

# 10

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## KEY TEN: GOD'S KINDNESS

*How can I know God more intimately?*

*(Henry Moorhouse) ... went through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation to prove that in all ages God loved the world. ... Mr. Moorhouse taught Moody to draw his sword full length, to fling the scabbard away, and enter the battle with the naked blade.<sup>1</sup>*

*Without putting it into such words as to shock themselves or others, many Christians ... look upon God as one of the most selfish, self-absorbed Beings in the universe, far more selfish than they could think it right to be themselves. —Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911)<sup>2</sup>*

### THE MAYHEM IN MY MIND

In this chapter, the testimony is mine. My spiritual/emotional/physical crash happened the summer after my freshman year of college, as I drove home from Honey Rock

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<sup>1</sup> William R. Moody, *The Life of D.L. Moody* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1900), 139-40.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Unselfishness of God, and How I Discovered It* (London: James Nisbet & Co., Limited, 1903), 9.

Camp in Three Lakes Wisconsin (Wheaton College's Northwoods campus). I was there to disciple others, but the truth is that my mind was in total chaos. There were actually days when I feared I might slip over the edge into insanity.

Then came the excruciating headache—it felt as if one of the mauls I had been using all summer to split wood was firmly embedded in the top of my head. As the pain continued, I grew feverish, weak, and lethargic. In a matter of days, my 200-plus pound frame began to wither. I dropped twenty pounds in two weeks. Doctors put me through a battery of tests and tried to figure out what was wrong. *Was it Lyme disease, hepatitis, cancer, AIDS?* No one had any definitive answers. Concerned friends and family told me that I would have to drop out of Bible college.

Looking back on everything now, the only answer that makes any sense is this—my understanding of God was all twisted up, and because of this I was all twisted up. In my mind, God the Father was a difficult, demanding taskmaster, an overbearing despot who seemed impossible to please. I was tormented with depression, fear, legalism, and doubt. Medicine and psychology had no answers for me, but on the day I began to let go of what I thought I knew about God, real healing began. (I later learned that a similar sort of mental duress is frequently found in Christian biography down through the ages—Luther, Whitefield, Chambers.)

The crazy thing was that at the time my health crashed, I believed that I had a pretty accurate understanding of God. I was, after all, working on a degree in theology. I knew the gospel, I had surrendered my life to God, I spent regular time in Bible study and prayer, and I had even led people to Christ. But if you asked me today, I would be the first to tell you that I didn't know much about God's kindness. That was the source of my chaos.

It took me a while, but once I identified the problem, I invited God to totally rework my beliefs about Him. Very specifically, I asked Him to *destroy and rebuild my theology, if necessary*. There had to be something wrong in my mind. To make a long story short, He answered my prayer. As I began to see God in a new light, my doubts, fears, and depression all cleared up like a bad rash.

Humbling myself in this way is one of the greatest things I have ever done. As I began to get my vision of God straightened out, my entire spiritual outlook went through a glorious transformation. Prayer made sense, God's will made sense, and serving God became downright fun.

## **MISERABLE SAINTS**

*We have not ceased to pray ... that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will conduct yourselves in a way that is worthy of the Lord, to please Him in everything you do, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9-10)*

Even after people are truly saved they often live in torment, and they have no idea that their bad theology is the source of it. The sad reality is that millions of born-again believers out there are holding on to some twisted-up vision of God, and it is twisting *them* all up. As a pastor, I have found this problem to be pandemic, and it lies at the root of the anxiety, depression, and neuroses of so many of God's children. We inherit our distorted vision of God from our parents, our pastors, or our church, and we never question it. Like me, many seeking souls go to Bible college or seminary to find God, and only end up more conflicted and confounded.

Our Heavenly Father wants us to enjoy our relationship with Him. The great objective of our human existence is to really know Him. *This is eternal life, that they might know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:3).* One of the kindest things God can do for us is to allow us to be shaken to the core (like I was) so that we trash our twisted-up vision and really get to know Him. Until we get this straight, our entire worldview will be off-center, and we won't be able to experience the peace, joy, and fruitfulness God has for us.

### **SPIRITUAL DIAGNOSTIC: ARE YOU HEAVY LADEN?**

*Nothing twists and deforms the soul more than a low or unworthy conception of God. —A.W. Tozer (1897-1963)<sup>3</sup>*

A smart car owner regularly brings their car to a mechanic for a diagnostic check to make sure everything is functioning properly. The mechanic checks the fluids, engine, transmission, electrical, etc., and tells them what sort of shape their car is in. A person who would like to live a long, happy, healthy life takes regular trips to the doctor's office for a similar reason—for the personal diagnostic check known as a “physical.” The doctor pokes and prods and asks questions to determine the state of their health. If the doctor detects a problem—high blood pressure, excess weight, high cholesterol, etc.—he can give them a course of action to take.

What about our spiritual health? Is there any sort of diagnostic test for that? According to the Bible, our spiritual health is determined by one factor—*how well we know God*. The

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<sup>3</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1955), 17.

bottom line is this—if your belief about God (your theology) is true and pure, you are a happy, healthy overcomer. If your theology is off-center, you experience anxiety, frustration, depression, or worse.

Over the years, I have found many spiritual diagnostic verses, and some of them come right out and say something like this, *If you really know God, then your life will be characterized by \_\_\_\_\_*. To assess our spiritual condition, all we really need to do is look at such passages and ask, *Does this describe me?* Answering no to any or all of them indicates we have a problem. Some people may not like what the mechanic or the doctor has to say, but the facts are the facts.

