

Book Review
David P. Stevens

Inexpressible: Hesed and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness, by Michael Card, InterVarsity Press, 2018, ISBN: 978-0-8308-4549, \$11.20.

Michael Card is a musician and award-winning artist. He earned a master's degree in biblical studies from Western Kentucky University under Dr. William Lane. He has written several books.

Michael Card attempts to capture the essence of the heart of God which he freely admits is difficult, if not impossible, to do. The Hebrew word *hesed* is diverse in meaning and usage in the Old Testament. The opening page of the book attempts to capture this diversity with one hundred and ten different words and phrases that express some aspect of *hesed*. Every context of every passage seems pregnant with meaning. We know that God is infinite in all of His perfections and the diversity and depth of meaning of the word *hesed* is an indication of His glory. The word *inexpressible* is apt when the human mind attempts to contemplate the fullness, richness and depth of God's lovingkindness. This book is a word study. It is a devotional guide on an important Old Testament word. It is a resource of Bible passages that contain the word *hesed* which opens up new areas of study. It will encourage your heart. It will challenge you to possess *hesed* and reciprocate it in all of your relationships. It will help you gain insight into the heart of God and, hopefully, it will transform your own heart.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One: The God of Hesed contains six chapters. Part Two: The Objects of Hesed contains six chapters. Part Three: Hesed Family Defined contains five chapters. Part Four: An Instinct for Hesed contains three chapters. These sections are preceded by a Preface and an Introduction to the book. They are followed by: a Conclusion, an Afterword, four Appendices, Notes, a Bibliography and a Scripture Index.

The book is easy to read and the chapters are not too long. It is written for the benefit of the average Bible student.

Card uses the Preface to discuss the way words work. He concludes the Preface by giving a definition of *hesed* that he could not give a proper attribution for, but which captures the essence of the word: "*Hesed*: When the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything" (5).

In the Introduction, Card warns about using etymology to define a word. The etymology of *hesed* is useless when seeking the meaning of the word. The context of the word in Scripture is the most valuable means of ascertaining the meaning of the word. This is called the *synchronic* meaning, or the meaning at one specific point in time (as opposed to the *diachronic* meaning which refers to the shift in meaning of a word through time) (8). *Hesed* (pronounced with a hard ch sound with the accent on the first syllable) occurs nearly 250 times in the Hebrew Bible throughout all three major divisions—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (9). The majority of occurrences are in the Psalms (127 times). Card notes that the vast range in meaning of the word *hesed* can be seen in the various ways that translators translate the word into English. The King James Version uses fourteen different words to translate the single word *hesed* (appendix B gives a comparison of the different translations as they translate the word). Card also gives the primary words that are used in close association with *hesed*. He calls this its *linguistic gravity*. A list of the words is: truth, mercy/compassion, covenant, justice, faithfulness, goodness, favor, and righteousness (11).

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Usually translators have chosen more than one word to translate the fulness of the meaning of *hesed*. Card indicates that no one word or group of words does complete justice to the meaning of *hesed*. It is a word that opens the door to the world of God's own heart (13).

In Part One, Card introduces his readers to the God of *hesed*. God goes first in opening His heart to people with whom He desires to establish relationship. Chapter one captures the essence of God's heart by revealing its openness. God desires relationship with His creature—man. Chapter Two addresses the definitive encounter between Moses and God as revealed in Exodus 34:6-7 where God reveals Himself to Moses and to Israel. God is angry with Israel because of the nation's sin in making the golden calf. The covenant has been broken. Moses intercedes in behalf of the people. God tells Moses He will not go up to the promised land with these people (Exodus 33:3). God reveals Himself as a God of *hesed*. Thirteen attributes of God are revealed in these passages referred to in Judaism as *The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy* (23). Moses seeks God's forgiveness. He asks God to go with them (Ex. 34:9). He asks for that which he knows he has no right to ask and he receives it. Chapter three focuses on Numbers 14:18 where it is declared that the LORD is slow to anger. Card shows how God's lovingkindness produces a restraint in His anger. This provides opportunity for repentance and renewal of covenant relationship with God. In chapter four, Card magnifies the incomparable God. He examines 2 Chronicles 6:14 (also I Kings 8:23). The occasion is Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple. Solomon states, "There is no God like you...who keeps his covenant of *hesed*." Card explores the use of the everlasting refrain found in I Chronicles 16:34 in chapter five. The refrain is, "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his *hesed* endures forever." This refrain is found repeatedly in the Old Testament. It becomes a "golden thread" in Old Testament thought. The final chapter in Part One explores a Psalm of *hesed*, Psalm 109. This Psalm reveals an unnamed evil person who violates *hesed* by desecrating a loving relationship of trust (54). One aspect of God's nature revealed alongside of His *hesed* is that He will punish the evil doer (Exodus 34:6-7). David pleads for God to respond with justice.

