

## CHAPTER 4

# "COMPASSIONATE AND GRACIOUS"

The LORD passed in front of him and said, "The LORD, the LORD, a God compassionate and gracious ..." (Exodus 34:6)



The previous chapter focused on "lovingkindness"—the most important word in *The Derakim*. But personally, the first attribute "compassionate" is my favorite. Why? This word points us to the emotional engine that drives God's great lovingkindness. The Hebrew word for "compassionate" is *rehum* and it means something like this—an involuntary (at times even violent) emotional response to suffering or need. For a point of reference, think of a mother's response to her crying newborn. When her child is in pain, or hungry, or facing danger, she hears its cry and her world stops until the situation is rectified. Why? She is moved by

a sort of primal impulse she can't suppress. It's woven into the warp and woof of her very being. God responds to us for the exact same reason—He is "compassionate." Millions of people seem oblivious to this glorious reality, but the fact is that God literally yearns, aches, and longs to help us a lot like any good mother ... but even more than a mother (Isaiah 49:15). The person who begins to grasp this amazing attribute of God can make it through anything life throws at them, like my friend Eric.

## 4.2 ERIC, THROUGH THE FIRE

Eric has been a close friend of mine for over ten years, and as long as I have known him he has held high-level administrative positions in education. (He is also on the board of our international ministry.) When I first met him, he was the principal of our sons' school, and later became superintendent of the district. He's a pretty serious guy, regularly making decisions that will affect thousands of lives. The first thing a person thinks of when they meet someone like him is not "bicep tattoo," but several months ago Eric just had to show me his.

We were out for lunch, and he leaned across the table and said, "Let me show you what I just did." He pulled up his shirt sleeve and—*Wow*—there it was. A fresh tattoo almost as long as his hand, with a big cross and Exodus 34:6 emblazoned on it. None of the community leaders at the next board meeting will know it's there, but all Eric's dearest friends will know ... and we will all know why. It is a testament to the God of *The Derakim*, who carried Eric through the

darkest days of his life—the three years his precious young son teetered between life and death.

I first learned about Eric's earth-shaking crisis sitting on the tarmac at the Kansas City airport. I had just returned from a mission trip to Africa, and my wife texted me to rush straight from the airport to Children's Mercy Hospital. While I was gone, Eric and his wife received the terrifying news that their handsome, confident, athletic little eight year-old son had life-threatening cancer. When I left for my trip, no one had a clue. This catapulted them into a three-year siege war.

Eric said fighting for his son was a second full-time job. He experienced more sleepless nights than he can remember, and countless emergency trips to the hospital hours away from their home. As the battle dragged on, chemotherapy sapped the strength out of their son. His thick blonde hair dwindled, and his strength withered. The financial demands were astronomical. The emotional cost? No one can understand, except parents who have fought a similar battle. Eric and his family eventually came through—wary, beaten down, and battered—but victorious.

There were two things that kept Eric going through it all. The first is the indescribable, to-the-bone emotion that this father had for his son. In Hebrew, Eric was *rehum* (compassionate). There is nothing he would not have done for his son. All the sleepless nights, the financial demands, and the buckets of tears were like dust on the scales compared to the value of his son's life. Eric would have gladly given anything—sold his house, donated vital organs, even laid down his own life. That's the way a good father is wired. He

has a God-given emotion that drives him to outrageous acts of self-giving love. That is what *rehum* is all about.

**Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who revere him. (Psalm 103:13)**

The second truth that pulled Eric through is this—he believed that the same sort of fiery emotion he has for his son, God feels for him. A few years before this nightmare hit, God prepared him by revealing to him the truths of *The Derakim* (Exodus 34:6). Eric knew that God is *rehum* (compassionate), that his prayers for help moved God more deeply than even a human father or mother. Because of this, no sacrifice, no obstacle, no cost can stop His love. As the apostle Paul tells us ...

**For I am convinced that neither death nor life, angels nor demons, things present nor things future, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)**

Again, the fact that God is compassionate explains the emotional fuel behind His great lovingkindness (*hesed*). This is what God was trying to tell us with the first attribute of *The Derakim*. In fact, the Bible tells us that this parent-like

emotional fire is what drives everything God does—"His compassions are over all His works" (Psalm 145:9).<sup>1</sup> After the darkest days were past, Eric said, "I never would have made it through the trial without knowing that."

