

CHAPTER 3

"GREAT IN LOVINGKINDNESS"

The LORD passed in front of him and said,
"The LORD, the LORD, a God ... great in
lovingkindness." (Exodus 34:6)



If someone were to ask me, "What's the most life-changing theological idea in the Old Testament?" without any hesitation I would say, "God's lovingkindness." In Hebrew what we are talking about is God's *hesed*. It is the fourth attribute of *The Derakim*, and it's without question the most important word in this amazing description of God. *Hesed* is the glorious center stone, and all the other attributes are there to illuminate its beauty.¹

According to the biblical authors, if you understand God's *hesed* you really know Him. If you miss it, you are largely stumbling around in the dark (even if you are a priest or pastor, or have a degree in theology). There is a lot of confusion

among scholars today concerning what God's *hesed* is all about. In fact, one book on *hesed* notes 170 different ways it has been translated in English.² Thankfully, God spoke the words of *The Derakim* (Exodus 34:6) to let us know with crystal clarity exactly what the word means when we apply it to Him. Yes, it's true that words are flexible, sometimes allusive things. Nevertheless, the rest of this book will argue the case that in the vast majority of instances, the superlative "lovingkindness" captures well what the biblical authors had in mind when they spoke of God's *hesed*.³

The sad fact is that millions of extremely religious folks down through history have completely missed God's lovingkindness. In this chapter we will show how this happened in the Old Testament era, how it happened in the New Testament era, and how it continues to happen today. This oversight is what the prophet Hosea was lamenting when he said, "There is no *hesed* ... or knowledge of God in the land" (Hosea 4:1). Like so many of Israel's prophets, he is rebuking God's people for missing the broadside of the theological barn, the essence of who God is and what His program on earth is all about.

How would a person know if they are getting it right? In the first place, God's lovingkindness has a tendency to knock people off their feet.

3.2 IT PUT ALAN ON HIS FACE

My eyes were *really* opened to God's lovingkindness (*hesed*) a few years after I returned from Russia. I was living in Denver, Colorado, and had recently finished a Master's degree in

Biblical Studies. My wife and I were attending a large church in the heart of the city, right next to the Denver Broncos stadium. We loved going to this fellowship each Sunday because of the soul-stirring worship and fiery preaching (and they had an amazing nursery, to boot).⁴ After attending for a while, I was asked to guest teach a class and was given complete freedom on my subject matter. I decided to share the truths of *The Derakim* that were gloriously working me over at the time. This would be my very first time teaching it to a group. I wondered, *Will it floor other people the same way it floored me?*

I remember being particularly impressed with Alan. He seemed to be the complete package, a successful young professional with a beautiful family. He was in transition at the time, pursuing his dream of becoming a commercial airline pilot. I carefully walked Alan and the rest of the class through the biblical material related to *The Derakim*, and very particularly told them how God's lovingkindness (*hesed*) changed everything for me. When it was over I received a lot of positive feedback (and was soon asked to take over the class), but I didn't notice anything unusual about Alan. He left without saying much.

A couple weeks later I ran into him in the hallway of the church and we started talking about life, families, jobs, etc. Suddenly, Alan got serious and said, "You know that stuff you were teaching about God a couple weeks ago?" "Yeah," I responded. "How did all that hit you?" His response amazed me. "I couldn't even bring myself to go into the church service," he said. "I went into an empty Sunday School classroom, got on my face, and just wept. I told God, 'If that's who You are, I surrender my life to You completely.'"

Evidently, the message hit Alan a lot like it hit me—like a freight train. Since that first time teaching it, I have shared the message about God's lovingkindness (*hesed*) all over the world to all sorts of people—in the U.S., Africa, Asia, to the rich, poor, prisoners, pastors, rural tribal people, college students, and PhDs. I have found Alan's response to be pretty common. I have seen whole rooms *get it* at once, and the effect can be astonishing. Many will be in tears, others on their faces. This "knock you to the floor" effect is what we find in the Bible, as well. **"Moses quickly bowed low to the ground and worshipped"** (Exodus 34:8).

3.3 A MOST IMPORTANT HEBREW WORD

Down through history there has been heated debate among scholars and theologians as to what God's *hesed* is all about. Not all of them would agree that "lovingkindness" accurately captures its meaning. In my opinion, so much of this scholarly discussion has completely missed the mark. The primary problem is that scholars tend to come to Scripture with their pre-existing theological beliefs driving their interpretation. In simple terms, this means they are determined to make certain words say what they want them to say.⁵ With respect to God's *hesed*, many interpreters feel the need to divest it of all its emotional and relational content (i.e., human-like content), so that it lines up with their pre-existing beliefs about God.⁶ Suffice it to say that in the hands of scholars and theologians, God's *hesed* can come out looking pretty small and chintzy—a legal term that applies to only a select few.⁷ That's hardly the sort of thing that lays an undeserving sinner on their face.

