

## Meaning of “Meek” in Psalm 25: Keeping One’s Eternal Covenants, LeGrand Baker

A friend describes meekness as the ability to accept offence without being offended. That is an enjoyable perspective, and it works well in many scriptures. However there is another meaning of “meek” that makes it one of the most significant words in the subtextual language of the scriptures. It is one of those “code words” that was never intended to be a code word, because that meaning of “meekness” is clearly explained in the Psalms. In Psalm 37:11, we learn, “The meek shall inherit the earth: and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.” The Savior paraphrased that psalm when he spoke the Beatitude, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” He may also have been referring to it with the Beatitude that reads, “And blessed are all the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” In D&C 88:17 he explained much the same thing, that the earth was created so “the poor and the meek of the earth shall inherit it.” Those ideas are all amplified in the place where one finds the most complete discussion of what meekness means, the 25<sup>th</sup> psalm.

It expands the blessings of meekness to include the doctrine of an eternal family—it promises that not just the meek, but also the children of the meek, will inherit the earth. It is that psalm that gives us the best explanation of who the meek are.

Psalm 25 is an intensely personal statement. The speaker may have been a single individual, or the psalm may have been sung by everyone in the congregation. The individual who sings it (even if there are many who sang simultaneously) is so very human that whether the psalm were sung by one person or the entire congregation would not change the personal nature of the hymn. The Lord’s statement, “For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads” (D&C 25:12), can be true whether one is singing alone, with a congregation, or just listening.

Most other scriptures that tell about the Council in Heaven make it seem very distant and detached because the accounts are about supermen like Abraham, Isaiah, or Lehi. Psalm 25 is not just about the king, but it is about Everyman. It seems to bring the Council home to the fireside where its covenants are a central part of ordinary daily lives. It is a prayer in which one lifts one’s soul (not just one’s hands) as an evidence of one’s worthiness. In the prayer, the person unabashedly exposes his inner Self, making himself vulnerable to all those who can know the meaning of his words. He is one who has unbounded faith in the Lord—one who knows he had made some very serious covenants in the Council—and one who is trying to keep those covenants while muddling through the dreariness that is life in this lonely, dark world. In the Book of Mormon, Nephi’s psalm in 2 Nephi 4 is so much like Psalm 25 that one wonders if Nephi may have been reflection on its meaning when he wrote his own.

The Psalm reads:

*1 Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.  
2 O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed*

One would be ashamed if one had borne testimony of God’s covenant, but God didn’t

keep them. The next lines suggest that the covenant he was asking God to keep is the promise that God would make a way for the psalmist to keep his own covenants:

*let not mine enemies triumph over me*

“Triumph,” in the context of this psalm, suggests that they would be able to prevent him from keeping those covenants:

*3 Yea, let none that wait on thee be ashamed:  
let them be ashamed which transgress without cause*

The word “wait” appears three times in this psalm. Each is translated from the same Hebrew word that means to anticipate, “to look for eagerly.”<sup>1</sup> The shame mentioned would only come if the Lord did not appear and the person who waits is disappointed. The blessings of waiting on the Lord is taught by Isaiah, where he writes:

But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).

That the psalmist had that same idea in mind is clearly demonstrated by his next phrase, where his words “ways” and “paths” have the same encoded connotation.

*4 Shew me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths.  
5 Lead me in thy truth, and teach me  
for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day.*

Psalms 25 is set in the context of our premortal covenants, and the next verse contains a word that brings those covenants into a deeply personal friendship/relationship. The word is translated “lovingkindnesses” and is from the Hebrew word *hesed*.<sup>2</sup> The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* shows the power of that friendship/relationship:

We may venture the conjecture that even in cases where the context does not suggest such mutuality it is nevertheless implicit, because we are dealing with the closest of human bonds.<sup>3</sup>

An explanation and clarification of their phrase, “*dealing with the closest of human bonds*,” is found in a new edition of *Strong’s Concordance*:

---

1 Strong 6960.

2 Katherine Doob Sakenfeld of Princeton University Seminary wrote a dissertation on “hesed” in which she argued that it meant “to do what is expected of one.” With regard to the covenant, God does what is expected (keep his covenant promises); man should also maintain “hesed” (keep his covenant promises).

Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, Montana; Scholars Press for the Harvard Semitic Museum, 1978).

3 G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., trans. David E. Green, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), article about *hesed*, 5:45-48). The Greek equivalent is *Philadelphia*, fraternal love, as explained in fn 905, p. 680.

*hesed*, unfailing love, loyal love, devotion, kindness, often based on a prior relationship, especially a covenant relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the *hesed* relationship described in this psalm is between the king who speaks the words, and Jehovah to whom he addresses them, it must be remembered that in the Israelite temple drama the king represented every man in the congregation. Therefore, the *hesed* relationship described here also evokes the terms of the covenant between Jehovah and each worthy man. That being so, it follows that this same *hesed* relationship also exists as an eternal, fraternal bond of each man with Jehovah, perhaps with their prophet/king, and most certainly each other. Consideration of the this-worldly continuation of those fraternal relationships brings us back to Peter's assurance that "brotherly kindness" (*philadelphia*) is prerequisite to making one's calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:1-11).

*6 Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy lovingkindnesses [hesed, plural];  
for they have been ever of old.*

Here is another example of where the phrase "of old" is a reference to the Council.<sup>5</sup> The prayer bears testimony that he knows that his and Jehovah's *hesed* relationship is now even as it was in the beginning, at the Council in Heaven, and remains forever—unchanged:

*7 Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions:  
according to thy mercy [hesed] remember thou me for thy goodness' sake, O Lord.*

It is apparent that the author of this psalm had an almost boundless knowledge of the whole plan of salvation, yet is burdened by his own human frailties as he asks the Lord to remember their former *hesed* relationship. Nephi's psalm echoes a similar lament:

17 Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

18 I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

19 And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted (2 Nephi 4:17-19).

---

<sup>4</sup> John R. Kohlenberger III and James A. Swanson, *The Strongest Strong's, Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), Hebrew dictionary # 2617.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of scriptures that use the phrase "of old" as reference to events in the Council in Heaven are: Deuteronomy 32:7-8; Psalms 25:6-7, 68:32-33, 93:1-2, 102:24-25, Micah 5:2 is another example. The most convincing modern example is this statement in the 76<sup>th</sup> section of the Doctrine and Covenants: "And to them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old." (D&C 76:6) When the Prophet Joseph wrote a poetic version of his vision, he made its meaning even more clear.

I'll surely reveal all my myst'ries to them—

The great hidden myst'ries in my kingdom stor'd;

From the council in Kolob, to time on the earth, (Joseph Smith, "A Vision," in *Times and Seasons*, February 1, 1843.)

The 25<sup>th</sup> Psalm continues

:       8 *Good and upright is the Lord: therefore will he teach sinners in the way*

Here again, “the way” is the frequently used code in the psalms that refers to the sequence of the ordinances and covenants, and connotes the “way” or “path” by which one climbs the “mountain” that is symbolic of the Jerusalem Temple Mount, and/or the “way” one conducts his life after leaving the Temple. The generic “in *the way*” implies the introductory ideas taught to the initiate there. There is a subtle, but very real difference between teaching “sinners in *the way*,” and teaching the meek “*his way*,” as appears in the next verse. “Sinners,” apparently, are people who have yet to be taught to understand—adults who were repenting, or young adults who typically had been so absorbed in growing up in this world that their premortal covenants were not only lost from memory but also from seeming importance. As they mature such “sinners” must be taught “in the way”—the generic principles that have universal application. Then in “his way, as the focus of the prayer moves forward and the singer recounts his own spiritual maturation:

9 *The meek will he guide in judgment:*

In these words, we begin to understand the meaning of “meek.” That he will lead them in judgment evinces that the singer has learned, and is still learning, to judge righteously. That represents the essence of the powers of both priesthood and kingship. The qualities of that judgment are described in the next verse and are enshrined in the Savior’s words, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.”

*and the meek will he teach his way*

The person who sings this prayer is no longer taught in the generic “the way,” but is taught God’s way. He has learned how to judge with “mercy and truth,” and therefore can be taught what he otherwise could not know:

10 *All the paths of the Lord are mercy [hesed] and truth  
unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies*

In the phrase, “the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth,” “mercy” is *hesed* and emphasize that covenant friendship relationship; “truth” is that criteria upon which the judgment is made.

