

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament
H. God's Answer for Sinful Rebellion
22. The Lovingkindness of God

We've been talking about Satanic and human rebellion against the divine order and God's inevitable and righteous judgment against it. You might call this judgment "God's resounding "No" to sinful rebellion. But that's only part of his answer for sinful rebellion. In fact, God says "No" in judgment in order that he can say "Yes" to those who repent of their rebellion and wholeheartedly agree with him on the matter of their proper relationship to him and place in his Creation. And so we speak today at the Lovingkindness of God.

From the beginning God has had kind and loving intentions for his whole Creation and particularly the image-bearers whom he appointed as stewards over it. And God's lovingkindness has become even more apparent in the way he has worked to restore what sin and rebellion have torn down.

Look, for example, at what happened right after what is called the Fall—that first act of disobedience by Adam and Eve. They immediately realized and regretted their sin, and tried to hide from God; their shame over their nakedness showed their awareness that they had disqualified themselves from continuing in the relationship they had previously enjoyed with God. It's clear that they were afraid at what he would say to them, much as disobedient children are when they've done something very wrong and know their parents are coming to call them to account.

One question that parents sometimes put to their children at such a time is "Why?" "Why have you done this?" And the pent-up anguish and frustration behind that question may also come out as an accusation: "How dare you? Why, after all my sacrifice for you, after working my fingers to the bone to provide you with not only the necessities of life, but the luxuries too, why do you repay me like this? How dare you?" God did not ask Adam that question. It would have been logical to do so. God, after all, is the perfect creator and He cannot tolerate sin. And Adam and Eve were definitely sinners.

But God did not withdraw from them in disgust or shocked disbelief at their nerve. Nor did he ask other questions parents are sometimes wont to ask:

- (1) "Why have you done this?" in the psychological sense, as if it were important to uncover the underlying factors that motivated Adam and Eve's disobedience. Or
- (2) "What am I going to do with you?" as a way to vent his frustration with them. Or
- (3) "Where are you?" phrased as a threat of the deserved punishment to come.

God did ask the "Where are you?" question, but to a different end—to let Adam and Eve know that he was not yet finished with them. He had not withdrawn from them, but still loved them and wanted to have a relationship with them.

God did later speak of punishment for their disobedience, but his question was a preliminary call for them to come clean and to return to believing and trusting in Him, and to make a new commitment to obedient living. God knew the worst. He knew the evil that had been done, and yet still loved Adam and Eve and the rest of his Creation. And shortly afterward, he gave them the amazing promise of eventual victory over the serpent, to be achieved by one of their offspring.

The love of God which prompted that promise would culminate in the gift of Jesus, God's only begotten son, given, as the apostle John put it, because "God so loved the world..."

But that love was repeatedly displayed in the centuries and millennia prior to that too. For example, Noah and the patriarchs definitely saw God's love firsthand. But it was especially Abraham's descendants, enslaved in Egypt, to whom God's loving character was more profoundly revealed—in that series of events culminating in their freedom from slavery and acquisition of a homeland in Canaan.

The Israelites didn't know much at first about what God was like. That was clear in what Moses asked God after being told that he was being commissioned to rescue them from Egypt (Ex. 3:13): *Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"* Moses' question about God's name was really a question about his character: "I know that you're the God of our fathers, but what are you like?"

In response, God gave this enigmatic reply: *I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."* And God also identified himself as Yahweh. Yahweh: I am who I am, or also translated as: "I will be who I will be." In effect God told Moses, "I am, who I'm revealing myself to be right now to you, and I will be what I reveal myself to be in everything that's coming. Yahweh is what his deeds have been showing and will be showing him to be.

Maybe that sounds a bit like doubletalk. But look at how God identified himself already in the incident of the burning bush. Moses learned here that God had heard the groaning of his people (2:24). He had seen their misery (3:7). And (3:9) "The cry of the Israelites has reached me and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them." But God not only saw and heard; he had a heart for what he saw and heard. "I am concerned about their suffering," he said of Israel.

