

Hesed in the Psalms

“Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the hesed¹ of the Lord.”

–Psalm 107:43

1. Read the selection of passages about *hesed* between persons.
 - . Is *hesed* an act of mutual obligation or gracious condescension?
 - . Is there an emotional element to *hesed*?
 - . Is *hesed* always offered to someone in need?
 - . Does *hesed* necessarily accompany a relationship?
 - . If you only had these verses, what words might you use to translate *hesed*?
2. Read the passages about God’s *hesed*. How is God’s *hesed* different from ours? Do humans show *hesed* to God?
3. How is *hesed* different from “love” in Jer 2:2 and Jer 31:3?² Name at least one way *hesed* differs from *agape*.
4. Read the beautiful Psalm 36. We have seen that *hesed* gets translated many ways, including “steadfast love”, “lovingkindness”, “loyalty”, “unfailing love”, “mercy”, “love”, “goodness”, etc. How would you translate it here?
5. What examples of God’s *hesed* toward you touch you most deeply? Are there particular times in your daily life and routine when you are aware of God’s *hesed* toward you?

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Fun fact: The word “lovingkindness” was coined around 1535 specifically to translate the Latin *miser cordia*, itself a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed* in the Psalms.

Bonus Fun fact: The Hasidic Jews derive their name from the Hebrew word *hasid*, meaning “pious”, which is in turn related to the word *hesed*.

¹ NRSV: “loving deeds”.

² See also Ex 20:5-6 and Esther 2:17.

Examples of *Hesed* (Translations Masked)

HESED BETWEEN PEOPLE

Jacob asks Joseph to bury him with his ancestors rather than in Egypt (Gen 47:29): “If I have found favor with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal **hesed** and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt.” [Expressed in proper burial.]

Abraham's request of Sarah (Gen 20:13): “And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the **hesed** you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'” [Expressed in Sarah's lying for Abraham.]

Lot's desperate request of the angels (Gen 19:19): “your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great **hesed** in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die.” [Expressed in their allowing Lot to flee to a nearby city.]

A king and his subjects (2 Sam 2:5): “David sent messengers to the people of Jabesh-gilead, and said to them, 'May you be blessed by the LORD, because you showed this **hesed** to Saul your lord, and buried him!'"

Ruth with Naomi and Boaz (Ruth 1:8; 3:10): “Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal **hesed** with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband”; “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your **hesed** is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.” [Expressed in providing for Naomi.]

Rahab and the spies (Joshua 2:12): “Now then, since I have dealt **hesed** with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal **hesed** with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.” [Expressed in Rahab's care for the Israelites and their sparing her kin.]

Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:23): “Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt **hesed** with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as an alien.” [Expressed in their covenant.]

David and Jonathon, after David asks Jon to cover for him with Saul (1 Sam 20:8): “Therefore deal **hesed** with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a sacred covenant with you. But if there is guilt in me, kill me yourself; why should you bring me to your father?” [Expressed in Jon's protecting David from Saul.]

Abner, torqued about accusations of betrayal (2 Sam 3:8): “Abner was very angry because of what Ish-Bosheth said. So he answered, “Am I a dog's head—on Judah's side? This very day I am **hesed** to the house of your father Saul and to his family and friends. I haven't handed you over to David.” [Expressed in not betraying Saul's friends.]

Ben-Hadad's officials proposing they plead with Ahab for mercy (2 Kings 20:31): “Look, we have heard that the kings of Israel are **hesed** . Let us go to the king of Israel with sackcloth around our waists and ropes around our heads. Perhaps he will spare your life.” [Expressed in sparing Ben-Hadad's life.]

