

AUGUST 30, 2020

LESSON 13

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD

THE COVENANTAL LOVE OF GOD (PSALM 136)

In **Lesson 2**, we studied about the love of God. In this lesson, we're going to consider the "covenantal love" of God, which is something a little bit different. These two words—"covenantal love"—translate a single Hebrew word, *hesed*, which is "one of the richest, most theologically insightful terms in the Old Testament."¹¹

Hesed is used nearly 250 times in the Old Testament (over half of these instances are in the Psalms) and is translated in numerous ways in our English Bibles, including "goodness," "kindness," "mercy," "grace," "love," "steadfast love," "unfailing love" and "loving-kindness."¹² As you can see by how many different ways to render it, the exact meaning of *hesed* is difficult to bring precisely into English. Entire books have been written about this word, one of which helpfully provides a working definition:

When the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything.¹³

Most often, the Bible describes God's *hesed* toward his covenantal people (see Ex 15:13; Num 14:18; Isa 63:7; Pss 25:7; 89:2). But it also describes the Israelites' covenantal love for God (Jer 2:2; Hosea 6:4, 6) and between people (Gen 32:10).

Psalm 89

Hesed is used 7 times in Psalm 89 (vv. 1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49). It is a celebration of God's love and commitment to his covenant people. Because he knows how the nation of Israel throughout its history sinned repeatedly against God, the psalmist admits they don't deserve God's love. But he praises God for it and prays it will continue.

¹¹ Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words, Bill Mounce, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 378.

¹² J. N. Oswalt, "God," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2008), 248. The KJV uses 14 English terms to translate *hesed*.

¹³ Michael Card, *Inexpressible: Hesed and the Mystery of God's Loving-kindness* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2018).

Psalm 136

Throughout Ps 136, the phrase, “for his *hesed* endures forever,” is used repeatedly. This is a historical psalm that recounts God’s protection and guidance of his people from the exodus until the conquering of Canaan. It celebrates God’s loyalty to his people.¹⁴

Ruth

In the book of Ruth, God’s *hesed* takes center stage. The term is only used three times (Ruth 1:8; 2:20; 3:10), but these are key places.

- **Ruth 1:8.** Despite faulting God with the tragedy of losing her husband and two sons, Naomi prayed for God’s “kindness” toward her Ruth.
- **Ruth 2:20.** After finding out that Ruth has begun gleaning in Boaz’s field, Naomi praises God for his “kindness.” She knew that Boaz was a close relative and could legally “redeem” them.
- **Ruth 3:10.** Boaz thanks Ruth for her “kindness,” since she chose him to marry and didn’t go searching for a younger suitor.

At the end of the narrative, we see God credited with providing for Naomi’s wellbeing (Ruth 4:14). And God was also at work bringing about the great King David for his covenant people (Ruth 4:22).

Larry’s Application

As we conclude this study on “Characteristics of God,” I think this is a great one for us to close our study with. Let’s consider a few of the ways that we can look at our own lives and see that the *hesed* of God is everlasting, that God is full of mercy, and how we should live our lives as a result.

1. God has cared for us since the beginning. In Psalm 139, we see beautiful words regarding the way that God has cared for people. David says that God has “searched me and known me” in v. 1. David describes how God knows him and that, no matter where he goes, God is there. David takes comfort in that fact. And so should we, knowing that God knows us better than we know ourselves.

What an awesome thought and a beautiful passage for us to consider. When things are going bad for us we should know that God is already in the future. God knows what we have needed since before we were formed. One of the things that God knew that we would need is a Savior and he planned that long before we were ever even here.

2. God cares for his covenant people. Consider Psalm 89. Beginning in verse 19 we see God speaking and in verse 20 he says, “I have found David my servant; with holy oil I have anointed him.”

¹⁴ See also Pss 106:1; 107:1; 118:1.) It is interesting that Paul also speaks of God’s love as lasting forever (1 Cor 13:13).

