

His Love Endures Forever

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[0:00] Now, as many of you will know, there's a variety of psalms in the Bible, and often they're used in a variety of settings. They were meant to be read in the congregation and not just personally. Some of them are.

And this particular psalm, Psalm 136, is what we call a corporate psalm of thanksgiving. If you look at Psalm 135, the content between those two psalms are actually quite similar, although there's actually more detail in the previous one, 135.

But what makes 136 different is that it's a responsive psalm. Many times as a congregation, we would read psalms responsibly, even though it wasn't written specifically for that.

But Psalm 136 was actually written to be read responsibly. So that's why we didn't have an Old Testament reading, because it would have been really odd for the person to be standing up here, reading the psalm and then saying, His love endures forever 26 times by himself or herself.

So instead, what we're going to do is we're going to actually read it as a congregation. Now, the congregation's part is very simple. It's actually the title of the sermon, His love endures forever.

[1:11] So you can't quite get it wrong. And we're not sure, but it was probably also set to music. And we were going to ask Gary and Bruce to write us a tune for today.

But no, thankfully, I spared them the work and we'll just be reading it. Now, we tried this at 745. I was, I think, a bit too demanding.

I told them to read it with me throughout the whole 26 verses. And we sort of kind of lost steam after, you know, verse 13 or 14. So I think what we're going to do, we're going to do a slight change of plans.

I know that the whole psalm is on the screen. But what we're going to do is break this psalm up into two halves. So read the first nine verses together. And you'll see why, because it aligns with the structure of the psalm.

And then we'll do the rest as we look at the second part. So I suggest, if you can, to keep up the volume. Because after all, we do believe, don't we, that His love endures forever.

[2:17] And forever means forever. And therefore, we're going to read it as though His love endures forever. Because His love does endure forever. So are we ready for that?

Yes? Okay. I think we sort of need to practice, maybe. So let's just do verse 1 a couple of times. I want to just gauge the level of enthusiasm here, right?

All right. So, ready? Verse 1. Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. He is not in Jesus' prayer.

Yeah, not bad. Okay. All right. Practice over.

Let's go for it. Okay. First nine verses. Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. Give thanks to the God of gods. Give thanks to the Lord of lords.

To Him who alone does great wonders. Who by His understanding made the heavens. Who spread out the earth upon the waters.

[3:17] Who made the great lights. The sun to govern that day. The moon and stars to govern the night.

Okay. Good. The second half is actually slightly longer. So, take a deep breath. Get ready. Now, this is actually a pretty straightforward psalm.

And, as I go through it today, there's probably not going to be a lot that's going to be earth-shattering to you. But still, it's actually a well-structured psalm.

And I thought we'd actually look at it today and perhaps come away being encouraged to give thanks to the Lord because His love endures forever. Well, how does this psalm begin?

In verses 1 to 3, with a call to worship or call to thanksgiving. And right at the start, we're told why. It's because the Lord is good. And then in the refrain itself, we're told why God is good.

[4 : 18] It's because His love endures forever. So, in a sense, that's the summary of the sermon. But let's look at it in a bit more detail. Now, many of you will know that character in relationships is everything, isn't it?

That's why in politics nowadays, I think we're in such a mess because leaders are often chosen because of their charisma or something like that. Only for them, for us to, or personality or maybe the amount of power they have, but only for us to discover that their true character afterwards, which is not that great.

In the same way, marriages often fail when people choose who they marry based on looks or even personality. And then they aren't willing to put up with the character flaws, which all of us have, when they discover them in marriage.

So, character in relationship is paramount because without it, there is no basis for trust, which we need to sustain and strengthen relationships.

So, think for a moment who your best friends are. They're those you trust, aren't they? Or, for example, if you no longer trust Andrew, your pastor, well, you're not likely to keep coming to this church, are you?

[5 : 40] Children need parents they trust in order to grow up healthy and secure. And on and on I can go. And so, isn't it wonderful then that the God we worship is good in character, which means he's also trustworthy.

And the best thing about it is that God's trustworthy character isn't something he's had to develop or learn. Rather, God's goodness and love is intrinsic to who he is.

In fact, his very nature defines what goodness and love is. Here in the psalm, the Hebrew word for love is chesed, which refers to God's steadfast love and enduring, steadfast loyal and enduring love.

In fact, if you look at the Hebrew, the verb endure actually doesn't exist in the psalm. The idea of endure is actually embedded in the word chesed itself.

So the refrain actually only has two words. Chesed forever. And come to think of it, even the word forever is a bit superfluous, isn't it?

[6 : 56] Because what does enduring mean except that it's forever? So there's really no doubt, is there, what aspect of this psalm we're meant to focus on, what we're meant to give thanks to God for.