“Covenant,” is another reference to the covenants made at the Council, *sode* in v. 14.

Scholars are not quite sure what “testimonies” mean. But it seems to be a physical testimony (a *pistis*<sup>6</sup>) of God’s covenants with man. In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant is frequently called the Ark of the Testimony,<sup>7</sup> and Johnson suggested that our verse is a reference to an embroidered copy of the Ten Commandments the king wore on his person.<sup>8</sup> So

---

6 See the chapter called, “Meaning of Faith—*pistis*. ”

7 Examples are: Exodus 25:16, Numbers 7:89, and Joshua 4:16.

8 Johnson, *Sacral Kingship*, 23-24.

verse ten might read, “All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his commandments.”

If that is correct, it appears the meek are those who keep the covenants they made at the Council (and that they re-made here), and also keep the commandments they receive in this world. One gets the same idea from psalms where the “testimony” is related to the experience on Sinai: “He spake unto them in the cloudy pillar: they kept his testimonies, and the ordinance that he gave them” (Psalm 99:7). Keeping the commandments associated with the testimony seems to be a kind of authorization or ratification on the part of men and women, so that God can bless them according to those covenants:

*11 For thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great.*

“For thy name’s sake” is another instance of the covenant-name’s being used to represent the covenant itself. The meaning of that phrase would remain almost the same if the word were changed so it read: “For thy covenant’s sake.”

It is significant that at this point in this psalm that celebrates man’s eternal success, there is an expression of one’s total dependence upon the principle of repentance and the Savior’s Atonement:

*12 What man is he that feareth the Lord?  
him shall he teach in the way that he shall choose*

That reads: “What man is he that feareth [honor, respect] the Lord? him [the man] shall he [the Lord] teach in the way [same temple codeword as path] that he [the Lord] shall choose.”

That is different from “in *the* way.” This is no longer the generic teachings, ordinances, and covenants taught to “sinners.” Rather, it is the “way” the Lord “shall choose”—it is individually a teaching from the Spirit, designed to enable one to fulfill the covenantal assignments made at the Council:

*13 His [the person's] soul shall dwell at ease;  
and his seed shall inherit the earth*

This is the promise of eternal family. Here is the covenant that the children of the meek, rather than just the meek themselves, shall inherit the earth. As discussed above, the new name given to the dead in the coronation passage of Isaiah 61 is another example of the Old Testament teachings of eternal increase.

*14 The secret [sode] of the Lord is with them that fear him;  
and he will shew them his covenant.*

The word “secret” is translated from the Hebrew word *sode*, so the verse reads, “The secret [*sode*] of the Lord is with them that fear him [“Fear” means respect, honor, revere]. The verse says: Those who honor the Lord will know the secrets of the Council; and the Lord will show them [the meek] his [the Lord’s] covenant. That is, he will show them the covenants they made with him at the Council. Such information is an ultimate empowerment. One can not know where he is going unless he knows where he has been and what purpose he has in the journey.

As we have already observed, a *sode* experience is when an individual has a vision in which he is returned to the Council in Heaven to be re-taught about the assignment he received, and to re-affirm the covenants he made there. But, as the scriptures make clear, the Lord need not take Everyman back to the Council in order to teach each his premortal covenants—that was what the New Year festival temple drama was for; and of course, among other things, that is what the Holy Ghost is for.

The whole meaning of the 25<sup>th</sup> psalm is focused on that single verse. Indeed, the whole meaning of the New Year festival drama may also do so. Those words define the “meek” and put everything else in the 25th Psalm into its proper context. Verse 14 fits well with the ideas in verse 10 where one learned, “All the paths [codeword] of the Lord are mercy [being a righteous judge] and truth [knowledge things as they were, are, and will be] unto such as keep his covenant [the covenant made at the Council].”

