



*Teaching the Loving kindness and  
Goodness (hesed) of God*

Whilst my Muslim friends will not use the language of sin, get a group of women together for a party or an event and their talk will be peppered with what comes across to my ears as a throw away exhortation: “Astaghfirullah” or “I seek forgiveness from Allah”. This expression is often followed by a wry smile or even a ripple of laughter. I have come to understand this as an admission that “I shouldn’t have done it, but I did”. When I have opportunity to share more intimately with one or two Muslim friends they will talk about the heart’s desire to be forgiven and the anxiety of not knowing until death whether this forgiveness has been extended to them. It would be easy for me to jump in and lead my friends through a conversation and discussion on what we Christians term “assurance of salvation” but am I really hitting the spot here when I do that? Talking about Jesus taking our sin on Himself on the cross thus giving us forgiveness of sin and securing eternal life for us when we repent and accept Him into our life has little meaning for Muslims. Why would it when, in Islam, the gravity of sin is not recognized<sup>58</sup> and when ‘it is Allah who decides who will be saved and who will be damned.’

### **Of Fear, Forgiveness and the Loving Kindness of God**

Over the many years in which I have spent time with Muslim women, better understanding the rhythms, responsibilities and worries of their lives I have come to a

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<sup>58</sup> In Islam sin is seen as a forgetting of the primordial covenant Allah made with all humanity to obey him. The task of the prophets is to remind the believers of this covenant and to warn un-believers of the consequences of their forgetting.

growing conviction of the value of sharing with my friends more of who God is rather than what God does. I've begun to focus more on describing God's character rather than on topics such as sin, repentance or salvation. A longing has grown in my heart that my Muslim friends would come to a deep experience and understanding of the loving-kindness and goodness of God.

The Hebrew word most often translated "*lovingkindness*" is *hesed*, which literally means "*covenant loyalty*." Most English translations of the Bible substitute more common English words such as *faithfulness*, *unfailing love*, *mercy*, or *good favour*. All of these are viable substitutions, but, as with many Hebrew words, *hesed* has no exact match in English. As we read the Bible, we need to remember that God's *hesed* is all of these, all at once; and it is out of this foundational basis of His character that God chooses to relate to humanity. Many places in Scripture speak of the lovingkindness of the Lord.<sup>59</sup> Lovingkindness is part of who God is; He delights in showing lovingkindness<sup>60</sup> and we praise Him for it<sup>61</sup>

Recently, in the small Monday night Bible study group with new believers out of Islam, we had a discussion reviewing the sermon given the day before on the gift of eternal life which Jesus spoke of repeatedly in John 6<sup>62</sup>. Most in the group had understood that through faith and trust in Jesus we are rescued from the danger of hell-fire into life forever with God. "But what is the benefit to our life now?" asked one who has thrown off Islamic identity in frustration and dissatisfaction and is cautiously

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<sup>59</sup> Exodus 20:6; 34:6-7; Deut 7:12; 2 Chron 1:8; Psalm 31:6

<sup>60</sup> Micah 7:18

<sup>61</sup> Psalm 138:2

<sup>62</sup> Jesus intimated 7 times that he was the source of eternal life

but seriously exploring following Jesus. This led us on to explore Jesus' words in John 10:10 "I have come that they might have life in all its fullness" As group members shared together of the freedom from fear, the presence of God's Holy Spirit within us, the comfort which His loving kindness affords us there was an aha moment in the mind of our enquiring friend: " Ah, Islam tells us that we must be ready to die but Jesus is saying that when we follow Him we can be ready to **truly live.**"

Yes, there is clear distinction here between an understanding of God who is capricious in nature, who has put on this earth to test us, and who decides our fate at death - who will be saved and who will be damned; and God whose steadfast love and kindness is seen in a proactive faithfulness towards us which is inclined to bless us. This realization is truly life-giving. Having attended a Prophets Stories' group<sup>63</sup> where, over 10 weeks, we had dialogued on the commonalities and differences of the stories of 7 prophets common in the Qur'an and the Bible, a Sudanese friend was able to express: "t appears that God in the Qur'an is always angry but God in the Bible is love." When, a couple of years later, this same friend saw advertising of the Prophets' Stories activity being offered again she shared with me the change that this knowledge had made in her daily life: " I used to be afraid of all sorts of things – and especially when my daughters were sick. But now, because I know God is love, I hardly ever feel that fear. And, the funny thing is" she said, almost conspiratorially "I don't think I even deserve it". My friend is on the journey to discovering God's love, His beneficent power over fear and His grace for her.

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<sup>63</sup> Prophets' Stories dialogue resource see <http://prophetstories.org.uk/>

For Volf, there is an important distinction in the way God's nature is understood by Muslims and by Christians. In Islam God is loving and does loving acts in response to those who obey Him. But Christians can be clear that God is Love in His very essence. "To say that God is love is not merely to describe the nature of God's activity toward the world. It is to name the character of God's eternal being, to describe the fountain from which the divine loving flows" <sup>64</sup> Traced throughout the Old Testament and fulfilled in the coming of Jesus in the New, "God's eternal and unchanging love is the foundation stone on which everything else is built – the gift of creation with its myriad delights, the gift of God's coming into the world to redeem humanity from evil, and the gift of eternal and glorified life" <sup>65</sup> This can only be understood in the light of the Christian understanding of God who is a community of self-giving Love in Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So can we talk in terms of discipling our friends towards a new understanding of who God is? In a story about the patriarchs we see a lone woman in the desert and in distress. God calls her by name and then proceeds to engage in conversation with her about her plight. On receiving both instruction and blessing from God, Hagar, in her response, gains the honour of the only woman in Scripture who names God: "You are the God who sees me." (Gen. 16:13) She has experienced herself to be truly known and this turns her fear to trust and future flourishing<sup>66</sup>. How do we help our friends experience this beautiful reality for themselves?

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<sup>64</sup> P165

<sup>65</sup> *Allah*. Miroslav Volf p.172

<sup>66</sup> <https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/sight-embrace-and-flourishing/>

## **Modelling confidence in prayer because of his loyal *hesed* love**

We know that prayer is an activity which forms the structure of each day for Muslim people and that even when our women friends are excluded from praying the salat during times of impurity they are able to perform du'a or informal prayer. And yet there are often times when one hears expressions which betray a lack of confidence that their prayers are enough or that their prayers are reaching God.

All over the Psalms and throughout the Old Testament stories we come to see that God is a prayer-answering God<sup>67</sup>. Such are the stories of Hannah, Ruth and Naomi – all women who carried their burdens to God in prayer and saw Him respond in miraculous ways. Some of us will have had the joy of our friends approaching us to ask that we pray for them: “your prayers work” or “your prayers are powerful” has been the refrain. I find it helpful at that point to share how Jesus, when teaching his companions to pray,<sup>68</sup> spoke of God as being our Father figure from whom good gifts could be expected. This, I will explain, has helped shape my understanding of God as being one who is more than ready to hear us and answer our prayers. The story Jesus told of the persistent widow, who only got what she requested because the judge was tired of her pestering him, could be offered as a contrast to God who loves to hear us as his loving kindness and goodness moves Him to bless us. Modelling language as we use opportunities our friends give us to pray for/with them may grow a confidence in them to ask for good gifts from our Good God.

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<sup>67</sup> Psalm 20 Psalm 65:2: 145:18; Psalm 91:15

<sup>68</sup> in Luke 11: 9-13 Matt.7:7-11

## **God's *hesed* love is generous and limitless**

The Bible often describes God's *hesed* as abounding and abundant<sup>69</sup>. It is generous and limitless<sup>70</sup>; sufficient for each of us and for all of us. The fact that we can never reach the limit of God's *hesed* directly challenges the world-view of limited good in which many Muslim women operate. Anyone who is seen to have more than their share of the finite good that there is in the world threatens the equilibrium of the community and so is exposed to the possibility of destructive envy on the part of another. I've seen how many of my friends line their new born babies' eyes with Kohl to make them look unattractive and so protect them from the eye of envy; how they hide their joy at the achievements of their children and their pleasure in having, themselves, succeeded in personal goals. This world view and its ramifications robs people of fully enjoying life, manipulates them and keeps them captive to fear of being prey to circulating evil forces which are ready to make their presence felt. Women may feel absolutely powerless in these situations and engage in folk Islamic practices in order to garner power in the face of the possibility of evil visiting them<sup>71</sup>. Rather than decry these practices let's find ways of speaking to them of the *hesed* of God which is undeserved kindness from One in power to one who is weak. God bends down to give unmerited kindness to us in our weakness. Let's tell them stories of Jesus' healing power which overturned the grip of a fever and even death. Let's place our hands over them/their sick child and pray in the power of that healing name. When we are given lucky

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<sup>69</sup> Numbers 14:18

<sup>70</sup> Psalm 57:10

talismans let's accept the gift, discuss where true power lies and speak of the power of our Good God to do good to us<sup>72</sup>. This may open eyes to see that God's *hesed* love and power could be available for them, too<sup>73</sup>.

