

God's Enduring, Rescuing Love

Psalm 136

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I've said many times that one of the greatest thrills of my life was to be here six years ago in August 2011 to preach Josh's installation. I think that's the last time I preached here on a Sunday, but actually the last two times I was in this pulpit was for funerals for two very dear friends—just a year ago for Fred Wuthrich, and two years before that for my dearest friend from childhood, Jim Corbin. I continue to grieve the separation from these dear friends, but as Paul says, we “do not grieve as do those who have no hope.” (1 Thess. 4:13).

And that hope, ultimately found in the gospel of Jesus Christ, is always my theme as I preach. Today's message is from Psalm 136.

Psalm 136¹

¹*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

²*Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

³*Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

⁴*to him who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

⁵*to him who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

⁶*to him who spread out the earth above the waters,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

⁷*to him who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

⁸*the sun to rule over the day,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

⁹*the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹⁰*to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹¹*and brought Israel out from among them,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹²*with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹³*to him who divided the Red Sea in two,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹⁴*and made Israel pass through the midst of it,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

¹⁵*but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹⁶*to him who led his people through the wilderness,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹⁷*to him who struck down great kings,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹⁸*and killed mighty kings,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

¹⁹*Sihon, king of the Amorites,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

²⁰*and Og, king of Bashan,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

²¹*and gave their land as a heritage,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

²²*a heritage to Israel his servant,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

²³*It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

²⁴*and rescued us from our foes,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

²⁵*he who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

²⁶*Give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Well, does anyone have an idea of today's theme? After twenty-six repetitions of "for his steadfast love endures forever," is there a hint of this sermon's focus?

Some of you thought the reading would endure forever! But as you wearied yourself about the length and the repetition, what did you learn about the psalm? Could you state it in one simple clause? Say it again for the twenty-seventh time—"for his steadfast love endures forever."

But I'm coming out of this reading with perhaps a double theme. Leading into this oft-repeated clause is the theme of gratitude. That's where this psalm starts. Look at it. "Give thanks to the LORD" (Yahweh). This personal name for God is found 6,500 times in the Bible. "Give thanks to the God of gods" (Elohim of Elohim). In Hebrew, Elohim is used for God, magistrates, and angels. But God is set apart—he is the God of gods. "Give thanks to the Lord of lords" (Adonai or Adonai). Adonai is found 300 times and means Lord, master, owner, and is used of human rulers and masters. But God is the Lord of lords. And that is brought into the New Testament as well: Jesus is "King of kings and Lord of lords."

The psalm ends the same way it began. Closing the brackets around the psalm is: "Give thanks to the God (El) of heaven." We are to be a grateful people, a thankful people and "praise God from whom all blessings flow." In the New Testament, Christians are commanded to be thankful, "...always giving thanks to God the Father for everything" (Eph. 5:20). "...in everything by prayer

and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). “...whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). “...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess.5:18).

What are you thankful for today? We could all make lists—food, clothing, health, protection, family, church, country, freedom. But the point of this psalm is not to make our own list—it’s already here. The main theme is gratitude, specifically, gratitude for God’s love. Even more specifically, for his enduring love. Still, even more specifically, for God’s enduring, rescuing love.

Our theme today is gratitude for God’s enduring rescuing love.

In Jewish tradition, Psalm 136 was known as the Great Hallel. What does hallel mean? Add the ending and you know immediately. Hallel...ujah! Praise to God; Hallelujah!

Psalm 136 also has a specific historical tie, as it is praise to God especially associated with Passover, which is a celebration of God’s enduring, rescuing love. One of the main ways we express hallel, or praise, is through gratitude. And Psalm 136 gives several reasons for gratitude to God.

This is an antiphonal hymn—a call and response—so that under each expression of gratitude, they said, “for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever.”

Why the repetition? One of the common criticisms of having more contemporary music in the church is the repetition. Choruses are called 7/11 songs—seven words repeated eleven times. And then someone noted that much classical Christian music, even the best of the best, like Handel’s Messiah, has even more repetition. But 2,500 to 3,000 years ago, Psalm 136 was a 6/26 song or in Hebrew, it’s a 3/26 song—26 repetitions of the exact same words—“for his steadfast love endures forever.” The Holy Spirit deemed this psalm worthy of twenty-six recitations of this clause.