Verse 23 says, “But I will crush his adversaries before him.” Verse 28 says, “My lovingkindness [*hesed*] I will keep for him forever and my covenant shall be confirmed to him.” In verse 34, God reminds us that “My covenant I will not violate nor will I alter the utterance of my lips.” And finally, in vv. 36–37 we see that

His descendants shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful.

Has God violated his covenant with David or has his throne been established forever? One of the things that I always try to point out in scripture is Jesus. We know that on Earth that Jesus was descended from David. Through Jesus this covenant has remained. Jesus is on his throne forever. It is a comforting thought that God cares for and keeps his promises, especially to his covenant people. If God keeps his promises and cares for his covenant people, then there are promises to us that we can know for certain that God will keep.

3. God shows mercy. Along those very same lines is the fact that God shows mercy. None of us are perfect. Paul says this to the Roman brethren in Romans 3:23 when he says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It is a big deal for us to understand that we do sin and that as a result we find ourselves separated from God. Paul would tell these brethren that they were justified “as a gift” (verse 24). Romans Chapter 5, Titus 3, and Ephesians 2 explain this further; but I want to look at the passage in Ephesians 2. Paul begins by telling them that “you were dead in your trespasses and sins” (2:1) but he gives them the good news in Eph 2:4–10. They’ve received grace!

Because of the mercy of God and his love, we have been saved. It is a gift of God. The thing about mercy is that we could never deserve it on our own. We could never do enough to warrant it. God grants it to us, his covenant people, because of the great love that he has for us.

4. What should we do about it? We all know the story of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25–37. To recount it, there was a lawyer who wanted to test Jesus and asked him what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him what was written in the law and the lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus told him that this was correct and that he should do that and live. The lawyer then asked, “Who is my neighbor?” at which time Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A traveler fell victim to robbers. He was beaten, stripped, and left half dead, with no way to help himself. We have all been in situations where there was no way that we could help ourselves.

So, in this story, a Priest and Levite walk by and they both stay away from the person that needs the help. The priest and the Levite would have been considered religious elite. They would have been considered the people that would be expected to do the right thing. They were the people that all would have expected to stop and help. That was not the case.

The Samaritans were generally considered sinners and a mixed race. They did not deal with or have any connection with the Jews. This would have been the last person on earth that the people who Jesus was talking to would have expected to stop—yet he did. Not only did he stop and help, but he also made sure that, even after he was gone, this poor victim with a great need would be cared for. This was the person that was the neighbor in this story. This was the person that showed the kind of love that God expects from us.

We should love and care for people from the beginning.

There are many people that may need help, physically or spiritually. We can be there to lend a hand. It does not always mean money. There are lots of ways that we can help. Get to know the people around you because it may not be as obvious as what we saw in the Good Samaritan. Once you find a need, fill it. Encourage others to do the same. I would venture that the Inn Keeper in our story was affected by what was done by the Good Samaritan. Can you affect others positively by your acts of kindness, too?

We should keep our promises. God has kept his promises to us. We in turn should keep our promises to God and to others. The Good Samaritan promised that if the Inn Keeper had to spend any other funds that he would pay those as well. Through the promise that he made this poor soul continued to receive the help that he needed. When we became a Christian one of the promises that we made was to serve God. A big part of that is being a neighbor to those around us. What are we doing to keep that promise?

Finally, we should show mercy to others. This is apparent in the Good Samaritan. He did not have to stop. By all accounts he should not have stopped when you look at the totality of the circumstances, yet he did. We have a chance to show mercy to others. One of the ways that we can do that is by helping people that we know have no way to return any help to us. This poor beaten man could never repay the Samaritan, yet he had compassion and mercy on him. Just like God has for us.

We can never repay the mercy that was shown to us by God, but if we truly want to be like God, we will strive to have the same characteristics that he displays to us, maybe none more important than this one: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:36-40).