### 4.3 AMAZING ETYMOLOGY

Etymology is the study of where words come from, their origin and development. In Hebrew, there may be no more fascinating, jaw-dropping etymology than the family of terms related to *rehum* (compassionate). The adjective *rehum*, the related verb *raham* (have compassion), and the noun *rehamim* (compassions) are all directly related to the noun *rehem*, which quite literally means "mother's womb."<sup>2</sup> This may seem odd, but the connection here is pretty easy to figure out. What is the most powerful emotional bond known to humankind? A mother for her child. When a child is suffering from hunger, thirst, or discomfort, their cry evokes a physical response, like a pain, inside the mother's body—she is *rehum* (compassionate). The only way for this pain to be alleviated is for the mother to meet the child's need. One scholar put it this way, "The mercy a mother shows to the issue of her *rehem* is *rehum*."<sup>3</sup> We can see how this all works in a well-known story from Scripture.

1 Kings 3:16-27 tells us how King Solomon, Israel's wisest king, solved a most perplexing problem. Two women came to him, both claiming to be the mother of the same infant. They were housemates and had born children days apart. One evening while they slept, tragedy struck; one of the mothers rolled over in her sleep and smothered her baby.

Both women were now claiming that the living child was theirs. They explained their dilemma to King Solomon:

This woman's son died in the night because she lay on it. So she arose in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your maidservant slept, and took him in her arms, and put her dead son in my arms. And when I rose in the morning to nurse my son, behold, he was dead ....” Then the other woman said, “No. The living one is my son, and the dead one is your son.” But the first woman said, “No. The dead one is your son, and the living one is my son.”

King Solomon didn't have the benefit of modern DNA technology, but he used an alternative, highly accurate method for testing maternity—the compassion test. Solomon knew that there exists a profound, mysterious connection between a mother and her child—she is *rehum* (compassionate). It doesn't matter what culture, creed, or social strata a mother is from, she is bound to her child by a force stronger than death. The king, therefore, devised a plan to determine who the real mother was. It was a little shocking, but effective.

And the king said, “Get me a sword.” So they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, “Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other.” Then the woman whose child was the living

one spoke to the king, for her compassions (*rehamim*) were enflamed for her son and she said, "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him." But the other said, "He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him!" Then the king answered and said, "Give the first woman the living child, and by no means kill him. She is his mother."

For Solomon, the results were conclusive. The woman whose insides suddenly burst into flames was obviously the mother (and the other woman was just criminally insane). Case closed. You see, unless a mother is seriously damaged emotionally and psychologically, there is nothing she can do to suppress it—she is *rehum* (compassionate). It's part of her God-given hardwiring.

According to its most fundamental (we could say primitive) meaning, *rehum* points to this sort of involuntary, uncontrollable eruption of emotion inside a person. The English phrase "moved in the guts" comes pretty close. This is the very first thing God wanted Moses to know about Him when He spoke *The Derakim*. When God sees suffering, when He hears the cry of the afflicted, when He sees injustice, sickness, bondage, and need, He too has an eruption of emotion in His heart. This is what makes Him more than willing to help us. Again, this is what fuels His great lovingkindness. We may have a hard time believing all this, but it is what God says over and over and over about Himself. In fact, the Bible takes this to an extreme—it states that even a human mother's compassions may fail, but God's never will:

Can a woman forget her nursing child and  
 have no compassion on the son of her womb?  
 Even these may forget, but I will never forget  
 you. Behold, I have permanently written  
 your name on my hand. (Isaiah 49:15-16)

(Evidently, sort of like my friend Eric, God also has a tattoo. What's on it? Your name!)

#### 4.4 "... AND GRACIOUS"

In *The Derakim*, this amazing little word *rehum* is attached to another adjective—*hanun*. This second word is often translated into English by the word "gracious." These two terms come as a package, a figure of speech, and in the Bible they are almost always used of God.<sup>4</sup> We could say that the words go together like tea and crumpets, or milk and cookies. The logical connection is this—if someone is profoundly moved in the guts (*rehum*), then they are going to do something about it (*hanun*). *Rehum* points to the feeling, and *hanun* points to the doing. This is pretty straightforward. An emotionally and psychologically healthy person does not just sit by unaffected and ignore the cries of the one they love. They swing into action. In the same way, God does not sit by unaffected when those who are created in His image (you and I) cry out to Him. He is *rehum* and *hanun*.

