

## Character of God

# Grace

### STUDY NOTES

When God reveals who he is to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, one of the words he uses to describe himself is gracious, or in Hebrew, *khanun*.

“Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate and **gracious**, slow to anger, overflowing with loyal-love and faithfulness.”

This verse is the most quoted and reused verse in the Hebrew Bible. It’s clear that this description of God is core to the biblical understanding of who he is, so we wanted to spend some time focusing on this fascinating passage. In our Character of God series, we’re looking at each of these descriptors and digging into their significance in the biblical story and their modern implications. These study notes will help you delve deeper into the Hebrew word *khanun* and see the ideas presented in our video Character of God: Grace.

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## Khanun and Related Words

The Hebrew word *khanun* (חַנוּן), meaning “gracious,” is from the root *khanan* (כּחנן). This root word is very common in classical Hebrew and was used as a verb, adjective, and noun in the Bible. Here are examples of how *khanan* is used.

### Verb

- “To be gracious, show favor” (חנן) *khanan* - 77 times

### Adjective

- “Gracious” (חַנוּן) *khanun* - 13 times

### Noun

- “Grace, favor” (חן) *khen* - 70 times
- “Request for grace, favor” (תַּחֲנוּנָה) *tekhinah* - 26 times
- “Request for grace, favor” (תַּחֲנוּן) *takhanun* - 18 times

## Meanings of the Root Word Khen

This Hebrew word *khen* has a few different meanings and contexts within the Hebrew Bible. It’s important to understand these iterations to get a better understanding of what it means for God to call himself gracious, or *khanun*.

### An Aesthetic Sense

*Khen* is used in the Hebrew Bible to mean “elegant, charming” or “inducing a response of favor.”

A poet who can craft words in an elegant and beautiful way can be said to have “lips of *khen*,” that is, lips of grace. These poets give a gift of beauty and value to the world that is viewed favorably.

*You are fairer than the sons of men;  
khen is poured upon your lips.*

PSALM 45:2

*One who loves a pure heart and who speaks with *khen*  
will have the king for a friend.*

PROVERBS 22:11

A beautiful necklace or head-covering can be called a wreath or ornaments of *khen*.

*Indeed, they are a wreath of *khen* to your head  
And ornaments about your neck.*

PROVERBS 1:9

*So they will be life to your soul  
And ornaments of *khen* your neck.*

PROVERBS 3:22

A deer that moves swiftly and elegantly up a hill can be called a deer of *khen*.

*As a loving hind and a doe of **khen**...*

PROVERBS 5:19A

Another important nuance of this word is that it can also mean “charming,” that is, *khen* describes a beauty that generates a favorable response. But it can also be deceiving.

***Khen** is deceitful and beauty is vapor,  
But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.*

PROVERBS 31:30

The focus of the word *khen* is not so much on the inherent beauty or elegance of the object but on the *perception* of beauty and charm in the eyes of the observer. *Khen* refers to something that is perceived as valuable and therefore generates a favorable response.

## A Concrete Relational Sense

*Khen* can also be used to mean “show favor and generosity.” The implication is also that favor is shown regardless of obligation or consideration of worth.

The verb *khanan* is used to describe acts of generosity and favor. It can be used in the context of someone requesting such favor or showing favor to someone else. The idea of social status is crucial to the meaning of *khanan*: it always describes the favorable response or action from a superior to someone of lower social status.

In the book of Esther, Esther goes before King Ahasuerus to “seek favor” from him, that is, to ask that her people be spared from destruction despite the decree. Esther is a subordinate making a request to a superior who is not obligated to grant her request. But he does so; the king “shows favor” to Esther.

*He [Mordecai] also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to **request his favor** and to plead with him for her people.*

ESTHER 4:8

*Then Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept and **requested his favor**, to avert the evil scheme of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had devised against the Jews.*

ESTHER 8:3

In the book of Genesis, Joseph’s brothers recall when they threw their brother into the pit and he begged for them to show him favor, that is, forgive his arrogance and not sell him as a slave.

