

“Abounding in Love” // Ex 34:6–7 // The Name, #3

One church/Series on the name of God... knowing God through his name. Today, we’ll look at the description of love in his name, and answer questions like, “How can I know God loves me?” “What do I do when I don’t feel his love” or “What do I do when I don’t feel love for God?” and “Has that love fundamentally changed your relationships?”

Columbus Sports bar/ 30 women in their mid-30’s, but they were all dressed like they were in high school...

*Probably 40% of these women were convinced when they were in middle school that they were going to marry Donny. You were going to get dressed up in your **best tube-top outfit** with their parachute pants and you were going to stand on the front row with everyone else and scream “I love you, Donny” with all the other girls you’re your scream was going to be just a little bit louder than everyone else’s and Donny was going to look over at you... and you’d have this **split-second moment of enchantment** and later during the concert a bouncer was going to come up to you with a note from Donny that said, **“You got the right stuff baby, you’re the reason why I sing this song...”** And you guys were going to get married, have cute little kids with floppy hair... But it never happened. **You married Phil from accounting**, who is slightly overweight, balding, and drives a mini-van.*

*Now, you look at these girls doing this same thing with Justin Bieber and you tell them, **“It ain’t ever going to happen, sweetheart.”** And it comes from a slight place of bitterness, but that’s ok, because you’re discipling the next generation, and part of that is helping them to live on planet earth. (“You got to shake them to wake them from this bad dream.”)*

Well, you may or not have been a groupee at some point in your life, but **most of us know what it is like to love someone** who doesn’t love us back.

I think one of the most mind-blowing things in Scripture is that you see God—the Almighty, self-sufficient Creator of the universe (who needs nothing and never will)—putting himself into that position! **We find him constantly reaching out to love people who don’t love him back...** when he has no real reason to... Understanding that one thing about God will do more to change your life than perhaps any other thing.

I started this series with this statement: **“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. The most (determining) fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.”* – A. W. Tozer¹

- How you see God determines more about your life and relationships than any other thing.
- If you see God as angry or distant, you’ll feel **fearful and insecure**
- If you see God as an **angry tyrant**, you’ll become an intolerant bigot.

When and if you come to know God as love, however... it will give you a joy and a freedom and a fullness that will redefine you and all your relationships, and transform you into a loving person, the kind of person you always wanted to be.

Our deepest longings are for love! You know that. Just listen to our songs; watch our movies... We want wuv. Twoo wuv.

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 1.

Exodus 34:6–7

Moses asks God if he can see him for who he really is, and God puts him into cave in a mountain and covers him with his hand, and says, ¹⁹ “I will make all my *goodness* pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ **34:5** And the LORD descended in the cloud and... ⁶ proclaimed, “The LORD (*Yahweh*), 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, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

The element that dominates this description of the name of God is love. It is presented here like a many-sided diamond. Let’s look at each of these dimensions:

“Merciful and gracious.” At first, that may sound **redundant**... like saying that something redundant *and* repetitive... (merciful *and* gracious)... but the Hebrew words have slight shades of distinction in them:

- The word translated ‘mercy,’ *rachum*, is about a feeling of compassion;
- The word translated ‘gracious,’ *wachanoon* is about the action you take when you feel *rachum*.
- God felt his people’s pain and then he acted on their behalf. *He saw us in our pain and couldn’t just sit by; he had to do something...*

“Slow to anger.” His love does not preclude his anger; but it makes him slow to it.

- God was **rightfully angry** at our sin; but his love overcame his anger and he saved us because his love for us exceeded his hatred over our sin.
- It is a **perverse and twisted idea** to say that God’s love precludes his anger. When you really love something or someone, it demands that you get angry at certain things...

- Because I love my kids, I am angry at anything I see destroying them.
- If I see them lie or do something that I know will hurt them, it makes me angry *because* I love them.
- People says, “Oh, you know, God is love” as if that means he never gets angry at or judges sin.
- God is angry at sin **because he loves**.
- The same writer who wrote, God is love also wrote, “*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*”² The **light of God’s presence exposes and drives out** darkness; God **wants us to be filled with** light and goodness and love like he is.
- His love is a **purifying love**, desiring not only goodness in himself, but in those whom he loves.

