levites strapped on their swords in the camp to be on the Lord's side only 3000 men died. Ex. 32:25-29. It was the 'people' who broke out against the Lord in calf worship. Our God is long suffering. The repeated history of Israel of turning away

from God though He blessed them, with only the exile coming long years later is a panorama of God being slow to anger and of a continuing love to a wayward and disobedient people.

What steadfast love God has to give His people a moral code unequaled among the nations. This was to save His people, to hedge them in from the immorality of the nations. And it was to show them their sin and great need for the mercy and grace of God. As we know love is the fulfilling of the law, so love was the giving of the law.

Ps. 86:15 “But thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Three times in the Old Testament psalm/ hymnbook the fourfold expression is found. Ps. 86 is a psalm of David for help in trouble. Think of David disdained by his brothers as he would face Goliath of Gath. It was God who bent down and bestowed favor on the young shepherd's sling and stone, that the great warrior enemy of God's people would fall. It was not only the giant spear of Goliath that David needed help to face. It was also the aimed spear of his king who sought his life. God's steadfast love was with him. Think of David hunted by his king, hiding, avoiding, on the run. He dared not go against the anointed King Saul and yet he must not fall into his hands either, for he was innocent. How merciful God was to the fugitive David. How slow to anger was God with David when he was king. David took several women as wives, though it was only finally with Bathsheba that David saw the anger of God in the death of the child. God bore with David as a man after his own heart and sought to bring him to repentance. In facing the rebellion of Absalom and later Adonijah vaunting himself who can David turn to for help but this merciful one.

Look at your own life. How many times have you taken lightly the Word and will of God and done your own thing like David with Bathsheba. Remember how God has bore with you to turn you. How often haven't you had troubles financial, physical and spiritual and the only one you can turn to for help is the gracious and merciful. All around you is darkness as you live in the light of His steadfast love.

Ps. 103:8 “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Would you look into the heart of God? Here is the view. We are told to speak good words to our God, “Bless the Lord O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name.” From within outward we are to have this attitude. The reason for this is not alone that He has been merciful in the face of our diseases or that He has sustained our daily lives. This is the God who has bestowed unmerited favor, forgiving all our iniquity. He is slow to anger not dealing with us according to our manifold sins. He stretches out His anger and gives time to repent. The wonderful Gospel is proclaimed of total forgiveness in vv. 11-13 “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him, as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him.” The psalmist says that His steadfast love is from everlasting to everlasting. v. 17 Paul in I Cor. 13 says that love never ends. We live in it here in time, are propelled by it into eternity and there in even fuller measure we will enjoy it. Steadfast.

Ps. 145:8 “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” In our study are you getting to know this and is it becoming a familiar saying to you if you hadn't it already? This is the Psalm of the three 'g's. God is great, gracious, good. The context here is that this is a psalm

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of praise. Interestingly in The Lutheran Hymnal we have three hymns based on verses in this psalm.

- #542 “The Sun Arises Now” by the great Norwegian hymn writer Thomas Kingo.
- #575 “Before the Lord We Bow” by Francis S. Key who wrote the American national

anthem

- #659 “Feed Thy Children, God Most Holy” by the fine German Lutheran hymn writer Johann Heermann.

Underlying hymns of praise to God is who He is expressed so precisely in the fourfold description. Sometimes we are neglectful in our prayer life. Oh, yes we will readily appeal to God for help in our various troubles. And when we have problems too big for us to handle we will turn them over to God in prayer. We have also learned in our prayer life to thank Him. At times we will simply talk with Him as our dearest Friend. What though about praising Him? Do we think, well the angels in heaven do a fine job of that and forget about this? Here we read to extol Him, to praise His name every day, not only because He is great and good. Many claim their god to be great and even that their god is good. But the one true God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. These four hang together and remind us He is the Savior God. Would you be unshackled from your sinful past? Would you see a glimpse of your glorious future? Meditate on these four and you cannot help but praise Him.

Joel 2:13 “Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...” Attached to the four is what could be better translated than it is with “repents of evil.” God of course does not repent, that is grieve over His sin and change. It is understood that very literally God sighs over the evil that either was to come or will come. This is an affliction or calamity of judgment due to the people's sins. We could also express this by 'it grieves God's heart'. The name Joel means 'Jehovah is God', though the people in Judah were not regarding Him as the Savior God who had been gracious and merciful to them times without number. Finally, as He is slow to anger He does send them locusts and drought to bring them to their knees. This also is His love. Unless, they repent, truly turn from their evil ways, something far worse will happen to them. It would come over three hundred years later, as God is slow to anger, the exile of Judah in Babylon. A child learns with a switch on the hinds legs to change lest something worse befalls him. All discipline is painful at the time though it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness later. Heb. 12:3-11 Locusts and drought were meant to turn the people. As Ezekiel tells quoting God, 33:11 “...as I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” God does not change, but people must.

Jonah 4:2 “...I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...” Here at the end of the passage we have the same Hebrew as in Joel that God grieves, sighs. Some other words to give the idea is have remorse or relent. What a contrast there is between Jonah and God. Jonah wanted Nineveh to suffer for all the wickedness the Assyrian Empire had inflicted. He did not want to lift his little finger to help them be spared from judgment. God though would have all men to be saved and to come to repentance. He sent Jonah and Jonah ran away. And then when Nineveh, that great, powerful, wicked city repented from the king on down to the commoner, Jonah is disappointed. He knew God was gracious, merciful, slow to anger and moved with a steadfast love. You can't help but think that Jonah might well have liked to have been an avenging angel of God to wreak havoc on the city. God says though that vengeance is mine, I will repay. Look at what God can do using even reluctant instruments. His Word has to go forth and will accomplish His will. In Jonah we have what would be done to the Gentile nations as the Gospel was spread. Take the task He gives you gladly, let His work your pleasure be.

Nehemiah 9:17 “...but Thou art a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and didst not forsake them.” When Nehemiah came back to Judah from his service to the King Artaxerxes in Susa, he had enormous tasks before him. His reliance was not on his money or his power at Governor of the province. He did not trust in his small band of servants

and their weaponry. He came back because God had bent down to him in mercy and equipped him for the work. He had bestowed upon him His favor without measure as we see in the book. It was the steadfast love of God that had sustained him in Susa and now in Judah. Nehemiah had to learn of the quality of being slow to anger as he faced the enemies: Tobiah, Sanballat and Geshem the Arab. The work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and governing the people of God bringing them back to the right meant his total reliance on He who is gracious, and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Nehemiah prefaces the fourfold with “ready to forgive”. We are the ones who hold a grudge, not God. Man can go to bed with anger on his mind awake to carry it out. As our Jesus taught we should be like our Lord, ready to forgive. How often when my brother sins against me should I forgive him?

...seventy times seven. And Nehemiah adds to the steadfast love that God did not forsake His people. Judah did go into a seventy year exile. It was only for seventy years, because God did not forget. Even in exile God called Ezekiel to work among the people and Daniel at the kings' court. Cyrus was prophesied in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 to send God's people back to Judah from exile. God did not forsake. Cyrus was born, grew up, became king and issued the decree.

What a God we have! **GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL, SLOW TO ANGER AND ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE**