

HESED, A Word with a World of Meaning

Text: Psalm 63:1-3; 69:16; Jeremiah 9:23,24

The German word *sehnsucht* has no equivalent translatable English word. The closest we may come to defining it is, “the inconsolable longing in the human heart for we know not what.” There is a similar concept in Welsh; it is the word *hiraeth*. The closest English definition would be, “homesickness for a home you cannot return to, or even a home that never existed at all.” We have only incomplete, working definitions for these words, because they don’t quite translate into English. Yet these words describe our own hearts in a way we English speakers don’t quite know how.

There is a word in Hebrew that has perhaps the broadest and largest range of meaning of any word in any language. To make an equivalent English translation was a monumental task for the translators. The Hebrew word of which I speak is *hesed*. It appears almost 250 times in the Old Testament. In 1535, Miles Coverdale, who produced the first entire English Bible, actually made up a word to translate *hesed* into English and it is the beautiful word lovingkindness. *Hesed* is an incredibly flexible word translated in the Authorized Version 150 times as mercy; mercies and merciful; 41 times as kindness and kindly; 30 times as lovingkindness and lovingkindnesses and 12 times as goodness. What seemed to determine how it was translated was determined by the context. Michael Card, a Hebrew scholar in his own right, wrote an entire book on this one word alone. He has an interesting take on how the context will often dictate the word chosen (from a human viewpoint) to be used:

“To borrow a concept from physics, we might say *hesed* is a word with an enormous mass. The greater the size of the object, the greater the gravitational pull it exerts. Earth revolves around the Sun because its great mass pulls us toward it. (The centripetal force, which pulls our planet away from the Sun, is perfectly balanced to keep us in steady orbit.) One of the fascinating features of *hesed* is its tendency to draw other words to itself by ‘linguistic gravity.’ It’s as if in struggling to express the inexpressible, the original writer was forced to enlist other words beside *hesed* to help convey its meaning. Sometimes the additional word is joined with the letter *vav*, usually translated ‘and’; hence, for example, “*hesed* and truth” (the most prevalent combination). In other examples the additional word occurs in close proximity, usually in what is referred to as poetic parallelism.”

Card makes a bold and, I believe, accurate definition of an inexhaustible and precious word. He says *hesed* takes place, “when the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything.” We see grace, truth and steadfast love coming together. This word could be spoken of as the defining characteristic of God. Jeremiah 3:12 says, “Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the LORD; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the LORD, and I will not keep anger for ever.” The word translated merciful is the word *hesed*. God

declares He is *hesed*! I cannot help but think that word was in the mind and heart of John as the Holy Spirit moved him to write John 1:14: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." Let's look into God's Word and see if we can know Him better through the study of *hesed*.

1. *HESED* REVEALS GOD IS PATIENT AND ABOUNDING IN MERCY.

Exodus 34:5-7

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments he discovered the children of Israel were practicing idolatry and all manner of evil, living opposite of the very commandments held by Moses. In anger, Moses threw down the tablets and they physically, as well as symbolically, broke into pieces. God declared in Exodus 33:3b, "...I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people: lest I consume thee in the way." In a plea for mercy, Moses said in Exodus 33:15, "And he said unto him, If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence." Then in Exodus 34:5-7 the basis of God's unconditional and longsuffering love was revealed to us: "And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness (*hesed*) and truth, Keeping mercy (*hesed*) for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."

2. *HESED* IS INTENDED TO BE RECIPROCAL.

Isaiah 55:3

David's ancestry illustrates *hesed*. Ruth 2:20: "And Naomi said unto her daughter in law, Blessed be he of the LORD, who hath not left off his kindness (*hesed*) to the living and to the dead. And Naomi said unto her, The man is near of kin unto us, one of our next kinsmen."

Ruth 3:10: "And he said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more kindness (*hesed*) in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich."

Ruth gave *hesed* to Naomi. Boaz gave *hesed* to Ruth, David's great-grandmother.

Hesed was extended to David from God in choosing him out of the sheepfold. Jonathan gave David *hesed* in initiating the covenant relationship: I Samuel 18:1-4; I Samuel 23:16,17. David gave Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan *hesed*: II Samuel 9:1, 11-13.

3. *HESED* IS TAUGHT AND LIVED BY JESUS.

A. Christ has *hesed* and desires the same in the lives of those who follow Him.

Matthew 12:1-8; Deuteronomy 23:25

Luke 5:27-32; Matthew 9:9-13

Malachi 1:6-8; Hosea 6:1-7

B. Jesus teaches *hesed* in the Prodigal Son:

Luke 15:32: "It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

C. Jesus teaches *hesed* in the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Luke 10:36, 37: "Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise."

4. *HESED* IS EMBEDDED IN THE DEATH, BURIAL, RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION OF JESUS.

Hesed is believed to be an act of mercy done by one in a higher station of life, being freely and lovingly bestowed upon one deemed outside the same station.

II Corinthians 8:9; Luke 23:34; Ephesians 4:8; Psalm 85:10; Psalm 2:12

CONCLUSION:

Hesed is designed to be brought from the pages of God's Word into the warp and woof of the Church, making us the salt and the light in the darkness. Matthew 5:7, 13, 14: "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy....Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid."

Romans 2:4: "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?"

-Pastor Pope-