So **his love does not preclude anger** at sin, but it does make him slow to it, because he loves us as much as he hates our sin, and he would rather **rid us of our sin** than **get rid of us because** of our sin.

His love is **steadfast**. It **doesn’t change based on his moods or how worthy we are on a given day**. It is a settled resolve, like I feel for my kids.

David says: ****“As a father has compassion (*rachum*) on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.” Psalm 103:13**

- **When I see one of them suffer**, my heart changes... Even if their suffering is their own fault, I think... “If I can suffer for them, I would.”

Isaiah: ****“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Isaiah 49:15,**

- **Is that even possible**, for a woman to forget she has a newborn child?
- **Have you ever seen a mother with a newborn?** It is truly a marvel to observe how giving birth to a child changes her. I’ve **known**

² 1 John 1:5

women—not my wife—who were not baby people at all... not very tender or compassionate—but after having a baby suddenly get completely tuned in and bound up in this child.

- After my wife and I had our first... the slightest whimper would perk up like a dog hearing a dog whistle... “I guess she slept through the night.” I quit saying that... started saying, “Yeah, I heard her, too... just **wanted to give you guys time to bond.**”

****“Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. [16] Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands...”**

God is **more in tune with our pain** than the most starry eyed mother of a newborn... his **nanny cam is always on** and he knows when even a single hair falls from our heads. (I know a lot of attentive mothers, but none like that)

The depth and the length of God’s love revealed in Scripture is shocking... In fact, so shocking that God chooses to reveal it to us in a series of stories, **some truths cannot really be explained, they have to be felt, experienced.** The love of God is one of those.

Let’s start with...

Jonah

- God called a prophet named Jonah to **go and preach salvation** to the Ninevites. **Jonah didn’t want to do it.**
- And (I’ve told you) **before we shake our heads at Jonah**, we should consider who the Ninevites were and what they had done to Israel.
- They were **fairly close neighbors** of Israel, and were some of the cruelest people we know about in the ancient world.
- A while back some **archaeologists uncovered an ancient Assyrian library**... Here are some actual things that Ninevite historians recorded their kings saying:

- ***“A mountain of heads I erected in from of the conquered king’s city. Their youths and their maidens I burnt up in the flames.”**
- **“I cut their throats like lambs. I cut off their precious lives as one cuts a string. Like the many waters of a storm, I made the contents of their gullets and entrails run down upon the wide earth. Their hands I cut off.”**
- **“I flayed [a conquered king]. His skin I spread upon the wall of the city.”**
- **“I pierced his [another conquered king] chin with my dagger. Through his jaw I passed a rope, put a dog chain upon him, and kept him in a kennel in the city square.”**
- **“I tied them up and madeth them listen to the Frozen soundtrack both day and night.”**

- One of those is false.
- You can see **why Jonah doesn’t want to go plant a church** in Nineveh. Jonah says, “I don’t want these people to be saved, I **want them to die.**”
- And so God brings about **the whole whale incident**... eventually Jonah relents and goes and preaches to Nineveh, not because he loves them, but because he doesn’t want to be whale bait...

And, sure enough, they repent.

***[4:1] But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. [2] And he said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, (quote from Ex 34) slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. (Jonah 4:1-2 ESV)**

- Jonah finds God’s love scandalous. How could God love the Ninevites?
- Of course, the **irony in the book is that Nineveh** is not a random, bad city God chooses to love... Nineveh represents all of us.

- It's **not that God finds it in his heart to love a few bad people** along with us good people; he only loves bad people because that's the only kind of people there are.
- **We are Nineveh** (*we always think in the story we're Jonah—we're not, we're Nineveh*); and one day when we see with clarity the love of God for us we're going to have a hard time believing it.
 - **Some things can't be explained; they have to be felt, experienced...** so **God put Jonah in a situation with people he'd never choose to forgive** and says, "Jonah, This is you. And I won't stop loving you." So if you've had the experience of being really betrayed—by a son or daughter, or parent, or friend—but you can't stop loving them, and you keep reaching out toward them... you get a taste of **God's love for you...**