For more than a century things had been really tough for the Hebrew slaves. And all this time they had cried out to God, not sure that he was personal and merciful, and concerned about them. But God told Moses that he was indeed, thus revealing a foretaste of his love, mercy, and compassion in the events to come. For he was making plans to rescue the Israelites from Egypt, but more than this, to bring them into a good land of their own.

Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, showed him a little of the lovingkindness of Yahweh. But by the end of the matter, both he and the rest of Israel would see much more of it. They would learn that that Yahweh—the God of their fathers—was more personal and merciful and faithful than they had ever imagined.

Some time later, after God had arranged the freeing of his people from Egypt, and dealt with the subsequent threat to them at the shores of the Red Sea, and arranged for their survival in the wilderness through provisions of manna and water, and repeatedly helped them through various other threats, including their own rebellious natures—we are told that the Lord again revealed himself to Moses, in a sort of reprise of what had happened at the burning bush.

The occasion was the second giving of the Ten Commandments (after Moses had destroyed the first set of tablets upon seeing the rebellion of Israel (Ex. 34:6).

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...."

God had earlier told Moses that he and Israel would find out who he was and what he was like by his actions on their behalf. And, indeed, they had. To be sure, he did not leave the guilty unpunished, but he had shown himself to be compassionate, gracious, patient, faithful, and forgiving—in short—abounding in love and faithfulness, and determined to remain so for those he called his “treasured possession.”

The biblical emphasis on the lovingkindness of God is highlighted by a study of the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is translated in English Bibles with a variety of words, including “kindness,” “love,” “lovingkindness,” “steadfast love,” “loyalty,” “faithful love,” and so on. Let me summarize some of the points made by Will Kynes, in an article titled “Considering the *Hesed* of the Lord.” (From the C.S. Lewis Institute Quarterly publication “Knowing and Doing,” Summer, 2010)

Scripture sometimes uses *hesed* to describe loving relationships between individuals or groups, whether that is between family members (Gen. 20:13), a host and guest (Gen. 19:19), friends (1 Sam. 20:8, 14), or a king and his subjects (2 Sam. 2:5). There’s an enduring quality to “*hesed*.” It’s not just love or kindness, but steadfast or unfailing love or kindness. It persists over time. Of course, in relationships between people this persistence is fallible. But “*hesed*” is stronger and more reliable when it describes God’s lovingkindness. And in fact, of the 246 times *hesed* appears in the Old Testament, the great majority refer to how God relates to people.

The steadfast love, the *hesed* of God, as depicted in the Old Testament, extends to the whole community of his people, but it is focused particularly on and through the person and the line of the anointed one whom Israel recognized at their greatest king: David. Let me read a few vs. from Psalm 89, which reinforce the gracious and enduring nature of God’s commitment to keep loving David and work his purposes out through him and his offspring.

²⁰I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him.

²¹My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him.

²²The enemy will not get the better of him; the wicked will not oppress him.

²³I will crush his foes before him and strike down his adversaries.

²⁴My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted.

²⁵I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers.

²⁶He will call out to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.’

²⁷And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.

²⁸I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail.

²⁹I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure.

Of course, David’s line culminated in Jesus Christ, through whom it would become clear that God’s *hesed* is big and powerful enough not only to cover the entire nation of Israel, but all of humanity. God’s *hesed* even fills the earth as Ps. 33:5 puts it.

True “*hesed*” is never merely a matter of possessing loving feelings, but always involves practical action taken on behalf of another.

Pharaoh's cupbearer, grateful to Joseph for interpreting his dream, showed "hesed" by speaking to Pharaoh on Joseph's behalf. And Israel's army, grateful for Rahab's help, showed her and her family "hesed" by saving them out of Jericho's destruction. "Hesed" is love in practice.

God's "hesed" is practical too; Scripture says that he "shows" hesed to those who call on him. Therefore the Psalms are full of appeals to God to work in hesed on behalf of the psalmist or the community to hear, to answer, to save, to redeem, to deliver, to help, to protect, and to forgive. In fact, the repeated refrain of Psalm 136, "his love (hesed) endures forever," suggests that all of God's actions from the creation of the world (vv. 5–9) to the redemption of Israel from Egypt (vv. 10–15) and beyond testify to his hesed.