**1. Is there an overall “lightness” and “easiness” in my life?**

Jesus said a true knowledge of God the Father would have this effect on a person. If your life (and your religion) is difficult and burdensome, this indicates that you are off-center. You don't know God very well.

*No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me ... and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light. (Matt. 11:28-30)*

**2. Is my life free of all anxiety and fear?** The Bible says that at the very core, God is love. If we really understand His love, our lives will be free of all fear. A lot of people believe that they are strong in their faith, yet they regularly wrestle with anxiety. The fact is that anxiety is just a sub-category of fear, and the Bible clearly says that those who know God's love are free of *all fear*.

*God is love ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out all fear because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. (1 John 4:8, 18)*

**3. Do I have the courage to do new and daring things for God?**

If you regularly freeze in fear and have a hard time making courageous decisions (like giving sacrificially, taking risks to advance God's kingdom, sharing the gospel), this indicates that your theology is off-center.

*Those who know their God will be bold and take action.  
(Daniel 11:32)*

**4. Do I hate the things the Bible clearly declares to be sin—sexual immorality, dishonesty, unforgiveness, materialism?**

More than once, the Bible states that there are people who claim to know God, but their tolerance of such sinful behaviors proves that they really don't. If you are o.k. with ongoing sin in your own life, and do not grieve for the sin in the lives of others, this indicates that your theology is off-center.

*They claim to know Him, but by their deeds deny Him.  
(Titus 1:16)*

**5. Do I have an inner yearning to obey God in all things?**

This is sort of the flip side of the previous point. Those who really know God see His goodness behind all He commands, so what He asks is not burdensome. If you have any sort of resentment towards the clear, righteous requirements of God (*forgiving others, handling money rightly, walking in sexual purity*), this indicates that you are off-center in your theology.

*The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (1 John. 2:4)*

**6. Do I like spending time with others who are committed to serving God?** As a general rule, if you are not active in a local Christian fellowship, this indicates that you do not know God very well. The Bible says that if we love God, we love His people (imperfect as they may be).

*Whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.  
(1 John. 5:1)*

**7. Do I regularly give my time, talent, and resources to others, especially those in need (like widows and orphans)?** The Bible says that a habit of helping the needy indicates that a person “knows God.” If you do not regularly engage in deeds of compassion, this indicates that you are off-center. You do not know God very well.

*He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy ... Is that not what it means to know Me? (Jeremiah 22:16)*

**8. Do I go through seasons of trial (like sickness, rejection, job loss) with joy and peace?** The Scripture says repeatedly that mature believers, those who really understand God and His love, can rejoice in the trials of this life. When they hit a rough patch, their souls are at rest. If you have a hard time doing this, you are off-center in your theology.

*Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... In all these things, we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.  
(Romans 8:35-37)*

**9. Do I expect God to move in response to my prayers?** If you don't expect God to pay attention to your prayers and answer you in very specific ways, you just don't know Him very well.

The book of *1 John* was written so that we could be confident that we really know Him, and toward the end of the book it says this:

*This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.*  
(1 John 5:14-15)

So how did you do? If you didn't do so hot, don't be discouraged. Even people who are seriously devoted to God (like I was back in Bible college) often come to realize that they don't know God very well. In fact, several major figures in the Bible were deeply committed to God for quite a while before they *really* saw Him clearly. Isaiah was a prophet in Israel for years before a vision in the temple completely remade him (*Isaiah 6:1-8*). Another example of this is the patriarch Job. Before his big revelation, God described Job in this way—*blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil* (*Job 1:1*). However, Job eventually admits that a lot of his theology was just secondhand information he had picked up from others. He says something everyone should meditate on:

*I have spoken about things that I did not know, things too wonderful for me, which I did not understand ... I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore, I retract and repent in dust and ashes.* (*Job 42:3-6*)

In a moment, we will look at that great lawgiver and prophet Moses. He was also confronted by the reality that he needed to know God in a much deeper way. This led to the desperate cry, *Let me know Your way that I may know You* (*Exodus 33:13*). In answer to Moses's prayer, God spoke some of the most



important words ever vouchsafed to humanity. Moses received a revelation of God's kindness that became the theological reference point for all the biblical authors (see *Exodus 34:6*). Tragically, most people, including millions of sincere Christians, are missing the message God spoke to Moses (and later confirmed in Jesus). Why? Because Satan's number one objective is to keep us from seeing God clearly. This was his strategy in the Garden of Eden, and it continues today.

*The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4)*

## **SATANIC SABOTAGE**

Ever since the Garden of Eden, Satan has had one primary way to control the human race—to *skew and confuse our conception of God*. Satan does not bother trying to get most of us to deny God outright and become atheists; this would be too difficult a task. We are hardwired to be religious. It's in our original operating system to believe in a Creator and Judge (*Romans 1:19*). Since embracing the idea that "there is nothing out there" is almost impossible for us, what Satan does is defame God's character so that the image in our minds does not line up with who God really is. And since our belief about God is absolutely central to our worldview, when Satan succeeds in sabotaging that, 10,000 other beliefs are corrupted as well.

Attacking the center (God's character) is exactly what Satan is doing with Eve in *Genesis 3*. He succeeds in convincing Eve that God is untrustworthy and unnecessarily difficult. This is how the serpent gets Eve to unplug from God and follow his (Satan's) suggestions—and this is how he continues to control billions of people today. Whether you know it or not, this is one

of the primary ways he torments us even after we become Christians. He gets us to believe that God is unfair, harsh, demanding, unpredictable, etc. We assume we are okay because we believe in God, but there is no joy. We may grudgingly serve Him, but we are frustrated, fearful, or worse.