The purpose of this book is to talk our way through *The Derakim* (Exodus 34:6), and by doing so prove that an over-the-top word like "lovingkindness" is indeed the best way to think of the word *hesed* when it's applied to God. It's definitely not something small and chintzy, reserved for a tiny portion of humanity. It's massive—"It stretches to the heavens" (Psalm 36:5). It's extravagant—"a river of delights" and "a fountain of life" (Psalm 36:8, 9). And best of all, it's available to "all nations" and "all peoples" (Psalm 117:1-2).⁸

The whole reason God put you and me on this earth was so that we could come to know His lovingkindness, and then as His image-bearers shine it to those around us. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes this point by borrowing the words of the Old Testament prophet. He says, "Go and learn what this means" (Matthew 9:13, also see 12:7). Jesus's argument can be a little difficult to follow if you don't know Greek and Hebrew, but He is basically letting a bunch of very religious folks know that their religion is next to worthless. Why? Just like the people in Hosea's time, and just like millions in our time, they had lost sight of God's lovingkindness. They were obsessed with religious activities—rituals, ceremonies, feasts, fasts, sacrifices—but they didn't know God's heart.

In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, the verse Jesus quotes reads, "I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). In the New Testament, which was written in Greek, it reads, "I desire *eleos* and not sacrifice."⁹ The message is the same. Jesus was saying what all the Old Testament prophets said down through the centuries—religion that gets the definition of "God's *hesed*" wrong is next to worthless. Such people may be striving and straining to please God, but they

are largely spinning their wheels. They have the disease Paul speaks of: **"They have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge"** (Romans 10:2). God's program has always been about lovingkindness. It's what He is, and it's what we were created to be.

This is what the LORD of Hosts said, "Practice true justice and perform *hesed* and compassion each to his brother; and do not mistreat the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner, or the poor; and do not make evil plans in your hearts against each other." But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. (Zechariah 7:9-11)

Somehow, I too had missed the monumental meaning and significance of God's lovingkindness in my Bible college and seminary days. In countless hours of studying Scripture, it completely escaped my notice that this was the one thing the psalmists and prophets just couldn't keep quiet about. It was only after seminary graduation, when I determined to re-examine everything I thought I knew about God, that I got turned on to it. The words of King David found in Psalm 63 sum things up pretty well. **"Your lovingkindness (*hesed*) is better than life"** (Psalm 63:3). It was by following the trail of lovingkindness left by David, Hosea, Jonah, and others, that ultimately led me to *The Derakim*.

Whether you know it or not, God's lovingkindness is what all of our souls are desperately thirsting for. It was this truth

that I was largely missing back in my college and seminary days, and it was this truth that completely renovated my theology and my life. It quite literally put me on my face, and since then I have come to see that this is a normal human response.

3.4 IT TAKES MEPHIBOSHETH'S KNEES OUT

Israel's greatest king was, of course, David. God made an everlasting covenant with him (2 Samuel 7:8-17), and this is why Jesus Christ comes from the line of David. We can confidently say that David knew quite a bit about *The Derakim*, and more specifically God's lovingkindness. (After all, he is the one who wrote that incredible song about it—Psalm 103.) There is one account from David's life that may give us a clearer glimpse into God's lovingkindness than any other passage in the Old Testament—the day David attempted the impossible.

Years after David had secured his kingdom, a tantalizing idea came to him. He started asking around to see if any descendants of the previous king, Saul, were still alive. A person unfamiliar with the Scriptures might make an educated guess as to what David is up to here. As long as there have been kings, it has been standard practice to annihilate the descendants of the previous dynasty. But there is one detail that puts an unexpected twist in this tale.

King Saul hated David with a passion. Saul tried to murder him on several occasions, and spent years chasing him around the Judean wilderness. But here is where the twist comes in. Saul had a son named Jonathan. Jonathan and

David had a friendship unparalleled in the annals of ancient history. We don't have time or space to delve into all the amazing details the Bible gives us, but suffice it to say that their hearts were "**knit together**" (1 Samuel 18:1).

David and Jonathan tried to keep this friendship going for as long as they could, but King Saul's bitter jealousy eventually forced them to part company forever. The Bible bears witness to their heart-wrenching separation. These two battle-tested soldiers, David the giant slayer and Prince Jonathan the valiant warrior, hung on each other's necks and wept (1 Samuel 20:41). Now let's get back to our story.

Now that David is king, he is not scouring the kingdom looking for revenge or trying to secure his position. He is trying to find a descendant of Jonathan, so that he can honor the memory of this once-in-a-lifetime friend. (At this point in the story, Jonathan has died in battle.) David is determined to do something absolutely over the top. He is not just going to show this unsuspecting descendant of Jonathan the sort of kindness that human beings show to one another. David is going to show him God-sized *hesed* ... what we are calling "lovingkindness."

In this account, David says something that has no parallel in the pages of the Old Testament. He is going to attempt the outrageous. "**Is there anyone remaining from the house of Saul, to whom I can show the lovingkindness (*hesed*) of God?**" (2 Samuel 9:3). David's words can be easily overlooked, but they are nothing short of jaw-dropping. Read it again. He is going to "**show the lovingkindness of God.**" A mere human being is going to attempt to imitate God's

central, defining attribute—His lovingkindness. Now watch in wonder.

King David's men search high and low, and eventually find a candidate—a crippled straggler from Saul's dynasty, attempting to lay low at a relative's house. The man's name is Mephibosheth,¹⁰ and he was Jonathan's only surviving son. He was just a child when his grandfather's kingdom fell. In the chaos, he was dropped by a fleeing nurse, leaving him crippled for life (2 Samuel 4:4). His humiliating limp was forever a reminder of lost glory and family shame. Strong-armed soldiers bring the pathetic, unsuspecting Mephibosheth trembling before King David.

