LOVING-KINDNESS
A Word Study

BY FRANCIS X. KIMMITT

LOVING-KINDNESS. Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language (2d ed., unabridged), defines it as “tender regard, mercy, favor.” The Oxford English Dictionary (1933 ed.) defined loving-kindness as “kindness arising from a deep personal love, as the active love of God for his creatures.”

Can any one definition give you a sense of the fullness of this word? Probably not! So too is the sense of the Hebrew word from which we have the translation “loving-kindness.” The Hebrew word is chesed (pronounced “kesed”). The biblical writers used the noun form of the word 246 times. 1 To truly understand God’s character in the Old Testament, one must understand the word that many biblical writers used to portray the “loving” side of the Lord.

Chesed in the Old Testament
The Old Testament uses chesed on two levels: (1) between human beings and (2) between God and people. Chesed entails faithfulness, loyalty, love, and kindness in human relationships. One example is Jacob’s deathbed speech to Joseph, “When the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, ‘Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness [chesed] and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt’” (Gen. 47:29). 2 Another is Boaz’s expression of love and respect to Ruth, “Then he said, ‘May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness [chesed] to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich’” (Ruth 3:10). The sense of chesed in relationships between humans (marriage, family relationships, friendships, kings and subjects) is that men and women show chesed to one another by treating each hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness [chesed] and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt’” (Gen. 47:29). 2 Another is Boaz’s expression of love and respect to Ruth, “Then he said, ‘May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness [chesed] to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich’” (Ruth 3:10). The sense of chesed in relationships between humans (marriage, family relationships, friendships, kings and subjects) is that men and women show chesed to one another by treating each

This temple at Medinet Habu, on the western shore of the Nile, was built by Thutmose III. The psalmist celebrated God’s everlasting loving-kindness that delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage (Ps. 136:11).

Mount Sinai, or Jebul Musa (the mount of Moses), where God established His covenant with Israel. God’s covenantal relationship is based on His loving-kindness.
other with kindness, loyalty, and love because that is the basis of the relationship, and it promotes the good health of these relationships.\[^3\]

Interesting to compare is what *chesed* is not in the biblical human-human relationships. In no setting does *chesed* refer to an emotion or a sentiment. Neither does it ever have a sexual connotation in human relationships. *Chesed* is not self-seeking and is not motivated by anything except desiring the best for another person. We hear echoes of the concept of *chesed* in Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, “Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

The various uses of *chesed* on the second level—the divine-human relationship—suggest that *chesed* flows out of the covenant Yahweh established with His people Israel. We can see several aspects of the covenant relationship as we examine different uses of *chesed*. God set up specific requirements for His children when He made His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:5-6). The First Commandment, to worship/serve the Lord God alone because He is the only God, expressed clearly Israel’s primary requirement. The Lord promised to be their God always and care for them and protect them if they would be His people (compare Ex. 6:7). Therefore, when *chesed* describes the Lord’s relationship with His people, it typically reflects the covenant relationship’s perspective that the Lord established and to which He bound Himself: “unfailing love,” “steadfast love,” “covenant love.”\[^4\]

Humans fail to live up to the expectations of the relationship. In Hosea 6:6, the Lord told disobedient Israel that He desired mercy [*chesed*] rather than sacrifice. The indictment, as Hosea explained in 4:1, is that “the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, Because there is no faithfulness or kindness [*chesed*] Or knowledge of God in the land.”

Even as the children of Israel often failed to fulfill the requirements of the covenant, the Lord continued to express His “faithfulness,” “covenant love,” “loyalty,” “mercy,” “loving-kindness”—His *chesed*—toward those disobedient and rebellious children. Some biblical scholars have suggested that...

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**Lesson Reference**

FBSC: Lamentations 3:19-24; Nehemiah 1:5

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God’s *chesed* was not love or mercy, but merely loyalty to His contractual obligations as a result of the covenant that He made with the patriarchs. However, this view fails to recognize that the Lord made His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because of His love for them and their descendants, not merely to honor a contract. God chose to make the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. In so doing, He bound Himself to the stipulations of His covenant; in essence, the Lord promised to show *chesed* to His chosen people, not because of any inherent goodness in them, but because of His own “covenant love,” “mercy,” “faithfulness,” “loyalty”—His *chesed*.

How does the Lord demonstrate His *chesed* toward Israel in the Old Testament texts? We can see several characteristics of *chesed*. (1) God’s *chesed* delivers His people from catastrophes and from their oppressors. In Genesis 19:19, Lot gave thanks to the three men for their loving-kindness (*chesed*) in saving his life when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord’s *chesed* is one of the common reasons the psalms offer praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. (2) The Lord’s *chesed* nourishes human life. The psalmist cried out for God to sustain him so that he might honor the Lord with his life (compare Ps. 119:88). (3) God’s *chesed* often limits His wrath—His righteous response to human sin. In the midst of his indictment against Judah for their sins, the prophet Micah praised the Lord for His mercy on Judah (Mic. 7:18). (4) The *chesed* of the Lord endures forever. The wonderful antiphonal response of Psalm 136 (NASB: “For His lovingkindness [*chesed*] is everlasting”; NIV: “His love [*chesed*] endures forever”) is a demonstration of praise and worship for God’s eternal faithfulness. (5) God’s *chesed* is often a primary motivation for His children’s prayer and petition. Moses used the Lord’s words in his petition after the people’s faithless response to the report of the 12 spies (see Num. 14:17-19). (6) Finally, the Lord’s *chesed* is bountiful. The Lord’s words of Exodus 34:6-7, which Moses quoted back to Him in his petition for the forgiveness of Israel (Num. 14:18), are central to this concept of God’s abundant *chesed*.

**Chesed in Lamentations 3**

How then should we understand *chesed* in Lamentations 3:19? The poet who penned the book is describing in vivid emotional terms the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C.
by the invading Babylonians. We hear his heart cry as he described his feelings about this horrible event in the life of his people. In the midst of his agony, the poet was able to lift up his eyes and see his God. The Lord had not changed His character, nor had He ceased to be the covenant God of His people Israel.

This very aspect of the Lord’s nature was the source of the poet’s hope. The Lord’s chesed will never cease. The parallelism of the poetry reinforces the hope. God’s chesed is displayed in His compassion. His faithfulness is great. Every day IS a new day, filled with hope and promise precisely because of the Lord’s “faithfulness,” “covenant love,” “mercy,” “loyalty,” “loving-kindness.”

The message is as relevant today as it was to a hurting people more than 2,500 years ago:

“Great is Thy faithfulness,
O God, my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not,
Thy compassions, they fail not;
As Thou hast been,
Thou forever wilt be.
Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning
new mercies I see;
All I have needed,
Thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness,
Lord, unto me!”

1. Chesed appears in 27 of the 39 Old Testament books. It is not in the Books of Leviticus, 2 Kings, Ezekiel, Amos, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi, Ecclesiastes, or Song of Songs. More than one-half of all the occurrences of the word are found in the Book of Psalms (127 times). From Abraham Even-Shoshan, A New Concordance of the Bible (Jerusalem: Kriyat Safer Ltd., 1989), 386-387.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

3. Compare Jesus’ statement in Matthew 7:12 “Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”


6. Compare Hosea 11:1 “When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son” (NASB). The Lord’s motivation for His chesed was not the mere honoring of the terms of a contract but the love of a Father for His son.


8. “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” by Thomas O. Chisholm © 1923. Renewal 1951 Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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