Hosea

Hosea was a prophet of God given the most unusual assignment. God said to him, "**Go and marry a prostitute** (but you didn't see that coming, *Hosea*), **and have children with her. This will illustrate how Israel has acted like a prostitute by turning against the LORD and worshiping other gods.**" Hosea 1:2

- **(How would you like to get that calling from God in seminary? I want you to pastor here... and you be a missionary over here... and I want you to go marry a prostitute who is going to cheat on you.)**

Hosea (who has to be one of the most understated heroes of the Bible) **obeys**, and goes and marries a prostitute named "Gomer." (Bad enough she's a prostitute; her name is Gomer).

- And he **doesn't just go through the formalities**, evidently he genuinely falls in love with her, has kids with her...
- But **soon after they marry she cheats on him**, and **eventually leaves him** for a man that is abusive to her and won't even provide for her needs.

- Throughout the book, Hosea **pleads with her** to come back, but she won't do it.
- Hosea **even gives the man she is living with money** so that she can be taken care of, but she stays blind to the fact that the money used to care of her is from Hosea.

Eventually, this man sells her back into the sex slave trade, and God appears a second time and tells Hosea to go and buy her back. You can imagine Hosea saying, 'Buy her back? She was mine, and then she put herself back in this situation? And now you want me to go buy her out?'

[3:1] And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love this woman who is... an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods..."

Hebrew scholars tell us what this scene would have looked like. The slaves would be stripped down naked—so that the buyers could see what they were getting. *There stand Hosea, in front of his wife, who has left him again and again, naked being bid on by men who were going to mistreat her.* And Hosea says, "I'll top the highest bid. I'll make her mine again.)

God was trying to reveal his nature to Hosea. He says, "Hosea, you and I have given our hearts to people who will utterly reject us. We are going to spend our time and effort going after them. Until *you experience that, Hosea, you'll never understand how my heart works.*"

In fact, I think the **most remarkable** verse in Hosea, maybe the most remarkable in the OT, is 11:8, "**Oh, how can I give you up, Israel? How can I let you go? My heart is torn within me!**"

- God has bound up his happiness in ours.

If you were Gomer's friend, and she confided in you and wants your advice, and she says, "Hey, I'm having an affair, and I'm leaving my loving husband and my kids for this guy who beats me up" ... You'd tell

her, “Stop it, don’t be a fool.” But let’s say she ignores your advice and night after night she comes over and you have the same conversation... Eventually, you’d say, “**Listen, we’re done.** If you’re not going to listen, I’m not going to be your friend.”

But if you’re married to her, or if she was your beloved daughter, your heart has become so bound up with her that her wounds become your wounds. Your happiness is contingent on her happiness.

This is **how God reveals** he feels about his people; about you.

Listen: God was happy before he made us; we would have been happy had he destroyed us after he sinned; but so wrap up his emotions up in our pain so that he could not be happy until we were happy.

- Theologian ****J.I. Packer: “By his own free voluntary choice, God will not know perfect and unmixed happiness again till he has brought every one of his children to heaven.”³**

After Veronica and I had our 4th kid, I told my wife, “I don’t think I will ever be happy again.” Because with four, one of them is always hurting or unhappy... and I feel their pain.

This is how God feels about us. In fact, **Gomer’s** name means “completion.” God’s love and happiness cannot be complete until he saves us.

- **Even if we are the greatest source of pain in his life,** and even if we have brought the pain we are experiencing onto ourselves.

And can it be, the hymn writer said, that I should gain, an interest in my Savior’s blood? Died he for me, who caused his pain; for me, who him to death pursued?

- *I hear Jesus say from the cross, “Father, forgive them...” I don’t say, “WOW, look at his love for them, but that’s ME”*

³ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 125.

- **AMAZING LOVE! HOW CAN IT BE?**

Donald Grey Barnhouse put it like this: “*The pursuing love of God is the **greatest wonder in the spiritual universe.** When we see this love at work through the heart of Hosea **we may wonder if God is really like that.** But he is. Think about it: Many years later he would give man the trees of the forest and the iron in the ground...He gave them the ability to form that iron into nails, and to fashion those trees into a cross... Then he stretched out his hands upon that tree and allowed us to nail him there, and in so doing he took our sins upon himself. **This is our God, and there is no one else like him.**”*

HOSEA: Two Hebrew words: GOD SAVES

BTW, did you notice that both of those are OT stories?

