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THE STEADFAST LOVE OF THE LORD

THOMAS H. OLBRICHT

*A favorite devotional song of college students a generation ago was based on
Lamentations 3.22:*

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”

What a great affirmation of the love of God! It declares that God’s love is ever present. He is an incessant lover. Believers have a real reason for getting up in the morning. They eagerly anticipate the surprises God has in store for them on this new day!

When one considers the setting for this affirmation they are amazed at the audacity of the writer. The circumstance under which the author writes makes the anticipation of God’s unwavering love even more decisive. These words were uttered after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Under the leadership of that dominating Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, Jerusalem was completely destroyed. The walls were pushed over, and everything combustible was put to the torch. In the long siege prior to ultimate defeat, young children starved in the streets (Lam 2.12), and apparently mothers even ate their own offspring so excruciating was their hunger (2.20). The conditions were unmistakably harrowing, and the author minced no words in expressing his bitterness (Lam 3.1–21). He concluded his graphic lament:

He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace,
I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, “Gone is my glory,
and my expectation from the Lord.” (Lam 3.16–18)

Nevertheless in the midst of these grievous circumstances, the author lifts up his heart in hope, “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end” (Lam 3.21–22).

(CHESED) A CHIEF CHARACTERISTIC OF GOD

Every characteristic of God must be appraised from the perspective of his love, which includes his holiness, his righteousness and his acting for the sake of his name. God’s intense love is the ground and explanation

of his characteristics. In a real sense, this rousing declaration that God's love is unrelenting is central to the theology of the Old Testament.

The Hebrew word translated in the Revised Standard Version, "steadfast love" (my quotes are from the NRSV) is *chesed*. *Chesed*, translated "steadfast love," occurs in the Old Testament in 171 verses. One of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of God is his steadfast love. When God presented a verbal self-portrait he employed along other terms *chesed*.

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,
 "The Lord, the Lord,
 a God merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger,
 and abounding in steadfast love (*chesed*) and faithfulness,
 keeping steadfast love (*chesed*) for the thousandth generation,
 forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
 yet by no means clearing the guilty . . ." (Exod 34.6-7)

The word *chesed* that occurs twice in this proclamation is translated "steadfast love" both times by the NRSV. The word is usually translated "steadfast love" in the NRSV, but sometime "kindness," or "loving-kindness." The NIV usually translates the word "love" and the NASV "loving-kindness." The KJV and the NKJV translate it "mercy." The reason "mercy" is preferred in the older translations is likely because the Septuagint translated the Hebrew *chesed* into the Greek as *eleos*, which in turn is normally translated "mercy" into English in the KJV.

It is normally only God who is declared to possess *chesed*. But Micah, in an important and memorable text, declares that God challenges humans to be persons of *chesed* like himself.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
 and what does the Lord require of you
 but to do justice, and to love kindness (*chesed*),
 and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6.8)

In this case the NRSV translates *chesed* "kindness." Why is this the case? Why not "steadfast love"? Likely because the text declares that mortals are "to do justice, and to love kindness" (*chesed*). It would be awkward to translate the phrase, "to love steadfast love." It is of interest to note that Jesus essentially quotes Micah 6.8 in Matthew 23.23. He uses the Septuagint translation *eleos* for the Hebrew (*chesed*) and therefore the NRSV translates it "mercy."

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy (*eleos*) and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others."

Jesus too argues that humans need to exhibit this very crucial characteristic of God, that is, steadfast love or mercy.

What Dimensions of Meaning May Be Found in *Chesed*?

What does the word *chesed* mean in the Old Testament? *Chesed* is not the only word in the Old Testament that is translated "love." An even more frequent word translated "love" from the Hebrew is *ahab* in its various forms. The word can refer to God's love, but more characterically it refers to human love of God or of other humans. *Chesed* in contrast is mostly employed to declare the love of God. In most of the contexts the point is clear that God's love is constant. God never gives up on his wayward people. God continues faithful even when his people are faithless. We will notice this dimension of the word in Psalm 136 and as employed in the covenants of God with his people.

