

Psalm 136 "How to Praise God When You Don't Feel Like It"

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[0:00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah.

! It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian, checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

It's my privilege to preach for you this morning from Psalm 136. So if you have a Bible, I encourage you to open that and find it. If you don't, we've got a few extra here that we'd love to just give you. Feel free there on the front. You can come down, grab one. It'd be great if you followed along, because it's a big psalm. It's the psalm that Owen read for us. So I'm not going to go through every single part of it as I mention it, but hopefully the sermon is faithful to the whole text. And I encourage you to have the Bible open so you can see, and so you can see how the Lord is speaking to you from the scriptures itself.

[1:47] Well, first thing to say about Psalm 136 is that this is a psalm about, well, you know what? Before I start, let's just pray. Why don't we just pray?

Father in heaven, Lord, we thank you for this day. We thank you just for the chance that it is to come together as your church to worship you through song, to worship you in prayer and studying your word. And we ask, Lord, that you would speak to us this morning through your word, and that we would be reminded afresh about your steadfast love, which does endure forever, and that you are worthy of all of our praise. And I ask, Lord, that you would set our hearts free to worship you rightly, that we would have the joy of knowing an intimate relationship with you through Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.

Well, so the first thing to say about this psalm is that it's about praise. And, you know, if you're new to Christianity, or if you're visiting with a friend, welcome here. But praise is a, it's kind of a religious word. It's not a word that is in everyday speech, I would say, for the most part. But the basic idea of it is, it's, well, it's something we all do. So later on this evening, I'm looking forward to watching the new Spider-Man to go see it in theaters. I think it's going to be great. And if I say, wow, that was a great movie, you've got to go see that. That's praise, you know, because I've really enjoyed the movie, I've really enjoyed it, and I think that there's something great in it, and I'm really commending it to other people. And I'm acknowledging it as good. And that's basically praise.

But the Bible tells us that God is the one who is most worthy of our praise, and that we should know God in a way that is not just abstract, but that really enjoys him, that enters into a knowledge of him that delights in him, and that acknowledges him as good, and that shares that and expresses that, that kind of enjoyment. And so praise, and by that I mean that this heartfelt, personal thankfulness to God that acknowledges him, and that makes it a big deal of him, and that really delights in him, I've got to confess that that doesn't really come naturally to me.

You know, you wake up in the morning, maybe you've got a Bible reading kind of habit or something like that, and if you're like me, you wake up and your heart's not just ready to go, praise

the Lord, this is a great day, I'm just so thankful to be here, so thankful for God. But often when I get up, my heart's kind of a little cold, and my love for God feels just kind of a little bit low sometimes. [4:24] And sometimes it's like that when we come to church. And so I think that what this psalm does for us here, it offers us something really wonderful, because it doesn't just say, praise God, you've got to do it. It tells us why we should praise God, and it also tells us how to praise God. And it takes us on a journey, if you will, it takes us on an odyssey to get there. And so turn with me to the Psalm 136, and let's read the first part of verse one. Give thanks to the Lord. Why do we give thanks to the Lord? Well, it says for or because he is good. And just a little pause here, that this is, I think, constructive for us. It doesn't simply just say, give thanks to the Lord, praise the Lord, because he's all powerful, and you need to. You know, God is all powerful, and we should praise him, even for that alone.

But what does it say? It says it prays God because he's good. And how do we know his goodness? Well, the next verse tells us, and this reason gets repeated 26 times throughout the psalm. It says, for or because his steadfast love endures forever. Just an aside before we move on with here, when verse two, when it calls God the God of gods and the Lord of lords, he's not, the psalmist isn't just saying that our God, the God of the Bible, is, you know, the main God, but there's all these other ones. He's just the biggest. What he means here by this is that our God is the only real God. He's the only God. There's other spirits, but our God is God. You know, we're going to see two theaters, two stages throughout the psalm, one of creation, and one of world history. And we see here that God is completely in control of creation. He doesn't need anybody's help. He alone is God. But also in world history, sure, there's other, there's kings, there's world governments, but at the end of the day, God is king over all things. He's almighty and all powerful. But what this psalm is going to show us is that

God uses his great power in his rule for, in love, which makes him completely unique. And so my first point of three points, they're very simple, but the first point is this, thank and praise God, not just because he's all powerful, but because he is good. We can see that from these first three verses, or at the end of verse 26, we see that too. Well, there's another thing that stands out to us here that we could miss. What does it mean to give thanks to God? I mean, on this superficial level, I think that sounds just obvious. Just give thanks, just be thankful. And yes, that's true. But George gave me, Pastor George gave me a little stack of commentaries, and they were really helpful. And they were written by people way better educated and way smarter than me.