Can I take a moment to address one of the most confused, twisted ideas people have about the Bible...

- They think the **OT God—the Father**—is mean and grumpy, always mad... He watches Fox News every night and he’s ready to kill everybody. And **Jesus is like the son who went off to college** and got these liberal ideas about grace, so when he came back he was like, “Dad, come on! These people aren’t so bad. They are creative and funny. Let’s try to rescue them!”
- **Nothing could be further from the truth!** Jesus’ greatest stories about the love of God were always about the **love of the Father, the Father revealed in the OT...**

(The Prodigal Son)

One of his most famous stories is about a dad whose son came to him one day and said, “Dad, I hate living here. I am sick of you. Give me my inheritance and I’m going to leave and never come back.”

- **I could not imagine anything** more painful than for my kids that to me: “*All you are **good for now,** dad, is your money. We **don’t want to know** you; we don’t want our kids to know you. Get our of*

our lives, and **hurry up and die already**, because then you'll at least be good for something.

- The son then **takes the family inheritance** and goes out and blows all of it! **He destroys** the family fortune and the family reputation.
 - **Jewish law** said that a son who did much less than that could be killed. If a **son ran away from home** or dishonored the family, the family would perform a ceremony called the **kezazah—literally the ‘cutting off’**—where they officially pronounced the son “dead,” and **after that** the community would have nothing to do with this wayward person.⁴
- But **this father never performed that** ceremony; in fact, Jesus said, he **stood every day looking off** in the distance of the direction his son had gone...
- And **then one day** he sees his son coming home... poor; worn out; hurt... and the father pulls up the skirt of his robe and begins to run.
 - **Grown men in those days did not run.** In our day, too... And to do it, he had to lift up the front and expose his knees, something considered shameful.
 - But there **comes a time when an emotion** so dominates your heart that you forget about everything else.
 - When I see the father running, I think of that iconic image of **Jimmy Valvano**... He looks like he's lost his mind. “Jimmy, you look crazy!” “I don't care! We won the national tournament.”
 - To the father: “**You're shaming yourself.**” He says, “**I don't care!** I have my son back.”
- This is how Jesus said the Father felt about us.
 - The cross was the Father running after us. The cross was the Father exposing himself to scorn and ridicule so he could get us back; for **the joy of having us reunited to him**, he despised the shame and pain of the cross... he just wanted us back!
- **1 John 3:1**

- **John 3:16**
 - *I know the Trinity is confusing, and I know I can't explain everything about it to you.* But in Christ's death on the cross, **the Father himself suffered for our sins.** God did not send someone else to die for our sins; he did it himself (this is why the JW and Mormons are so wrong—whoever died to save me is the one I'm going to most love fore eternity). God is one, and the Father and the Son are one being.
 - But at the same time—and this is the confusing part—the **Father and Son** are separate, and the Father loves the Son more than anything, **which makes the sacrifice even more painful**, because I am pretty sure that I could more easily sacrifice my life for you than I could go give up my son Adon for me...
 - My dad used to teach Sunday School... Boy in the gears. I remember him telling that story with tears in his eyes... I sat there thinking, ‘Would he do that to me?’ But in that moment I got a glimpse of how painful it would be for my dad to give up me, his son!
 - **So, I'm not sure we know how to explain it all...** God loved us so much he would die himself for us; he loved us so much he would give up his precious Son for us.
- Henry Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal*: “Perhaps the most radical statement Jesus ever made is **Luke 6:36, ‘Be merciful (rachum), as your Father in heaven is merciful.’**”

So, I have 3 questions for you:

1. Do you believe in the steadfast love of the Father?

- These stories are about you; about his love for you.
 - You are **Nineveh** that he, beyond everyone's comprehension, comes to forgive (angels are confused!).
 - You are **Gomer** whom he won't—he can't—let go. And like Gomer, he took you when you were naked and ashamed,

⁴ John Mark Comer, “God has a Name, Part 3.”

bought you back, and clothed you—not with your robes of unrighteousness, but with his robes of righteousness.