Most people have never even entertained the thought that what they believe about God may be corrupted and sabotaged by Satan, but if you are a human being on planet Earth, your theology has been targeted. So how do we get free? It's simple. Take the risk that I did and invite God to destroy your theology and rebuild it if necessary. God wants us all to have the correct center, and once we do see it, it's as clear as the sun up in the sky.

## **SEEING THE OBVIOUS**

*That you, being rooted and grounded in love, will be able to grasp with all the saints the breadth, and length, and height, and depth, and know Christ's love which is beyond knowledge, so that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19)*

Do you remember the name Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) from your high school science class? We could give him another name—*Sees the Obvious*. He was the astronomer who figured out that the Earth is *not* the center of the universe. The theory of an Earth-centered (geocentric) universe came from the ancient Greeks, and virtually every intelligent person in the world used to believe it. As you might imagine, this idea left serious stargazers scratching their heads as they tried to figure out why the heavenly bodies moved as they did. From this completely wrongheaded perspective, the planets weren't traveling in smooth, predictable orbits (as we now know they

do). Their movements seemed catawampus—forward then backward, up then down.

In an attempt to explain this cosmological chaos, some really smart guys came up with complex explanations for the movements of the heavenly bodies. The view that won the day was the theory that they traveled in several orbits at the same time, spinning this way and that way simultaneously. With enough tinkering, these “experts” made it all work, and they could “explain” everything. Obviously, what they really needed to do was face the fact that their center of reference was completely off—the Earth isn’t the center of anything. Because their center was off, all their complex explanations were complete nonsense.

After a long, hard look at the data, our hero Copernicus suggested something radical. He proposed that the planets were not revolving around the Earth at all. Rather, all the planets of our solar system, including Earth, revolved around the Sun. He argued that if people would just shift their center of reference, and make a few other minor adjustments, the mechanics of our solar system would make a lot more sense.

Unfortunately, people’s opinions don’t yield easily, and poor Copernicus’s book titled *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) never really caught on during his lifetime. Years later, his theory was revived by some other guys you may remember from science class—Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton. Once the dust cleared and all the facts were in, people had to admit that Copernicus’s Sun-centered (heliocentric) view made the best sense of things. And the rest, as they say, is history.

I bring up this story about Copernicus, aka Sees the Obvious, because in Scripture there is one description of God that clearly functions as the center, and millions of people (theologians,

pastors, and Bible scholars included) continue to miss it. I never cease to be amazed at how many good-hearted, truly Christian people continue to overlook something so obvious ... just like the sun blazing up in the sky. But for anyone who starts to get it, this will clear up 10,000 other questions they have about God and His ways.

### **THE BIBLICAL BULLSEYE: *EXODUS 34:6***

Moses, the great deliverer, lawgiver, and prophet (who wrote the first five books of our Bible), came to realize that he had a lot to learn about God, even after he had walked with God for some time. *After* he met God at the burning bush, *after* he delivered Israel from Egypt, *after* seeing the Red Sea part, and *after* receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, he came to see that he still didn't know God all that well. Surprisingly late in the narrative, we find him crying out to God,

*If I have found favor in Your eyes, let me know Your way,  
so that I may know You. (Exodus 33:13)*

What follows is one of the most important moments in the Bible. God sets it up by making it abundantly clear to Moses that He is about to do something special. He says that what is coming is a revelation of His *way* (*Exodus 33:13*), His *glory* (*33:18*), and His *name* (*33:19*). These three concepts found in *Exodus 33*—*way*, *glory*, and *name*—are just brimming with theological significance. In the ancient near east, a *name* represented the very essence of a person. *Glory* pointed to the quality of something that makes it weighty or awesome. A person's *way* basically describes their *modus operandi*—we could say *what makes them tick*. God was saying in no uncertain terms, *I AM GOING TO SHOW YOU WHO I REALLY AM!* The long and the short of it all is that God's answer, found in *Exodus 34:6*, is

the definitive divine personality profile in the Bible (the biblical authors after Moses affirm this).

For anyone who wants to get a clear picture of exactly who God is, there is simply no more important verse in the Old Testament. In just a handful of words, God gives us the bullseye, the dead-center of a pure and true theology. We could rightly call it the Copernican center. These are *God's own words from God's own mouth*, telling Moses and us what He is like.

The sovereign Creator of the universe stoops down, and with only a handful of Hebrew words, He tells Moses (*and anyone else with ears to hear*) the great mystery of our human existence. At first reading, the words seem unremarkable, almost cliché. But they are not cliché. (Note: If they don't knock you to the ground like they did Moses, you have missed the point.) From this point on, everyone in the Bible who really knows God sees these words as their theological reference point, their center—the secret that makes sense of everything else.

*Then the LORD passed by in front of him and said, "The LORD, the LORD, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in kindness and faithfulness."*

The more I have studied *Exodus 34:6*, the more convinced I have become of the following—*anyone who misses the message of this verse is largely driving blind through the pages of the Bible*. It is the personality profile of the Main Character. This is why biblical authors from Moses onward refer to it so frequently (see *Numbers 14:17-18; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nehemiah 9:17*; et al.).