We don't need to say much about the meaning of the adjective *hanun* here, because the word pretty much covers the same ground that the noun *hesed*<sup>5</sup> does. (Go back and



read the last chapter.) This may seem a bit technical for the non-specialist to follow, but the adjective *hanun* corresponds to the noun *hesed*. All this means is that when God is described by the adjective *hanun* (gracious), it is not because He has the noun *hen* (grace).<sup>6</sup> Throughout the Old Testament, the rule is that when a person is described as *hanun*, it is because they have *hesed*. (Some folks may have to pull out their old high school grammar books here.)

This same connection exists between the related verb *hanan* and the noun *hesed*. When someone in the Bible cries out for God to "be gracious," they are not asking for grace (*hen*)—they are asking for *hesed*. This happens all the time in Israel's great book of prayers, the Psalms: "Be gracious (*hanan*) to me, God, according to your lovingkindness (*hesed*) ..." (Psalm 51:1). Every time you see "be gracious" in the Old Testament, remember that this is an appeal for that mind-bending, knock-you-to-the-ground attribute of God—His *hesed*.

Be gracious (*hanan*) to me, LORD, for I cry to You all day long. Make the soul of Your servant glad, for I lift up my soul to You, LORD. For You, LORD, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness (*hesed*) to all who call upon You. (Psalm 86:3-5)

All this linguistic stuff can get a little bit confusing, but all you really need to know is that "compassionate and gracious" (*rehum vehanun*) is simply a figure of speech. The

words go together like a hand in a glove, because if your guts are on fire with parent-like feeling, you are going to act.<sup>7</sup> When you act, the adjective is *hanun* ... and the related noun is *hesed*. (Now you can put your high school grammar book back on the shelf.)

#### 4.5 A FATHER'S HEART

It was mentioned earlier that Psalm 103 is King David's meditation on the words of *The Derakim*. Throughout this song, David takes the attributes of Exodus 34:6 and examines them like a jeweler scrutinizing the facets of a diamond. When he meditates on *rehum* (compassionate), this is what he says: **"Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who revere Him"** (Psalm 103:13). It is not just mothers who experience an involuntary eruption of emotion over their children. Like virtually all fathers, David's greatest emotional upheavals occurred because of his children. His heart was bound to them. Once, for instance, when David's baby was sick, he was inconsolable and lay on the ground and did not eat food for a week (2 Samuel 12:14-20). That's *rehum*.

A father's heart is mysteriously tied to his children ... even when they are wicked and rebellious. David's son Absalom, for instance, hated him and for years tried to defy and humiliate him. This all came to a head when Absalom attempted to steal the throne in a violent coup d'état. Psalm 3 was inspired by this event, and the historical notation on the song reads, **"A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son."**

**LORD, how my opposition has increased!  
Multitudes are rising up against me. Multi-  
tudes are saying of my soul, "Even God can-  
not deliver him." (Psalm 3:1-2)**

David's rebel son was eventually killed in this conflict, and the Bible tells us that David was beside himself with grief. He would have gladly given his own life to avoid this outcome.

**The king was deeply moved and went up to  
the chamber over the gate and wept. And  
this is what he said as he walked, "O my son  
Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I  
had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son,  
my son!" (2 Samuel 18:33)**

If Absalom would only have turned back to his compassionate father, he would have been forgiven and restored. There is virtually nothing a healthy parent can do to control their emotional response for their children. Again, this is the first thing God wanted us to know about Him when He spoke *The Derakim*. The fact that God is "**compassionate and gracious**" like David, but even more so, is the great hope of all His image-bearers—Jew or Gentile, king or cripple. His insides are on fire for us, and because of this He is always willing to forgive, heal, save, and restore. We only have to put ourselves in a position to receive.