The meek, then, are those who keep the covenants they made at the Council in Heaven. In that definition, the ordinary meaning of the word “meek” is not lost, but in these contexts, “meekness” has only to do with one’s being meek before the Lord, and has nothing whatever to do with being meek before men. Thus it was written of the prophet who defied Pharaoh and defeated all the armies of Egypt, “Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). What that meant was explained by the Lord to Miriam and Aaron, in the next few verses. The King James Version gives a somewhat muddled translation of that explanation, but the Tanakh makes that explanation very clear:

The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, “Aaron and Miriam!” The two of them came forward; and He said, “Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!”<sup>9</sup>

The important statement is that Moses “is trusted throughout My household.” The “household” of God would be the same as the “household” of a king. That is, it would consist of not only his immediate family but also his official entourage—the inner circle of his counselors and court leaders. In the case of God, his “household” would be the members of the Council in Heaven. So the Lord’s statement that Moses “is trusted throughout My household” is a reference to the fact that Moses was originally called—and is presently sustained—by the other members of the Council. The statement that “Moses was very meek, above all the men,” simply means he kept with care and rectitude the covenants he made with God. One of the best examples in the Book of Mormon of a prophet who was truly meek is Abinadi standing before King Noah, defiantly asserting that Noah cannot have the power to kill him until after the prophet has delivered the message the Lord has sent him to deliver!<sup>10</sup>

To return to Psalm 25; the verse we are discussing reads:

---

<sup>9</sup> *Tanakh*, Numbers 12:5-8.

<sup>10</sup> “Touch me not, for God shall smite you if ye lay your hands upon me, for I have not delivered the message which the Lord sent me to deliver; neither have I told you that which ye requested that I should tell; therefore, God will not suffer that I shall be destroyed at this time” (Mosiah 13:3).

*14 The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him;  
and will shew them his covenant.*

That verse posits that the *sode*—the secret decisions of the Heavenly Council, made, sanctioned, and sealed by covenant in the presence of the Lord—is made known to those who honor him because the Lord would show them what that covenant was. That was done in generic form during the festival temple drama. Thereafter, by the power of the Holy Ghost each individual could be led to understand the intent of the specific covenant he had made. Then he might know what to do and how to live to fulfill that covenant.

An excellent illustration is the story of Jean Wunderlich.<sup>11</sup> At the end of World War II, he was called to be the first post-war mission president in West Germany. His assignment would be to find the remnants of the Saints there and help them come together and make the church a viable organization again. After receiving the call, he and his wife traveled to Salt Lake City where he was to be set apart by President David O. McKay. When they entered the prophet's office, President McKay stood, came from behind his desk, welcomed his guests, and invited them to sit down. Jean's wife sat in a chair by the door. Jean sat in a chair that the prophet had moved to the center of the room.

President McKay placed his hands on Jean's head and began to give him a blessing. Here, Jean stopped his narrative, his eyes lit up, and he said, "When the prophet has his hands on your head, you listen—and I was listening!" However, Jean said that President McKay had spoken only a few sentences when he gave a command that introduced Jean into the most powerful spiritual experience of his life. He saw a beautiful light, and other things which he did not describe. Jean said he again became aware of the prophet and the room, only when the blessing was finished, and he felt President McKay's hands lift from his head. Baker recalls, "Jean said that was the most significant experience of his whole life, and his telling me became one of the most significant conversations of mine. He said he was not telling me a story, he was giving me a gift. The gift he gave me was the words of the command which the prophet spoke, which initiated Jean's profound experience. Those words were these: 'Be true to the Law of your own Being.'"

Jean commented that in LDS theology "law" has an eternal connotation, and the command to be true to that law suggests that one might also apostatize from it—that one may be at variance with who and what one really is. As Jean understood it, "the law of one's own being" is simply what one IS—the individual personalities we each have developed and nurtured from the beginnings of our premortal cognizance.

He suggested that sin is simply one's being in violation of the eternal law that is one's Self—defying the law of one's own being. He said that there are some things which none of us can do without doing violence to our Selves, such as stealing, blaspheming, and hurting other people. These generic sins are all covered by the basic commandments. But there are also things that are specific sins to only one individual, and are not sins to everyone else. He said he believed that a chief function of the Holy Ghost is to help one bring one's earthly life into perfect accord with that law.