In the Proverbs (Prov 11:17, 21:21): “Those who are **hesed** benefit themselves, but the cruel bring ruin on themselves”; “Whoever pursues righteousness and **hesed** finds life, prosperity and honor”

*The Sinai covenant is repeatedly referred to as a "covenant of hesed" (Deut 7:9): "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of **hesed** to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments." [Expressed in rescuing Israel from Egypt; see also Deut 7:12; 1 Ki 8:23; Ne 1:5; 9:32; Prov 31:26; Dn 9:4, etc.]*

*What the Lord requires (Mic 6:8): "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love **hesed**, and to walk humbly with your God?" [Expressed in righteous living.]*

*Hosea calls Israel to repentance (Hos 10:12): "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap **hesed**; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you."*

*God promises betrothal to Israel (Hos 2:16-20): "On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, "My husband," and no longer will you call me, "My Baal." For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in **hesed**, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD." [Expressed in God's commitment to loving provision.]*

*God's self-description (Ex 34:6-7): "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in **hesed** and faithfulness, keeping **hesed** for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty" [Expressed notable in his forgiveness and justice. Also Mic 7:18, which says that God "delights in **hesed**".]*

*In the Messiah (Isa 55:3; Acts 13:34-35): "I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my **hesed** promised to David."; "God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, 'I will give you the holy and **hesed** promised to David.'" [Expressed in God's sending the Messiah and his resurrection.]*

HESED IN THE PSALMS (SEE ALSO 85:10; 86:5; 89; 136; 103; 106; 107)

*(Ps 23:6): "Surely goodness and **hesed** shall follow me all the days of my life." [Expressed in God's provision.]*

*(Ps 36:7-9): "How precious is your **hesed**, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."*

*(Ps 33:18): "Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his **hesed**"*

*(Ps 63:1, 3): "A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah. O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water... Because your **hesed** is better than life, my lips will praise you."*

*BONUS: The parable of the unforgiving servant uses the Greek *eleos*, which is the word most often used to translate *hesed*. This parable ends with the statement, "'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had **hesed** on your fellow servant just as I had [**hesed**] on you?'*

Examples of *Hesed*

HESED BETWEEN PEOPLE

Jacob asks Joseph to bury him with his ancestors rather than in Egypt (Gen 47:29): “If I have found favor with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal **loyally** and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt.” [Expressed in proper burial.]

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Ben-Hadad's officials proposing they plead with Ahab for mercy (2 Kings 20:31): “Look, we have heard that the kings of Israel are **merciful**. Let us go to the king of Israel with sackcloth around our waists and ropes around our heads. Perhaps he will spare your life.” [Expressed in sparing Ben-Hadad's life.]

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HESED BETWEEN GOD AND PEOPLE

The Sinai covenant is repeatedly referred to as a “covenant of love [hesed]” (Deut 7:9): “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.” [Expressed in rescuing Israel from Egypt; see also Deut 7:12; 1 Ki 8:23; Ne 1:5; 9:32; Prov 31:26; Dn 9:4, etc.]

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BONUS NT reference: *The parable of the unforgiving servant uses the Greek eleos, which is the word most often used to translate hesed. This parable ends with this: “‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had [mercy] on you?’”*

Leader's Notes

Hesed, which occurs 246 times in the OT, is both important to understanding God's relationship with humans and is challenging to translate because of its vast semantic range: The LXX translates it primarily as *eleos*, or "mercy", but also as "righteousness", "grace", "glory" and "hope". In the Hebrew text it is paralleled with a spectrum of words including "faithfulness", "goodness", "strength" and "salvation". English translations use "kindness", "love", "steadfast love", "loyalty", "favor", "devotion" and "mercy", etc. That there is no consensus on how to translate this word is demonstrated by looking at a sampling of Psalms (5, 6, 13, 17, 18, 21, 23, 25, 26 and 31) in the NIV and NRSV. The NRSV translates *hesed* as "steadfast love" in all these cases except for Ps 23, where it's "mercy", probably because that wording is precious to readers. The NIV translates it in these psalms as "great love", "unfailing love", "love", and "mercy". Whole books have been written on just this word, and there has been much scholarly debate on the relationship between *hesed* and covenant.

Understanding this word is not just important to us because it appears well over 100 times in the Psalms. This word is important because it is one of the words God uses to describe himself, as in Exodus 34:6-7, when he says to Moses, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in *hesed* and faithfulness, maintaining *hesed* to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." Tonight we will look at the way this word is used and define it for ourselves, inductively, in order to get a greater understanding of its depths.