We won't experience the effects of God's deep affection if we are behaving like David's son Absalom, rebelling and hurling spears at God. But if we will only humble ourselves and

return home, He will gladly welcome us. Always. (This was the point of Jesus's most famous parable, The Prodigal Son [Luke 15:11-32].) In the next chapter, we will see that this is true even for Israel's archenemies, like Assyria. His heart burns with compassion for everyone.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.6 GETTING REAL WITH KING DAVID

There is one dark season in David's life that is hard to reconcile with the portrait of him we see elsewhere—"the man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14) and "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Samuel 23:1). After years of walking in intimacy with God, David seems to completely lose his mind. He goes on a shocking sin spree, and takes the married woman Bathsheba into his bed. Soon after this, he discovers that she is pregnant, and so he arranges to have her husband Uriah murdered (2 Samuel 11 & 12).

His adultery is shocking enough, but the way David deals with Bathsheba's husband stands as one of the most infamous acts of treachery in the Bible (perhaps second only to Judas). David actually knew her husband Uriah—he was a leader in the king's army, and you would be hard-pressed to find a more devoted, faithful follower.<sup>9</sup> But sin had so hardened David's heart that his only concern was saving face and trying to bury his humiliating moral failure. He plots, deceives, and schemes until Uriah is eliminated. Very specifically, David colludes with one of his field generals to pull back in battle and leave Uriah in a downpour of spears and arrows. Put plainly, David murders him.

Eventually, the prophet Nathan snaps David out of his sin-fueled stupor with a stinging rebuke, bringing him back to reality.<sup>10</sup> In an instant, David realizes the gravity of what he has done. There are several different words for sin in the Hebrew language, but the most severe is *peshah*—open defiance against God. There is no prescribed ritual or sacrifice for this sort of flagrant violation. David knows that he is guilty of *peshah*, and he knows that he has only one hope—to throw himself on the father-like heart of God.

David's cry for mercy is found in Psalm 51: "**Be gracious (*hanan*) to me O God, according to your lovingkindness (*hesed*), according to Your great compassion (*rahamim*), blot out my sin (*peshah*).**"<sup>11</sup> What David is doing here is running straight to the words that the LORD spoke to Moses in *The Derakim*: "**compassionate and gracious ... and great in lovingkindness.**" In this first verse alone, David alludes to three of the five attributes of *The Derakim*, and he puts special emphasis on the fact that God is compassionate—"according to Your great compassion blot out my sin." Although David was worthy of death, he knew that God loved him in the same way that he loved his own children (Psalm 103:13). David's hope was that the same forgiveness he would have gladly given Absalom, if only Absalom had returned, God will give to him. The broken, repentant David cries out,

**Create in me a clean heart, God, and make  
new a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast  
me from Your presence and do not take Your  
Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of**

**Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit. (Psalm 51:10-12)**

A thorough search of Scripture reveals that God always, always, always forgives the repentant sinner. Psalm 51:17 goes on to affirm this incredible truth: **“The broken and contrite, You will never refuse.”** Why is God so willing to forgive? Because like a father, He yearns for us, longs for us, aches for us—He is **"compassionate and gracious"** (*rehum* and *hanun*). His compassion is even greater than a human father's, greater than a human mother's.

Why does the Bible give the ugly details of such extreme cases—adultery, treachery, murder? Because there will be a time in most people's lives when they feel a lot like David. If God is compassionate toward a repentant adulterer, liar, and murderer like David, you and I can be sure that this is how He will respond to us, too. This truth about God certainly does not excuse our sin or make it any less heinous, it simply reveals the awesome reality that God's lovingkindness, fueled by His ferocious parent-like emotion, can always bring hope in our darkness.

#### **4.7 GOD'S COMPASSION—NEW TESTAMENT**

What do we find when we come to the New Testament? The biblical authors tell us the exact same thing about God, but with Greek words. God has a spontaneous, irrepressible reaction to human need, akin to a parent's response to their suffering child. It doesn't matter who they are—man or woman, Jew or Gentile, slave or free.

There is a very special Greek word, coined by the Gospel authors, to convey the Hebrew idea of being compassionate. They created the term by taking the Greek word *splanchna*, which literally means guts,<sup>12</sup> and transforming it into the verb *splanchnizomai*. In the Gospels, this Greek word functions very much like the Hebrew word *rehum* (and the related terms) in the Old Testament. It points to the emotional eruption in the heart, an eruption that moves God to action. We are not stretching the meaning if we were to translate it "moved in the guts," but we will render it "have compassion."