God's hesed can be the basis of these appeals precisely because it "endures forever." And so the appropriate response to God's hesed is to continually remember and proclaim it with singing and rejoicing, not only as a testimony to others, but also as a way to keep renewing one's own hope and trust in him.

One of the Old Testament's most effective and compelling metaphors to help us understand the great hesed or lovingkindness of God is that which compares God's love to the love parents have for their children. God loves his children with the love of a father and the love of a mother. In Is. 66:13 God compares himself to a mother who comforts her child. In just that way, *so I will comfort you*, he says. That is also reminiscent of how God treated Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. Deut.1:31 reminds the people of Israel, *The Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son.*

Fathers and mothers both have a gentle and unbounded love and emotion for their children. That is the point of the scriptural comparisons. More than anything else, fathers and mothers love their children. That's the part of their many-sided task that stands out; they love their children. And God knows just what that's like. Even more than parents do, God loves his children. Isa.49:14ff. makes that clear. Zion said, *"The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me."* *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?* [Of course not; how can it be? Impossible! But he continues] *Though she may forget, I will not forget you.*

God loves us the way mothers love their children whom they have borne and carried and nursed. And even much more. For, impossible as it may seem, a mother can forget her child. Lamentations tells of people being in such desperate straits, and so starving that they killed and ate their own children. I can't imagine that. Even less can God imagine forgetting his own children. His love, his compassion, never fails (Lam 3:22,32).

Isaiah speaks in Isa. 49:16 of a tattoo on the palm of God's hand that he always sees: *See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.* And Hosea points out the ties that bind God to his people (11:3,4). *It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.* As parents feed their children and teach them to walk, kiss their wounds better, love them, and lead them along; that's how God treats his children. Psa. 103:13 puts it like this: *As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.*

Not all of us are fathers or mothers, but each of us is someone's child and should be able to understand something, from one side at least, of the love that exists between parents and their children. Too many children, to be sure, receive from their parents, not love, but only grudging attention, or violence and abuse. But most of us, I think, have occasionally if not regularly, experienced how great it is to be loved by a father or mother. We have experienced how secure it feels, how comforting it is to receive love from a parent.

If we take that sense, whether we've experienced it a little or a lot, and we magnify it a thousand times, a thousand times a thousand times, we know a little bit of how God wants us to feel about his love for us. Then we know a little of how God wants us to respond to and bask in his love.

Throughout history, the lives of parents have revolved around their children. Parents want to see their children do better than they did. They're proud to say, "Those are our children; we nurtured them; they belong to us." But not even a perfect father or mother can love us as God loves us, consistently and with such passion. Not even the best human parent always avoids the trap of manipulation. And what parent hasn't experienced impure motives toward a willful and disobedient child?

But God loves us perfectly. He never abuses his children. Never. He always has their best interests in mind. And he will heal his children of even the most traumatic memories and experiences. As you walk with Him, he will demonstrate to you the grace of true parental love.

God says of his children. "Those children are mine. I love them. I want the best for them. I'll never forget them, even if they run away from home, they'll always be in my heart, my thoughts. I want to do something for them, to spare them difficulty." That's the sense conveyed by the love and compassion of God in these scripture passages; it's a strength of feeling which leads one to action on behalf of another; it's the strength of that hesed for us, even when we were dead in sin and completely unlovable that led God to make the supreme sacrifice. So that (I Jn.3) we could be called the sons and daughters of God, so that we could be full-fledged, restored, regenerated, children of God.

This Scriptural emphasis on the lovingkindness of God, hinted at already in Genesis 3 in God's "Where Are You" question to Adam, and a little later in his promise to Eve of an offspring to vanquish the serpent, keeps getting fleshed out more and more in the redemptive-historical story until it becomes brilliantly clear with the coming of Jesus. It's this love of God that is the basis of the Christian's life and security, and that also gives each of us the ultimate role model for our own parenting, as well as an indication of the other works of love to which God calls his church.