

Character of God:

# Loyal Love

STUDY NOTES

When God reveals who he is to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, one of the ways he describes himself is overflowing with loyal love, or in Hebrew, *khesed*.

“Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger,  
**overflowing with loyal love** and faithfulness.”

This verse is the most quoted and reused verse in the Hebrew Bible. It’s clear that this description of God is core to the biblical understanding of who he is, so we wanted to spend some time focusing on this fascinating passage. In our Character of God series, we’re looking at each of these descriptors and digging into their significance in the biblical story and the implications they have for us today. These study notes will help you dig deeper into the Hebrew word *khesed* (loyal love) and see the ideas presented in our video Character of God: Loyal Love.

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# Khesed in the Hebrew Bible

In Hebrew, *khesed* is a noun meaning “loyal love.”

It occurs 245 times in the Hebrew Bible.

- 127 times in the Psalms
- 46 times in Genesis–2 Kings
- 26 times in the Prophets
- 13 times in the wisdom literature

*Khesed* describes a relational trait between two people or groups, either God/human or human/human. But out of all the mentions of *khesed*, 75% of them are referencing God’s *khesed*.

Let’s take a look at some of the other forms of *khesed* in the Hebrew Bible.

*Khasid* (noun): one who shows *khesed* to another (to Yahweh or to people)

- Occurs 32 times
- Usually translated as “godly ones” (NASB/ESV) or “faithful ones” (NIV/NRSV)

*Hitkhased* (verb): to act with loyal love

- Occurs 2 times (2 Samuel 22:26, Psalm 18:26)
- This word has been translated a few different ways throughout the history of English translations.

<b>Tyndale Bible (early 1500s) and Wycliffe Bible (late 1300s)</b>	“Mercy”
<b>King James Version and NASB</b>	“Lovingkindness” or “mercy”
<b>NRSV and ESV</b>	“Steadfast love”
<b>NIV</b>	“Love” or “unfailing love”

## A Basic Definition of *Khesed*

*Khesed* assumes a pre-existing relationship, and it refers to actions that demonstrate loyalty to that relationship, to preserve, protect, and make it flourish. It does not refer to any one specific type of action. Rather, it describes a posture in the relationship that can be expressed through many different acts.

# Notable Old Testament Passages Using *Khesed*

Your *khesed*, Lord, reaches to the heavens,  
Your *faithfulness* to the skies.  
Your *righteousness* is like the highest mountains,  
Your *justice* like the great deep.

PSALM 36:5-6 (NIV)

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
So great is his *khesed* for those who fear him;  
As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has he *removed our transgressions* from us.

PSALM 103:11-12 (NIV)

He has shown you, O human, what is *good*. And what does the  
Lord require of you? To do *justice* and to love *khesed* and to  
walk humbly with your God.

MICAH 6:8 (NIV)

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is *good*;  
His *khesed* endures forever.

PSALM 118:1 (NIV)

Because of the Lord's great *khesed*, we are not consumed,  
for his *compassions* never fail. They are new every  
morning; great is your *faithfulness*.

LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23 (NIV)

God's *khesed* is expressed by maintaining the stability of creation that sustains life (Psalm 36), by forgiving the sins of the his people (Psalm 103), by showing "goodness" (Psalm 118), and by not allowing his people to be destroyed (Lamentations 3). Human *khesed* is expressed by doing justice and humbly honoring God's commands (Micah 6).

*Khesed* is a character trait that motivates generosity, forgiveness, protection, and loyalty.

## Human Acts of *Khesed*

People do *khesed* when they fulfill their commitments to another person in their family or kinship network. Let's look at a few examples.

### Jacob's sons bury their father

Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years, and the years of his life were a hundred and forty-seven. When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, "If I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me *khesed* and *faithfulness*. Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried." "I will do as you say," he said.

GENESIS 47:28-30 (NIV)

## Ruth stays with and supports Naomi and her family line

And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord do **khesed** with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me...

RUTH 1:8 (NASB95)

Then he said, "May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter. You have shown your last **khesed** to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich. Now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence."

RUTH 3:10-11 (NASB95)

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me."