Part Two of Card's book takes a look at the objects of *hesed*. In chapter seven, the author relates a personal story about a woman named Dinah who showed him *hesed* during his visit to the church where she attends. Every person has the potential to show *hesed* to every other person. Chapter eight teaches concerning the "mercies of David." Isaiah 55:3 is brought into focus. The relationship between David and Jonathan was based upon *hesed*. Card reveals that *reciprocity* is one of the special aspects of *hesed*. In chapter nine, the author shows how *hesed* is involved in worship directed to God. He uses Psalm 89:1 and relates information about Ethan, the composer of this Psalm. He then shows how *hesed* was sung about by Moses (Ex. 15:13), David (I Chronicles 16:34), Solomon (I Kings 8:23; II Chron. 6:14), the people sang about it as the Spirit filled the new temple (II Chron. 7:3); they sang about it when God delivered them from their enemies (II Chron. 20:21); they sang about it when the new foundations were laid for the second temple (Ezra 3:11); the people sang about in the days of Nehemiah when they confessed their sins (Neh. 9:17,32); the prophets sang about it (Is. 40:6; 54:8, 10; Jer. 2:2; 31:3; Hos. 2:19); at the birth of Jesus Zechariah and Mary sang about it (Lk. 1:50,54, 72, 78). *Hesed* is something you sing

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about when glorifying God. The Psalms are filled with references to *hesed*. Twenty-nine passages are given by Card on pages 75-76. Understanding the heart of God makes the human heart burst with song in worship to Him. In Chapter ten, Card considers Psalm 90 which was composed by Moses. Psalm 90:14 states, "O satisfy us early with thy mercy: that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." Here *hesed* is associated with the morning and only God's mercy can bring renewal and refreshment to the soul. When weary and faint, we can seek God's lovingkindness and find spiritual renewal for our souls. Card examines Jeremiah's use of *hesed* in chapter eleven. "The word *hesed* occurs only some twenty-eight times in all the prophets" (84). Jeremiah uses the word more frequently than the other prophets. Through the prophets, God calls his people back to faithfulness to His covenant and He stands ready to forgive them and restore them. However, they refuse. Jeremiah's ministry extended over five kings, but only one (Josiah) actually listened to him. He preached for forty years and was rejected by God's people. But, God is *hesed* and He announces through Jeremiah that He will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Jesus Christ will reveal God's *hesed* in a personal way and give hope once again to all people. This new covenant will be known as a covenant of grace: God's riches at Christ's expense (87). Chapter twelve is the last chapter in this section. Card focuses on the use of *hesed* in Hosea. He states, "The purpose behind the parable (Card is hesitant to give the book a certain classification) of Hosea and Gomer's life is to provide a window into the broken and betrayed heart of God, who will not give up on his people because of his *hesed*" (89). Hosea is called upon to love Gomer in spite of her ongoing unfaithfulness. Thus God's lovingkindness toward Israel is depicted. The author examines six passages in Hosea. Each passage gives an insight into the tenacity of *hesed*.