And they all said that in the original language that this psalm was written in, that give thanks is a bit deeper than that. You know, it's a thanks that has content to it. It's not just saying, oh, thank God. Why? Oh, I don't know. It's nothing. It's actually telling us why we should thank God. Because implicit in this is this idea that we are remembering God, who he is, his goodness, but we're also remembering everything he's done for us, and his goodness to God's people, his goodness to me personally. And so it's a call to really praise God with the reason why, seeing who he is and how good he truly is, and how deeply he deserves our praise. You know, there's a story about a Scotsman visiting a church in the U.S., and he'd been having a rough morning, and he finally arrives at church, and the worship leader opens and just says from the front, says, how is everybody feeling? Feeling great. Let's worship. And the story goes, this Scotsman, he's maybe a bit curmudgeonly, and he says, how am I feeling? I'm feeling lousy. I slept bad. The kids are a mess. I kicked the cat on the way out the house. I got stuck in traffic, and I got road rage, and then I got to church late. How am I feeling? I'm not feeling great. I'm not feeling primed for worship. And if that's you, I think the psalm has something good for you here. What do you do when you're not feeling worshipful?

What do you do when you're not feeling worshipful, but you know that worship is something you should do, but it's also, you know it's a real joy, because you've experienced it before. Well, what do you do?

[9:05] You remember God, and you think about what you've learned of him, all he's done for you, and you remember his steadfast love towards you, and then maybe your heart's more ready to praise.

You know, worship is not about just purely a good feeling or good vibes, and it's not about going through the motions. It comes from the heart, and this psalm models us for us a way to prepare our hearts for worship by remembering and thanking God for all of the different ways he's been good to you, and that's what we see next. I mentioned that we're going to see two stages, the stage of

creation and the stage of history. Well, let's start with creation here, verses four through nine. You know, when we think about nature, I think the first thing we see is just nature is so fine-tuned. You know, everything fits together perfectly. You know, people often say if we were a little closer to the sun or a little further away, that life on earth would not have the conditions to support human life, and you know, we could think of a billion other examples of just how balanced the world is, how many conditions need to be right in order for us just as human people to physically live, and we see here that God has made us, for us in this earth, a perfect habitat, and nobody else has this kind of power or understanding or wisdom like God who does this, but the psalmist says that not only in this do we see God's power, his understanding, his wisdom, but we also see his love. You know, not only does creation work, but it's also extremely beautiful.

I mean, God as creator, he was like an engineer, a brilliant engineer who created this most efficient system to support life. Things work. It's great. It's brilliant, but God has also been like an artist who's made for us a beautiful place, not just to live, but to enjoy, and why did he need to do this?

I mean, he didn't need to make the world beautiful, if you think about it. It could have just been like a little, you know, I don't know. It could have just been purely mechanical, but God made us a beautiful place to enjoy in this world, and that's because he loves us, because his steadfast love endures forever.

[11:26] I mean, how often do we think of or not think of just how wonderful the world is? I mean, I mean, there's colors, there's trees, there's flowers, there's the ocean, there's the sunsets, there's all these sorts of things, and it's fantastic, and these things show us God's love for us.

I'm not a parent myself, but I've seen enough movies to know that sometimes first-time parents, you know, when they have their first born, it's not typical to go the Harry Potter route and put a little bed in the pantry or in the closet, but typically, at least I've heard, that first-time parents often want to make a beautiful home for their kids, you know. Maybe they paint a baby room all nice, and they put stuff in there, and they get a crib, and they want to not just create a place that's efficient or safe, but to create a space that's beautiful for this new member of their family, and I think that God has done something like that for us in creation, that he's made us a place to be, but also a place to enjoy that's just for us.

