

Is There No *Hesed* in John?

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There is a way of testing whether a word has travelled. You take the Hebrew term, find what the Greek translators of the Old Testament reached for when they had to render it, and then look for that Greek word in the New Testament. *Hesed* — covenant loyalty, the love that keeps its word — usually came across as *eleos*. Mercy.

So I went looking for *eleos* in John.

It isn't there. Not in the prologue, not in the farewell discourse, not at the cross. Twenty-one chapters, and the word never appears. Nor does its verb. Nor does the other main word for compassion, the one about being moved in the gut. The Gospel that gives us the vine and the shepherd and the washing of feet does not once use the ordinary word for mercy.

To see how strange that is, put the others beside it.

Luke cannot stop using the word. Mary sings that God's mercy is on those who fear him, from generation to generation. Zechariah, when his tongue is loosed, says God has shown mercy to the fathers and remembered his holy covenant. The tax collector at the back of the temple, who has no case to make and knows it, can only say *God, have mercy on me*. Ten lepers call it out from a distance. A blind man on the Jericho road shouts it until they try to silence him, and then shouts it louder. It runs through Luke like a watermark, and it is the same word every time.

Matthew is sparer, and more pointed. He uses it three times, and all three are arguments. Twice Jesus quotes Hosea — *I desire mercy, not sacrifice* — once when he is criticised for eating with tax collectors, once when his disciples are accused of breaking the Sabbath. The third is the woe against the scribes for measuring out their garden herbs while letting the weightier matters go: justice, mercy, faithfulness. Matthew's mercy is always the prophet's word, handed back to religious people who have mislaid it.

Mark, it should be said, doesn't use the noun at all, and anyone building on a zero should know that before they start. But Mark is not the puzzle. Mark is short and urgent, more interested in what Jesus does than in what holds him to us.

John is the puzzle. John is the Gospel that slows down — abiding, the Father who loves the Son, friends rather than servants, belonging that survives death. If any Gospel were built to carry covenant loyalty, it is this one.

And it sharpens further. Matthew shows the line running directly from Hosea into the Gospels, and the verse he reaches for is the one where covenant loyalty stands shoulder to shoulder with knowing God. Then comes John, who thinks about knowing God more deeply than any of them, and the word is gone.

Except that it isn't.

Go back to the beginning of the Gospel, to the fourteenth verse, before the narrative has properly started. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Three verses later, John says it again: *grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

Grace and truth. *Charis* and *alētheia*. Two words, paired, said twice in the space of four verses and then not paired again in the Gospel.

Many readers hear something underneath that pairing. There is a moment in Exodus where Moses asks to see God's glory, and God hides him in a gap in the rock and passes by, saying his own name aloud as he goes. The words he uses of himself are *hesed we'emet* — covenant loyalty and faithfulness. The two words stay together after that. The Psalms use them as a pair, over and over, whenever they want to say what God is like. If John is reaching back to anything with *grace and truth*, it is almost certainly that.

Which changes the shape of the question entirely. It is not that John has no *hesed*. It is that John states it once, in the prologue, before anyone has been healed or fed or washed — attaches it to the moment the Word takes flesh — and then puts the vocabulary down and never picks it up again.

The word doesn't go missing. It gets spent.

Watch what happens next.

A man born blind is questioned, disbelieved, and thrown out by the authorities. Jesus hears he has been thrown out, and goes and finds him. Nobody in the passage says the word mercy. Something is done instead.

There is a woman brought into the temple court with an accusation already decided, and a man who bends down and writes in the dust until the stones are put back down. There is a wedding running out of wine and a mother's quiet word. There is bread handed out on a hillside until everyone has had enough, and twelve baskets left over. There is a tomb at Bethany and a man who weeps before he does anything about it.

And there is the last night, when he washes the feet of the men who will scatter before morning — including the one who is already leaving. Then he tells them to do the same for each other.

That is *hesed*. Loyalty held toward people who cannot compel it and will not, that night, deserve it. Every element the Hebrew word carries is in that room: the prior bond, the freely kept promise, the one who owes nothing acting as though he owes everything. What isn't in the room is the word.

John says it once in the prologue and then makes us watch it for twenty chapters.

But John does have a word he uses constantly, and it is worth asking whether it simply does the same job under another name.

Agapē. Love. It saturates the last third of the Gospel — love one another, remain in my love, greater love has no one than this. If *hesed* has gone missing, love has more than filled the gap.

It isn't the same word, though, and the difference is not about strength. Both are words for something done rather than something felt. *Hesed* is Ruth staying with Naomi when leaving would have been reasonable, Boaz at the gate, David sparing the man hunting him. Nobody in those stories is having a feeling. They are keeping something.

The difference is what each word points back to. *Hesed* points back to a promise. It presumes a covenant already made, and it means honouring that covenant when nothing forces you to. Take the promise away and the word has nothing to stand on.

John's love points back to a person. The measure is not a covenant but a sentence: *as I have loved you*. The love comes from the Father to the Son, from the Son to his friends, and from them to each other — a current running down a line, not a clause being honoured. In the prayer on the last night he asks that the love the Father has for him would end up inside them. That is not covenant language. That is something being passed along.

Neither word is the greater one. But they are anchored in different places, and a reading that treats them as interchangeable will miss what John has actually

done — which is to take the loyalty that used to rest on a promise and rest it on a person instead.

I should say what this costs me.

I read the Bible with a shape in mind. It runs like this: you come to know God — really know him, the way you know a person, not the way you know a fact. That knowing makes you loyal, to him and to people. And that loyalty shows up as doing right by people who are getting a raw deal. Knowing, then loyalty, then justice.

That shape works in the prophets because all three are there in the words they use. In John, only the first one is. And John does more with it than any prophet managed — he has Jesus say that eternal life *is* knowing God, and that the whole reason he made the Father known was so the Father's love would end up inside his friends. John says that himself. I'm not reading it in.

The other two I am reading in. Loyalty is there, but shown rather than said — I've argued that above, and I think it holds, but somebody who doesn't share my shape could look at the same scenes and never reach for *hesed* at all. And justice, the way the prophets meant it, isn't really in this Gospel. It shows up in the letters. John's own letter asks how God's love can be in a man who sees his brother go without and closes his heart. James says looking after widows and orphans is the test of whether your religion is real. The Gospel plants it. The letters bring it in.

Which brings it back to the towel.

He knew what was coming. He knew who was leaving and who would deny him before the fire had burned down. And he got up from the table, took off his outer clothing, tied a towel round his waist, poured water into a basin, and knelt.

The word *hesed* is nowhere in the passage. It didn't need to be.

These reflections did not begin with artificial intelligence. They began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this manuscript, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.