We can only imagine what poor Mephibosheth was thinking at this point. Would it be a quick disemboweling with the sword? A slow, torturous death? Maybe, just maybe, David would show human-sized kindness and spare his life, perhaps exile him. The Bible says that Mephibosheth came before David and **“fell on his face and prostrated himself”** (2 Samuel 9:6). The strong-armed guards then set him back on his feet to hear David's pronouncement. Now stand in awe as David tries his best to imitate the lovingkindness of God:

And David said to him, “Do not fear, for I will surely show lovingkindness (*hesed*) to you for the sake of your father Jonathan, and will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul; and you shall eat at my table regularly.” (2 Samuel 9:7)

Huh?! No execution? No imprisonment? No banishment? Mephibosheth's mind must have been on the brink of short-circuiting. This first wave of mercy, kindness, and generosity quite literally knocked him right back down to the floor. As I said, God's lovingkindness seems to have this effect. Lying prostrate before the king, he stammers, **"What is your servant, that you should have regard for a dead dog like me?"** (2 Samuel 9:8). But David is just getting started.

Then the king called Saul's servant Ziba, and said to him, "All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. And you and your sons and your servants shall cultivate the land for him, and you shall bring in the produce so that your master's grandson may have food."
(2 Samuel 9:9-10)

Let's do a little inventory here. In less than one minute, Mephibosheth goes from an outcast with a death sentence on his head, to one of the most secure, wealthy men in the kingdom. He not only gets all the land that belonged to his royal grandfather, he is given a small army of servants to work his vast holdings. But there's more. The truth is that all this wealth is just gravy, because he won't be needing any of it. Every day for the rest of his life he will be eating at the king's table, as if he were one of David's sons. Welcome to one of the most life-changing theological ideas in the Bible—the lovingkindness of God. When you start to get this, you are beginning to really know, understand, and see God as He wants you to see Him.

Who is wise? Let him give heed to these things, and consider the lovingkindness (*hesed*) of the LORD. (Psalm 107:43)

3.5 IF IT DOESN'T FLOOR YOU

God was probably smiling as He watched David, "the man after His own heart," fawn all over the unsuspecting Mephibosheth. Human kindness might have allowed Mephibosheth to keep his life. Extravagant human kindness might have even allowed him to keep some of his grandfather's possessions. God-sized *hesed*, what we are calling "lovingkindness," explodes all human parameters. As David says in Psalm 103, it is "as high as the heavens are above the earth" (v. 11). God's lovingkindness lavishes undeserved, outrageous goodness on a person until all they can do is fall down in awestruck wonder. And the great news is that it's available to everyone—insiders, outsiders, saints, and backsliders. This is the main point that *The Derakim* is attempting to make. And this is the truth about God that little children can so easily hear, but the "wise and intelligent" can so easily miss.

Let me state the obvious here. If what you think about God (your theology) doesn't take your breath away, bring tears to your eyes, and make you fall on your face, you can't be seeing what Moses or Mephibosheth (or Alan) saw. In light of this, I find so much of the scholarly discussion about God's defining attribute—His *hesed*—deeply troubling. Scholars and theologians regularly make God's *hesed* too narrow, too

restricted. The prevailing view is that God's *hesed* primarily has to do with duty, or legal obligation.¹¹ From this perspective, God's *hesed* primarily points to the fact that He keeps His side of agreements (i.e., covenants). If you are in a covenant with Him, His *hesed* is for you. If not, too bad for you. Scholars in this camp like to translate *hesed* with terms like "faithfulness" or "covenant faithfulness."¹² According to this view, when the Bible says, "**Give thanks to the LORD ... for His *hesed* is everlasting,**" it could be interpreted like this: "Give thanks to the LORD ... because if He has made a legal arrangement with you, He will keep His side of the deal." (How uninspiring.)

This sort of paper-thin understanding of God's *hesed* is precisely what led Jesus to tell the religious folks in His day, "**Go and learn what this means ...**" (Matthew 9:13). God's *hesed* is massive, and it's not just reserved for a little huddle of insiders. They were getting God all wrong, and because of this their religion was all out of whack. This should come as no surprise, however, because the Bible says again and again that it is possible to read God's Word, study God's Word, and even know it verbatim ... and still miss what it is saying (Isaiah 6:9-10; Matthew 13:14-15; Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26-27). Don't forget that many of the people responsible for nailing Jesus to the cross, who yelled, "Crucify! Crucify!" had the entire Bible memorized. They knew all the words, but they were still missing the broad side of the theological barn.

I fear that something very similar is happening today when so many scholars give such a disappointing explanation of God's central, defining attribute. It is certainly true that God is a covenant keeper and never goes back on His word,

but my question is this—Does that definition of His *hesed* make your knees buckle like Mephibosheth’s?¹³ Thankfully, God gave us *The Derakim* (Exodus 34:6) so that we would be sure to get the meaning of His central attribute—His *hesed*—right. The coming chapters will mine the riches of the other words of *The Derakim*. By doing so, we can begin to apprehend the breadth, and length, and height, and depth of God’s lovingkindness.

How can we be absolutely certain we are on the right track, that our translation of God’s *hesed* is the right one? The answer to this is pretty simple, and in my mind irrefutable. The New Testament authors take pains to make one thing clear—the God of *The Derakim* took on flesh and blood in the Person of Jesus Christ. He was the lovingkindness of God with skin on.