Psalm 136 is an excellent venue for ascertaining the basic meaning *chesed*. A quick glance at Psalm 136 reveals that the Psalmist extols the mighty acts of God on behalf of his people. After each line, upon the declaration of an act of God, the phrase “for his steadfast love endures forever” is repeated—a total of twenty-six times. Why is this the case? The Psalm is apparently in this form so that it is suitable for antiphonal reading at a gathered assembly. The gathered worshipers in ancient Israel did not have texts to read. They therefore needed a line which could be easily remembered and repeated. A worship leader, normally a priest, read the first line, then all the people would in unison declare, “for his steadfast love endures forever” and thus they would proceed until the Psalm was finished.

The profession of God’s forever love is the result of another Hebrew word that follows *chesed*, that is, *olam*. “His steadfast love endures forever (*olam*).” Nevertheless, from the Psalm it is obvious that *chesed* itself has the dimension of never ending love. The Psalmist moves from the beginning of God’s creation to the present time. In verses 4–9 he presented God’s work in creation in respect to the earth and the heavens. In the Old Testament narrative God’s people did not respond as he had hoped. Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree. The thoughts and intents of the hearts of humans became constantly evil. God determined to destroy humans from the face of the earth, but he relented (Gen 6). The next section of Psalm 136, verses 10–16, depicts God’s new actions on human’s behalf. He didn’t give up despite second thoughts in the days of Noah. He led his people out of Egypt and into the wilderness. In various actions they proved faithless there. Nevertheless God empowered them so that they defeated such mighty kings as Sihon of the Amorites and Og of Bashan (17–20). Despite his people’s lapses in faith God did not have lapses in love. His love was steadfast. His steadfast love continues into the very present (23–26) in that he lifts up the humble, rescues his people from their foes and gives food to all creatures. I think that the NRSV translation “steadfast love” better captures the meaning of *chesed* than all the other translations.

Another context in which *chesed* occurs discloses its meaning. The word appears whenever God presents covenants, especially the Mosaic and the Davidic covenants. God puts his commitments to his people in writing, that is, in covenants. And God’s covenant commitments are forever. God’s covenant promises and his love are both steadfast. They are forever as Ezra declared.

“Now therefore, our God—the great and mighty and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love—do not treat lightly all the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings, our officials, our priests, our prophets, our ancestors, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until today.” (Neh 9.32)

In the giving of the ten commandments the faithfulness of God is unrelenting. His *chesed*, that is, his steadfast love extends to a thousand generations.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exod 20.5–6)

In his covenant promise to David God likewise declared that the promise was premised on God faithful love. The promise was forever and it was grounded in *chesed*, God’s steadfast love. God will neither end his covenant promise nor his steadfast love. They are forever.

Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.
I will establish his line forever,
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.
If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my ordinances,

if they violate my statutes
 and do not keep my commandments,
 then I will punish their transgression with the rod
 and their iniquity with scourges;
 but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
 or be false to my faithfulness.
 I will not violate my covenant,
 or alter the word that went forth from my lips. (Psalm 89.28–34)

David exhibited some of the same rebellious traits as Israel. He was not always faithful in keeping the commandments of God. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the death of her husband Uriah the Hittite. David was punished for both and from that time on his kingdom faced great challenges. But David was faithful and God upheld his commitment. He did not remove his steadfast love from David.

“Thus says the Lord: If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken, so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with my ministers the Levites.” (Jer 33.20–21)

WHAT OF THE WRATH OF GOD?

If God’s love is steadfast and never wavers, then how is it that God can sometimes become quite angry? When that happens, does his love, in fact cease? A famous depiction of the wrath of God occurs after Moses has gone up the mountain to receive the law of God. The people below became restless. Aaron accepted silver and gold from them, melted it down and formed it into a molten calf even though he told Moses that it just came out that way. Furthermore, he declared to them that this calf was the god who brought them up out of Egypt. God’s displeasure is immediately obvious.

The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” (Exod 32.7–10)

Does this imply that God by his wrath has departed from his steadfast love? No. In fact, it discloses the opposite, that is, that God burns precisely because his love is so intense. It is an ultimate demonstration of his love.