*Then they said to one another, “Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he **begged for favor**, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.”*

GENESIS 42:21

We see this use again in the book of Proverbs in a description of someone showing favor towards a person of a lesser social status.

*The one who oppresses the poor insults his maker, but the one who **shows generosity** to the needy honors him.*

PROVERBS 14:31

## To Find Favor in Your Eyes

*Khen* most often appears within the common phrase, “let me find favor in the eyes,” used 47 times in the Hebrew Bible.

*He **found favor** in the eyes of Potiphar and became his personal attendant, and he was appointed over the entire house and everything belonging to Potiphar.*

GENESIS 39:4

(As Joseph is working as a slave in Potiphar’s house)

*Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, “**Why have I found favor in your sight** that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?”*

RUTH 2:10

(Ruth, a Moabite widow, to Boaz)

*And the Lord had **given the people favor** in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have their request. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.*

EXODUS 12:36

(Yahweh bestows favor on the Israelites through the Egyptians)

## Subversion of Human Power Structures

In each occurrence of this phrase, the person in a vulnerable or subordinate position of low status is given a gift of favor or kindness from a person of higher status. The gift is given without regard to one’s worth or status and without any sense of obligation.

Sometimes, the favor requested isn’t simply given *regardless* of someone’s worth but actually *despite* their lack of worth.

*But Laban said to him [Jacob], “If I have **found favor in your eyes**, stay with me; I have divined that the Lord has blessed me on your account.”*

GENESIS 30:27

*And he said, “What do you mean by all this company which I have met?” And he said, “To **find favor in the sight of my lord.**”*

GENESIS 33:8

(Jacob reunites with Esau, the brother he cheated, and he sends animals to find favor in Esau’s eyes)

In both of these cases, a person who has wronged and cheated another is asking for a gift of favor!

*“Generally, these words are descriptive of beneficent actions that are freely offered or received and contribute to the well-being of another or to the health of an ongoing relationship. It is active kindness or generosity exhibited particularly toward those in need, e.g., aiding the poor (Prov 28:8), assisting the young or old (Deut 28:50), and showing compassion for those who suffer (Job 19:21) or who are oppressed (Dan 4:27 [24]). It is assumed that these will not be isolated actions, but constitute the ongoing shape of life (Prov 14:21, 31). These actions are not only pleasing to God (14:31), but are considered as done unto the Lord himself and carry their own reward (19:17; cf. Matt 25:40).”*

TERENCE FRETHEIM, IN WILLEM VANGEMEREN, ED., NEW  
INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY & EXEGESIS, P. 204.

## God’s Generous Acts of Favor

Human acts of favor account for about one third of the uses of the *khanan* word group in the Hebrew Bible. But the majority of occurrences describe acts of God’s generous favor shown towards his people.

The first person to whom God shows *khen* is Noah. He does so by noticing Noah’s righteous life choices and sparing him from the coming punishment of humanity.

*Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and he was grieved in his heart. The Lord said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah **found favor in the eyes of the Lord**.*

GENESIS 6:5-8

Later in Genesis, Jacob tells Esau that God has shown him generous favor despite Jacob’s many failing. In this moment, Jacob is giving that same generous gift to Esau, so that Esau will “show favor” now to him, despite the fact that he doesn’t deserve it.

*“Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God **has shown me generous favor** and because I have plenty.” Thus he urged him and he took it.*

GENESIS 33:11

## The Golden Calf Incident

Perhaps the best example of God showing undeserved favor is in the golden calf story in Exodus 34, the context from which the first description of God's character is recorded in the Hebrew Bible.

The people break the first two terms of the covenant—no other gods and no idols—right after making them. God tells Moses that he is done with these people, that they are going to keep doing this. He is going to leave them and let them go toward the promised land without his presence.

Moses first shatters the tablets of the covenant (and makes the people drink the powdery ash!), and then he ascends to Yahweh for five rounds of intercession and conversation.