3.6 LOVINGKINDNESS INCARNATE

My pursuit of God really took off when I began to study the life and words of Jesus more closely. I was in a spiritual funk at the time and concluded that if anyone could help me out, it was Jesus. After all, He did say, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Right after finishing my second theological degree, I still had the strong sense that I was overlooking something vital. Several times a week, I would go to the seminary library and prayerfully pore over the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. *What was I missing?*

I started my quest in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and my attention was soon drawn to one little

Greek word—*eleos*. It only occurs a limited number of times in the Gospels, but always at very important moments. It became increasingly clear to me that according to Jesus, this word *eleos* was key to understanding God and His agenda on earth. As we already noted, Jesus repeatedly told confused religious folks (like I was at the time), that they needed to get a handle on its meaning. **"But go and learn what this means. 'I want *eleos* and not sacrifice'" (Matthew 9:13).**

But if you had known what this means, "I want *eleos* and not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent. (Matthew 12:7)

A little bit of cross-referencing revealed that Jesus's words in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7 were direct quotations from the book of Hosea, and the Greek word being emphasized (*eleos*) was the New Testament translation of that all-important Hebrew term *hesed*.¹⁴ Since the Jews in Jesus's day lived in a Greek-speaking world, they read from the Greek version of the Scriptures (the Septuagint). All this means is that for the Gospel authors Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Greek word *eleos* was *hesed*, and *hesed* was *eleos*. Jesus was telling His opponents to go do a little homework and figure out what this grand theological idea, *hesed* in Hebrew and *eleos* in Greek, is all about.

This is the point where things got really interesting for me. Why? Because this emphasis on *eleos* in the life of Jesus is what led me back to the Old Testament, and ultimately to the to main theological message of Moses and all the prophets.

As God Himself said, He is "great in lovingkindness." This is exactly what I had been missing.

One of the first things I discovered was that nothing could send Israel into a wild frenzy like celebrating God's lovingkindness. "I will sing of the lovingkindness of the LORD forever." (Psalm 89:1)

Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name. For the LORD is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting....¹⁵ (Psalm 100:4-5)

In the very darkest of times, it was God's lovingkindness that gave hope to the hopeless:

Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death ... But I have trusted in your lovingkindness, my heart will rejoice in Your salvation. (Psalm 13:3, 5)

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why have you become disturbed within me? Put your hope in God ... He will command His lovingkindness to visit me again. (Psalm 42:5, 8)

**This I remember, therefore I have hope ...
the LORD's lovingkindnesses are new every
morning. (Lamentations 3:21-23)**

Seeing God's lovingkindness catapults a soul from the depths of despair to the heights of ecstasy in a single heart-beat. At times you would think that the biblical authors are downright intoxicated by the idea. They say that God's lovingkindness is "a river of delights and a fountain of life" (Psalm 36:5-12). One psalm focusing on the lovingkindness of God mentions it an astounding twenty-six times in twenty-six verses (Psalm 136). Often, God's character and name are summarized by a reference to His lovingkindness: "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Your name give glory, because of Your lovingkindness ..." (Psalm 115:1).¹⁶ On one occasion, the psalmist cuts right to the very heart of things and calls God, "My lovingkindness" (Psalm 144:2). Again, to know God's lovingkindness is to know Him, and to miss it is to miss Him.

**Let not a wise man boast in his wisdom, and
let not the mighty man boast in his might,
and let not a rich man boast of his riches;
but let him who boasts boast in this, that
he understands and knows Me, that I am
the LORD who exercises lovingkindness ...
(Jeremiah 9:23-24)¹⁷**

For the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land, for there is no faithfulness, or lovingkindness, or knowledge of God in the land. (Hosea 4:1)

3.7 LOVINGKINDNESS FOR ALL

In the first chapter, I explained how God used Psalm 103 to begin calling me into a deeper relationship with Him. Over the years, I have become convinced that this psalm is best understood as King David's meditation on *The Derakim*, which really makes it a meditation on God's lovingkindness. David is ruminating on all the blessings and benefits offered to us because God is "**great in lovingkindness**" (Psalm 103:8).

Psalm 103 begins by singling out the blessing of forgiveness. "**Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name ... who pardons all your iniquities**" (Psalm 103:1,3). Forgiveness is only one of the many ways that God lavishes His lovingkindness upon us, but its importance cannot be overemphasized, and it is appropriate that we think of it first. Why? It's God's forgiveness that draws us all to Him in the first place. It's the doorway. Without this, we don't have access to anything else. This fact explains why, after God first spoke *The Derakim* to Moses (Exodus 34:6), He goes on to say that He forgives sin in all its derivations and permutations, in all its degrees and dimensions. Right after God says that He is "**compassionate and gracious,**" He goes on to say that He "**keeps lovingkindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin**" (Exodus 34:7).

Why did God make such a big deal about forgiveness in Exodus 34:7? Part of the answer is because the covenant God made with Israel had just been shattered into a thousand pieces. The agreement between Israel and God, delineating in meticulous detail all that God was going to do for them, had just been nullified by their apostasy. Their adulterous affair with the golden calf had cancelled it all out, and this is precisely why Moses shatters the tablets of stone when he comes down from the mountain. This act is profoundly symbolic. The covenant has been obliterated.

