

EXCERPT

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Inexpressible

HeseD and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness

December 18, 2018 | \$16, 208 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4549-1

God's identity cannot be fully expressed in human words, but Scripture uses one particular Hebrew word to describe God's character: *hesed*. Michael Card unpacks the many dimensions of *hesed*, exploring how it is used in the Old Testament to reveal God's character and how its fullness is ultimately embodied in the incarnation of Jesus.

The Greatest Sacramental Word in the Hebrew Bible

You have every right to ask yourself how someone could become so obsessed with a single word that they would attempt to write an entire book about it. It's a fair question.

As I try to reconstruct the story of how I became enamored with the word *hesed*, I find that for each step along the way my memory fails me somehow. Some years ago, while working through the laments of the Old Testament, I encountered this remarkable word for the first time. I had studied Hebrew as an undergraduate at Western Kentucky University, but I cannot remember my professors talking about this word. The truth is, they probably did, but I simply wasn't listening.

One of the fascinating features of biblical laments, which so captured my imagination, was the way every one transitions. These psalms begin lamenting (which is still a form of worship), and then at some unpredictable point they transition and begin to praise. This shift usually takes place by means of the Hebrew letter *vav*, which is usually translated "and" or "but." It is as if the lamenter finally exhausts himself and turns back to the God he was complaining to or about. (The sole exception is Psalm 88, which laments all the way to the end.)

In three important laments, Psalms 13 and 69 and Jeremiah's Lamentations, the word *hesed* appears at this turning point. It marks the transition from despair to hope, from emptiness to a new possibility of becoming filled once more. It's as if David and Jeremiah had run out of doubt and despair, had run out of words—except for this one untranslatable word. They could not exhaust its bottomless supply of hope, and by grace it rose to the surface of their lament, transforming it to praise. Their self-centered "I" mercifully became the God-centered "Thou." The pain and frustration and anger were not wiped away but rather transformed by entering the world of this untranslatable, three-letter, two-syllable word, *hesed*. Here are those three transitions:

But I have trusted in your *hesed*. (Ps 13:5)

But as for me, LORD,
my prayer to you is for a time of favor.
In your abundant *hesed*, God,
answer me with your sure salvation. (Ps 69:13)

Because of the LORD's *hesed*
we do not perish,
for his mercies never end. (Lam 3:22)

The next step in the process of becoming obsessed with *hesed* has also been lost to memory, which is hard to understand considering that my life has been so changed by it. As I remember, in the midst of a radio interview with one of my scholarly heroes, I mentioned my newfound fascination with *hesed*. I distinctly remembered him saying, "Oh, that is the

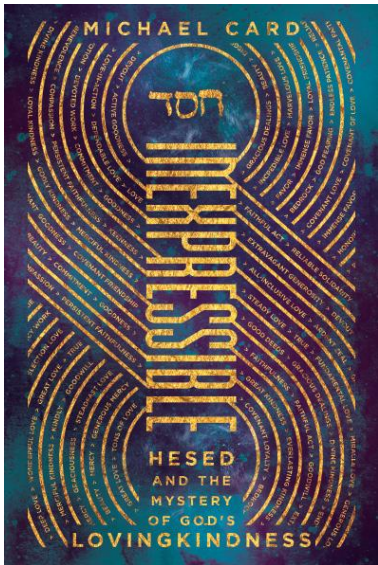


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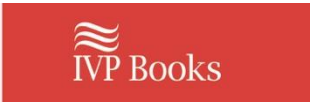
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"Michael Card brilliantly leads us to discover the heartbeat of hesed, as he gives language to this virtually undefinable word. When he first shared with me his basic definition of hesed—'When the person from which I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything'—I couldn't wait to learn more. I've been completely moved by this book: first, to explore and experience an aspect of God's character I never knew before, and second, to let his hesed inspire me to live hesed every day."

Ginny Owens, singer and songwriter

defining characteristic of God." That statement, coming from someone whose scholarship I so admired, lit the fuse. A few years later in a follow-up interview I reminded him of this statement. He insisted he never made it.

The final step involved the discovery of a working definition of this indefinable word. Again, the details have been lost. Looking back through the articles and notes I have collected over the years (two fifteen-hundred-page notebooks full!) I cannot find a trace of it anywhere. I don't think I'm clever enough to have come up with it on my own, and so I do not claim it as my own original definition, though sadly I cannot give a proper attribution. It will provide our initial, ever-incomplete working definition:

HeseD: When the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything.

So in the midst of researching a different topic I discovered this remarkable word. (Perhaps it discovered me.) I learned about it in the course of discussions I might not have had and read about it in a source that might not exist. Like the members of the dictionary committee in 1844, I monumentally underestimated the task of writing a book on hesed. What I thought would take a year took ten. In the course of working on this book I realized that understanding hesed is a lifelong journey. None of us will ever get to the end of it in this life. This book is just the beginning of an exploration, an invitation to join in the journey of the vast world that is the word *hesed*, the greatest sacramental word in the Hebrew Bible.

—Taken from the preface

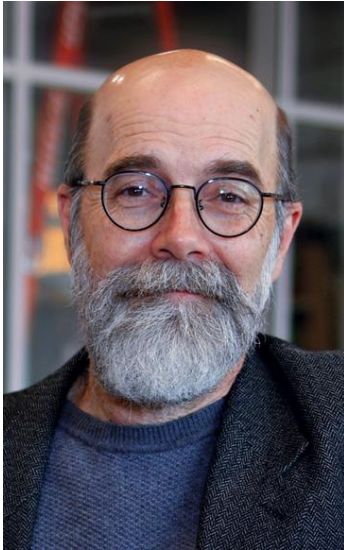


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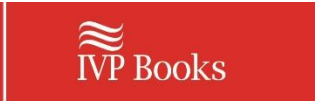
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BIO



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“Michael Card has given his life to joining the wonder of Scripture with careful scholarship. He writes with the touch an artist, the mind of a scholar, the heart of a pastor, and the reverence of a disciple.”

Russ Ramsey, pastor, author, Retelling the Story Series

Michael Card: Musician, Author, Teacher, Student

In a career that spans over thirty years, Michael Card has recorded over thirty-seven albums, authored or coauthored over twenty-seven books, hosted a radio program, and written for a wide range of magazines. An award-winning musician and performing artist, he has penned such favorites as “El Shaddai,” “Immanuel,” and many other songs.

Card has expanded his ministry beyond music and written numerous books, including

- *Scribbling in the Sand*
- *A Sacred Sorrow*
- *A Violent Grace*
- *The Parable of Joy*
- *Sleep Sound in Jesus* (a children’s book)
- Biblical Imagination Series, with a book and accompanying music CD for each of the four gospels

A graduate of Western Kentucky University with a bachelor’s and master’s degree in biblical studies, Card also serves as mentor to many younger artists and musicians, teaching courses on the creative process and calling the Christian recording industry into deeper discipleship.

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