Now, before we get into any more detailed content of the psalm, I want you to see the way it is structured with two very small words, both prepositions, which control the entire psalm. The words are “to,” used twelve times, and “for,” used twenty-six times.

Now, let me show you how important these two prepositions are. Welcome to Grammar Class—Fall term, 2017. “To” is primarily directional. Verses 1,2 and 3 all say “give thanks *to*.” And just so you don’t forget, it’s said one more time at the very end in verse 26, “give thanks *to*.”

Gratitude does not exist as an end in itself. Gratitude is only meaningful when it is directed to someone. And gratitude is not expressed *to the gift*—food, clothing, health, protection, family, church, country, freedom. Gratitude is expressed *to the giver*.

Look again at what follows “to” in every one of the twelve examples in Psalm 136. Verses 1-3 “to the LORD”, “to the God of gods,” and “to the Lord of lords.” Verse 4 “to him.” The same in Verses 5, 6, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 17. Then a slight variation, in verse 23 “it is he who remembered,” in verse 25 “he who gives,” and verse 26 “to the God of heaven.”

Gratitude, thankfulness, and praise are directed solely and entirely to God. It’s not shared with anyone else. As God says in Isaiah 42:8, “my glory I give to no other” and in Isaiah 48:11, “my glory I will not give to another.”

Next, the preposition, “for.” Used one time in Verse 1, “for he is good.” Then, in every verse, twenty-six times, “for his steadfast love endures forever.” “For” is a very diverse preposition with seven definitions at Dictionary.com. But commonly it denotes purpose or cause. In this case, it is putting the focus on God’s attributes that lead to his gifts for which we express gratitude to him, specifically for his steadfast love; his enduring love.

We’ll come back this “for” statement at the end of the message, but for now, just keep it in mind. The response, “for his steadfast love endures forever,” arises from everything else in the psalm.

Gratitude is to go *to* God *for* his steadfast love. As we look more closely at the content of Psalm 136, we see more definition and detail about how God’s steadfast love is expressed.

And we’ll look at this in three categories.

THANKS TO GOD FOR HIS CREATION AND PROVIDENTIAL CARE.

We are taken back to Genesis 1 and reminded that everything God did in Genesis 1 comes out of his steadfast love. This assumes that the readers have a knowledge of the Old Testament account of creation and the stories of the Old Testament, so that even a brief reference brings to mind the whole thing.

Don’t forget that every time we see “to him” the assumed words before it are “give thanks.” Verses 4-9 give thanks “to him who alone does great wonders.” This is the LORD... the God of gods...the Lord of lords... the God of heaven. In contrast to the “gods” of the nations described in Psalm 135, God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and sovereign.

Take a look at Psalm 135:15-18. “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but they do not speak; they have eyes but they do not see; they have ears but they do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths.” They are dead!!! They are dead!!! “Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them.”

This is the one and only incomparable God... who by his understanding made the heavens...who spread out the earth above the waters...who made the great lights—the sun to govern the day and the moon and the stars to govern the night. And designed it in such a way that, irregularly, the sun disappears in the middle of the day because it is eclipsed by the moon.

Our grandson, Preston, was one of the eclipse chasers and got directly under it for a picture. God did that, but in his mercy did not entirely block out the sun. The moon is no match for the sun. And neither the moon nor the sun are a match for God. God is sovereign over all of creation as a reflection of his steadfast love.

Last January, I stepped down as Lead Pastor at Faith Indianapolis, after 12.5 years in that role, and 40.5 years as solo or lead pastor going back to 1976 in Nebraska, then Wichita, and now Indianapolis. But I’ve stepped back a bit. Two of my former associates are sharing the lead role and I’m on staff half-time as Pastor of Shepherding. It feels very strange after all these years not to preach almost every week. But now, for the first time since 1985, I get to go to an adult class, or teach one, which I did this past spring. It was called Story Lines.

The story line of the Bible starts with creation. But then, it gets very personal. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who was the friend of Moses, the God who promised David an everlasting

kingdom, the God who became flesh and lived with us, is he who made it all; who created all there is. And it all relates to an essential aspect of God's character—his steadfast love endures forever.

But starting in verse 10, everything in the rest of Psalm 136 is related to the core story of Israel, with the focus being on the exodus of Israel from Egypt and being settled as a nation in the land of Canaan, the Promised Land.)

And two tracks of history are intermingled here for which thanks to God is due.

THANKS TO GOD FOR HIS RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT; IN WHICH HE UPHOLDS HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS AND EXPRESSES HIS JUSTICE.