RUTH 1:16-17 (NASB95)

People do *khesed* when they fulfill their commitment to someone they've made a covenant agreement with. Here are some examples.

### Abraham to Abimelech

Now it came about at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do; now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but according to the **khesed** that I have shown to you, you shall show to me and to the land in which you have sojourned." Abraham said, "I swear it."

GENESIS 21:22-24 (NASB95)

### David to Jonathan and Jonathan's son

May Yahweh be with you as he has been with my father. If I am still alive, will you not show me the **khesed** of Yahweh, that I may not die?

"You shall not cut off your **khesed** from my house forever, not even when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth." So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the Lord require it at the hands of David's enemies." Jonathan made David vow again because of his love for him because he loved him as he loved his own life.

1 SAMUEL 20:13-17 (NASB95)

David asked, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show **khesed** for Jonathan's sake?" Now there was a servant of Saul's household named Ziba. They summoned him to appear before David, and the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" "At your service," he replied. The king asked, "Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show the **khesed** of God?" Ziba answered the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is lame in both feet."

So King David had him brought from Lo Debar...When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor. David said, "Mephibosheth!" "At your service," he replied. "Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you **khesed** for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table."

2 SAMUEL 9:1-7 (NIV)

People do *khesed* when they treat someone as if they are in a committed relationship (even if they're not). Here are some examples.

### Pharaoh's winemaker to Joseph

*Then Joseph said to him, "This is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you will put Pharaoh's cup into his hand according to your former custom when you were his cupbearer. Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do *khesed* to me by mentioning me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house."*

GENESIS 40:12-14 (NASB95)

*Thus it came about on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand; but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet *the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.**

GENESIS 40:20-23 (NASB95)

### The spies to Rahab

*"Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show *khesed* to my family because I have shown *khesed* to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death." "Our lives for your lives!" the men assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you with *khesed* and *faithfully* when the Lord gives us the land." So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall.*

JOSHUA 2:12-15 (NIV)

In Hebrew, you'll notice that *khesed* is often paired with either "faithful" or "compassionate."

*Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the *faithful* God, keeping his covenant and *khesed* to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.*

DEUTERONOMY 7:9 (NIV)

*Have mercy on me, O God,  
According to your *khesed*;  
According to your great *compassion*  
Blot out my transgressions.*

PSALM 51:1 (NIV)

## A Summary of Human *Khesed*

*Khesed* is what you would call an act of loyal love. It's when someone treats another as a close friend or family member, doing what is necessary to ensure their well-being and the health of the relationship. While the action may be an obligation or duty, *khesed* also refers to the emotional motivation of love that drives overabundant expressions of generosity and care.

In the above examples, *khesed* refers to the following behaviors:

- Fulfilling a promise to do what someone else requests, even if it's not important to you personally (Jacob's sons in Genesis 47)
- Continuing to live with a family member who has suffered hardship and loss (Ruth 1)

- Inviting an orphaned child of a friend to become part of your family (2 Samuel 9)
- Promising to maintain healthy relationships between neighboring tribes (Genesis 20)

## God's *Khesed* to his People

In Genesis 24, God shows *khesed* to Abraham by providing a marriage partner for Isaac and ensuring the future of Abraham's family.

*Then the servant took ten camels from the camels of his master and set out with a variety of good things of his master's in his hand, and he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at evening time, the time when women go out to draw water. He said, "O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show **khesed** to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Now may it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels also'—may she be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown **khesed** to my master."*

GENESIS 24:10-14 (NASB95)

God made a promise to bless Abraham and give him a large family. This promise requires God to remain committed to Abraham for future generations, which is what Genesis 24 is all about.

Here Jacob refers to God's *khesed* as fulfilling his promises to protect and prosper Jacob and restoring him to the land of his family.

*Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' I am unworthy of all the **khesed** and of all the faithfulness which you have shown to your servant. For with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. For you said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.'"*

GENESIS 32:9-12 (NASB95)

Notice that God's *khesed* commits him to showing generosity and care for people who don't deserve it, like Jacob who has deceived and cheated his brother Esau. God's *khesed* creates fascinating conflicts of interest in God's purpose. Should he punish Jacob or bless him; should God violate a promise or not?

