

## What does lovingkindness mean?

Throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrew term “hesed” has a range of meaning: “loyal steadfast love”, “mercy,” “goodness and great kindness.” Because there is no English equivalent to this Hebrew term, Miles Coverdale created the biblical word “lovingkindness” to convey the depth and meaning of “hesed.” Translators of the Septuagint saw that the contextual meaning of “hesed” included mercy and translated accordingly with the Greek term “eleos” (mercy).

To begin to understand the depth of this term, it is important to note that “hesed” is used only of parties that have some significant relationship between them. It is not used in the context of casual relationships, as for example, the indiscriminate kindness one might display towards anyone.

### God’s love for the nation of Israel

When in reference to God’s love of Israel, the translation “lovingkindness” represented the type of attitude that two parties should have in a covenant relationship. Within its meaning were two essential parts of that attitude: love and loyalty. Some examples of this can be seen here:

Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness (**hesed**) and truth; who keeps lovingkindness (**hesed**) for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” (Ex 34:6-7)

Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness (**hesed**) to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face. Therefore, you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them. Then it shall come about, because you listen to these judgments and keep and do them, that the Lord your God will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness (**hesed**) which He swore to your forefathers. (Deut 7:9-12)

When viewed within the context of God’s history of dealing with His covenant people, “hesed” has a deeper and significant meaning. Despite the obstinate rebellion of His people, God’s covenant commitment portrays a love that is steadfast, sure and reliable. Though unfaithful, the nation of Israel could not do anything that would invalidate God’s unilateral and unconditional covenant He made with Abraham. Against God’s “hesed,” the nation of Israel’s “hesed” is contrasted and is translated as “devotion” or “loyalty.” In this contrast, man’s shallow temporal faithfulness to the covenant is noted.

The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness (**hesed**), forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.’ 19 Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness (**hesed**), just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.” (Num 14:18-19)

“Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord, I remember concerning you the devotion (**hesed**) of your youth, The love of your betrothals, Your following after Me in the wilderness, Through a land not sown.” (Jer 2:2)

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? For your loyalty (**hesed**) is like a morning cloud And like the dew which goes away early. (Hos 6:4)

### A human being’s love for another

With God’s “hesed” including the sense of forgiveness, grace and mercy, the meaning takes on the sense of “kindness” when used with human interpersonal relationships.

## What does lovingkindness mean? (page 2)

Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly (**hesed**) with you, that you also will deal kindly (**hesed**) with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth, and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." So the men said to her, "Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the Lord gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully (**hesed**) with you." (Josh 2:12-14)

He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative." Then he said, "May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness (**hesed**) to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich. (Ruth 3:9-10)

Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, so that I do not destroy you with them; for you showed kindness (**hesed**) to all the sons of Israel when they came up from Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. (1 Sam 15:6)

With the Hebrew term "hesed" confined to the Old Testament, it would not have been possible to gain a sense of its full meaning without the New Testament. Against the background of His righteousness and judgment in the Old Testament, God's provision of His only Son for atonement of mankind's sin portrays a lovingkindness of unfathomable depth. And it forces us to re-examine our "hesed".

### References:

1. Richardson A, ed., *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, New York: MacMillan Publishers, (1951).