Verses 10-12 says give thanks “to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt.” This part of the story is from Exodus 12 when the angel of death went through Egypt killing all the first born of man and animals.

Verses 13-15 says give thanks “to him who divided the Red Sea in two” and...“overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea.” This part of the story comes from Exodus 14.

Verse 17-22 says give thanks “to him who struck down great kings,”...“and killed mighty kings,” “Sihon, king of the Amorites”...“and Og, king of Bashan.” This part of the story comes from Numbers 21.

And what does it say after each one of these bits of history? “For his steadfast love endures forever.” God did this because his steadfast love endures forever. God's righteous judgment is a reflection of his steadfast love.

Now we know this won't fly without some significant pushback, as some will see this as evidence of a mean and nasty God of the Old Testament in contrast to the more refined loving God of the New Testament. But if you try to make that case, you merely show that you don't know the Bible and its consistency throughout. That God is a just judge and a caring, loving Father. And these are not two distinct gods, but one and the same God. God is not bi-polar, alternating between justice and mercy, but is fully both all the times.

God as revealed in the Old Testament is the God whose steadfast love endures forever. And it is reflected most dramatically in the New Testament in Jesus. I can't develop a robust explanation in this sermon. One source I suggest is Tim Keller's book, *The Reason for God*. In chapter five, Keller makes the case that God's love and God's judgment are necessary complements in finally putting all things right.

Would a God of love not hold Hitler accountable for his evil? Some say, “That's a little extreme, isn't it?” Ok, sure, but start at that extreme and work back. How can a loving God send people to hell? Does Hitler deserve hell? “Well, yes, but again, that's such an extreme example—most people aren't that bad.” Oh, they aren't? If we are really honest with the murderous intentions of our own hearts before we came to faith in Christ, (and even afterward); if we are honest in acknowledging the shocking amount of malice we find toward others in our hearts, we may see that we are not as different as we think. Apart from God's restraining and saving grace, any one of us could be a Hitler. Read Romans 1-3 and then try to tell me otherwise.

God is holy. Sin must be punished. Justice must be upheld. Can a loving society be loving without justice? We can see that on a human level—how much more offense against a holy, perfect God. A God who is not just, who does not care about justice and righteousness, would not be loving. But because God is love, he is patient. He delays deserved judgment.

Here is an example: God told Abraham that his family would be exiled as slaves in Egypt, *afflicted for four hundred years*, and then brought back to the land of Canaan, the land God promised to Abraham and his descendants. And one of the reasons for this long delay in the promises being fulfilled is the explanation given in Genesis 15:16b, “for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

God does not unfairly judge anyone. He is amazingly restrained. The problem of God’s judgment is not that he judges, but that he waits so long. He waits patiently. But judgment and justice cannot be denied.

God is the same with us. Peter writes about the coming end times judgment and says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise” (the promise to judge is the context) “as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord” (the day of God’s judgment) “will come...” (2 Peter 3:9-10a).

The track of God’s judgment is perfectly paired with the track of God’s saving, rescuing grace.

THANKS TO GOD FOR HIS RESCUING, SAVING PURPOSE IN DELIVERING HIS PEOPLE FROM SLAVERY AND LEADING THEM TO LIFE AND HOME.

Verses 10-12 says give thanks “to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,”...“and brought Israel out from among them,”...“with a strong arm and an outstretched arm.” God was delivering slaves into freedom. This is the story from Exodus 11-15, the foundational story of Israel’s history. The annual Passover is the celebration of this deliverance. This is Israel’s Fourth of July, but it takes place in the spring, Independence Day from Egyptian slavery.

We celebrate with patriotic music, cookouts and fireworks for a much lesser deliverance from Mother England and King George III. They celebrate a much greater deliverance—and we with them as we see how it points to Christ—with the Feast of the Passover, both a sober and a joyful reflection of the goodness of God, whose steadfast love endures forever.

The Passover lamb was slain and the blood on the doorpost marked that home for deliverance from the angel of death and the rescue from slavery. That points to Christ as our Passover Lamb, whose blood was shed for us to deliver us from sin and death into eternal life.

But the story continues. Verses 13-15 say give thanks “to him who divided the Red Sea in two,”...“and made Israel pass through the midst of it,”...“but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea.” Verses 16 says give thanks “to him who led his people through the wilderness.” Verses 23-25 says “It is he who remembered us in our low estate.”...“and rescued us from our foes,”...“he who gives food to all flesh.”