It happened that when Moses came near to the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses's anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the base of the mountain. (Exodus 32:19)

We could say that Israel was back at square one. God no longer had any obligation to bless them. In fact, if God were going to be a legal stickler He should have wiped them out. Was the situation hopeless? Absolutely not. Moses just needed to get a better handle on God's lovingkindness. God wanted to teach him that His lovingkindness was not just available for Israel when they were being faithful to a covenant. It was also there for them when they were standing on the outside, completely undeserving, and seemingly hopeless. It is bigger than Moses understood ... way, way, bigger. As the psalm says, **"As the heavens are higher than the earth"** (Psalm 103:11).

There are three different words for sin in Exodus 34:7—iniquity (*avon*), transgression (*pasha*), and sin (*hata*). The Hebrew language uses multiple words for sin to differentiate its kind, its severity, and even the intentionality behind it. The long and the short of it is that God wanted Moses (and you) to know that He is willing to forgive absolutely anything that falls under the broader heading of sin—from skipping that appointment yesterday to committing premeditated murder. And this last example is not at all an exaggeration, because King David actually did commit premeditated murder, and when he did he ran straight to *The Derakim*. David wrote Psalm 51 after one of the greatest acts of treachery in the Bible. It begins, “**Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness.**”

In *The Derakim*, God is making the shocking declaration that His lovingkindness is for covenant keepers as well as covenant breakers, for insiders and outsiders alike. For those on the inside, His lovingkindness can be lavished upon them in all the ways expressed in Psalm 103—healing, deliverance, provision, protection, etc. But for the outsiders, too, His lovingkindness is His everlasting invitation to come home. (But of course, you gotta come home.)

**Boast in the LORD (Hallelujah), all nations!
Praise Him, all peoples! For His lovingkind-
ness is great toward us, and the faithful-
ness of the LORD is everlasting. Boast in the
LORD (Hallelujah)! (Psalm 117)**

3.8 JESUS DEFINES IT

By the strategic use of the Greek word *eleos* (a Greek stand-in for the Hebrew word *hesed*), the Gospel writers show that Jesus is the greatest manifestation of God's lovingkindness that the world has ever seen. The very beginning of Luke's Gospel, for instance, is just dripping with God's *eleos*. Astonishingly, the word is used five times in a single chapter (Luke 1:50,54,58,72,78). In the midst of this lovingkindness-saturated section, Luke describes the heart of the Father in sending His Son, Jesus Christ (it's a little hard to translate): **"... because of the compassions of lovingkindness (*eleos*) of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death"** (Luke 1:78-79).

It is clear in the life and teachings of Jesus that God's lovingkindness is available to absolutely everyone. The Gospels show us again and again that Jesus's heart is on fire with compassion for all people, even those to whom God has no legal obligation. This was one of the most scandalous aspects of Jesus's ministry. He showed lovingkindness to Jews, lapsed Jews, apostate Samaritans, and even "the Gentile dogs." Jesus continually showers them all with *eleos*. In a huge percentage of the cases where a miracle occurs, the afflicted person (Jew or Gentile) uses the verbal form of *eleos*, which is *eleeo*. In English this is often translated as **"have mercy on me"** (Matthew 9:27, 15:22, 17:15, 20:30,31, et al.). The result is that Jesus gives them exactly what they ask for—*eleos*. If the synoptic Gospels had been written in Hebrew, there is no question that the term emphasized would

have been *hesed*. What we are talking about here, of course, is lovingkindness.

To drive home the point that God's lovingkindness is available to all, let's return again to Hosea 6:6 and Jesus's quotation of it. The first time Jesus refers to this passage is when He tells a bunch of Bible scholars that they need to do a little homework (Matthew 9:13). What was Jesus up to? What is the context? He is being criticized for giving His time and attention to covenant breakers—turncoat tax collectors, drunks, and prostitutes. What sort of legal obligation does Jesus have to them? None. Is He in any sort of covenant with them? No. The problem with the religionists of Jesus's day is that they were (like so many today) missing the enormity of God's lovingkindness.

And it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were eating with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: I want lovingkindness and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:10-13)

Another fascinating piece of evidence is the way Jesus uses the word *eleos* in His parables, like The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). The only definition that makes any sense here is a *free and outrageous expression of kindness available to anyone*. The cultural background figures heavily into Jesus's meaning. Samaritans and Jews were mortal enemies, without any sort of arrangement, expectation, or agreement between them. Jesus refers to the kind actions of the Samaritan in this tale with the word "*eleos*" (Luke 10:37), meaning actions that are not only outrageous but completely unmerited. The whole point of the story is to explain that God desires His people to act like He does. He wants our hearts to be moved with compassion, resulting in lovingkindness being shown to everyone ... even our mortal enemies.