It's his chesed, his steadfast, enduring love. Well, what the rest of the psalm then does is to demonstrate God's steadfast love in two areas of life in this world.

First, God's chesed is displayed from verse 4 to 9, which we just read in God's creation. And then secondly, from verses 10 to 24, in his rescue or redemption.

So let's first look at God has set in his creation. We're in verse 4. It says, We're to give thanks to him who alone does great wonders, who by understanding made the heavens and spread out the earth above the waters, who made the great lights, the sun to rule the day and the moon and stars to govern the night.

Now, the psalmist, with limited space and time, is not able to actually mention every single little detail in creation. So what he does, by way of shorthand, is he mentions both the heavens and the earth, and by so doing, he encompasses everything else in between.

[8 : 18] He does the same thing with reference to day and night. But by doing that, he actually signifies that every moment of the 24-hour day is included in God's care.

So God's chesed is seen in all creation, in every aspect of time and space. And as you look out, the sun's not quite out today, but even then, I'm sure you can agree wholeheartedly just how thoughtful and wise God's been in creation.

How we see, actually, his loving kindness to us. Well, we don't have time to go through all of it, but today I just want to mention one that keeps coming back to me, and that is regarding the regularity and the variety in God's creation.

Many of us appreciate the order in God's creation. Others love the variety. But have you ever considered how both regularity, order, and variety are there in just the right measure?

I don't know if you've found this with children, but I found that in planning the meals for my children, regularity and variety are very important. I know many of us grew up with just being told that we just should be grateful to have a hot meal, much less what our favorite meals are.

[9 : 41] But because we can afford it now and because we do love our children, we try and give them variety and regularity in their meals. So in our household, the girls have a list of about seven or eight favorites.

If you're interested, I'll put them up on the screen for you. I've called them the choose very own food for soul menu. Come up in a while. If anything takes your fancy, let me know.

I can come around and cook them for you. But as you can see, dad's chicken rice is one of them. And even though, let's say, chicken rice is their favorite, it's not good me serving them chicken rice five days a week, is it?

They would, by the third day, maybe even the second, quickly tire of it. Why? Because too much regularity is bad. Instead, we try and vary the meals accordingly.

But on the other hand, too much variety and no regularity is bad too because they want to see chicken rice regularly on the menu. Often, they would come in and the rice cooker would be cooking with the chicken stock in it and they'd go, oh, dad, I know what it is.

[10 : 50] Chicken rice, yes. And if there was a week that goes by without chicken rice, well, there'll be questions asked of me. And I think the same pattern of regularity and variety in creation is also a sign of God's love for us.

Because if there was too much regularity, there would just be, you know, creation would be monotonous. And we would die of boredom, wouldn't we? On the other hand, if there was no regularity, then our lives will be in chaos.

We wouldn't be able to plan or order our lives. And so as I think about it, I see how God has cleverly made the earth to rotate on its axis, but not just vertically upright, but tilted at an angle.

At the same time, its orbit around the sun is elliptical, slightly off-center. And by just doing that, physically, the physics of it, we get both regularity and variety.

We get seasons in the year by which we cycle through, but we know when they'll come around again. We get climate variations between different parts of the world so that we can enjoy different kinds of trees and flowers, depending on where we go to visit in our holidays, and different varieties of fruits and things like that to eat.

[12 : 09] Now imagine if the earth spun around like a crazy marble, this way and that without any pattern. That would be chaos, wouldn't it?

Australia would be in the south one year, and then the next year would be in the north. And we wouldn't know from year to year when winter would end and summer would begin, or spring. But as it is, our world is orderly, and yet has an amazing variety in it.

I just picked one example. For instance, one animal species like the fox. We've got the fox, and yet we've got both the desert fox, on the top left-hand corner, those big ears, and the arctic fox, which are kind of like really cute, isn't it?

Both are foxes, and yet both are varied and beautiful, created by God. And God does this because He loves us. He doesn't want us to merely exist in this world.

No, He wants us to enjoy living in it as well. In fact, He wants us to enjoy it the way He Himself enjoyed creating and sustaining the world. Just like a gardener, like my wife, enjoys the garden she pours her heart into.

[13 : 26] That's what God is like in creation. His steadfast love is seen in creation. And for me, I take particular delight in the order, as well as the variety. Well, that's the first way that we see God's facet.

So now the second way we see God's facet is in His rescue or redemption. Here's where we have to do some work again, because we're now going to read the rest of the psalm, like we did the first part.

So are you ready? Still there with me? Okay. I'm going to read verse 1 again, just to give the instruction of giving thanks, and then I'll jump to verse 10.

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. To Him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt and brought Israel out from among them.

With a mighty hand and outstretched arm, to Him who divided the Red Sea asunder and brought Israel through the midst of it, but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea.

[14 : 39] To Him who led His people through the wilderness, to Him who struck down great kings and killed mighty kings.