- You are the **prodigal son** for whom he stands daily on the porch of heaven longing to come home, and for whom he slew not the fatted calf, but himself, at the cross.
- Sometimes you can't "feel" the love of God; there are days I don't feel it.
 - On those days, I choose to believe it because of what I saw at Calvary.
 - On the night before Jesus died... as Jesus prayed in Gethsemane... I've showed you that **something mysterious** was happening... He became deathly afraid. Sweat great drops of blood.
 - **God showing Jesus what he was about to go through.**
 - **Why? Why not wait until Jesus had died?** *"It was so we could see Jesus could go to the cross voluntarily knowing full well what he was about to experience, so that his love for us would be put on display even more."* **Jonathan Edwards**
 - VERY IMPORTANT: My perception of the love of God is not based on how I feel at the moment; or how well my life is going; it is based on how **God sought me and bought me and forgave me** at the cross.
 - *If you base your perception of the love of God on your feelings, or your circumstances, you're never going to feel secure; but if you base it on the settled work of Calvary, that will become a rock that will anchor your life through any storm.*
- You see, listen... you may not understand why he does or does not do certain things... Let me confess to you something.... I don't either.
 - But can you trust the revelation of his love given in Scripture, and wait in faith to see how the love of God turns all things, even your most painful, for good?
 - I read this in college, and have held onto it now for years. I believe it, though I often can't feel it: **"Many things about**

how God rules the universe are confusing to us now. But what will amaze us, as we look backwards from eternity, is not the severity of God's anger but the magnanimity of his love." **J. Oswald Sanders**

- God's name, "Yahweh," means, "I am." It means he never changes. He is what he will always be.
- *Do you believe that he does not change, even in your dark days?*

2. Have you embraced his love for you?

- We'll see this more next week, but he won't force his love on you. You have to choose to receive it.
 - **Salvation is a gift...** found in a *personal* relationship with Jesus. It's not just *believing* in him; it is trusting *him* personally.
- Christian, are you renewing yourself in the reality of this love of God *for you* daily?
 - The Apostle Paul says that the Holy Spirit "sheds abroad" the love of God in our hearts. (Rom 5:5 KJV). *"Shed abroad"* literally means *poured out*. It's the same word used for the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts. The power of this word is immense; Paul is not talking about a faint feeling of sentimentality, but a **flood**.
 - **This "flooding" is part of the regular work of the Holy Spirit; it's not** a special gift or a rare occurrence you get only once a quarter or even only once a week in church. It's just what the Spirit does, **when you ask him.**⁵
- **If you don't sense his love, and live in the awareness of it, I promise you there's no way you will feel closeness to him.**
 - **Me with my kids...** draw close or run away?
 - If you **only see God as Judge**, you'll pull away.
 - That's why, again... people who say, "God, I get... but what's the big deal about Jesus?" only know God as Judge, Creator...and they never feel the warmth of intimacy with him.

⁵ Packer, 118.

- **That's why some of you feel no emotion toward God**; you know him only as Creator and Judge and not as Father and Lover and Savior.
- **Only when you see that you were Nineveh**, and he saved you; **Gomer**, and he pursued you; **the prodigal son**, and he longed to bring you back home ... will you really develop affections for God.
- Knowing the love of God *for* us, in Christ, produces love for God *in* us.

3. Have you sensed his love for others?

- I often say this, but there's just **no way to experience mercy** and love like this and not be changed!
- **Those who believe the gospel become like the gospel.** They become merciful and gracious.
 - They have to! **Mac Truck**
- **Luke 6:36, 'Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful.'**
 - **I pray:** As you have been to me, so I have been...
- **Last question: Has your "mercy" (feelings, *rachum*) become "graciousness" (actions, *wachanoon*)?** Your feelings have to lead to actions.
 - **Have you told others about Jesus?** How could you know the love of God for someone, and not tell them?
 - Is there someone you **to forgive**, like Christ forgave you. That you are **going to keep on loving** them, even though they hurt you?
 - Are you **servicing**? SERVE365