"... he was moved with compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and if you spend any more, when I return I will pay you back.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed *eleos* toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same." (Luke 10:33-37)

What does all of this mean? For anyone who might have missed the extravagant, lavish kindness of God in the Old Testament, Jesus Christ is the final Word on the matter. He was quite literally fleshing out the divine *modus operandi*, which God had already revealed to His friend Moses 1500 years prior in *The Derakim*. Jesus is the One who perfectly reveals the central attribute of Yahweh in the Old Testament—*hesed*. But as overwhelmingly clear as Matthew, Mark, and Luke are on this, John actually says it even more clearly. He does so by connecting Jesus directly to *The Derakim* in a way that is hard to miss (... well, hard to miss if you were a Greek-speaking, first-century Christian).¹⁸

3.9 "WE BEHELD HIS GLORY"

The Gospel of John tells us something absolutely astonishing. It uses a slightly different vocabulary than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John prefers the Greek word *charis* as a stand in for the Hebrew *hesed*, but the message is clear—Jesus Christ reveals the glory that Moses saw on Sinai.¹⁹ What sort of glory? The glory of God described by *The Derakim*. John's account of Jesus's life begins by making this point.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of lovingkindness (*charis*) and truth. ... For of His fullness we have all received, and lovingkindness (*charis*) upon lovingkindness (*charis*). For the Law was given through Moses; lovingkindness (*charis*) and truth

were realized through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:14-18)

Notice how John couples “lovingkindness” (*charis*) with “truth” more than once. This combination of words mirrors exactly what the Old Testament writers did. Putting together the last two attributes of *The Derakim* was a quick way to refer back to what God told Moses on the mountain (e.g., Psalm 25:10; 40:11-12; 57:3; 61:7; 89:14; 115:1). If John had been writing his Gospel in Hebrew, there is no question what words he would have used here,²⁰ but of course he was writing in Greek. Again, the message is clear. Jesus is *The Derakim* in the flesh!

What really seals the deal and connects John 1 to *The Derakim* are all the other things that point back to Moses’s meeting with Yahweh in Exodus: the mention of Moses’s name, the repeated reference to “glory,” the allusion to God’s statement in Exodus 33:20 that “**no man can see Me and live,**” etc. The section ends with this astounding declaration: “**No one has seen God at any time, the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He explained Him**” (John 1:18). Clearly, John is pointing us back to Sinai and telling us that if we want to know the God described there, we need to study Jesus. This is exactly what Matthew, Mark, and Luke were saying, as well. John just chooses different words to do it.²¹ If we want to understand God’s heart, His lovingkindness, His ways, we study “**the Word made flesh.**”

Why did Moses hit the ground after hearing the words of Exodus 34:6—the great secret of the universe, the truth that scholars can't grasp, and the truth children see with ease? He realized in that moment that Yahweh is simply, literally, just as wonderful, winsome, and welcoming as that Person we see 1500 years later in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. This is the great truth that will completely transform your life.

**God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers
in the prophets in many portions and in
many ways, in these last days has spoken to
us in His Son ... And He is the radiance of
His glory and the exact representation of His
nature. (Hebrews 1:1-3)**

Did Moses see some manifestation of Jesus with his eyes? The evidence is compelling. What we do know is that the message he received about Yahweh is that He is precisely, exactly, in every way like the God-Man who would walk the dusty roads of Palestine. We may have grown up believing that Jesus Christ is kind, gracious, patient, and forgiving, while His Father is harsh, distant, austere, and mysterious. But here is a news flash. If this is how you think of God, you have not seen what Moses saw, and you have not heard what God was telling us when **"the Word became flesh."**

3.10 SO GO LEARN WHAT IT MEANS

What God was attempting to tell us in *The Derakim* and through the life of Jesus is simply this—His greatest joy is

taking crippled outcasts like Mephibosheth, showering them with undeserved lovingkindness, and making them sons and daughters. His lovingkindness is not reserved for a limited few, and He certainly does not grudgingly dole it out. When you start to get it, you too may cry out like Mephibosheth, **"Why are you doing all this for a dead dog like me?"**

God's lovingkindness amazes you. It is unexpected and wholly undeserved. It takes a poor wretch destined for humiliation and death and exalts him to the place of sonship and royalty. It is the kindness shown to the Prodigal Son:

Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring out the fat calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found. (Luke 15: 22-24)

God's lovingkindness extends to the foreigner, the covenant breaker, the murderer, the adulterer, the thief, and the liar. It is also the great hope of the suffering—the orphan, the widow, the slave, the poor, the hungry, and the outcast. **"He has made His lovingkindness marvelous to me in a besieged city"** (Psalm 31:21). It is for all the troubled and heavy laden, as the psalmist sings. (Notice how many times the word "all" is used.)

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and great in lovingkindness.

The LORD is good to all, and His compassions are over all His works ... The LORD sustains all who fall and raises up those who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to You, and You give them food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of all living things. The LORD is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His deeds. The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. (Psalm 145:8-18)

The great goal of our human existence is found in God's lovingkindness. We just need to understand it and believe it. This is the message of *The Derakim*. He said it the first time to Moses on Sinai, and He said it again in the life and ministry of "the Word made flesh," Jesus Christ. This is His eternal, unchanging modus operandi, and it is the heartbeat of His program on earth. God joyously welcomes the hungry and humble into this revelation.

3.11 "AMEN!"

The very first time *The Derakim* appears in Scripture, we find the attribute "faithfulness" after lovingkindness. When later biblical authors quote this description of God, they often leave this word out (e.g., Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). The reason for this is because "faithfulness" serves a slightly different purpose than the other attributes of the formula. All the other words of *The Derakim* describe for us what God's lovingkindness (*hesed*) is and how it works. The word "faithfulness" tells us that it

will never change. It lets us know that this is the way God has always been, and it's the way He will always be.