At one point Moses says, "If your presence doesn't go with us, do not bring us up from this place [Mount Sinai], for how then can I know that **I have found favor in your eyes**, I and your people? Isn't it by your going with us, so that I and your people are marked as distinct from all other people on the face of the land?" (Exodus 33:15-16).

God responds, "I will do this thing that you have asked, because **you have found favor in my eyes**" (Exodus 33:17).

So God ends up recommitting to the people and renewing the covenant they just broke, and he appears to Moses saying that he is "compassionate **and khamun**..." (Exodus 34:6). He is the giver of generous favor to people, even when they deserve the opposite.

This character trait of God from Exodus 32-34 becomes foundational for all of God's future interactions with Israel.

## Calls for God to *Khaman*

In the Psalms, there are frequent requests for God to *khaman* and deliver the psalmist from difficulty, death, and sickness, or deliver the people from threats, defeat, and exile.

*Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!  
You have given me relief when I was in distress.  
**Be gracious to me** and hear my prayer!*

PSALM 4:1

**Be gracious to me**, O Lord, for I am languishing;  
Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.  
My soul also is greatly troubled.  
But you, O Lord—how long?

PSALM 6:2-3

Turn to me and **be gracious to me**,  
For I am lonely and afflicted.  
The troubles of my heart are enlarged;  
Bring me out of my distresses.  
Look upon my affliction and my trouble,  
And forgive all my sins.  
Look upon my enemies, for they are many,  
And they hate me with violent hatred.  
Guard my soul and deliver me;  
Do not let me be ashamed, for I take refuge in you.

PSALM 25:16-20

But you, O Lord, abide forever,  
And your name to all generations.  
You will arise and have compassion on Zion;  
For it is time to **be gracious to her**,  
For the appointed time has come.  
Surely your servants find pleasure in her stones  
And feel pity for her dust.

PSALM 102:12-14

## Response to Rebellion

This is the character trait of God mentioned in moments where people have rebelled against God. They're asking for God's favor despite the fact that they don't deserve it.

In this psalm, King David reflects on his rape of Bathsheba and murder of her husband. He is not deserving of God's favor, but he requests it anyway. And God is generous, allowing him to remain king. But God also hands him over to the consequences of his poor choices, which destroy his family.

**Be gracious to me**, according to your loyal love,  
According to your compassion, blot out my rebellious acts.

PSALM 51:1

In King Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple, he anticipates all the disasters that could happen to Israel when they abandon Yahweh and turn their backs on him.

*If they sin against you...and you deliver them into the hand of their enemies and they are taken captive to the land of their enemies...if they take it to heart in their captivity and turn and **request favor/grace**, saying "We have sinned, and acted corruptly and wickedly..." then please from the skies, the place of your dwelling, hear their prayer and their **request for favor/grace**... and forgive your people.*

1 KINGS 8:46-50



After the Israelites have broken the covenant and are sitting in Babylonian exile, they draw upon these stories, and like Moses, David, and Solomon, they ask God to give them a gift of favor.

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious,  
Slow to anger and abounding in loyal love.  
He will not always strive with us,  
Nor will he keep his anger forever.  
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,  
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.  
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
So great is his loyal love toward those who fear him.*

PSALM 103:8-11

*Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord.  
Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive  
To the voice of my requests for favor.  
If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?  
But there is forgiveness with you,  
That you may be feared.  
I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait,  
And in his word do I hope.  
My soul waits for the Lord  
More than the watchmen for the morning;  
Indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning.  
O Israel, hope in the Lord;  
For with the Lord there is loyal love,  
And with him is abundant redemption.  
And he will redeem Israel  
From all his iniquities.*

PSALM 130:1-8

Nehemiah recounts Yahweh's acts of grace/favor despite Israel's rebellion at Mount Sinai and in the wilderness (Nehemiah 9:17). Then he asks for God to renew and continue that grace/favor by restoring his people after the Babylonian exile (Nehemiah 9:31).