The phrase "law of one's own being" is not found in the scriptures, but the concept is

---

<sup>11</sup> The story is as LeGrand Baker remembers Jean told it to him. Jean died several years ago so we cannot ask him to check the details.

there, and the word “law” is used in connection with that concept.<sup>12</sup> It seems that if one is to comprehend the law of one’s own being, one must first seek to understand its origin, objective, and primary consequences—its relationship to the preliminaries of one’s foreordination; its relationship to one’s keeping the laws and commandments of the Lord while we were intelligences, then spirits, now in this life, and again in the next. It appears that is what the psalmist meant when he wrote:

*14 The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him;  
and will shew them his covenant.*

During the presentation of the festival temple drama, for each individual the basic covenants were the same, but for each the individual meaning was specific, and the expanse of those covenants was among the biggest ideas one’s mind could reach around. It was probably in response to the bigness of the idea, that the next line recalls the Lord’s covenants of invulnerability, and expresses thanks for the fulfillment of those covenants:

*15 Mine eyes are ever toward the Lord  
for he shall pluck my feet out of the net.*

The “net” would be the people or other obstacles that seek to entangle one’s feet to prevent one from “walking” in the “way” and from keeping one’s covenants. Those impediments are very real, and once again, in this psalm which is a celebration of the blessings of eternal life, one is brought face to face with the difficulty of just muddling through this lonely, dark world.

We have wandered so far in our discussion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Psalm, that it seems a good idea to read it again without all the interruptions, and also to add the concluding verses which evoke the promises of the covenant of invulnerability. The Psalm reads in full:

1 Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.  
2 O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed,  
let not mine enemies triumph over me.  
3 Yea, let none that wait on thee be ashamed:  
let them be ashamed which transgress without cause.  
4 Shew me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths.  
5 Lead me in thy truth, and teach me:  
for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day.  
6 Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy lovingkindnesses [*hesed*];  
for they have been ever of old.  
7 Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions:  
according to thy mercy [*hesed*] remember thou me for thy goodness’ sake, O

---

<sup>12</sup> Many of these scriptures also emphasize free agency: D&C 88:28-33, 93:29-38; 2 Nephi 2:11-30, 9:14-16, 26:10; Alma 13:3, 40:24-26, Alma 42:7; Moses 4:3-4; Moroni 7:15-17; Ether 12:27-35; Moroni 10:32-33; 2 Ne. 10:23-24 Abraham 3:22-28. At the funeral of Jedediah M. Grant, Heber C. Kimball reported: “He said that after he came back [from the spirit world] he could look upon his family and see the spirit that was in them, and the darkness that was in them; and that he conversed with them about the Gospel, and what they should do, and they replied, ‘Well, brother Grant, perhaps it is so, and perhaps it is not,’ and said that was the state of this people, to a great extent, for many are full of darkness and will not believe me.” (*Journal of Discourses* 4:136).



Lord.

- 8 Good and upright is the Lord:  
therefore will he teach sinners in the way.
- 9 The meek will he guide in judgment:  
and the meek will he teach his way.
- 10 All the paths of the Lord are mercy [*hesed*] and truth  
unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies.
- 11 For thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great.
- 12 What man is he that feareth the Lord?  
him shall he teach in the way that he shall choose.
- 13 His soul shall dwell at ease;  
and his seed shall inherit the earth.
- 14 The secret [*sode*] of the Lord is with them that fear him;  
and he will shew them his covenant.
- 15 Mine eyes are ever toward the Lord;  
for he shall pluck my feet out of the net.
- 16 Turn thee unto me, and have mercy upon me;  
for I am desolate and afflicted.
- 17 The troubles of my heart are enlarged:  
O bring thou me out of my distresses.
- 18 Look upon mine affliction and my pain;  
and forgive all my sins.
- 19 Consider mine enemies; for they are many;  
and they hate me with cruel hatred.
- 20 O keep my soul, and deliver me:  
let me not be ashamed; for I put my trust in thee.
- 21 Let integrity and uprightness preserve me;  
for I wait on thee.
- 22 Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles (Psalm 25:1-22).

The final three verses return the audience to the place where the psalm began. It is a prayer for strength to retain one's integrity, so that the Lord can keep his part of the covenant.