### **We can be sustained in suffering by God's *hesed*.**

Lina, from Syria, who has had to flee to the west due to conflict in her country, wrings her hands as she talks of the horrific journey she, her husband and young son endured. My Iraqi friend, Rihab, sighs and stifles tears as she absorbs the implication of her 7 year old son's diagnosis of chronic illness. Rashida, from Pakistan, stays behind after English class is over to quietly explain the reason for her absence, yet another miscarriage. When, in each situation, I seek to respond with words of sympathy the common refrain I hear from them is 'alhumdillah' or 'may God be praised'. As I sit with Khadija, my Moroccan friend, who has suddenly and unexpectedly lost her husband, there are whispered words repeated to her as each mourner arrives: "*sabr wa iman*". Literally translated "patience and faith", this phrase is used more as an admonition not to question the difficulty being faced but to endure the trial which Allah has sent with patience. This belief is rooted in a theology that God created the world with evil and death in it, fully intending that we would suffer in our lives, and that this is a test which is set for us. My friends talk about their hope that they will "pass this test" and explain to me that "we say '*alhumdillah*' because we have to accept whatever God wills". I think there is another opportunity here to share of Hope/trust, rather than

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<sup>72</sup> Psalm 119:68

<sup>73</sup> Psalm 147:11

mere endurance in suffering. Our Christian Hope is enabled by a deep knowledge of the goodness and loving kindness of God. Here is an opportunity to speak again of our own experience of God's hesed love – his steadfast love – which doesn't give us a pass on suffering. Rather, it holds us IN suffering. Personal testimony of knowing God's love and faithfulness through a time of trial can be powerful. Within the context of an honest conversation about the concerns I myself might have for my children, my health, future or finances I've found it useful to talk about the discipline of choosing to live in the environment of our loving, generous God rather than under the dictatorship of my own poor needs; so learning to live under blessing when faced with anxious thoughts and foreboding fear<sup>74</sup>.

### **Hesed love which restores honour /lifts from shame**

Stories of Jesus' interactions with women enable us to encourage those Muslim friends who carry around with them a sense of shame derived from ascribed shame, embodied shame or the female universal of menstruation.<sup>75</sup> The story of Jesus healing the bleeding woman, and the way that Jesus asked for her to identify herself as the one who touched Him so that power went out from Him, may at first sight feel indiscreet of Jesus. However, when we understand that Jesus did this to reinstate her into community, we begin to understand that the crowd were witnessing that not only was she healed but that she was to be recognized by all present as having been healed; and so re-instated back into community. The woman who wept at Jesus feet and wiped

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<sup>74</sup> Lamentations 3:22

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2018/01/03/women-shame/>

them with her hair is acclaimed by Jesus. Her 'welcome' of Him is over and above any hospitality that he had been offered by his religious hosts and Jesus declares that wherever the gospel is spoken of her story will be shared. In these few words Jesus raises this woman, in the face of the disapproving gaze of the men around her, from shame to honour. An act of lovingkindness, indeed.

### **We're called to show *hesed*.**

My Somali friend and I enjoy meeting up together once a month to walk around a local beauty spot. As we walk the conversation invariably turns to our faith experiences. She's also part of a wider friendship group of 7 of us – 6 of whom are Christian. She has noticed a kindness amongst us and is intrigued. When she and I met recently we returned to the topic of kindness but in the context of the alarming (to her) news that some people from her country were becoming Jesus followers. "It's this dangerous kindness of Christians which first attracts people" she, only half-jokingly, said. A colleague has spoken of a conversation with a Pakistani friend who says she has been deeply impressed by the kindness of Christian people she's come across who offer support, not expecting anything in return. Another colleague was visiting the home of an Afghan family when the mother asked her son the meaning of the English word kindness. He replied "you know, it's how Christian people are." What each is recognizing is the fruit of God's presence in us and the work of his Spirit shaping our character. We need to understand such comments as more than just flattery, taking them as opportunities to speak of our understanding of God whose *hesed* love we have experienced and in response want to share with others. Indeed, Scripture expects that

we bless others<sup>76</sup> and the apostles demonstrate for us the authority we are given to pass on blessings in Jesus name.

