

# “THE GOD OF COMPASSION”

## PSALM 78:32-39

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### INTRODUCTION

We can see a comparison of this passage with Hos. 5:15-6:6—a comparison even more apt since the same verb “search diligently” found in v. 34 appears also in Hos. 5:15 and 6:3, and the verb “return” of v. 34 also appears in Hos. 6:1. In Hosea God awaits for Israel’s response (5:15) and in 6:1-3 we read of an apparent humble return to the Lord for healing and revival so that they may “know the LORD” (6:3). However, just as in our passage, the seemingly sincere coming to God was short lived, and evidently insincere—as Hosea 6:4 says their “loyal-love is like a morning cloud and like the dew that goes away early”; compare our passage where God speaks of Israel’s weakness as “a wind that passes and does not return” (39) and speaks of their turning to God as “deception” and “lying” (36) due to a heart that was not “steadfast” toward God nor “faithful” to His covenant.” The last term “faithful” is commonly related in the OT to the word “loyal-love” or “lovingkindness” used in Hos. 6:4 and again in 6:6 for what God delights in rather than sacrifice. Such loyal love and faithfulness is similar to what is demanded in a marriage relationship. Notice also that Hosea 6:5 speaks of God’s chastening of Israel—“I have slain them” by prophets and God’s words—and of “judgments on them”; compare here God’s bringing their days to an end and killing them (vv. 33-34a). The apparent response to the LORD in Hosea is with “a touching elegance which may deceive the reader” (6:1-3); note the attempted “deception” of God here in v. 36. With the superficial claim to godliness in both passages, compare the hypocrisy described by James of those who were only “hearers” and not “doers” of the word (1:22ff; 2:14ff).

Yes, the deception of Israel, and their fickleness of repentance for their sins is somewhat depressing. But what is heartening is the consistency and heartfelt compassion of their God who understands man’s weakness, manifests restraint, offers pardon, and continues over and over again to restore His people to their relationship with Him—even though they are bound to apostatize again.

### **IT IS BY GOD’S MERCY THAT WE ARE NOT CONSUMED!**

What is the historical background here? Likely what immediately follows the scene of Num. 11 with the craving and giving of the quail, along with the judgment of God. Num. 13-14 depicts the incident of refusal to believe God and go into and conquer Canaan, with then the aborted effort to do it on their own once God had condemned them to 38 more years of wilderness wandering—until all of them had died vainly in the wilderness. Along the way there were many “sudden terrors” killing a lot of them—like Num. 21 with the fiery serpents.

- I. “ALL HAVE SINNED AND COME SHORT OF GOD’S GLORY (32, 37)
  - A. Continuing to “miss the mark”
  - B. Refusing to believe and be faithful to God
  - C. Not “faithful/believing” [same verb; cf. also vv. 8, 22] in His covenant—due to unbelief in God Himself (37)
  - D. Not firm/steadfast in their relationship with their God.
    - There was no genuine solidity in their relationship “with Him.”
    - Their “heart” was not right with God—source of thought, will, emotion.
- II. “THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH” (33-34a)
  - A. Divine retribution
    1. Brought their days to an end.
    2. Killed them
  - B. Human dismay
    1. Vanity/emptiness/wind—the words of Ps. 39:5-6 are fitting: “Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime as [cf. “years” here] as nothing in Your sight; surely every man at his best is a mere breath. Surely every man walks about as a phantom.” Though Moses himself in Ps.

90:9 uses different words, he states “all our days have declined in Your fury; we have finished our years like a sigh/whisper.”

2. Trouble/sudden terror-- The people dealt with the fruitless monotony of their existence during this long period, and their constant apprehension of some outbreak of divine wrath.

III. “MY PEOPLE DRAW NEAR WITH THEIR MOUTH AND...LIPS...BUT THEIR HEART [IS] FAR FROM ME” (feigned repentance) (34-36) [Is. 29:13]

- A. Seeking Him with a diligent search (34)
- B. Remembering the spiritual benefits from God (35) [Note names Elohim, El, Most High]
  1. Their Rock-- see Dt. 32:15, 18, 37. God was their strength, support, and provision.
  2. Their Redeemer (kinsman redeemer; the only One who could remove their sin debt, buy back their inheritance lost due to their sin, and restore them to the relationship lost with Himself.)
- C. Deception and lies (36)
  1. Using the mouth and tongue to “deceive/flatter” God with insincere words.
  2. Such was true of much of the nation—though some were undoubtedly genuine in repentance and turning to God—otherwise He would never have forgiven.

IV. “THE LORD COMPASSIONATE AND GRACIOUS, SLOW TO ANGER, ABOUNDING IN LOYAL LOVE AND FAITHFULNESS,...FORGIVING INIQUITY” (38-39)

[Ex. 34:6-7; Alluded to by Moses in Num. 14:18-19—the very historical incident likely in view in this passage]

**Notice the powerful contrast: BUT HE—Being so much different from them!**

- A. Compassionate in His very being (38a; 39)
  1. Remembering their being mere “flesh”
  2. Remembering their being mere “breath/wind”
    - “Passing by”
    - “Not returning”
    - Cf. Ps. 103:14-16—but “dust,” “as grass,” “as a flower of the field,” “wind passes over it and it is gone,” “no remaining place.”
- B. Control of His Powerful emotions
  1. Restraint of His anger—“made much to cause it to return”
  2. Did not stir up all of His hot wrath.
  3. Did not totally destroy them
- C. Forgave their iniquity—covered, atoned for it
  1. “Iniquity”—broadly used for iniquity, guilt, or even punishment for iniquity.
  2. “Forgive”—often with the idea of “cover, pacify, propitiate” one’s sin by offering the required sacrifice that God has provided to satisfy his righteous requirement for the sinful offence. However, when God is the subject as here, the meaning is “forgive” since God has accepted the provision He has made available through the blood sacrifice and also because of genuine repentance and request for forgiveness that must accompany the sacrificial offerings.

## CONCLUSION

“All have sinned”; “the wages of sin is death”; His people draw near with mouth and lips but with hearts far from Him; Yet, He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, great in mercy, full of forgiveness.

## IT IS BY GOD’S MERCY THAT WE ARE NOT CONSUMED!

In light of such “apostasy” from the status claimed by Israel, such “compassion” and “restraint” by God here are remarkable—yes even “overwhelming” (K. 284). Kidner also compares Hosea where God says to His stubborn and rebellious people, “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?” And also, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? ...My heart is turned over within Me, all my compassions are kindled” (11:8). Here we have an expression of God’s normal way of dealing with undeserving sinners due to His very nature; such truths hold true for all times. God’s mercy is like Himself, everlasting, and ever the same.