Why did they coin a term, instead of using one that already existed in Greek? Why did they pass up the options available in the popular Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint? They needed a unique word that would clearly be understood to be a "God word"—one that could only be used of God the Father, Jesus, or the perfection of this attribute in the teachings of Jesus. Options available from the Septuagint were not exclusively reserved for God.<sup>13</sup> They also likely chose this word because of its gritty and physiological connotation—"guts." In this regard it's a lot like the Hebrew terms related to *rehum*.

*Splanchnizomai* is an extremely special theological term. It's never used to describe the average man on the street. This word is key in several very important moments in the Gospels. To illustrate this, we can look to some of Jesus's most famous parables, like The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), The Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35), and The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). These stories all end with the God-like figure showing outrageous lovingkindness, but *splanchnizomai* is used to point to the profound inner emotion that inspires the act. It's worth noting

that in Jesus's stories, *splanchnizomai* often functions like the fulcrum upon which the story turns.

In the parable of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), Jesus is trying to convince His hearers how much God loves them, and that He has open arms to all who run home to Him. In this well-known story, a wealthy young man demands his inheritance early, and then takes it and wastes it on sinful, selfish pleasures. He squanders it on loose living and prostitutes. Eventually he is left with nothing, and finds himself alone, starving, and literally living in a pig sty. The symbolism here is hard to miss. Jesus is speaking to those who have wasted their God-given resources and opportunities, and find themselves living in condemnation and despair. In the story, the son is out of all options ... except one:

**And when he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have more than enough to eat, but I am here starving to death? I am going to get up and go to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I've sinned against heaven, and in your eyes; I am not worthy to be called your son any longer; let me be one of your hired men.'" (Luke 15:17-19)**

Now buckle up. Here comes that special word *splanchnizomai*, and the tsunami of lovingkindness that always follows right behind it.



But when he was still far away, his father saw him and he felt compassion (*splanchnizomai*), and he ran and hugged and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your eyes; I am not worthy to be called your son any longer." But the father said to his slaves, "Hurry up, bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and get the fat calf and butcher it, and let us feast and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." And they had a party. (Luke 15:20-24)

It should go without saying that in Jesus's teaching, His theology of the Father lines up exactly with a simple, literal interpretation of the words of *The Derakim*—"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness."

In another very similarly constructed parable—The Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35)—Jesus again points to *splanchnizomai* as the motivation for the outrageous lovingkindness of the God-figure in the tale. In this story, a man owes his master an impossible debt that he could never repay in several lifetimes—the equivalent of billions of dollars. In an attempt to recoup some of his losses, the master says he is going to sell the man, his wife, and his children. The debtor then falls on his face and begs for more time to pay the impossible debt. Then the word *splanchnizomai* appears, followed by that glorious tsunami of lovingkindness. In this

case, billions of dollars worth of debt are erased in an instant. **"The servant's master felt compassion (*splanchnizomai*) for him, canceled the debt, and let him go"** (Matthew 18:27).

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) also turns on the word *splanchnizomai*. This time, however, Jesus is telling His listeners that they are supposed to be functioning with the same *modus operandi* as their Heavenly Father. As the Old Testament prophets made clear, a life that is pleasing to God is one that reflects His name and nature. (In Hebrew, this person can be called a *hasid*. More on this in Chapter 6.) This well-known story tells of a Jew that is robbed, humiliated, and left dying on the road. **"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among robbers. They stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead."** In the story, two of his fellow Jews, religious professionals, passed right by him. Then a Samaritan, a mortal enemy, sees him and feels (buckle up, here it comes again) God-like compassion:

**When he (the Samaritan) saw him, he felt compassion (*splanchnizomai*), and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own donkey, and brought him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out an entire day's pay and gave it to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him, and if it costs you any more, when I return I will pay you back."** (Luke 10:33-35)

Now let's connect some of the dots with ideas discussed in previous chapters. The Good Samaritan's actions are summed up by that very special Greek word we discussed in the last chapter—*eleos*. Jesus asks His listeners, "Which of the three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man?" The answer is, "The one who showed *eleos* toward him." Of course, this word *eleos* points us back to the most important word of *The Derakim*—lovingkindness (*hesed*). This all bears testimony to a very consistent character portrait of God throughout the Bible, a portrait that is supposed to be reflected by His image-bearers. This is precisely what Jesus taught. It was also what Jesus, the perfect revelation of the Father, lived out.

