



God’s Grace in the Old Testament: Considering the *Hesed* of the Lord

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This article originally appeared in the Summer 2010 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

*Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love [hesed] of the LORD.
(Ps. 107:43, ESV)*

Though we may deny the commonly held opposition between the wrathful, judging God of the Old Testament and the gracious, loving God of the New Testament, we may still be guilty of propagating it by neglecting the Old Testament’s own witness to God’s character, and especially to his grace. Too often, preaching from the Old Testament (if we hear it at all) either presents the relationships its characters have with God as a foil for the one now offered in Christ, or focuses merely on the moral example of those heroes of the faith (“Dare to be a Daniel”). Recently I heard a student say that growing up, he knew that Noah had built an ark and Jonah had been swallowed by a fish, but he did not know who God was. The central figure of the entire Bible is God, and we must be attentive to the many ways he has revealed himself.

To attend to God’s character in the Old Testament, we should start with his self-description, a description which emphasizes his grace:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [hesed] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love [hesed] for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exod. 34:6–7)

Though God’s promise of transgenerational punishment may appear problematic, it is engulfed in

love, faithfulness, and forgiveness. God twice mentions his *hesed*, which is here translated as “steadfast love,” giving it a prominent place in his self-understanding. If we want to grasp the merciful and gracious nature of God, we will have to comprehend his *hesed*. But what does this word really mean?



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The word’s etymology helps little since we only know of a doubtful connection with an Arabic word, *hashada*, which means “come together for aid.” In the Septuagint, a collection of ancient Greek translations of Old Testament books, the word is primarily translated by the Greek word for “mercy,” but several other words are also used, including the words for “righteousness,” “grace,” “glory,” and “hope.” The words that parallel *hesed* in the Hebrew text also reflect a broad semantic range stretching from “faithfulness” and “goodness” to “strength” and “salvation.” In English Bibles, *hesed* is translated with a variety of words, including “kindness,” “love,” “steadfast love,” “loyalty,” “favor,” “devotion,” and “mercy.” Attempts to define the word have filled scholarly articles, dissertations, and even entire books, which testifies to both its theological importance and indeterminate meaning. The streams of ink spilled in this debate have congealed around disputes over the word’s relation to covenant and whether it is inspired by mutual obligation or gracious condescension.

Some insight may be gained by beginning with the word’s usage in the human plane, where it was likely

first used before it was applied to God. On this horizontal level, *hesed* always involves an interpersonal relationship between either individuals or groups, whether that is between family members (Gen. 20:13), a host and guest (Gen. 19:19), friends (1 Sam. 20:8, 14), or a sovereign and his subjects (2 Sam. 2:5). A degree of mutuality can be assumed since a response in kind is often expected (e.g., Gen. 21:23; Josh. 2:12, 14).

Further, *hesed* is never merely an abstract feeling of goodwill but always entails practical action on behalf of another, whether that involves the restored cupbearer putting in a good word to the Pharaoh for Joseph (Gen. 40:14), Bethuel giving his daughter Rebekah in marriage (Gen. 24:49–51), or the Israelite army sparing the family of Rahab (Josh. 2:12–13).

Finally, *hesed* is enduring, corresponding to both the unchanging nature of God's requirements of his people and the lasting commitment built into the relationships in which it is expressed. Here the concept of covenant intertwines with *hesed* because covenants cement an enduring commitment in a relationship in which one would not necessarily be assumed or an uncertain future threatens, such as David's relationship with Jonathan, the son of the man seeking his life (1 Sam 20:8, 14). However, this horizontal study is of limited value because the relationship between God and humans is unlike that between any two people, with the inequality between the parties far surpassing even that between a king and his subjects.

Of the 246 times *hesed* appears in the Old Testament, the great majority refer to the vertical plane of God's relationship with people. The vast disparity between the eternal and infinite God and the mere mortal recipients of his *hesed* alters the meaning of the term. It still describes an interpersonal relationship, but now it can encompass the entire nation of Israel and even all of humanity (Ps. 36:7) as God's *hesed* fills the earth (Ps. 33:5).

Mutuality can no longer be expected because God does not have any needs for humans to fulfill (Ps. 50:12), though he does demand obedience to his commandments (Deut. 7:12). The practical nature of *hesed* remains, with the Hebrew verb often used suggesting that God "does" *hesed* for those who call on him (e.g., Gen. 24:12, 14; Ruth 1:8). The Psalms are full of appeals to God to work in *hesed* on behalf of the psalmist (e.g., Ps. 6:4) or the community (e.g., Ps. 44:26) to hear, answer, save, redeem, deliver, help, protect, and forgive. In fact, the repeated refrain of Psalm 136, "for

his steadfast love endures forever," suggests that all God's actions from the creation of the world (vv. 5–9) to the redemption of Israel from Egypt (vv. 10–15) and beyond testify to his *hesed*.

God's *hesed* can be the basis of these appeals precisely because it "endures forever." This characteristic is crucial to Israel's understanding of God's gracious relationship with them and is often repeated, becoming a refrain which resounds in the later books of the Old Testament (e.g., Ezra 3:11; 2 Chron. 20:21). Though the loss of God's *hesed* is threatened on occasion (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:15; Jer. 16:5), God's institution of the covenant with the people (Deut. 7:9, 12) and their king (2 Sam. 7:11–16; Ps. 89:28–29), reinforces the gracious and enduring nature of his commitment to them. God is not like a family member whose *hesed* can be taken for granted. He is vastly superior to the Israelites, and yet, through his covenant, he binds himself to them eternally to do them good. The appropriate response is to recall God's *hesed* (e.g., Ps. 106:7), to hope (e.g., Ps. 33:18) and trust (e.g., Ps. 13:5) in it, and to proclaim it (e.g., Ps. 92:2; Isa. 63:7) with singing (e.g., Ps. 59:16–17) and rejoicing (e.g., Ps. 31:7).

As divine *hesed* on the vertical plane intersects with the human horizontal plane, it transforms it. Our lives are infused with the *hesed* we experience from God, creating new relationships with those around us as his goodness pours through us. We see this in the Old Testament when God demands *hesed* of his people (e.g., Mic. 6:8) and when David asks if there is anyone remaining in Jonathan's house to whom he may show "the *hesed* of God" (2 Sam. 9:3; cf. 1 Sam. 20:14). Jesus also illustrates this principle in the parable of the unforgiving servant, who after having a great debt forgiven by the king is expected to forgive his fellow servant (Matt. 18:23–35). The climax of the story is the king's accusation of the unforgiving servant using the verb form of the Greek word most often used to translate *hesed*: "And should not you have had *mercy* on your fellow servant, as I had *mercy* on you?" (v. 33).

Ultimately, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of *hesed* cross in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus himself, as he demonstrates God's covenant *hesed* to his people. Jesus takes his place on David's eternal throne, thereby providing the means for individual sinners to be made into a community called the church, bound in his new covenant and committed to showing *hesed* to one another. At the cross, God by no means clears the guilty, but, by visiting the in-

iquity of the fathers on his only Son, he displays his abounding *hesed*.

Will Kynes is researching the connections between the book of Job and the Psalms for his Ph.D. program at Cambridge. He grew up in Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church in Annandale, Virginia, and interned at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

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