Sion, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan and gave their land as inheritance and inheritance to His servant Israel.

He remembered us in our lower state and freed us from our enemies. He gives food to every creature.

And finally, give thanks to the God of heaven. Amen. And so we see in this second half of the account, verses 10 to 24, the second reason I say that God has said is displayed, and that is His rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

Now remember back in verse 4, there was a reference to God's great wonders in creation. Well, there's a sort of similar wonder happening in redemption as well, except the phrase that is used is God's mighty hand and outstretched arm in verse 12.

[16:02] And so from verse 10 to 24, what we see verse after verse is God's miraculous power in rescuing His people from enemies more powerful than them and then bringing them to the promised land of inheritance.

So verse 10, with great power, God strikes down Egypt's firstborn, but then He rescues Israel, His own firstborn. Verse 13, He parts the Red Sea, taking Israel safely through it, but then overthrows Pharaoh's mighty army in it.

After leading them through the desert, God then strikes down more kings, verses 17 to 20, great and mighty kings to bring them finally into the land.

Each time, Israel is portrayed as small, weak, and powerless, and her enemies are strong and mighty. And yet, God is stronger still.

And it says there in verse 23 that He remembers Israel in her low estate. That is, He remembers His covenant and promises to her and comes to her rescue, freeing her from enemies that are stronger than she is.

[17:16] This is a God whose love is for those He has chosen, whom He has called His servants. Verse 22, It is out of love that He chose them in the first place and then it's in love again that He remembers them and rescues them.

Now, in the final two verses of the psalm, the psalmist returns again to the theme of creation before concluding by asking the people to give thanks to God once more. Now, I say verse 25 returns to creation because if you look at that verse, although the main point is about God's provision, the point is made that God gives food not merely to Israel, His people, but to every creature.

That is, God not only creates, He sustains all that He creates. And so, if God would feed every living creature, then how much more would He feed those He rescues for Himself?

We're meant to take that as a given, even though it's not stated explicitly. Well, there we have it.

That's the psalm in a nutshell, and overall, it's probably pretty straightforward.

But what I want to do with the rest of our time is just reflect on three ways in which this psalm encourages us and applies to our situation. So first, consider the focus of thanksgiving in the psalm.

[18:42] And in particular, notice the weight that's given to creation and redemption. Now, this psalm is not saying that we should never thank God for our daily provision or for any other blessing that comes into our life.

I think that's what verse 25 is there for. It is right for us to thank God for feeding us, clothing us, sheltering us, giving us jobs. But in terms of thanking God as we gather together, it's His love, which is shown in creation and redemption that gets the most attention in this psalm.

Every other good thing that comes to us from God stems from this fact that first, God has created us and then secondly, as Christians, He has saved us or redeemed us.

Now, I think all of us, as we've read the psalm today, we would have quite easily resonated with the verses on creation because by and large, as we're looking out on our world, it is the same world that the psalmist is describing.

However, the redemption story probably doesn't resonate at first, does it? After all, none of us, I don't think, have been slaves in Egypt. Neither have we had kings like Sion and Og coming at us.

[20:03] And yet, we all know that in Christ, all of us know God as Redeemer as well, don't we? Our enemy isn't Pharaoh or the king of Bashan or the Amorites.

Rather, we've been freed from an even greater enemy, that of sin and its consequence, death.

We've been freed from the punishment that our own pride and selfish nature deserves.

Every lie we've told, every hurt we've inflicted on others, often to those we love, every hateful thought, all of which we've been powerless to stop, even though we know they're wrong.

God has freed us from their penalty and their power in Christ Jesus. And God did it with outstretched arms as well, didn't He?

Only this time, they're the outstretched arms of His Son hanging on the cross for us. And for us, that is really the greatest act of chesed, isn't it?

[21 : 07] That God has shown for His people, not sparing His own Son for us. God remembered us when we were powerless to save ourselves.

He freed us from sin and death and brought us to share an inheritance with His Son. Now, in our New Testament reading today, Paul encourages us to give thanks for this as we meet on Sunday to remember, as he says, the message of Christ in the Gospel, in song and hymn and psalms. Which brings me to the second practical application, I think, and that is that we are to maintain the habit of corporate thanksgiving. Now, again, this is nothing new to all of you because we do that each week.

But I want you to notice what Paul says in Colossians 3, and verse 16, that we are to let the message of Christ dwell richly among us in psalms, hymns, and songs.

I've just spoken about that. But there are two reasons for that. The first, the natural one, is because it gives an expression of our gratitude to God.

[22 : 19] We give thanks simply because God deserves to be praised. Christ. But the second reason, it also has the added purpose, if you read the verse, it has the added purpose of building us up.