## **HIDDEN FROM THE WISE AND INTELLIGENT**

One thing is beyond dispute. According to the biblical authors, *Exodus 34:6* has massive theological significance. John

Calvin is exactly right when he says that these words are *as clear and satisfactory a description of the nature of God ... as can anywhere be found*.<sup>4</sup> More recent scholars have concluded the same thing. Theologian Walter Brueggemann states, *This is an astonishing disclosure of God, which tells Moses (and us) as much about the God of the Bible as any verse can*.<sup>5</sup> Judaic scholar Abraham Heschel calls them *the words which are of fundamental importance for the understanding of all biblical words*.<sup>6</sup>

Yet there is something inexplicable that has gone on in history, and in particular Christian history. To put it bluntly, it's as if "the wise and intelligent" (scholars and theologians) just don't know what to do with *Exodus 34:6*. As J. Laney notes, *Strangely, this great passage has received little attention from systematic theologians*.<sup>7</sup> The fact is that there has been virtually no serious scholarship devoted to explaining the meaning of it.<sup>8</sup> Yes, you heard that right—the most important theological verse in the Old Testament ... no serious studies devoted to it!

It appears that Jesus's words are really true. Somehow, down through the ages, the God of *Exodus 34:6* has remained *hidden*

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin Translation Society, *Psalms* (vol. 4), 6, 275.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1:947.

<sup>6</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 374.

<sup>7</sup> Laney, "God's Self-Revelation," 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> The very limited number of studies on the formula include: Robert Denton, "Literary Affinities of Exodus 34:6f," *VT* 13, no. 1 (1963): 34-51. J. Carl Laney, "God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8," *BSac* 158 (2001):36-51. Graham Cole, "Exodus 34, the Middoth and the Doctrine of God: The Importance of Biblical Theology to Evangelical Systematic Theology," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 3 (2008): 24-36.

*from the wise and intelligent (Matthew 11:25-30)*. In Christian theology, it has remained totally out of the discussion. A detailed exposé on the reason for all this is beyond the scope of this study (the subject for another time and another book). But the long and the short of it is this—a straight-forward reading of *Exodus 34:6* just does not line up with what most theologians believe about God. Trying to lay it out as an actual description of God is a bit like poor Copernicus trying to explain his new vision of the cosmos. It runs head-on into centuries of religious thinking.

The simple fact is this—there is nothing in the Bible like *Exodus 34:6*, a string of divine attributes spoken straight from the mouth of God. It is key to knowing God, and it is key to recognizing Jesus Christ as “God in the flesh.” The rest of this chapter will be devoted to unpacking its meaning. But before going there, let’s quickly note what God does *not* emphasize in this great divine personality profile. All those things we *wise and intelligent* humans like to bring to the discussion.

*All systems that deal with the infinite are ... exposed to danger from small, unsuspected admixtures of human error, which become deadly when carried to such vast results. The smallest speck of earth’s dust, in the focus of an infinite lens, appears magnified among the heavenly orbs as a frightful monster. —Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896)*<sup>9</sup>

In *Exodus 34:6*, God does not say much about wrath or judgment, except that He does not like to punish (*slow to anger*). He also says absolutely nothing about His power—not that He lacks power, but this is no big secret. God’s power is obvious to anyone who will take an honest look at the universe (*Romans*

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<sup>9</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister’s Wooing* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 339-40.

1:19-20). God also says nothing about control, a favorite subject of many theologians (as if the most important thing anyone could ever know about God is that He does whatever He wants ... *so just stop complaining and worship Him*). Also missing from *Exodus 34:6* are all the things we find in our theological textbooks—abstruse philosophical discussions requiring an IQ of 140 or above.

What God gives us in *Exodus 34:6* is a string of simple words that bring peace, rest, and relief to the human soul. It's everything we *NEED* to hear from Him. It's a vision of God that is, quite literally, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. No 25-cent terms. The words are so simple, in fact, that any small child (or ancient near eastern shepherd) can grasp their meaning. Again, it is a befuddling fact that scholars from all quarters have acknowledged the importance of these words, but it's as if no one will grasp the nettle and explain their simple meaning. Why? Because for the most part, the theological experts are committed to a vision of God that is incompatible with a simple reading of these words that came straight from the mouth of God.

Suffice it to say that anyone who really hungers to know God would be wise to lay down pre-existing, overly philosophical, overly complex ideas about God and examine *Exodus 34:6* like a jeweler examines a priceless gem. Prayerfully turn it this way and that, and marvel at how the words are used throughout the rest of Scripture, and then consider how they are ultimately explained by the life of Jesus Christ, *The Word made flesh*.

## **LET'S GET TO IT!**

The primary emphasis of *Exodus 34:6* is on the forth attribute mentioned—God's *HESED* (חֶסֶד). The closest equivalent we have for *HESED* in the English language is the word *kindness*. But when talking about God's *HESED*, the



English word *kindness* arguably falls short—it's just not awesome enough. Some English Bibles have attempted to remedy this by using the word *lovingkindness*. Whatever English word we use, we need to understand that God's *HESED* is something stunning and glorious, beyond all human speech—*as high as the heavens are above the earth (Psalm 103:11), and better than life (Psalm 63:3)*.

This wonderful thing—God's *HESED*—is what distinguishes the One and True living God from the thousands of unworthy conceptions of Him littering our universe. We could say the whole of *Exodus 34:6* is God's attempt to make sure that we are all straight on just what His *HESED* is all about. The other attributes—*compassionate, gracious, etc.*—are there to illumine *HESED* and cast light on its brilliance, sort of like smaller gems surrounding a center stone. By the specific words He chose, God defines it and tells us how it works.

Here are the cold, hard facts—there are a lot of people who say a lot of things about God, but according to the biblical authors, if they don't know God's *HESED*, they don't know diddly.<sup>10</sup> Again and again the Bible tells us that knowing God's *HESED* is the key to really knowing HIM, and missing it is missing HIM.