You could think of it this way. It's a bit like my grandpa extolling the virtues of (bragging about) his favorite auto mechanic—smart, thorough, honest, fair, fast ... and then tacking on the fact that this garage has been like this for decades. Or it's like a friend telling me about their favorite restaurant—amazing food, great service, incredible ambiance, affordable prices ... and then letting me know that it's a generational family business determined to keep things the same. Do you get it? First I hear about how amazing something is, and then I am told that the thing has endured, and will endure. That is what the last attribute of Exodus 34:6 tells us.

Something you could never see unless you knew a little bit of Hebrew is that the word "faithfulness" is related to the English word "Amen." The word in Exodus 34:6 is *emet*, but in actual fact the word is *emenet*. (Can you see the "amen" in there?) The "en" in the middle of the word drops out, and this leaves us with *emet*. (In Hebrew, the consonant "n" often drops out of words.) So *emet* is one way to say "faithful" in Hebrew: *emenet* – *en* = *emet*. There is another form of this word: *emunah* (keep the "n" and put a "h" on the end). Both of these "amen" words point to the fact that something is steadfast, immovable, etc. When this idea was originally included in *The Derakim*, God was saying that His lovingkindness will always be the same throughout endless ages.

All through the Bible we find God's lovingkindness attached to the idea of "faithfulness" (either *emet* or *emunah*). This was a constant reminder to Israel that what God said about

Himself in *The Derakim* will never change. Because of this, there is always hope.

It's worth noting that ancient Israel had another way of making this point, as well. It's found in a little phrase that functioned very much like a national motto. **"Give thanks to the LORD for He is good, and His lovingkindness (*hesed*) is everlasting"** (1 Chronicles 16:34). Several psalms are devoted to this phrase—Psalm 106, 107, 118, and 136—with Psalm 136 repeating it 26 times in 26 verses. Same basic idea. What God said about Himself will never change.

The same sort of extravagant, outrageous, uninhibited lovingkindness that David tried to heap onto Mephibosheth is what God wants to heap on you and me. That is what will never change. This is how God is all day, every day, from eternity past until eternity future—He is a God of "faithfulness." **"I the LORD do not change, and because of this, Israel, you are not consumed"** (Malachi 3:6). *The Derakim* tells us who He is and what He does. Nothing can or will ever change Him. (We just need to believe it, and put ourselves under the flow.) This is the great secret we were all created to know. This is the Copernican center. *Amen!*

3.12 LOOKING AHEAD

In addition to being God's most glorious attribute, careful study also reveals that lovingkindness is the main thing God wants in His worshipers—you and me. Whatever this wonderful, glorious thing called God's *hesed* is, as His image-bearers we are supposed to have it, as well. In fact, throughout the Old Testament, a true follower of Yahweh

is often called a “*hasid*,” which is like calling him “a person characterized by *hesed*” (e.g., Psalm 4:3, 12:1, 16:10, 18:25, 30:4, 31:23, 32:6, 37:28, 50:5, et al.). The logic here is pretty straightforward—if a person is really seeing God rightly, they should increasingly look, think, feel, and behave like their God. This is another key that works like magic for unlocking countless Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments:

He has told you, O man, what is good and what the LORD requires of you: to do justice and to love *hesed* and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

For the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness or *hesed*, or knowledge of God in the land. (Hosea 4:1-2)

This may seem entirely unrelated, but there is one psalm in the Old Testament that is pretty dark. It’s known as “The Judas Psalm.” Line after line it paints the picture of a person who seems more demon than human. The apostle Peter applies this Scripture directly to Judas Iscariot after he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (see Acts 1:20). If you examine the psalm very closely, this wretched man’s condemnation is summed up in one line—“**Because he did not remember to show lovingkindness**” (Psalm 109:16). What was this man’s problem? Why would it have been better for

him to have never been born (Mark 14:21)? If you break it down, it's because he didn't know God's lovingkindness and his life didn't show God's lovingkindness.

Now we return to where this chapter began. When all the facts are in, the most life-changing theological idea in the Old Testament is God's lovingkindness. As Jesus indicated, it is absolutely essential that we get the meaning of this one idea straight. This lies at the very heart of a proper definition of God, it is key to rightly interpreting the Bible, and it informs who we are supposed to be as God's image-bearers. Stated another way, if you get this wrong, you will get God all wrong and His purpose for your life all wrong.

This is the point. God's lovingkindness is the Sun, around which all other theological and religious truths revolve. Now let's press even deeper into Jesus's command, **“Go and learn what this means ...”**

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1. *Hesed* is clearly the main attribute of Exodus 34:6. The other attributes are there to illumine it. The first attribute, *raham* (“compassionate”), points to the astonishing emotional component of God's *hesed*. The second attribute of the formula—*hanun* (“gracious”)—is simply the adjective that corresponds to the noun *hesed*. This just means that if someone has *hesed*, they are described by the adjective *hanun*. The verse following Exodus 34:7 also points back to *hesed*—“He shows *hesed* to thousands ...” The first time Moses refers back to *The Derakim* after the Sinai event (in Numbers 14:18-19), the emphasis is clearly on *hesed*.

2. See, Michael Card, *Inexpressible: Heseḏ and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2017), iv.
3. See Chapter 1, note 18.
4. While we were attending, this church was included in a book titled, *Excellent Protestant Congregations: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* by Paul Wilkes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). The church was very supportive of my ministry to street kids, and partnered with me to establish my first discipleship home. See Wilkes, 79-80.
5. This problem is dealt with in David Kelsey's *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), which addresses the problem of pre-existing "construals" driving biblical interpretation. What this means is that a person's ultimate theological commitments have a profound impact on how he interprets the text. If an interpreter, for example, is committed to the idea that God does not have human-like emotions, they will not be able to "find" such emotions in the biblical text.
6. For a helpful review of the most influential scholarly studies of the word *heseḏ* in the Bible, see Gordon R. Clark, *The Word Heseḏ in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 15-30.

