

6.27.21 God is Abounding in Steadfast Love and Faithfulness Psalm 86.15

Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

If someone asked you what God is like, how would you respond? How would you describe God to someone? Psalm 86 is a good place to start. Since the beginning of May we've been hearing about what God is like from Psalm 86 so I thought it would be good to hear most of that Psalm today so you can hear the many different attributes of God that we've been giving thanks and praising God for and seeking to emulate in our own lives.

Psalm 86:1-15, *"Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.*

2 Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you.

You are my God; 3 be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long.

4 Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

*5 For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, **abounding in steadfast love** to all who call on you.*

6 Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.

7 In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.

8 There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours.

9 All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.

10 For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.

11 Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.

12 I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.

*13 **For great is your steadfast love toward me;** you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.*

14 O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them.

*15 But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and **abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.***

One of the things I've learned through the thirty plus years I've been a pastor is that a person's understanding of God has a huge influence on her or his life. You see this in people who, motivated by their view of God, embrace inspiring lives of love, devotion, service, compassion, justice, and generosity. We also see how some people's understanding of God leads to judgmental, hateful, abusive, violent behavior even to the point of committing mass murder. Our understanding of what God is like is tremendously important and it's often significantly shaped by our parent's view of God as well as by any preaching, teaching, or education that we experience. What our parents, pastors, and teachers shared with us about God can be life giving, inspiring, comforting, and appealing; or it can be disturbing, confusing, scary, or a turn off. If we believe God to be angry, vengeful, and judgmental that will shape us in a certain way. We will be formed in a far different way if we believe **Psalm 86:15**, *"But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."* Part of the struggle we see in the world today is a struggle about what understanding of God will have the greatest impact and influence on the most people.

Some of you didn't grow up hearing about God's character like this, rather you heard about an angry, judgmental God who is just waiting to catch you in your mistakes, errors, or sin and seems almost eager to eternally punish people. Yet we all want God to be merciful to us. We don't want God to "remember" **our sins**, but to remember us according to the Lord's mercy. This is expressed in **Psalm 25:6-7** which pleads with God, *"Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness sake, O Lord."* None of us wants to be remembered for our worst mistakes or faults or for things we did when we acted foolishly. We all want the Lord to see us through eyes of mercy and to remember us according to God's steadfast love, according to God's character more than our own. If this is what we want for ourselves, then we should treat others this way as well.

Exodus 34 and **Numbers 14:13-24** offer a version of the same incident. In both Exodus and Numbers, Moses intercedes for the people, and "talks God out of" a terrible response. In Numbers 14, Moses encourages the Lord to use God's power in a gracious, forgiving, and loving manner rather than in a destructive way. In **Numbers**

14:17-20 Moses says, “17 And now, therefore, let the power of the LORD be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, 18 **‘The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression,** but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.’ 19 **Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people,** from Egypt even until now.” Moses is asking God to forgive, not because the people deserve it because they don’t, **but according to the greatness of God’s steadfast love.**

20 Then the LORD said, *“I do forgive, just as you have asked;”* however, all the people who didn’t obey God and who complained and tested God repeatedly – none of them would see the Promised Land. I believe the idea of the iniquity of parents impacting children and a family for generations is more a statement of reality than something God intentionally inflicts on people. This is seen in the consequences of unhealthy choices parents make, some while a baby is still in the womb, that can lead to fetal alcohol syndrome or babies being born with drugs in their system. It continues when parents are violent, abusive or don’t properly love, care for, and nurture their children. There are consequences to disobedience even when God forgives us, just as there are consequences even when we forgive someone or when someone forgives us.

The next time today’s description of God appears is in **Nehemiah chapter 9** where Nehemiah retells the same experience of the Israelites being blessed by the wonders God performed, following God in the wilderness, the Lord giving them the commandments to live by, manna to eat, water from the rock, and the stubborn people’s repeated disobedience. **Nehemiah 9:17, 30-31** affirms, **“But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.”** 30 Many years you were patient with them, and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen. Therefore you handed them over to the peoples of the lands. 31 Nevertheless, **in your great mercies** you did not make an end of them or forsake them, **for you are a gracious and merciful God.**” The pattern that starts to emerge is that God’s character is consistent, but sadly, so is the stupid, violent behavior of stubborn, disobedient people. This is an iniquity that seems to be passed from generation to generation as well.