That as we teach and admonish one another in songs and psalms and hymns, we build one another up with the wisdom of the gospel. You see, God uses our hearty singing, even when it's off-key, to strengthen the faith of our brothers and sisters as we gather each Sunday.

And sometimes those brothers and sisters come discouraged or struggling with doubt. So it's not just Mel singing up here or, you know, those of us who are ministering up front that do ministry each week.

All of us do ministry when we gather. I remember being able to go to the London Men's Convention one year some time back and it was actually in the Royal Albert Hall and many of you would know that place.

It's the place where they hold the last night of the proms each year. And I was incredibly moved as 5,000 men sang in unison.

[23 : 40] Now, most of us were not good baritones at all but boy did we sing our hearts out and it really lifted the spirits of everyone there. Likewise, I also know a school chaplain.

He shared one time that as he was battling depression, he would turn up each Sunday at his local Anglican church. It was an early morning prayer book service and even though he himself could not sing or read or participate, he would allow the members of the church to minister to him.

The prayers, the liturgy, the hymns, all of which were rich in God's word was what God used, the people, to serve him and minister to him in his time of need.

And friends, we actually have the joy of being able to do this every Sunday. To come to church, not just to be lifted ourselves, uplifted ourselves, which is great, nothing wrong with that, but also to be able to minister to others around us.

I seem to imagine how God's people, as they get it at God's temple each year maybe, and then they recited this psalm in that courtyard.

[25 : 03] How, you know, it would have been thousands, how they would have been encouraged as they heard one another reading this psalm. And we can do the same each Sunday, can't we?

Which brings me to the last point in application, and that is, I think this psalm also encourages us to be disciplined in the practice of thanksgiving.

And by that, I mean to do it even when life isn't going well at present. And that, I think, is the value and beauty of focusing our thanksgiving on God's creation and rescue.

Because these are the two fundamental gifts that God has already achieved in our lives and in this world. I wonder whether you've noticed as you've read the psalm that every point of thanksgiving is actually a past act of God.

There is only one, verse 25, where God feeds us or his creatures that is in the present. And that's really wise, isn't it, if you think about it?

[26 : 07] Because if we simply focus on our thanksgiving, focus our thanksgiving on the here and now, on what God is doing or isn't doing in our lives right at this moment, then our thanksgiving will

actually go up and down like a yo-yo, wouldn't it?

Depending on what's happening in our lives. I don't know whether you played this game when you were young lovers a long time back, or maybe even now, but you remember when girls or guys would take petals of the flowers or the flowers and then they would peel them off one at a time and they would say as they do it, she loves me, she loves me not.

Do you guys do that? I've seen TV programs where it happens. Well, it's tempting for us to do the same with God, isn't it? Depending on our circumstances, he loves us, he loves us not.

But God's not like that, is he? Because in his creation and in his redemption, we know that God doesn't change, that, actually, is not he loves me, he loves me not, but he loves me, he loves me lots, all the time, even when life is tough.

God loves us, his haset is forever. One of the things that struck me about this Psalm 136 is that I think it's the same lesson that Israel had to learn.

[27 : 23] Psalm 136 is found in Book 5 of the Psalter, and it's that part of the Psalms which was actually compiled after the exile, which meant they had just experienced a tough period in their history.

And even though they were back in the land, and there was hope, there was also actually difficulty, because gone were the glory days of the monarchy. Israel herself was under foreign rule, and yet, in this Psalm, Israel disciplined themselves to remind themselves to look back at God's great wonders in both creation and redemption.

They recalled that God remembered them in their lowest state, that he continues to be good because his love endures forever. And so I think as a church, we would do well to remember that as well, and to do the same, to be disciplined in our thanksgiving, not because of the here and now, ups and downs, whatever God may be putting us through at this moment in time, or even as a church, whatever situation we may find ourselves in society at the moment, we do well to look back at God's creation and God's redemption, and to remember that God remembers us in our lowest state, and he has freed us from the greatest enemy there is, sin and death.

And so therefore, we can take it for granted that he will care for us now, not only feed us as his creatures, but also bring us to our final place of inheritance.

So let's give thanks to the Lord right now, why don't we, let's pray. Father, we want to give thanks to you again, for you are good, and your love endures forever.

[29 : 16] Father, there may be some among us today who may be going through difficulty, and we look at ourselves as a church in Australia, where perhaps more and more people are turning their backs on you and your son.

And yet, Lord, remember, we remember that you are good to us, that because you created us and you've rescued us, you will continue to look after your church and all the members in it.

Help us, Lord, therefore, to come together each week and to remember to give thanks to you, and as we do, lift up our hearts so that we may go out again into the world, to our lives, and live a life thankful to you in all that we say and do.

And as Paul says in Colossians, whether in word or deed, to give glory to you. We pray this in your son's name. In the name of Jesus, amen.