#### 4.8 IN THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

The Gospel authors were very careful never to apply this word *splanchnizomai* to a mere human. It is "a God word," and so there is only one man worthy of it—Jesus. Knowing the meaning and theological significance of this special Greek word gives us much greater appreciation for what is being said. By using it to describe Jesus, we see that the heart beating inside Him is the very heart of the Father. Consider this in light of what the Bible says about Him: "His name shall be called Immanuel, which translated is 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23). Jesus is *The Derakim* in Person. In the flesh. Again and again we see divine compassion compelling Jesus to forgive, heal, deliver, and save.

**And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and felt compassion (*splanchnizomai*)**

for them, and He healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14)

Then Jesus called His disciples unto Him, and said, "I feel compassion (*splanchnizomai*) for the crowd, because they have continued with Me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and I will not send them away without eating, or they might faint on the way." (Matthew 15:32)

So Jesus felt compassion (*splanchnizomai*) for them, and touched their eyes; and immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him. (Matthew 20:34)

When Jesus saw the crowds, He felt compassion (*splanchnizomai*) for them, because they were ripped up and thrown down like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is abundant, but there are few workers. So cry out to the Lord of the harvest to send workers into His harvest." (Matthew 9:36-38)

Do you see how the character portrait of God remains the same throughout the entire Bible? In Jesus we see the divine

modus operandi with crystal clarity—His lovingkindness is fueled by a fiery affection greater than a mother's for her child, and it is available to all—men, women, Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free, saints, and sinners. The New Testament authors are telling us that Jesus perfectly fulfills the words that God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai.

#### 4.9 "WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?"

There is obviously a word related to God's heart that has a much bigger role in the New Testament than the words we have been focusing on. That word, of course, is "love." In Greek the noun is *agape* and the verb is *agapao*. "The greatest of these is love (*agape*)" (1 Corinthians 13:13). "For God so loved (*agapao*) the world that He gave His one and only Son" (John 3:16). "God proves His love (*agape*) in this way, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Arguably, no New Testament author drives the message of God's love harder than the apostle of *agape*, John (who wrote John, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation). He seems to emphasize love in just about every conceivable way he can—as a title, as a noun, as a verb ...

Loved ones (*agapetoî*), let us love (*agapao*) one another, for love (*agape*) is from God; and everyone who loves (*agapao*) is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love (*agapao*) does not know God, for God is love (*agape*). (1 John 4:7-8)

So how does this idea of love (*agape*) relate to all the words we have been talking about, especially the Greek words *splanchnizomai* and *eleos*? And by extension, how does *agape* in the New Testament relate to the divine m.o. described by *The Derakim* in Exodus 34:6?

Jesus makes this easy to grasp, cracking the idea of love open like a nut, and showing us what is inside. (Spoiler alert—it's the divine m.o.) Nowhere does Jesus do this more clearly than in the parable of The Good Samaritan, which we visited above. All we need to do is pay close attention to the most important words in the story. The parable comes on the heels of the following exchange:

**And a lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered, "You shall love (*agapao*) the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Then He said to him, "Your answer is right; do this and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-29)**

So the point of The Good Samaritan is to explain what love (*agape*) looks like. We could say that love is the nut that Jesus is about to crack open for us. He is going to explain what "Love God ... and love your neighbor" means (v. 27).

When we break this story down, according to Jesus love has two constituent elements: 1. Having compassion (*splanchnizomai*), and 2. lovingkindness (*eleos*). Jesus lays this all out in the parable, where the Samaritan is first moved with compassion (*splanchnizomai*) and then falls all over himself showing lovingkindness (*eleos*) to the suffering man. Once again, this is the divine m.o. in action. In Old Testament terms, what we are talking about is **"compassionate and gracious,"** and even more specifically **"great in lovingkindness"** (Exodus 34:6).

The apostle of *agape*, John, confirms this basic idea in other ways, too—that love (*agape*) is all about being deeply moved with emotion and then acting in outrageously kind ways. The Gospel of John, for instance, focuses on seven miracles that Jesus performs, with the seventh—raising Lazarus from the dead—being the climax. He goes into great detail to show us what motivated Jesus to perform this miracle.