*The LORD has a case against those who dwell in the land,  
Because there is no faithfulness and no HESED  
Or knowledge of God in the land. (Hosea 4:1)*

*Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his  
wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let*

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<sup>10</sup> Just a warning here. A lot of technical, scholarly studies on the word *HESED* get the meaning wrong. If you really want to understand it, don't try to take a shortcut. Go find all the biblical passages where it appears. The study will be arduous, but well worth it.

*not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises HESED....” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)*

Just how important is it to the biblical authors? The way it is emphasized gives us a clue. God’s *HESED* satisfies the faithful in the morning (*Psalms 90:14*), and follows them all the days of their life (*Psalms 23:6*). It was one of ancient Israel’s favorite things to sing about.

*I will sing of the HESED of the LORD forever; To all generations, I will make known Your faithfulness with my mouth. For I have said, "HESED will be built up forever; In the heavens, You will establish Your faithfulness." (Psalms 89:1-2)*

The authors of Scripture just couldn’t say enough about *HESED*. It is the wellspring of every good thing in life—abundance, deliverance, wisdom, provision, protection, forgiveness. *Psalms 136* repeats the following refrain 26 times in 26 verses:

*Give thanks to the LORD for He is good, for His HESED endures forever ... Give thanks to the LORD for He is good, for His HESED endures forever ... Give thanks to the LORD for He is good, for His HESED endures forever.*

The message is clear. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, there is nothing like God’s *HESED*. To understand it is to understand just how good God really is.<sup>11</sup> This is why He Himself explains it in such vivid detail to Moses in *Exodus 34:6*.

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<sup>11</sup> This is precisely what Jesus is saying in Matthew 9:13 (and 12:7), when He tells His opposition to study the meaning of Hosea 6:6. The Hebrew word being emphasized in Hosea 6:6 is *HESED*.

## THE OTHER *EXODUS 34:6* ATTRIBUTES

So what does God tell us about His *HESED*? God first wanted to let us know that His *HESED* is fueled by an inner emotion more powerful, true, and pure than the affection a mother has for her baby—it is *compassionate (rehum)*. Start to really grasp this first attribute in *Exodus 34:6*, and you will be on your face.

This is one of the more amazing terms in biblical Hebrew. It quite literally comes from the word meaning “a mother’s womb” (*rehem*). The most primitive meaning of this concept of *compassion* points to the affections that a mother has for the child of her womb. But throughout Scripture, God makes it clear that His compassion is something even deeper, stronger, and better than a human mother’s. The prophet Isaiah tells us that a mother’s compassions can fail, but not so with God’s (*Isaiah 49:15*).

This powerful divine emotion isn’t reserved just for God’s people Israel, either. It’s how the LORD feels about everyone on earth. *The Lord is good to everyone, and His compassions are over everything He has made (Psalm 145:9)*. In an absolutely amazing moment in the Old Testament, one of God’s prophets (Jonah) goes AWOL and refuses to complete his mission. Why? Because he knows that God’s compassion is so vast that He wants to bless everyone ... including Israel’s archenemy, the wicked, warmongering Ninevites. Jonah didn’t want them to have a chance to repent and experience the kindness of God (note how Jonah quotes *Exodus 34:6* here).

*But this displeased Jonah greatly, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please, LORD, wasn't this what I said while I was still in my own country? So in order to keep this from happening, I ran to Tarshish because I knew that You are a gracious and*

*compassionate God, slow to anger and great in HESED, and one who turns away from disaster. So now, LORD, please just take my life, for death is better to me than life."*  
(Jonah 4:1-3)

God's self-description in *Exodus 34:6* begins with this fact—He loves us all more than a mother loves her nursing baby. He has tender affections for absolutely everyone on earth, even the folks we think are most worthy of death and hell, like the Ninevites. Just stop and ruminate on this idea for a while, especially if you have kids. God's heart for you is more tender and devoted than yours for your children. If this is true, what wouldn't God do for you? Anyone who begins to grasp this first attribute is well on their way to inner peace.

Again and again, the Bible unashamedly tells us that God's heart is on fire with loving affection for us. Even when human stubbornness leads to judgment, what is God doing? The best evidence is that He is weeping (see *Hosea 11:8*). He aches to do good for us ... all of us. As we said already, if this is not how we think (and talk) about God, one of the following must be going on—either He is lying, or we are. (Could that old serpent be back in the mix. *Did God really say ... [Genesis 3:1]*)?

Tragically, in the history of Christian thought (as well as Judaism and Islam), it has been widely taught that God does not actually experience *compassion* at all—at least not as we understand compassion. God just sort of scripts everything out and then lets the script play. *Compassion* from this perspective is just a figure of speech, a helpful, quasi-poetic way for people to talk about God (the 25-cent word theologians like to use is “anthropomorphism”). But if this is the case, why didn't God ever tell us this in His Word? Why didn't He add a little caveat to *Exodus 34:6* and tell Moses that He was just being poetic? Once again, was God lying?

In *Exodus 34:6*, God then goes on to tell Moses that because of this profound *compassion* for people, He loves to break in and meet their need. His *HESED* is not just *compassionate*, it is *gracious (hanun)*. When God sees us suffering, He wants to help. God is not sitting up in heaven coldly, with His arms folded, waiting for you to perform for Him like a show pony. He is not an angry, red-faced drill sergeant constantly berating you for your failures. The fact is that He is deeply moved by your pain and longs to break in right now and help you ... today. *The LORD longs to be gracious to you (Isaiah 30:18)*.