In Part Three, Card focuses on the definition of *hesed*. Chapter thirteen explores *hesed* and truth. In the first part of this chapter, the author breaks down the use of *hesed* in the Septuagint. In the vast majority of cases, the authors of the Septuagint used the Greek word *eleos* (*mercy*-almost two hundred times). The word *charis* (*grace*) is used only twice. The word for righteousness (*dikaïosunē*) is used five times. *Elpis* (*hope*) is used once (98). Clearly, when the authors of the Septuagint thought of *hesed* they thought of God's mercy. Next, Card turns his attention to the Gospel of John. He cites John 1:17 as an example of how *hesed* becomes "grace and truth" in the personal life and ministry of Jesus. Grace and truth is a Hebraism which is found in Exodus 34:6-7, Gen. 24:7, Josh. 2:14, 2 Sam. 2:6, Ps. 40:11, and Ps. 89:14. In Exodus 34:6-7, the phrase is part of God's self-revelation to Moses. In John 1:17, it refers to Jesus and confirms His deity. The identity of Jesus was a question mark in the minds of many during His earthly ministry. John writes to establish Jesus' true identity even though he records twenty different occasions where Jesus was misunderstood. In chapter fourteen, Card looks at two passages in the Gospel accounts where Jesus quoted and applied the phrase, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13 and Matt. 12:7). Here, *hesed* is on the lips of Jesus. In chapter fifteen, the author looks at how to amaze Jesus. Card relates the narrative of the healing of the centurion's servant and Jesus' response with amazement (Jesus marveled at his faith). The centurion asks for mercy and a miracle even though he is keenly aware that he was not worthy. *Hesed* is when a person from who we have no right to expect anything, gives us everything.

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God's mercy is aptly demonstrated in this story. Chapter sixteen takes up the account of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:36-37). Card emphasizes that *hesed* is something that you do. It is also defined by Luke in Luke 6:35. Speaking of God, Luke states, "he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil." *Hesed* involves loving your enemies and so loving as God loves. Part III concludes by examining Paul's statement of God's goodness in Romans 2:4. When God's goodness is despised, the human soul is placed in peril. The rejection of God's mercy robs one of the mercy he so desperately needs. This is a self-inflicted wound that results in impenitence. To die in such a spiritual state is to die in one's sins—unforgiven.

Part IV of the book contains three chapters. Chapter eighteen is a personal example in the life of Card where he determines to develop the instinct of *hesed*. Chapter nineteen focuses on *hesed* in post-AD 70 Judaism. In this brief chapter, Card affirms that *hesed* became an important part of the instruction given by the Rabbi's in the Talmud and post-Christian era. The final chapter of the book explores how *hesed* became a part of Jewish life and instrumental in healing the world. Two phrases are explored: *Gemilut hesed* or "the practice of *hesed*" and *tikkun olam* or "repairing the world." Repairing the world is accomplished through acts of *hesed* (129).

The book concludes with a study of Hosea 6:8 where the prophet instructs concerning what the LORD requires: to act justly, to love *hesed*, and to walk humbly with your God. The passage blends together justice, mercy and humility. At the end of this chapter, Card gives his own definition of *hesed*.

Card includes an afterward where he emphasizes that God's love defines us and His *hesed* is at the heart of His love.

Appendix A contains 246 occurrences of *hesed* in the Old Testament. Card also gives the Greek words from the Septuagint that are used to translate this Hebrew word.

Appendix B gives a comparison of the translations concerning word choices that the translators used to convey the meaning of *hesed* in various contexts.

Appendix C gives a vocabulary of words associated with *hesed*. There are eight words listed: truth, mercy/compassion, covenant, justice, faithfulness, goodness, favor and righteousness.

Appendix D gives ideas for further study of *hesed* in Old Testament passages and in the life of Jesus.

The book finishes with Notes, a Bibliography and a Scripture Index.

Michael Card has produced a work that informs and inspires. By gaining an insight into the heart of God, we can transform our own hearts. Biblical concepts were given by God to be transformational to our lives. *Hesed* is one of those biblical words that can bring about monumental self-improvement through the pursuit of the heart of God. In turn, we can help repair the world of its corruption. First, God changes us. Then, we help change the world.