God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt as an act of *khesed*, fulfilling his promises to Abraham (links back to Exodus 2:23-25).

*Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? You stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies. In your *khesed* you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.*

EXODUS 15:11-13 (NIV)

God forgives Israel for rebelling in the account of the spies as an act of *khesed* in response to Moses' request.

*The Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn me? And how long will they not believe in me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they." But Moses said to the Lord, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by your strength you brought up this people from their midst, and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people. For you, O Lord, are seen eye to eye, while your cloud stands over them, and you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.*

*Now if you slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of your fame will say, 'Because the Lord could not bring this people into the land which he promised them by oath, therefore he slaughtered them in the wilderness.' But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as you have declared, 'The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in *khesed*, forgiving iniquity and transgression. But he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.' Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your *khesed*, just as you also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."*

NUMBERS 14:11-19 (NASB95)

Because of his promise to David, God remains committed to David's family forever.

*Yahweh said to David, "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but my *khesed* shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before me forever; your throne shall be established forever."*

2 SAMUEL 7:12-16 (NASB95)

Here God promises to show eternal *khesed* to the line of David, promising to raise up a royal descendant who will build God's temple and establish his Kingdom on earth as in heaven. But the *khesed* for David's line does not excuse each generation from maintaining loyalty in return. He will let any given generation destroy itself, while still maintaining *khesed* to his promise to David.



## Summary of God's *Khesed*

God's *khesed* is expressed in a series of covenant commitments to restore the Eden blessing to the nations through the family of Abraham. He will do this by raising up an Israelite royal seed of David who will bring God's Kingdom.

Because of God's commitment to this promise, he shows many acts of *khesed* to people who may or may not deserve God's loyal love.

- Abraham in Genesis 24
- Jacob in Genesis 32
- The Israelites in Exodus 15
- Rebellious Israel in Numbers 14
- David in 2 Samuel 7

## God's *Khesed* in the Psalms

In the book of Psalms, God's *khesed* is primarily expressed by saving people from disaster, death, or oppression.

*I will be glad and rejoice in your **khesed**,  
For you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul.  
You have not given me into the hands of the enemy  
But have set my feet in a spacious place.*

PSALM 31:7-8 (NIV)

*Who will rise up for me against the wicked?  
Who will take a stand for me against evildoers?  
Unless the Lord had given me help,  
I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death.  
When I said, "My foot is slipping,"  
Your **khesed**, Lord, supported me.*

PSALM 94:16-18 (NIV)

*I cry out to God Most High, to God, who vindicates me.  
He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who  
hotly pursue me—  
God sends forth his **khesed** and his faithfulness.  
I am in the midst of lions; I am forced to dwell among  
ravenous beasts—  
Men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are  
sharp swords.  
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;  
Let your glory be over all the earth.*

PSALM 57:2-5 (NIV)

*"The biblical writers are persuaded that life is fragile. One lives surrounded by the threat posed by the calamities of nature, the hostility of enemies, and the weakness of self. The same writers plead for God to save them by his *khesed*, and they recognize that this effective loyalty on God's part is their only hedge against disaster." — R.P. GORDON, "KHESED," NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY & EXEGESIS (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: ZONDERVAN PUBLISHING HOUSE, 1997), PP. 213-214.*

God's *khesed* in the past are the basis for hope of future *khesed* in the restoration from the exile.

*Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.  
Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?  
We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.  
Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing **khesed**.*

PSALM 44:23-26 (NIV)

God's *khesed* is the foundation of the cosmos. The stability of creation is itself an expression of his abundant, loyal, and trustworthy love.

*For the word of the Lord is right and true;  
He is faithful in all he does.  
The Lord loves righteousness and justice;  
The earth is full of his unfailing **khesed**.  
By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,  
Their starry host by the breath of his mouth.  
He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;  
He puts the deep into storehouses.  
Let all the earth fear the Lord;  
Let all the people of the world revere him.*

PSALM 33:4-8 (NIV)

God's *khesed* is what motivates forgiveness of his covenant people's failure and rebellion.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your **khesed**;  
According to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.  
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

PSALM 51:1-2 (NIV)

## People Showing *Khesed* to God

In seeking out a covenant partner, God desires that his people show *khesed* to him just as he has shown *khesed* to them. Israel is supposed to demonstrate their *khesed* by honoring the terms of their covenant with Yahweh, but they fail repeatedly.

*Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: There is no faithfulness, no **khesed**, no acknowledgment of God in the land.  
There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery;  
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

HOSEA 4:1-2 (NIV)

Israel's *khesed* is contrasted with God's *khesed*.

*What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you,  
Judah? Your **khesed** is like the morning mist, like the early  
dew that disappears... For I desire **khesed**, not sacrifice,  
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*

HOSEA 6:4-6 (NIV)

The destruction of Israel in the exile was an act of God's anger, and their restoration will only happen as a result of God's *khesed*.

*Who is a God like you, who pardons iniquity  
And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of his possession?  
He does not retain his anger forever,  
Because he delights in **khesed**.  
He will again have compassion on us;  
He will tread our iniquities under foot.  
Yes, you will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.  
You will give truth to Jacob  
And **khesed** to Abraham,  
Which you swore to our forefathers  
From the days of old.*

MICAH 7:18-20 (NASB95)

This passage from Isaiah is a work of poetic biblical theology, illustrating God's *khesed* as a core part of who he is.

*"Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song,  
Shout for joy, you who were never in labor;  
Because more are the children of the desolate woman than of  
her who has a husband," says the Lord.  
"Enlarge the place of your tent,  
Stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back;  
Lengthen your cords,  
Strengthen your stakes.  
For you will spread out to the right and to the left;  
Your descendants will dispossess nations  
And settle in their desolate cities.  
Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame.  
Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated.  
You will forget the shame of your youth  
And remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.  
For your Maker is your husband—  
The Lord Almighty is his name.  
The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;  
He is called the God of all the earth.  
The Lord will call you back  
As if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—  
A wife who married young, only to be rejected," says your God.*

*"For a brief moment I abandoned you,  
But with deep compassion I will bring you back.  
In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment,  
But with eternal **khesed** I will have compassion on you,"  
Says the Lord your Redeemer.  
"To me this is like the days of Noah,  
When I swore that the waters of Noah  
Would never again cover the earth.  
So now I have sworn not to be angry with you,  
Never to rebuke you again.  
Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed,  
Yet my **khesed** for you will not be shaken  
Nor my covenant of peace be removed,"  
Says the Lord, who has compassion on you.*

ISAIAH 54:1-10 (NIV)

# Notable New Testament Passages Using *Eleos*

In the Old Greek Septuagint, the Hebrew word *khesed* (חסד) was most regularly translated as the Greek word for mercy, *eleos* (ἐλεος). This translation is used 221 times in Greek out of 232 instances of *khesed* in Hebrew.

The Hebrew meaning of *khesed* is evident in many New Testament uses of *eleos*. Here are some examples.

*And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His **mercy** extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be **merciful** to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."*

LUKE 1:46-55 (NIV)

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient... But because of his great **love** for us, God, who is **rich in mercy**, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by **grace** you have been saved.*

EPHESIANS 2:1-5 (NIV)

Here Paul uses the two septuagint words from Exodus 34:6.

- Paul's phrase, "rich in mercy," is an equivalent translation of "great in loyal love." Paul's use of "gracious" echoes Yahweh's declaration of his own grace in Exodus 34:6.

## Jesus as the Embodiment of God's *Khesed*

God's ultimate act of *khesed* and his loyalty to his covenants made to Abraham, Noah, and David are embodied in Jesus. Jesus came to receive and show God's *khesed* and to restore the partnership between God and humanity.

Compare the opening chapter of John's Gospel with key passages of Exodus to see this important covenant language mirrored.

John 1:14	Exodus 25, 32-34
<p><i>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.</i></p>	<p><i>Have them make a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell (Heb. shakan) among them. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle (Heb. mishkan // Grk. τῆς σκηνῆς) and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it.</i></p>
<p><i>We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father...</i></p>	<p><i>"You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory (Heb. kavod // Grk. δόξα) passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by."</i></p>
<p><i>...full of grace and truth.</i></p>	<p><i>Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and full of covenant love and truth.</i></p>
	<p>EXODUS 34:6-7</p>