**When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was stirred inside, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. Then the Jews were saying, "Behold how He loved him!"** (John 11:33-36)

The Gospel of John may be using different words, but he is saying the exact same thing as Matthew, Mark, and Luke. God is profoundly moved for us, and because of this He is yearning to help. Whether it is Matthew, Mark, and Luke

using the combination of Greek words *splanchnizomai* and *eleos*, or John telling us that, "God so loved the world" (John 3:16), the message is the same. God is "compassionate and gracious ... and great in lovingkindness" (Exodus 34:6).

#### 4.10 "WHAT'S HISTORICAL THEOLOGY GOT TO DO WITH IT?"

Tragically, throughout Christian history the most influential theological thinkers have downplayed the idea of God having human-like compassion, or being moved by our pain. Previous chapters discussed the reason for this, i.e., the obsession among theologians to see what the Bible says cannot be seen—God's infinite nature. The traditional view is that emotional terms like *rehum* (compassionate) are helpful, poetic ways of speaking about God (anthropomorphisms), but are not literally true of Him. A classic statement on impassibility is found in the work of one of the most important theologians in history, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109).

Truly, You (*God*) are this way (*compassionate*) in terms of our experience, but You are not this way in terms of Your own. ... You are not affected by sympathy for (*our*) misery. ... When You see us in our misery, we experience the effect of compassion, but You do not experience the feeling.<sup>14</sup>



If God does not want us to think that He has emotions very much like ours, why would the biblical authors waste so much ink making this point? Why would they take such pains to connect the divine *modus operandi* to the man Jesus? And what would be the meaning of all the statements by Jesus and His apostles to the effect that He is the definitive revelation of the Father? "**He who has seen Me has seen the Father**" (John 14:9).

Let me shoot straight here. Theological speculation about God's infinite nature is what has almost completely destroyed the biblical testimony about who God told us He is, both in *The Derakim* and in Jesus Christ. It has destroyed the obvious connection we are all supposed to see between the Father and the Son. It guts *The Derakim* of virtually all of its meaning. Even worse, it makes nonsense of the idea of the glory of God revealed "**in the face of Christ**" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

In recent years, many theologians have admitted that an emotionless (impassible) God is problematic, so there have been countless attempts to modify traditional theology to make room for real emotions in there somewhere.<sup>15</sup> The problem, however, is that you can't really tweak the traditional understanding of God (Classical Theism) without undoing it altogether. The whole model is a tight logical system, and when you start to pull on one of the threads the whole thing begins to come unravelled. In addition, all such efforts to modify traditional theology inevitably cause more problems than they solve. Are we, for instance, supposed to believe that God causes everything, like the death of a child, but be comforted by the fact that He has deep emotion for us when it happens? The logic is mind-numbing, insani-

ty-inducing. This seems an even worse option than thinking of God as One "who surveys with uninterrupted bliss what transpires in this vale of tears which is our world."<sup>16</sup>

Moses was given a revelation of God's ways (*derakim*), a personality profile. There was no fine print given, or a complex addendum warning Moses not to take the words at face value. So when Moses heard that God was *rehum* (compassionate), there was perhaps no word that could have brought more comfort and peace to his heart. The idea of the awesome Creator of the universe yearning for us like a mother—to forgive, provide, protect, and bless—would have astonished him, just as it astonishes us. Perhaps it brought to Moses's mind his own mother, who defied the Pharaoh's edict and risked her life to save him. This is exactly, precisely what our human hearts are longing to know about God.

God wants us to know that He feels deeply for us, and truly responds to the cries of His children. He also hates suffering, oppression, and disease. He is standing by, waiting to hear our earnest prayers, yearning to intervene. This is the God my friend Eric came to know before the nightmare began with his son. There is obviously a lot more to God—His infinite mode (or ontology)—but He has not invited us to speculate about that. To truly have a relationship with Him, we simply need to come humbly and walk with the One who loves us so deeply. He would do absolutely anything for us, even lay down His life. This is the God of *The Derakim*, the God who is **"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness."**

I would again suggest that the best way forward is to humble ourselves and stop trying to make sense of infinite God.

"No one can look on Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). Instead, we should embrace the fact that an incomprehensible God clothes Himself in a form that we can see, understand, and engage, the Person revealed in Jesus Christ. There is more ... much, much more to God, but attempting to look into it is akin to staring into the blazing Sun. You may destroy your ability to see Him at all. There comes a point where we need to heed the words of Charles Wesley's hymn, "'Tis mystery all ... Let angel minds inquire no more."<sup>17</sup>

*The Derakim* and the Person of Jesus Christ is the vision of God we should be obsessing over on this side of heaven. This is what God has given us to make it through the storms of this life.