Regardless of what you or I think about Him, the fact is that God loves to save, heal, forgive, comfort, guide, and provide. So many of us are just flat deceived, but James says, *Don't be deceived ... God is the source of every good gift (James 1:16-18)*. The problem, you see, is not with God. It is with us. We have embraced some perverted vision of Him, so we don't expect (have faith) for all the good He wants to do for us. What more could God say or do? God sent His Son to die for us in the ultimate expression of His *great kindness*. And like Paul says, *If He didn't spare His own Son, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Romans 8:32)*. But we are not done yet. *Exodus 34:6* just keeps getting better.

After the LORD tells Moses that He is *compassionate and gracious*, He then tells him that He takes absolutely no delight in punishing anyone. God's *HESED* is *slow to anger (erek apayim)*. He waits and hopes and longs for the wayward sinner's return. Many of us have this all backward and upside down. We think He is up there with a hammer or a baseball bat, just itching to let us have it. How deceived we are. Everyone who really knows God knows that He always prefers to give second, third, fourth ... and ten-thousandth chances. Is this the God you know?

*I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. (Ezekiel 33:11)*

These truths—*compassionate, gracious, slow to anger*—then lead us to the great crescendo, the crown jewel of this awesome description of God—His *HESED*! But God wants Moses (and us) to know that His *HESED* is absolutely colossal, enormous, and mind-blowing, so He says that He is *great in kindness* (***rab*** *HESED*). Just how massive is it? The Psalmists liked to put it this way—*as high as the heavens are above the earth* (*Psalms 103:11*). Once again, all the other words in *Exodus 34:6* were spoken to help Moses appreciate just how glorious this central attribute of God really is.

The fact is that the breadth and length and height and depth of God's *HESED* cannot fully be captured in human terms ... but the biblical authors sure try.

*Your HESED, LORD, extends to the heavens ...  
How precious is Your HESED, God.  
The children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings.  
They drink the fill of the abundance of Your house.  
And You give them to drink of the river of Your delights.  
For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light, we see light.  
Continue Your HESED to those who know You. (Psalm 36:5-10)*

Knowing God's *HESED* is really the key to everything. So do you know the God described in *Exodus 34:6*, or has this been eclipsed by some other vision of God? The God of rules, the God of philosophical attributes, the God of control? This verse is the most quoted and alluded to description of God in the Bible and is the bullseye of a healthy worldview. It is the way to a peaceful, fruitful life. Once a troubled soul (like I was) really comes to know the God of *Exodus 34:6*, their frustration, depression, and anxiety will evaporate like the morning mist when the sun rises.

But we are still not quite done with *Exodus 34:6*. There is one more thing the LORD tells us about His *HESED*. It is characterized by *faithfulness (emet)*. What this glorious little word tells us, among other things, is that God and His enormous kindness (*HESED*) will be the same through endless ages, with no alteration or shadow of change. He does not have good days and bad days, and His *HESED* does not waver based upon our performance. He is always, ever, and only this way!

Put everything together and what it means is that *Exodus 34:6* has been, and forever will be, the unchanging *modus operandi* of God. You and I may carry around some other vision of God, but by His own admission, by the proclamation of His *ways, glory, and name*, God says this—His eternal, unchanging obsession is to lavish incomprehensible goodness on human beings ... you and me! This is how He wants us to think about Him and relate to Him. Any other vision of God is a perversion, a distortion, a satanic sabotage.

... And just one more thing. There is something else we need to say about the LORD, with fear and trembling. The very next verse lets us know that although He is mind-blowingly kind, He is no pushover (see *Exodus 34:7*). For anyone who thinks that God's extravagant goodness means they can live however they want, and God will just wink at it, think again. He will forgive any and all sin, but His very nature makes it impossible for Him to wink at our sin. Perhaps we should meditate on this a little more.

God hates all sin in all its manifestations. He is bound by Who and What He is to destroy it. Why? Because sin is the antithesis of God's ways. It kills and destroys the crown of His creation—us. The frightening reality is that the person who is determined to hang on to their sin will eventually be destroyed with their sin. Again and again, the Bible makes one thing

clear—*If a man will not repent, He has sharpened His sword (Psalm 7:12)*. But this is not what God wants at all. This is why it says He is *slow to anger*. What God really wants is for everyone to repent—RIGHT NOW—so that He can lavish His extravagant *HESED* on them. This is the underlying message of the entire Bible. We are sinners, destined for wrath, but God loves us with an everlasting love.

### **A GUY WHO GOT IT**

One man who knew the Lord deeply was King David. God called him *a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:14)*. He was also known as *the sweet psalmist of Israel (2 Samuel 23:1)* because he wrote so many beautiful songs about God. Although he lived centuries after Moses, he absolutely loved *Exodus 34:6* and often used it in his songs. David actually wrote one very special song completely devoted to this description of God. If you want to go deep into the meaning of *Exodus 34:6*, meditate on David's *Psalms 103*.

*Bless the LORD, my soul,  
And all that is within me bless His holy name.  
Bless the LORD, my soul, and don't forget any of His benefits;  
He forgives all your iniquities,  
He heals all your diseases;  
He redeems your life from the pit,  
He crowns you with HESED and compassion;  
He fills up your years with good things,  
So that your youth is made new like the eagle.  
The LORD does righteous acts and judgments for all who are  
beaten down.  
He made His ways known to Moses,  
His acts to the sons of Israel.  
**The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and  
abounding in HESED.***



*He won't always struggle with us,  
He won't be angry forever.  
He has not dealt with us as our evil deeds deserve,  
Or rewarded us according to our iniquities.  
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
So great is His HESED toward those who fear Him.  
As far as the east is from the west,  
So far away has He removed our evil deeds from us.  
Just like a father has compassion on his children,  
So the LORD has compassion on those who revere Him.  
For He Himself knows what we are made of;  
He knows that we are just dust.*

This song tells us the sorts of things that the God of *Exodus 34:6* loves to do for people—forgive sins, heal diseases, get them out of pits, fill their lives with abundance, forgive, etc. King David had experienced all these things firsthand. For David, God was not some dry theological system, or a series of philosophical attributes. God was a wonderful and winsome Person who delights to give and forgive. David had experienced God's *HESED* in profound ways, and he knew that *Exodus 34:6* expressed this more clearly than any other passage of Scripture.