So, you know, it's getting a little cold, and I like the fall a lot, so maybe, you know, thinking of Thanksgiving, but Thanksgiving comes around in a few months, and maybe you're at a table, maybe you have a family tradition, and people say, hey, what are you thankful for this Thanksgiving? I have some suggestions for you from Psalm 136, verses 7 through 9. Sunshine by day, moonlight by night, stars in the sky, and also the ability that we get from these things, from the sun, from the moon, to count time, like 24-hour days. We count our hours, our days, our months, our years, and that means we get weekends out of that. We get anniversaries. We get birthdays. We get holidays, all because God has given us things that we just take for granted, that we just take for granted, but creation and all within it are gifts from God for us to enjoy because God loves us, and that's pretty incredible.

And so that's my second point, that God proves his goodness by his steadfast love toward you as creator. We see that in these verses here, and also verse 25. But throughout the Psalm, throughout Psalm 136, we see that this love that the Psalm talks about isn't just a generic love.

It's not the kind of love that, you know, you're rooting for England and FIFA, but they lose, so now you're rooting for Spain. You know, it's not a fickle love or something like that, but it's a steadfast love. And what does that mean? Well, another way of saying that is that God's love never ends.

[14:11] It's a loyal love. It's a covenantal love, if you know that word. It's committed. It's a committed love with no end. And it's unchanging, and it doesn't give up. And the Psalm shows us that creation is evidence for that. And so here's the point of application, that if you feel unloved, or if you are, maybe you're a Christian and you feel like that you've done enough wrong, that maybe God will kind of tolerate you, but God might not love you, that God might not care about you that much, well, take, the Psalm tells you, just take a moment, take a step back, and see that God created you because he loved you. God sustains you because he loved you. And the sun is still shining on you, or reigning and giving life, but you get to enjoy the world. You get to enjoy creation, no matter what you've done, or no matter what you do. And why, this is not something we should just take for granted. God is showing his love towards all people as their creator by giving us this life, keeping us in this life, enjoying these good things, this creation. And that's proof that God loves all people with a love that endures as their creator. Well, next we move from the stage of creation to

the stage of world history. And at this point, we also move from the love of God towards all that he's made as creator, towards a special love for his people that are in a covenantal or in a committed relationship with him. But verse 10 stands out a bit as we read it. Stands out like a sore thumb, I think.

Well, let's read it. Verse 10 says this, Give thanks to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, for his steadfast love endures forever.

That might sound like a bit of a change from what we've just read. We've just read about how God has a love for towards everything that he's made. So what's what's going on here? Well, for those who maybe for those who are new to Christian, new to the Bible, this is referring to the Exodus, you know, that defining origin story of Israel as a nation.

The Israelites, they had been enslaved by the Egyptians, put into a very, very long, brutal slavery. And then what happens is that that God sends Moses to go to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt and say, let my people go, let them free, stop enslaving them, stop brutalizing them and murdering them and setting them to this brutal oppression, but set them free and let them go.

And Pharaoh says, who is God that I should listen to him? I'm going to do my own thing. I'm going to keep on doing this. I'm not going to show any mercy. I'm going to oppress these people. And Moses, God says to Moses that that each of these times he's going to send what a supernatural sign of judgment, something that traditionally we call plagues, you know, at the 10 plagues over Egypt.

[17 : 24] Not that they were all about like a virus or something like that, but these are all 10 supernatural, demonstrable signs that God means business, that he's serious.

And then after Pharaoh would reject the sign and this declaration, this warning, the sign would happen. And then Moses would come back and say, God says, let my people go.

And Pharaoh would say, no. And then the next sign would happen. And this goes back and forth and back and forth 10 times until finally God comes to Moses and says, let my people go.

And if you don't, this last one, it's going to happen. And Pharaoh in Egypt still said no, still did not let them go, still did not release their chokehold on Israel and stop their oppression.

And it took this final plague in order to break that hold and let them go. So that's the history. But how do we, what can we say about this? Some things we can say.