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1. Psalm 145 is another song that focuses on *The Derakim*. It focuses on telling the coming generations about how great Yahweh is. **"Men will tell of the power of Your awesome acts, and I will proclaim Your great deeds ... The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness."** (Psalm 145:6-8)

2. Many words have meanings that are not related to the root from which they are derived, and to press a root meaning in such cases is an error. When this occurs, it is called "the root fallacy." James Barr's monumental work points out this and many other such errors in biblical interpretation. See, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). However, there are many words, like the ones being highlighted here, that clearly have a meaning directly related to the root from which they come.
  
3. Lundbom and Freedman, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977-80), p. 25. It should be noted that this profound Hebrew concept is not restricted to only mothers. It can be used of friends, siblings, really any sort of interpersonal relationship. A good English equivalent for *rehum* (and related terms) is "moved in the guts." In the book of Genesis, for instance, Joseph's heart has this sort of eruption when he sees his younger brother for the first time in years. **"And as he raised his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son ... Joseph rushed out, because his compassions (*rehamim*) were enflamed over his brother, and he looked for a place to weep; so he went into his room and wept there."** (Genesis 43:29-30)
  
4. A possible exception to this is Psalm 112:4. These terms used of God can be seen in 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:31; Psalm 86:15; 111:4, etc.

5. Why doesn't the Bible use the word *hasid* here, the adjective that is directly related to the noun *hesed*? Why doesn't *The Derakim* begin, *rehum ve hasid*? Because the adjective *hasid* takes on a completely different (incredibly important) role in the Bible. It is usually used as a title and refers to a person who reflects God's *hesed*. See Chapter 6.
6. In the historical books of the Old Testament, the noun *hen* is, for the most part, reserved for one little figure of speech—"to find grace [*hen*] in another's eyes." Moses uses this just prior to receiving *The Derakim*—"If I have found grace (*hen*) in Your eyes, let me know Your ways ..." (Exodus 33:13). This collocation is found often in the Torah, e.g., Genesis 6:8; 18:3; 19:19; 30:27; 32:5; 33:8; 33:10; 33:15; 34:11; 39:4; 39:21; 47:25; 47:29; 50:4; Exodus 3:21; 11:3; 12:36; 33:12; et al.
7. The following passage speaks of God's emotion just prior to a season of judgment, but does not use *rahamim*. Why? God grieves, but He is not going to intervene: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I surrender you, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned over within Me. All My affections (*nihuma*) are on fire." (Hosea 11:8)
8. In the book of Jonah, the prophet is angry that God has compassion and does not judge the Ninevites (Assyrians). Jonah quotes *The Derakim* in his complaint (4:2), and the account ends with this statement—"Should I not have pity on 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left?" (4:11)

9. The biblical account portrays Uriah as a man of impeccable character, as well as an outstanding military man. He makes the short list of David's mighty men—his most devoted and outstanding warriors (2 Samuel 23:8–39; 1 Chronicles 11:10–47).
10. "Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon" (2 Samuel 12:9).
11. Note the modifier "great" (*rab*), which in Exodus 34:6 is attached to *hesed*.
12. For the literal use of this word as "guts" see Acts 1:18, which describes how Judas committed suicide and his guts (*splanchna*) spilled out.
13. In the Septuagint, the Hebrew word *rahum* in Exodus 34:6 is translated into the Greek as *oiktirmon*. Words related to this term are commonly used in the New Testament to convey "compassion" of both God and people.
14. Anselm, *Proslogium*, chapter 8.
15. For a review of this debate in recent theology, see Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2000).

16. This is a quotation from Nicholas Wolterstorff, who actually ended up rejecting Classical Theism after a personal tragedy—his son died. In light of this event, he said he found Classical Theism “repulsive.” See, “Does God Suffer: Interview with Nicholas Wolterstorff,” in *Modern Reformation* Sept/Oct 1999, 45.
  
17. From the second verse of the hymn, "And Can It Be," by Charles Wesley (1707-1788):  
'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!  
Who can explore His strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love Divine!  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.