### **Forgiveness and rescue because of God's *hesed*.**

So how DO we engage with Muslim friends who glibly cry “*Astafigullah*” whilst in company with their friends? Some may have told us, within the safety of a personal conversation, that they present this earnest cry before God when alone in their room, crying out to God for forgiveness on the night of power during Ramadan. I have found that people respond well to the image and language of rescue of which there are so many biblical examples: “*Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love (hesed).*” Psalm 44:26; Psalm 103 is full of the language of God’s *hesed* love – compassion, faithfulness, steadfast love - which moves Him to intervene on behalf of loved ones and to rescue those who call on Him; “You, Lord are forgiving and good, abounding in love (*hesed*) to all who call on you” Psalm 86:5; God, as a compassionate Father, reaching out to us in the person and work of Jesus to forgive us beyond measure (v3,8-12), to redeem (v4) and to restore (v5). The stories of the Old Testament speak loudly of rescue: God provided the boat for Noah’s rescue, the whale for Jonah’s rescue, the blood over the door sill for the rescue of the first born son from death, the parting of the sea for the rescue of the people of Israel, and a ram for the rescue of Abraham’s son from death. From sharing these things it’s not too difficult to move on to the mention of John the Baptist, or Yahya (as known by Muslim people) who pointed his own companions to Jesus and said “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin

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<sup>76</sup> 1 Peter 3:9

of the world” and then talk of Jesus, the pure and sinless one, as the one who rescues us from unclean hearts full of sin and who leads us from death into life. It’s not difficult, but I find it needs regular revisiting and regular and persistent sharing as for my Muslim friends this good news is almost too good to be true.

### **Extended to all?**

*Hesed*, or lovingkindness, as it relates to the character of God, is most often used to describe God’s heart toward those who are His own. It is the love of Covenant Love. Discussion by Christian women engaging with women from an Islamic heritage has shown that some would wonder whether the promises of God’s *hesed* love made available to us are made only for those within the covenant? In response, I find plenty of evidence in both the Old and New Testaments of women from outside the covenant community to whom God reveals His *hesed* love and goodness. God speaks words of comfort and consolation to Hagar, an Egyptian bonds woman: “the Lord has heard your cry<sup>77</sup>” and goes on to make promises of blessing for her future through her son<sup>78</sup>. *Hesed* is one of the key words controlling the book of Ruth whose story traces a Moabite woman, who experiences the *hesed* love of God in several ways, to the extent that she becomes an ancestor in the covenantal line to Jesus. The Syro-Phoenician woman who pleaded before Jesus for the health of her demon-possessed daughter experienced both His loving and affirming response to her initial (some would say inappropriate and bold approach) to Him and His healing power. In a short, but clear, study of God’s *heed*

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<sup>77</sup> Genesis 21:17,18

<sup>78</sup> Genesis 16:11,12

blessings, as set out in Psalm 67 and in Ephesians 1, Dale<sup>22</sup> shows how the blessings of fertility, fruitfulness and flourishing<sup>79</sup> and forgiveness of sins and redemption<sup>80</sup> is there for peoples of all the nations. In both passages of Scripture the result of this blessing will be that God will be honoured by all.

I think I am seeing this in the life of a dear friend. A Turkish single parent for whom life is filled with struggle and with whom I walked for over 12 years, recently shared with me an experience she'd had when she felt that God had cleared a space in the clouds in the sky so that He could look at her. And in that gaze she knew that she was loved. For now, for her, that is enough. Like the experience of my Sudanese friend at the beginning of this piece, she is finding that being touched by God's hesed love is making a difference to her every day. Neither have come to a "saving faith" but my prayer is that as I continue to rehearse, live out and offer them stories, words of blessing and discussion on the goodness of God, who gives and gives and gives again, I will be working to create for my friends a template for building truth narratives of God who is, indeed, Love and who invites them to step into this covenant community of those who enjoy His hesed love.

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<sup>79</sup> Psalm 67

<sup>80</sup> Ephesians 1: 3 ff