[18 : 25] Well, I think the first thing we can say is that this didn't come without warning, that God didn't just show up and say, I'm going to do this to Egypt. But no, this is, this is the final plague, the final judgment following 10 previous judgments, 10 previous plagues with the warning, let my people go, all of which were ignored.

You know, we, we sometimes think that, oh, I'm a, I'm a gracious guy. I give second chances. Or maybe I'm really, really gracious and I give three chances.

But God gives 10 chances here and then an 11th. And I think we also forget that this doesn't happen in a vacuum. This is after over, this is over, after about 400 years of tyrannical, brutal, brutal slavery.

And in the midst of that, there's also a genocide against Israel's baby boys as well, too. And then God sends Moses and says, let my people go.

And he gives 10 chances to Egypt. And each of these times with a proven, legitimizing, supernatural sign saying this is serious. This is serious before it reaches this, this breaking point.

[19 : 39] What, what I mean by this is that the scriptures are true and it says God is slow to anger. This passage is not teaching us that God hates people.

You know, we've seen before that God has a common, gracious love towards everybody by making them and sustaining them in this life. But the theologians sometimes refer to judgment as God's, as God's reluctant work.

Because God would rather save than judge. And, but we see sometimes salvation is a double-edged sword. You know, the same, the same deliverance is sometimes the same, the same action and strong action of God to save is sometimes the same action that results in judgment for those who would oppress and keep, keep down and do violence to God's people.

This passage teaches us that God loves his people. That's, that's the focus that no one will stop God from saving his people.

And that is my third point. That God proves his goodness by his steadfast love towards his people as their savior.

[20 : 50] That he proves his goodness by his steadfast love towards his people as their savior. And we see that not, after this, we see not only this, but not even nature or the world's most powerful army at that time is going to stop God from saving his people.

The history goes, Israel escapes, Pharaoh gets second thoughts, gathers his army, tears off after them, corners them, traps them between army feet behind them, the Red Sea in front.

And you'd think Israel's done for at this point. But God supernaturally parts the waters, drag around them in the middle, and that's Israel, brings Israel, in fact, through.

Well, just an aside about this is, some people will say bodies of water don't just split in half. This is unscientific. This doesn't happen.

And I think that the text would actually agree with you with that. Things like this don't typically happen. And that's, that's why we have the category of, not to sound cliché, but that's why we have the category of miracles.

[21 : 56] You know, if you believe in, that there is a God who created everything out of nothing, which is, just as an aside, I think much more reasonable than somehow a nothing creating everything out of other nothingness.

Then it's not so hard to see that God could actually engage in world history and exercise some of that magnificent, almighty power to do something a bit unusual in nature, in the world, in the structure of the world.

If he can create it, surely he can edit it. And Paul, I mean, rather the psalm is not saying that this is ordinary. In fact, it's, it's including it here in the psalm because it's extraordinary, because it's an example of how great is the steadfast love of the Lord, still great that not even the created order of nature will prevent God from saving his people.

Well, back to the text. You know, God brings Israel through the waters, but Pharaoh and his army rushing after them. And at this point, did God just throw up his hands and say, I've done enough for this people.

It's on them now. I mean, it's been a long time. I've been holding their hands. They've got to, they've got to figure this out on their own. But no, verse 15 says that God overthrew or literally shook off Pharaoh and his, and his army into the sea.

[23 : 17] How did he do this? Because he's God of gods and Lord of lords. And why did he do this? Because towards his people, God's steadfast love endures forever.

And I think just as an aside too here, that's another picture I think. We even see God's graciousness here. You know, when Pharaoh and his armies come after Israel and try to trap them in here, God, his first response isn't, I'm going to smite the entire army there.

He actually just provides a way of escape for Israel. And it's only when Pharaoh and his army come after them to try to kill them in spite of that, that God, that God throws them off like this and says enough is enough.

That God is patient and slow to anger. Well, the next scene that we get moves Israel into the wilderness and then through the wilderness to the border of this promised land that God would give them out of their slavery.