7. Perhaps no study on *hesed* has received as much attention as Nelson Glueck's *Hesed in the Bible* (1960), which defines the word in terms of loyalty and/or obligation, particularly in the context of a binding relationship, i.e., covenant.
8. In one of the more outrageous applications of God's *hesed* to sinners on the outside of any covenant with God, see Jonah 4:2. Here *The Derakim* is quoted with regard to God's attitude toward Assyria—a notoriously brutal nation, who was Israel's arch enemy.
9. When Matthew, Mark, and Luke quote or allude to the Old Testament, they stick with the Septuagint's choice of *eleos* as a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*. This is seen in the quotations of Hosea 6:6 in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7.
10. It is worth noting here the significance of a name. Mephibosheth literally means “one who removes shame.” This is exactly what he is remembered for. He is the one who, through David's kindness, brought dignity back to the house of Saul.

11. See Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967); K. D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of "Hesed" in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978); also see G. R. Clark, *The Word "Hesed" in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOT Sup 157 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993). D. A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, "Hesed" in *The New International Dictionary of the Old Testament & Exegesis*, ed. William VanGemeren, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 211.
12. The translation of Scripture I have preferred for decades is the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB). The most recent revision in 2020, however, made a very unfortunate interpretive move—translating *hesed* in Exodus 34:6 with the word "faithfulness." Prior to this recent revision, *hesed* in Exodus 34:6 was translated with the preferable term "lovingkindness."
13. Another group of scholars hold the view that I am arguing for, that God's *hesed* refers to a free expression of undeserved kindness, available to all. From this perspective, when the Bible says, "**Give thanks to Yahweh ... for His *hesed* is everlasting,**" it means something like, "Give thanks to Yahweh, because His mind-blowing lovingkindness is always free and available to everyone." This view much more adequately covers the biblical data, and clearly corresponds more closely to the Person and teachings of Jesus. See, e.g., F. I. Andersen, "Yahweh, the Kind and Sensitive God," in *God Who is Rich in Mercy*, ed. P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson (Sydney: Lancer, 1986): 41-44.

14. The common practice in Hebrew poetry of emphasizing an idea by restating it in a different way (parallelism) makes the theological value of *hesed* in Hosea 4:1 startling—it is equated with “the knowledge of God.”
15. This little phrase—“His *hesed* is everlasting”—actually functions like a national motto for ancient Israel. It fills the Psalms and is celebrated at critical moments in the nation’s history. For examples, see 1 Chronicles 16:34, 41; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 2 Chronicles 7:3, 6; 2 Chronicles 20:21; Ezra 3:11; and Jeremiah 33:10-11.
16. This verse, like several others, also includes the attribute faithfulness, but this word is secondary and given to modify *hesed*. It corresponds to the hendiadys of Exodus 34:6, “*hesed ve-emet*.”
17. The Septuagint uses *eleos* for *hesed* over 200 times, as in all the Old Testament passages referred to in this section, e.g., Jeremiah 9:24, Hosea 4:1, Micah 6:8, et al.

18. Note: As was mentioned earlier, the New Testament authors were familiar with the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint), so many words and phrases were taken directly from it. But the New Testament authors were not slavishly bound to the Septuagint. It was just a translation. (Just as English scholars today are not slavishly bound to *The King James Bible*, or German scholars to Luther's translation.) What really mattered to them is what was meant in the original language. If a New Testament author felt like a better Greek word would suit his needs, he wouldn't hesitate to use it. This is what John does, written decades after Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Instead of using the Septuagint's *eleos* for God's lovingkindness (*hesed*), John prefers the Greek word *charis*. This may be a bit confusing for the uninitiated, but hang in there. Once you know which Greek term John prefers, you find the most stunning connection between *The Derakim* and Jesus in the entire Bible.

19. Recent New Testament scholarship argues, "The prologue's 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14), echoed in John 1:17, is likely an allusion to Exodus 34:6: 'abounding in lovingkindness and truth,' though according to the Hebrew ... not the Septuagint (*polueleos kai alethinos*)." Alexander Tsutserov, *Glory, Grace, and Truth: Ratification of the Sinaitic Covenant according to the Gospel of John* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2009), 23.

20. Reading this New Testament passage in most Hebrew translations and then comparing this to the Hebrew of Exodus 33 and 34 is simply stunning. “We beheld His (Jesus’s) glory ... full of grace and truth (Gk. *charis* and *alethea*)” in John 1:14 is regularly translated into Hebrew, “We beheld His (Jesus’s) glory ... full of *hesed* and *emet*.” See, e.g., *The Modern Hebrew New Testament* (Jerusalem: The Bible Society in Israel, 2010), 181.

21. Consider how Paul uses these words interchangeably in Ephesians 2:4-7. Salvation is based on the riches of God’s *eleos* in v. 4, and based on the riches of His *charis* in v. 7. “But God being rich in *eleos* because of His great love ... even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ—you have been saved by *charis* ... in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His *charis* in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”