David understood God's extravagant generosity. He had been a lowly shepherd boy, a nobody, and God raised him up to be the king of Israel. David also knew firsthand all about God's mind-blowing forgiveness. Later in his life (when he knew better), David abused his power and privilege and sinned profoundly. He committed adultery and murder. He knew he deserved to die but threw himself on God's kindness ... and he was forgiven (see *Psalms 51*).

Does your understanding of God inspire you to shout and sing for joy like David? Are you so overwhelmed at His kindness that, at times, you cannot even stay on your feet? If not (to be straight with you), your center is off. Once we really start

to get this, we win. We can say goodbye to our heavy yoke of anxiety, fear, depression, and frustration. We will understand what A.W. Tozer meant when he said, *I have found God to be cordial and gracious and in every way easy to live with.*

### **ONE FINAL THING, JUST IN CASE YOU MISSED IT**

How can we know with absolute certainty that such a straight forward reading of *Exodus 34:6* is really who God is? There is one final piece of evidence that “seals the deal” for any serious student of the Bible. If we turn to the New Testament, we find the biblical writers choosing their words very carefully to make a jaw-dropping point—Jesus Christ was *Exodus 34:6* with skin on.

By the very words they chose the New Testament authors were telling us again and again that Jesus was living out the character of God, *Exodus 34:6*. *We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).*<sup>12</sup> Jesus is *the Word made flesh* and He shows us exactly how God the Father thinks, feels, acts, and reacts. *No one has seen God at any time ... He (Jesus) explained Him (John 1:18).* *Exodus 34:6* was God’s detailed self-description, Jesus Christ was God’s final Word on the matter (*Hebrews 1:1-3*).

When Jesus’s disciples once asked Him to show them the Father, Jesus seemed more than a little bit frustrated. They were missing the whole point. Again, Jesus *is* the final, definitive explanation of God and His ways.

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<sup>12</sup> New Testament scholars have convincingly argued for the connection between the words of John’s prolog and *Exodus 34:6*. See, e.g., Anthony Hanson, *Grace and Truth* (London: SPCK, 1975), and Alexander Tsutserov, *Glory, Grace, and Truth* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2009).

*Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not come to know Me? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; How can you say show us the Father? (John 14:9)*

There is a mountain of biblical evidence I could dump on you at this point to prove what is being said here. God is literally, simply *compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in kindness and faithfulness*, and He said it one final, definitive time in the Person of Jesus Christ. God feels deeply for everyone, loves with abandon, is impossibly patient, and always overflowing ... and He never alters. Any student of the Bible who misses this description of God misses the main character of the Bible (*and this tragedy happens all the time*).

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is these that bear witness of Me (Jesus), and you are not willing to come to Me. (John 5:39-40)*

Start to see God as He described Himself in *Exodus 34:6*, and in the Person of Jesus Christ, and you will absolutely love life. Opt for some other vision of God—one that centers on control, judgment, or philosophical profundity—and be part of the teeming masses who are *weary and heavy-laden*.

Those who are truly free in Christ are growing in their understanding of God's kindness (*HESED*), and Jesus Christ becomes their lens for understanding the ways of God. The former group, the strugglers, may be able to quote creeds and catechisms, they may affirm that there is a great Creator and Judge "out there," they may even have degrees and stand behind pulpits and lecterns. Still, if the God in their head does not line up with the words of *Exodus 34:6* and the Person of Jesus Christ, they have the wrong center.

Let us follow the advice of the prophet and *press on to know the LORD (Hosea 6:3)*. Just believing that God is the Creator and Judge is not enough. Even believing that God is a Trinity, or that He became a man in the Person of Jesus Christ and died on the cross for our sins, does not mean that we know Him intimately. What everyone really needs is a revelation of His heart, His love for us. This is what gives us the light and easy yoke. This is the simple truth that set me free.

Unfortunately, it seems as if some people would rather die with their warped theology than consider the possibility that they are wrong. But if we fail the diagnostic test, if our lives are not characterized by peace, joy, courage, love, and fruitfulness, we need to ask God for a deeper revelation. If Moses could do this, surely we can, too. He is *great in kindness*.

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade;  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the ocean dry;  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> From the hymn, "The Love of God," by Frederick Lehman (1868-1953).

## *FARE THEE WELL, NEXT GEN*

So that's it. We are now done with the basic, basic, basics of the Christian life. These are the keys I feel so many are missing in our day. I plan on continuing to work with a small group of young disciples, but I thought that a book like this could benefit those I may never have a chance to meet on this side of heaven. I hope that whoever you are, this book touches you, challenges you, and invigorates you. My prayer is that God uses it to raise many in the generation behind mine to bear His glorious image, shake heaven with their prayers, send demons fleeing, and bring God's kingdom to earth.

*Thou Christ of burning, cleansing flame,  
Send the fire!  
Thy blood-bought gift today we claim,  
Send the fire!  
Look down and see this waiting host,  
Give us the promised Holy Ghost,  
We want another Pentecost,  
Send the fire!<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> William Booth (1829-1912). See, "Thou Christ of Burning, Cleansing Flame," (#203) in *The Song Book of the Salvation Army* (Great Britain: The Salvation Army, 1986). This hymn originally appeared in The Salvation Army's periodical, "The War Cry" (1894) on the 50th anniversary of Booth's conversion to Christ.