And as they go through, they're trying to get to the promised land. They've got to come through a few territories to get there. And they ask this very powerful king, King Sihon of the Amorites, if they could pass through the land.

[24 : 24] They promise we're not even going to, it literally says we're going to follow the king's highway. We're not going to get off the road. We're not even going to pull over for an on route. We are just going to go straight through.

Can we come through? But Sihon says no. And not only no, but he brings out his famous forces, his impressive army to attack this tiny nation of weak ex-slaves at that time who had just come out of slavery.

And then, but again, God saves his people. And then the second time, a different king, King Og, same thing happens. Abaddon comes in after them. But again, God saves.

Verse 21, and gave their land as a heritage or as an inheritance because his steadfast love endures forever.

A heritage for Israel, his servant, for his steadfast love endures forever. Well, just notice the word servant there in verse 22.

[25 : 25] I think that's very interesting because this is the first time in the psalm that we have even a hint or a suggestion of Israel giving God any kind of service or doing anything for God.

You know, this comes out at the very end of a very long list of everything God has done for his people. He has made them. He sustains them.

He rescued them from slavery. He saved their lives time, time, time, time and again. Brings them through the wilderness. Gives them a land and an inheritance. Becomes their God.

They have a father in him. And then at the very end of this, we see that they are God's servant. You know, we sometimes have this idea that God will give us what we want if we do something for God. That God will bless us if we do something for him and serve him right. That if we kind of earn something, if we earn some credit with God. Or maybe we have this idea that God will actually love us if I first make myself lovable.

[26 : 28] If I first get my life together and it becomes respectable or good in God's sight. Then maybe he'll love me. But the psalm teaches us that when we are brought into God's family, into his people, our past is grace, our present is grace, and our future is grace.

The history of God's people is a history of slow, faltering obedience in a sea of God's grace. Look up to verse 16 and see this.

See how it mentions here that God led his people through the wilderness. Now, if you remember the story in the book of Numbers, those were not prime years for Israel.

Those were not good times of great service to God. Those were horrible times where Israel is constantly complaining about the God who literally just saved them.

Saying, oh, if only we could go back to being slaves again. Like, incredibly ungrateful. Like, horrible. And there's terrible examples all throughout about how bad they were at being God's people.

[27 : 36] About serving God. And in fact, in this whole period, from the Exodus, through the wilderness, into the land, saved from these two kings, that's like not much more than 40 years of time in that period.

And if all of that time, like 40 of those years plus, is this wilderness time. Either end is these salvation acts of God. But in the middle here, we have the whole history really is Israel's very lapsed obedience and bad attitude towards God.

And in 12 verses here of God's steadfast love, enduring forever, of God's saving, of God's blessing, of God redeeming Israel, we have less than half of a verse that only kind of indirectly references Israel's faltering obedience.

Well, why is that? Because covering their sin and covering their failure, the Lord's steadfast love endures forever.

And if there was a love that was tested ever, then this was it. But God's love endures. Well, in verse 23, the psalmist takes this up to his present day.

[28 : 49] And thousands of years later, we can also join in with this and look back and say, who is this who saved us? It is he who remembered us also in our lowest state and our desperation, who remembered us in our need and our place of weakness, and who rescued us from all our foes because his steadfast love endures forever.

We have an invitation here to look back on the history of Israel, like this psalmist did, to look back on these establishing great times and see that that's our God too.

That's my God who saved them and who saved me for his steadfast love endures forever. And just like that, psalmist is also inviting his readers to say, look at your lives, look at where we are now.

And God's steadfast love still endures forever. That he is still the God who remembered us in our lowest state. That we ourselves can look back to see that God has a love for us that endures forever.

But nowhere is this love more clear to us than in how this story continues and what happens at the culmination of the story of God's redeeming love for his people.

[30 : 03] That God sent his son, Jesus Christ, fully God, fully man. Into the world. That he died the death on the cross that we deserved.

God's firstborn son dies the death that we deserve so that we might live in the life that he earned. That he opened the door for all people to become God's people.

If they put their faith and their trust in him, in this God who saves, and in his steadfast love which endures forever. Remember the history of the whole church, of Christianity, the history of our own congregation.