We might understand the plight of God by comparing his situation with that of a husband who has an unfaithful wife. (I certainly am not the first to use this analogy. It is used many times in the Old Testament, a stellar example being Hosea. Here we will merely modernize an ancient comparison.)

John meets Mary at a party. After a whirlwind courtship, they marry in a picturesque rock garden on a rare June day. John works for IBM and travels during the week. One night as she returns from the supermarket, Mary meets David in the parking lot of the apartment complex. In a few weeks they strike up a friendship. About a month later John comes home from a business trip. The dishes are stacked high, the bed is unmade, and the apartment is in general disarray. Mary is nowhere to be found. Sometime later she arrives home and explains she has been with David.

Now John could simply pass off the incident as an example of the liberation of modern woman. If he seemed indifferent to the whole matter, we would be justified in presuming that he didn’t really love Mary after all. But had he introduced some sanction against her, such as saying, “Mary, I want you around when I get home, and if you aren’t here next time, I will go out for dinner and not come home until midnight,” we would assume that he really cared for Mary and wanted her home when he returned. If he simply “cleared

the guilty,” or rationalized her behavior with no sanction whatsoever, he indicated that the relationship mattered little to him one way or the other. Likewise, God shows by his wrath that his love for wayward humanity is undying and deep. His sanctions against humans are the result of his incessant desire to bring man back into his fellowship (Amos 4.6–12). The characteristic opposite of love is not wrath, but indifference. God’s love is relentless. He just never gives up. He is faithful despite our faithlessness. He challenges us to develop the identical deep and abiding love.

God never gives up on his children.
 How can I give you up, Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah?
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
 My heart recoils within me;
 my compassion grows warm and tender.
 I will not execute my fierce anger;
 I will not again destroy Ephraim;
 for I am God and no mortal,
 the Holy One in your midst,
 and I will not come in wrath. (Hosea 11.8–9)

GOD AND THE SON CHALLENGE US TO BE GODLIKE IN LOVE, TO EXHIBIT *CHESED*

Amazingly God wants us to have the same sort of love that characterizes his very being, that is, *chesed*.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
 and what does the Lord require of you
 but to do justice, and to love kindness (*chesed*),
 and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6.8)

We live in a time in which faithfulness and loyalty take a backseat to individual needs. The advice columnists regularly instruct those who write in that what they need to do is to make decisions based upon what works best for them, or in what manner they are most fulfilled in their personhood. Permanency in relationship is seldom advanced as a priority. But the God of *chesed* requires steadfast love from humans made in his image.

Just as God is willing to put it into writing to declare a forever relationship, so God encourages humans to put it in writing so that our relationships will continue forever. The propensity of couples to live together without putting it in writing is a demonstration of a failure to embrace God’s call for constancy. The statement made by such an arrangement is, in effect, that we will live together as long as it works for us. The day when the relationship cools one of us will move out. Such relationships are fickle, erratic and capricious. Unpredictable love is the opposite of divine love, in which God is faithful in relationship forever.

The same constancy God likewise commends for the family. God’s people are challenged to make a lifelong commitment to children, to parents and to other relatives. Of course, the intensity of such relationships depends upon age, proximity and various other factors. But according to our *Chesed* God, the breaking off of such a relationship is not an option. These persons are still within our sphere of love regardless, even if they take up goals and values completely at odds with our Christian commitments. We certainly are not to participate in their vices, but we are still challenged to love them and to encourage them to walk in paths of righteousness. Our love for our grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren is to be Godlike, that is, a steadfast love, that is, neither intermittent nor capricious.

We also are challenged to love our brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus with the same permanency. It has become a standard conclusion these days that if you outgrow the fellowship of Christians in which you are

involved and if you are no longer being fed, then the appropriate action is to leave that congregation and find another. You are not to concern yourself with faithfulness or loyalty. Those are old-fashioned Victorian values. Perhaps they are to the heady world of the twenty-first century, but not to our God who will never abandon or desert us regardless. We are likewise, as much as it is possible, to love our neighbors with the same steadfast love.

Prove me, O Lord, and try me;
test my heart and mind.
For your steadfast love is before my eyes,
and I walk in faithfulness to you. (Psalm 26.2-3)

Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you. (Psalm 63.3)

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