Read Exodus 16-40, and the book of Numbers, which is far more than numbers; it is packed with stories of God saving his people in all kinds of situations. God is just. God is love. God judges. God rescues. God provides. And all of this is explained by these words: for his steadfast love endures forever.

THANKS TO GOD FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE.

So, we give thanks to God for his creation and providence, for his righteous judgment, for his rescuing, saving purposes; and wrapping it all together, we give thanks to God for his steadfast love.

What does this have to do with us today? Everything!

The story of Israel, partially recounted in Psalm 136, is the story of God's promises to Abraham, Moses and David; the story of Egyptian slavery and deliverance; the story of the Passover Lamb and the blood on the doorpost; the escape through the Red Sea, a nation born, a kingdom established (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel). All in the history of ancient Israel.

And it all points ahead—supported by the prophets as you read the latter half of the Old Testament—to Jesus who died for us, was raised from the dead to deliver us from our own slavery to sin, to provide forgiveness and eternal life.

This is what we call the gospel, the good news. And it is based on the character of God revealed in three Hebrew words, six in the English: for his steadfast love endures forever. But it's really packed into one word translated here, "his steadfast love."

The concept is introduced as foundational to God's character in Exodus 34:6-7, shortly after God's rescue of Israel from Egypt, and Israel's rejection of God in what we call the Golden Calf incident in Exodus 32. God is speaking to Moses and reveals himself with these words, words I first learned in 1974 in doing my memory work as part of Evangelism Explosion training. "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love [*hesed*] for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty (Ex. 34:6-7).

It is the Hebrew word, *hesed*, found about 250 times in the Old Testament. It has a broad range of meaning that can't be captured by a single English word, so that it can be translated as goodness, grace, mercy, kindness, faithfulness, loyalty, devotion, lovingkindness, favor. Many of the words used in the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5 and the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, are part of *hesed*.

Will Kynes, writing for the C.S. Lewis Institute's quarterly, *Knowing & Doing, God's Grace in the Old Testament*, describes the meaning of *hesed* on a human level, and then sharpens the focus as it reflects God's *hesed*.

1. It always involves interpersonal relationships, and I would add, the relationship between fellow image bearers of God, that on a human level involves mutuality. We practice *hesed* toward each other.
2. It always involves practical action on behalf of another. You don't just feel *hesed*. You do *hesed* for the benefit of another.
3. *Hesed* is enduring. It lasts or as Eugene Peterson says in *The Message*, "love never quits." It is intertwined with the concept of covenant, a sacred covenant, like God's marriage vow to Israel and Jesus to the Church.

But *Hesed* as expressed or done by God goes beyond this. Of the 250 times the word it used, the vast majority refer to the vertical relationship between God and his people, to include the whole world, as in Psalm 36:7, "How precious is your steadfast love [*hesed*], O God! The children of

mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Or in Psalm 33:5 “[God] loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love [*hesed*] of the LORD.”

And the way this is repeated 26 times in Psalm 136 “suggests that all God’s actions from the creation of the world (5-9) to the redemption of Israel from Egypt (10-15) and beyond testify to his *hesed*.” (Kynes)

God’s *hesed* is the foundation under both judgment and salvation. God’s *hesed* is what ultimately reconciles the two at the cross as Jesus in his death, fully satisfies both God’s holiness that demands judgment and God’s love, which calls for mercy—judgment for sin, and salvation for sinners.

Tim Keller’s devotional book *Psalms, the Songs of Jesus*, asks about this repetition of “his love endures forever.” Why is love highlighted? Why not holiness? Isn’t that equally enduring? Of course! God is perfect and unchanging from eternity past to eternity future. “None of the attributes of God can be [properly] understood without the others. Still Paul hints that while God’s greatness can be logically deduced from the created world (Romans 1:20), God’s love is a complete surprise and wonder.

Looking at the human heart and history, you would never conclude that God loves us. But he does! Paul asks for help to grasp not God’s righteousness, but ‘how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.’ Ephesians 3:18.”

A few years ago a lady named Sally Lloyd-Jones, a British/American author who lives in New York City, wrote an amazing children’s Bible called *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. She addresses this phrase “steadfast love” and she gives it her own definition in kid’s language, the “Never Stopping, Never Giving up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.”

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”