Daniel is also an exile. He is in Babylon confessing the sins of his people and "requesting favor/grace" from Yahweh on behalf of Jerusalem. His prayers are heard, and he is shown a vision of Jerusalem's ultimate restoration after God's plans come to their completion (Daniel 9:20, 23).

## The Prophets Ask God to Favor His People

The biblical prophets speak of Yahweh's promises to show favor/grace to his people.

After the exile, God promises to show generous favor, evidenced by Jerusalem's restoration and the land's abundance.

*Therefore the Lord waits **to be gracious to you**,  
And therefore he exalts himself to show compassion to you.  
For the Lord is a God of justice;  
Blessed are all those who wait for him.*

*For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. **He will surely be gracious to you** at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you....*

*And he will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and bread, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. In that day your livestock will graze in large pastures, and the oxen and the donkeys that work the ground will eat seasoned fodder, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. And on every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water, in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.*

ISAIAH 30:18-26

*I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, **the Spirit of grace** and of supplication, so that they will look on me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.*

ZECHARIAH 12:10

*With weeping they will come,  
And by supplication I will lead them;  
I will make them walk by streams of waters,  
On a straight path in which they will not stumble;  
For I am a father to Israel,  
And Ephraim is my firstborn.*

JEREMIAH 31:9

This is a portrait of God's generous favor given to people regardless of their status or worth and despite the fact that they deserve justice rather than a gift.

# Septuagint Translations

When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek they used a variety of Greek words in the Septuagint.

## **Verb** — *khanan* (כָּחַן)

- Most consistently translated as *eleeo*, “to show mercy” — 43 times out of 77 instances
- Sometimes translated to *oiktiro*, “to show compassion” — 10 times out of 77 instances

## **Adjective** *khanun* (כַּחֲנוּן)

- Usually translated as *eleeo*, “to show mercy” — 12 times out of 13 instances
- Sometimes translated to *oiktiro*, “to show compassion” — 1 time out of 13 instances

## **Noun** *khen* (כֶּהֵן)

- “Most consistently translated as *kharis*, “grace or gift” — 62 times out of 69 instances

# God’s *Khen* Embodied in Jesus

This is the character trait of Yahweh that is embodied in Jesus. When Jesus’ first followers looked back at his life, death, and resurrection, they use the vocabulary of “grace” and “gift” to describe it.

In the passage below, John has created a messianic version of Exodus 34:6 by reconfiguring the themes of Exodus 19-40.

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of **grace** (*kharis*) and **truth**.*

*For of his **fullness** we have all received, and **grace** (*kharis*) upon **grace** (*kharis*). For the law was given through Moses; **grace** (*kharis*) and **truth** were realized through Jesus Christ.*

JOHN 1:14-17

In the story of Jesus, God’s gracious favor has become a person, the ultimate gift of God’s generous love given without regard to status or worth. And even more, it’s given to those who are unworthy of a gift and instead deserving of justice.

Paul is very aware of the mismatch between his worth and the gift of God's grace shown to him through Jesus.

*...even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace (kharis) of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.*

1 TIMOTHY 1:13-14

Paul describes humanity as the living dead, captive to the powers of death, selfishness, and sin, but God is rich in mercy (eleeos) and love. He has given life to the dead through Jesus as a display of "the surpassing abundance of his favor/grace" (kharis) shown to us in the Messiah Jesus. Paul calls all of this the "gift of God, not a result of anything you do."

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.*

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace (kharis) you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace (kharis), expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*

*For it is by grace (kharis) you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

*For you know the grace (kharis) of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace (kharis) comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.*

2 THESSALONIANS 2:16-17

## Conclusion

God's grace is an inextricable part of who he is. The Bible is full of language pointing towards God's generous gifts towards those who are undeserving. We see this language frequently in the New Testament as well, as the apostles and early Christians saw Jesus as God's generous Spirit become human. To learn more about the character of God, stay tuned for our next video in this series about God being "slow to anger."