

LOVING-KINDNESS

Hesed -- a rich word in Hebrew thought, it is variously understood to mean “loving-kindness; steadfast love; covenant loyalty; grace; mercy; faithfulness; goodness; devotion.” The word is used 240 times in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms. The word is one of the most important in the vocabulary of Old Testament theology.

It is possible to identify several basic meanings of the word, which in some sense interact: “strength,” “steadfastness,” and “love.”

The word refers to mutual and reciprocal rights and responsibilities between parties in a relationship (especially Yahweh and Israel). But **hesed** is not only a matter of obligation; it also entails generosity. It is not only a matter of loyalty, it also invokes mercy.

Hesed implies personal involvement and commitment in a relationship.

The Bible often speaks of someone “doing,” “showing,” or “keeping” **hesed**.

When man is the subject of **hesed**, the word usually describes the person’s kindness or loyalty to another (2 Sam. 9:7).

Humans demonstrate **hesed** toward others within the community -- toward family and relatives, friends, guests, masters, and servants.

Hosea 6:6 states that God desires “mercy and not sacrifice.”

Hesed is one of God’s most fundamental characteristics. His loving-kindness is offered to his people, who need redemption from sin, enemies, and troubles. A repeated confession describing God’s nature is that He is “abounding in **hesed**” (Ex. 34:6; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 103:8; Jonah 4:2).

Creation is the result of God’s **hesed** (Ps. 136:5-9). His love lasts for a “thousand generations” (Deut. 7:9; cf. Deut. 5:10 and Ex. 20:6), indeed “forever.”

The association of **hesed** with “covenant” keeps it from being misunderstood as mere providence or love for all creatures; **hesed** is God’s particular and specific love for His chosen and covenanted people. “Covenant” stresses the reciprocity of the relationship; but God’s **hesed** is ultimately beyond the covenant. It will not ultimately be abandoned, even when the human partner is unfaithful and must be disciplined (Is. 54:8, 10). Agape is the closest New Testament equivalent to **hesed**. Both terms accurately and beautifully speak of God’s covenant love and faithfulness to those who are recipients of His grace.