We've been through some times, you know, especially in 2008, 2011, before I was here, some times of, real times of testing in the life of the congregation. And we can see these things and we can also see in the history of our own lives.

How God saved us from our foes. How God delivered us and rescued us. How God didn't give up on us. How his steadfast love endures forever. Who rescued us. Who redeemed us.

[31:06] Who saved us. And who delivered us. Why? Not because we deserved it. But because his steadfast love for his people endures forever.

Because that's who he is. Because he's a great God. And worthy of praise. Because his love endures forever. And if you are a follower of God through Jesus Christ.

If you are a Christian. And you've been brought into the family of God. And the false starts and persistent sins in your life.

And in your faltering, hesitating obedience. If it weighs on your conscience. The psalm encourages you and tells you to take your eyes off yourself.

And put your eyes back on God. Who loves you with the steadfast love that endures forever. Who did not let his people. He did not abandon his people to slavery.

[32:02] He did not abandon his people to die in the wilderness. But he gave them a family. He gave them a people. And he brought them into the land of blessing. That he gave them an inheritance.

And the right to be called children of God. For his steadfast love endures forever. In this psalm, we've seen that God loves everything that he's made.

You know, verse 25 adds to it. And says that even the act of having food. Is an act of God's provision for everything that lives. You know, we often think of things just how we go about food. But what about God's providence and everything it took for us to have that? You know, God's love is for all people. And giving us just the blessings in this life. And that's one reason why we should just thank God for the food that we eat.

But we've also seen here God has a special love towards his people. That he acted in real history. To redeem his people.

[33:00] To free them from slavery. To save them from their enemies. Give them a home and an inheritance. And if you are, if you're not sure where you stand with God in this.

But you want to know this special love that God has for his people. This saving love. And you want to be part of God's family. To be part of that community. Then I encourage you to cry out to God and ask him.

Lord God, I want to serve you. I know that you are a God who deserves praise. That you are the only true God. And a great God. And a God who's powerful to save. And who's willing to save. Lord God, save me.

Lord God, help me to believe. Help my unbelief. Help me to believe. And save me. And if that's you, I'd be happy to talk to you after the service. Or so many Christians here would.

We have prayer time, as Hudson mentioned, through those doors too. We would love to pray for you. And to help you with that. Because through Jesus Christ and what he did on the cross.

[33:59] He opened the door for all people to become God's people. If they put their faith and trust in him. And this God whose steadfast love endures forever. And so we asked a question at the beginning of this psalm.

But what is praise? How do we get there? Why should we praise God? And how? And I think this psalm has shown us. It shows us why we should praise God. Because he's shown his goodness. And he's proven his goodness in creation. In history. Most of all in sending his son to die for us. For the love that he has for us. To save us. And it's showing us also how to worship God.

That when you wake up and your heart doesn't feel worshipful. And you're not tasting the goodness of the Lord. A better way than just trying to force things. Is to take a moment and just remember God.

You know, open up the scriptures. And just see what God's done. His goodness. Who he is. What he's done for you. His love for you. And remember these things. And you'll enter into worship.

[34:59] And so in closing, just those three points. Thank God and praise him. Not just because he's all powerful. But because he is good. And God proves his goodness. By his steadfast love toward you as creator.

And God also proves his goodness. By his steadfast love towards his people as their savior. Give thanks to the God of heaven. For his steadfast love endures forever.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, Lord. We thank you for this word.

Lord God, we thank you. That you have a love for us that endures forever. Lord, we thank you that you are the God who saved Israel. Out of all of these things time and time again. And didn't give up on them.

On your covenant people. And now we thank you, Lord. We put our trust that if we belong to you through Jesus Christ. That you do not give up on us. That you save us. And you deliver us.

Because your steadfast love endures forever.

[35 : 59] So we pray, Lord God. That we will grow to have hearts that see your goodness. That taste and see that you are good. And we pray, Lord. That you would set our hearts free to worship you. This day and always.

For the great love that you have towards us. As our maker, redeemer, savior, and Lord. In the precious name of Jesus Christ. Through whom all of these things are possible.

We pray. Amen. Amen. Thank you.