Yet God's steadfast love and faithfulness are tenacious. In Psalms 86, 145, and 103, we hear this description repeatedly, ***"The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."*** God's steadfast love is foundational to who God is and to what you believe and how you live your life. In the English Standard Version of the Bible, **"steadfast love" is mentioned 196 times in the Old Testament, 127 times in the Psalms alone.**

In Psalm 103 that we see an important shift. The key is in **verses 8-10**. ***"8 The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities."***

Now either God has changed, which I doubt, or humanity's understanding of God has matured – which I suspect to be true. After hundreds of years and many generations, there was an awakening to the fact that God, ***"will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities."***

This understanding of what God is like - that not only is God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but that God doesn't always accuse, stay angry, or deal with us as we deserve, is seen also in the prophets. Joel 2:12-13, ***"Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13 rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."***

In Jonah 3:10-4:4 we see God change and relent from punishing people. ***"10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. 4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"***

Jonah basically quotes Joel and repeats the same affirmation of faith about God, but Jonah is unhappy about it! Jonah is God's instrument in the most effective evangelistic outreach in the Bible - and he's disappointed! Jonah, angry with God, went out of the city of Nineveh (Mosul in Iraq today) to sulk and watch what God would do. The problem is not so much in Jonah's head but in his heart. It was not so much a theological error that ignited his anger but his spiritual poverty. He knew what his faith tradition said about God and could quote it from memory, ***"for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."*** Yet he refused to accept the implications of what his faith said about God. Improbably Nineveh has been saved, but rather than rejoice, Jonah seems more disappointed that had predicted the destruction of Nineveh and it didn't happen. Perhaps he felt foolish and he's angry. He had been surprised by grace.

Angry about mercy and forgiveness and lives being restored and given new hope, Jonah turns to God in prayer which is good. Jonah's angry prayer of self-justification is not good. He basically prays, *"I've been right all along, everything happened just the way I thought it would. That's why I didn't want to come here in the first place. I knew you'd let those dirty rotten Assyrians off the hook."*

It's interesting to note how Jonah and God speak in the fourth chapter of Jonah. Jonah speaks primarily in angry declarations. God speaks three times, and all three times God addresses Jonah and you in the form of a question. God's first question to Jonah is, *"Is it right for you to be angry?"* God wants you to figure things out for yourself. God doesn't say, *"You self-centered, uncaring, short tempered little twit, what in heaven's name is the matter with you?"* God says, *"Is it right for you to be angry?"* What form of speech are you more likely to employ on a regular basis, an angry declarative statement about someone or something like Jonah, or a question, like God?

Jonah's so intent on his need to be right, to say, *"I told you so,"* that in his anger he misses what God is doing. His notion of God has been too small, too limited. In his book, *The Song of the Bird*, Anthony de Mello tells the story of an elephant and a rat. "An elephant was enjoying a leisurely dip in a jungle pool when a rat came up to the pool and insisted that the elephant get out. *"I won't,"* said the elephant. *"I insist you get out this minute,"* said the rat. *"Why?"* asked the elephant. *"I shall tell you that only after*

you're out of the pool," replied the rat. *"Then I won't get out,"* said the elephant. Finally, curiosity got the best of the elephant and he lumbered out of the pool, stood dripping in front of the rat, and said, *"Now then, why did you want me to get out of the pool?"* The rat replied, *"To see if you were wearing my bathing suit."*

An elephant will sooner fit into the bathing suit of a rat than God will fit into our limited notions of God. What we do know about God is this: *"You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."*

In the New Testament, we're told that God is love (1 John 4:7-8) and that God so loved for the world God sent Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (John 3:16, 1 John 4:9-10). Paul assures us that there is nothing, absolutely nothing that (Romans 8:31) *"will be able to separate us for the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Live your life believing that God is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Imagine then like springs of living water bubbling up to bless you that will never run dry. Live with the assurance that God is love and God is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:9, Hebrews 10:23). Human love may wax and wane like the moon. We are tempted to withhold love, to let it decrease or favor one person over the other; but God loves equally and justly all the time. The Lord's love is steadfast, it doesn't waver in intensity. God fully, 100% loves you all the time. There is never a moment when God's love for you is not at 100% intensity. Ponder that glorious truth for a moment. At every moment, God loves you at max capacity. God cannot love you any more than he loves you at this minute.

The Lord's steadfast love abides forever and always. People can be unfaithful, unreliable, even untrue. God is faithful, reliable, and true. Though you are faithless, God remains faithful. God's love for you never changes. Put your hope not in the shifting and inevitably changing circumstances of your life and this world, but in the steadfast love of God that never changes. God is love and God is faithful.

Blessing: Hebrews 10:23-25 (NIV), "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, **for he who promised is faithful**. And let us consider how we may **spur one another on toward love and good deeds**, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. If someone asked you what God is like, how would you respond? How would you describe God to someone?
2. When you think of your answer to what is God like – are there particular verses, passages, or stories in the Bible that come to your mind? What are they?
3. Are there personal experiences, traditions, or learning outside of the Bible that has shaped your view of or belief in God? What are they?
4. Compare how Moses communicates with God in Exodus 34 and Numbers 14:13-24 with how Jonah converses with God in Jonah 4? What can we learn positively and negatively from these interactions? What do we learn about Moses and Jonah? Which approach would you like to emulate?
5. What difference does it make to believe that God loves you at maximum capacity in a way that never wavers; that God is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness toward you?
6. What are the implications for your life, your thoughts, your speech, your actions if you take seriously reflecting the image of God in the world?