## APPENDIX

### SALVATION: HOW CAN I KNOW FOR SURE?

Almost every Christian has wondered on occasion if they are really “in.” The book of *1 John* was written to answer that question. *These things I wrote to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life (5:13)*. This little letter outlines several proofs that demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is really inside a person. *And this is how we know that He lives in us; we know it by the Spirit He gave us (3:24)*. If you are wondering whether you are really saved, *1 John* is the book for you. It points out eight tests that will help you make the call:

**1. Real Christians Believe the Right Things about Jesus:**

The first thing John emphasizes is that a truly born-again person who has the Holy Spirit in them will have the right confession about Jesus. This test is pretty straightforward—Do you believe the same things about Jesus that John and the other apostles believed? Chapter 1 goes over all this. If you agree with what was said about Jesus in those pages, you are over the first hurdle ... but there are other “checks.”

*This is how you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. (1 John 4:2)*

*The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God makes Him a liar because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given about His Son. (5:10)*

**2. Real Christians Can’t Keep Sinning:** The next thing John emphasizes is that real Christians (those who have the Holy Spirit) are not comfortable living with sin in their life—it

grates on them, it grinds at them. When they have unconfessed sin, they feel like a fish out of water. Obviously, this doesn't mean Christians will never commit sin. John tells Christians what to do when they mess up (*1 John 1:9; 2:2*). But the reality is this—when the Holy Spirit moves in, you are changed at the deepest level of your being. Your innermost person is now bent toward God's will. A Christian may be capable of sin, but they will never again be able to enjoy it like they used to. If you can lie, cheat, steal, or sleep around, and it doesn't gnaw at you, grate on you, bother you ... there is a very good chance you are not born again. But if every time you sin, it feels like fingernails scratching down a chalkboard, that's a good thing.

*The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and doesn't keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (2:4)*

*No one who is born of God continues sinning because His seed abides in him, and he cannot keep sinning because he is born of God. (3:9)*

- 3. Real Christians Have a New Love Impulse:** The next thing John emphasizes is that real Christians have a strange new impulse to do good for others. Why? Because whether they know it or not, they have entered into a mysterious, mystical union with the Holy Spirit. Because of this, a saved person is only truly happy when they are doing God's will, and this can be summarized in one word—LOVE. One of the strongest indications that you have truly been regenerated, born again, saved, etc., is that you have this unrelenting compulsion to be like God—LOVE!

*Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God because God is love. (4:7-8)*

*But whoever has the world's goods and sees his brother in need and doesn't have compassion for him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or tongue, but in deed and truth. We can know by this that we are of the truth, and this assures our heart before Him. (3:17-19)*

- 4. Real Christians Can't Hate:** The next test is closely related to the previous ones, but hatred is such a dark, horrific thing that it's worth giving its own space to. Hatred is Satan's pure, unadulterated essence, so John doesn't pull any punches here—real Christians simply cannot live with hatred in their hearts. Again, this doesn't mean a Christian can't be tempted or even fall into a brief season of bitterness or unforgiveness, but if they do there will be an all-out war going on inside them until they spit the hatred out. The underlying reality is that if you have received God's Spirit, your life cannot be characterized by hatred.

*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (3:15)*

- 5. Real Christians Understand Spiritual Things:** One of the beautiful things about real New Testament salvation is that absolutely everyone has an opportunity to walk personally with God. Religious charlatans are always trying to convince us that there are superspiritual gurus out there with access to truth that is unavailable to the rest of us. The book of *1 John* lets us know that every person who is truly born again receives the Holy Spirit (also called "the Anointing"). This means that they now have the best teacher in the entire



universe living right there inside them. It does not mean that Christians can't benefit from good teachers, but what it does mean is that if the Spirit is really in you, you now have the ability to understand spiritual things. In practical terms, the Bible should have exploded to life when you got saved. That is proof that the Holy Spirit is in you.

*As for you, the Anointing you received from Him remains in you, and you don't need anyone to teach you. But as His Anointing teaches you about everything and as that Anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in Him. (2:27)*

- 6. Real Christians like Being around Other Real Christians:** We don't need to deliberate too long over this one. If you are really born again, you will like being around other born-again folks. Something is wrong if you still like being with your unsaved friends more than your saved friends.

*Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. (5:1)*

- 7. Real Christians Have Their Prayers Answered:** Virtually everyone on earth prays, but only born-again people get to regularly move the hand of God. It is possible that you are just a baby Christian and have not yet learned how to do this, but if you begin having an increase in answers to prayer, this indicates that you have favor with God, you have the Holy Spirit, and you belong to Him.

*These things I wrote to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears*

*us in whatever we ask, we know that we will receive the requests which we asked from Him. (5:13-15)*

**8. Real Christians Should Experience Diminishing Fear:**

There is a final point worth mentioning here, but it falls into a slightly different category. It isn't simply proof that a person is born again, it is an indicator that a person is maturing, growing deep in their salvation: They are no longer scared of God or anything else in the universe. They aren't afraid because they have come to understand how much God truly loves them and how completely He has taken care of their guilt and shame:

*There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out all fear because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. (4:18)*

There you have it—eight proofs that a person is saved. If you believe the right things about Jesus, have a new desire to love others, cannot continue in sin, cannot live with hatred, understand spiritual things, love to hang out with God's people, are seeing prayers answered, and fear and anxiety are diminishing in your life, you are in!