

His Love Endures Forever

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[0 : 00] Now, many of you will know that there's a variety of Psalms in the Bible. Often they're used in different settings. And Psalm 136 is what's called a corporate Psalm of Thanksgiving.

And if you actually look at Psalm 135, there's actually quite similar content between the two, although Psalm 135, I think, has more detail in it. But what makes Psalm 136 different is that it's actually a responsive Psalm.

And actually, sometimes in church services, we read Psalms responsively. But this one was actually written specifically to be read responsively. That's why we didn't have someone standing up here reading the Psalm all by himself or herself, because it's going to be really odd to read the line and then read His love endures forever by himself or herself.

So we're going to do it as a congregation. The congregation bit is very simple. There's only one line you need to remember. It's the title of the sermon, His Love Endures Forever.

Now, it was probably also set to music. And I didn't quite get in touch with the band to prepare a tune for us. So we're just going to have to read it instead of sing it.

[1 : 14] And you might be thankful for that as well. Now, normally, we try this at 745. If we read this all together, notwithstanding we're doing it as a congregation, we sort of tend to lose steam after verse 13 or 14.

Just repeating it, the same sentence over and over for 26 verses sort of does get a bit monotonous. Not that that is not true.

His love does endure forever. So what I think we're going to do instead is we're going to break up the Psalm. A slight change of plans from what's on the screen. But we're going to break up the Psalm into two parts. So we're going to read verse 1 to 9 together first.

And then we're going to read verse 10 to 24 halfway through the Psalm. Halfway through the talk. Okay, so is everyone sort of ready? Raring to go?

Yep. I think we should just practice this maybe once. Alright, so let's do verse 1 a couple of times, shall we? Alright, I'll just gauge the volume. And if I need to, you know, I need to just signal that it needs to go higher.

[2 : 20] Alright, so verse 1, let's try that. Give thanks to the Lord for He is good. He is love and He is for ever. Okay, good. Can you maintain that for nine verses? Okay, let's go.

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.

Who made the great lights. Do the sun to govern the day. Do the sun and do the day. Do the moon and stars to govern the night.

Do the sun and do the day. Do the sun and do the day. Very good. Very well done. Second part is actually longer, so we're going to test ourselves after this. Now, this is actually a pretty straightforward psalm.

[3 : 21] So what I'm going to say probably today is not going to be earth-shattering to many of you, but I thought it was still good for us to reflect on this today. It's actually quite a well-structured psalm, but my hope is that you'll come away today being encouraged anyway, notwithstanding that it's quite familiar.

So if you've got your outlines in front of you, there's a sort of little structure of the psalm at the top. And the psalm begins in verses 1 to 3 with a call to worship, or perhaps more specifically a 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. It's because His love endures forever. And that's probably the summary, the big idea of the psalm. If that's all you take away today, that's really all you need. But let's look a bit more in the detail of the psalm.

Now, many of you will know that character in relationships is everything, isn't it? That's why I think, for example, politics nowadays is in a mess, because often leaders are chosen because of their charisma, and only for us to discover afterwards their true character.

[4 : 35] I'm sure you have someone in mind, maybe, I don't know. In the same way, marriages often fail when people choose who they marry based on looks or personality, and then they aren't willing to put up with the character flaws, which all of us have after they're married.

And they discover it, and then they decide to end the marriage. So character in relationships is paramount, isn't it? Because without it, there's no basis for trust, which is what you need to sustain and strengthen relationships.

So think for a moment who your best friends are. They're people you trust, aren't they? Or if you no longer trust Andrew as your pastor, you're likely to leave the church, aren't you?

Children need parents they can trust in order to be healthy and secure. And on and on I can go. And so it's wonderful, isn't it, to know 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 is not something he needs to develop or learn. In fact, God's goodness and love is intrinsic to who he is.

[5 : 52] And his very nature actually defines what goodness and love is for the rest of us. Here in this psalm, the Hebrew word for love is chaset, which refers to God's steadfast, loyal, and enduring love.

And in fact, the verb endure that we've been repeating isn't actually in the psalm at all. But the sense of it is embedded in the word chaset itself.

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

Because what does enduring mean if not forever? And so there's really no doubt what the whole point of this psalm is. We are to give thanks because of God's character, his chaset, his enduring, loyal, steadfast, and faithful love.

And then what the rest of the psalm then does is demonstrate God's steadfast love in two areas of life. First, his love is displayed, and we've read from verses 4 to 9, in God's creation.

[7 : 04] And then, from verses 10 to 24, in his redemption or rescue. So let's first consider how we see God's chaset in his creation.

So verse 4 says, Now the psalmist, with limited space and time, is unable to mention every single detail in creation.

But by way of shorthand, what he does is he mentions both the heavens and the earth, and so by doing, he encompasses everything in between. In the same way, his reference to both day and night signifies that every moment of the 24-hour day is included in God's care.

And so God's love is seen in all creation, in every aspect of time and space. Now many of you, if you look out at creation, will probably agree wholeheartedly with that.

We look at how God is so thoughtful and wise in the way he's created this world. And in it, we see signs of his loving kindness. We don't have time to mention all of them today, but I just want to mention one, which I often keep coming back to, that strikes me every time I look at God's creation.

[8 : 28] And that is the regularity and the variety of God's creation. So many people appreciate the order in God's creation. Others love the variety, but have you ever considered how both regularity and variety are there in just the right measure?

I don't know if you've found this with your children. One of mine's here today, so I better watch what I say. But I've found that regularity and variety are very important in trying to work out their meals for the week.

I know some of us are just thankful to have a hot meal, but nowadays kids, because we love them and spoil them, we think hard about how we can have variety and regularity in our meals.

So in our house, the girls have a list of about seven or eight favorites. I think if you're interested, I've got that on the screen. Yes. It's our very own version of Food for Soul.

So as you can see, is that right? Have I left anything off? No? Okay, good. I don't cook McDonald's, by the way. That just gets ordered.

[9 : 36] But as you can see, number four, dad's chicken rice is one of their favorites. Now, even though that's one of their favorites, I think it's sort of not good serving it to them five days a week, would it?

Too much regularity is bad. They'll get sick of it after the second or the third day. On the other hand, too much variety is also a bad thing because the girls want to regularly see chicken rice on the menu.

If a week does go by, and I don't think it's Emma, it's Mont Lauren, if a week goes by without chicken rice, then there will be questions asked. Well, this 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, this world would be monotonous, wouldn't it? We would die of boredom living in it. On the other hand, if there wasn't any regularity, then our lives will actually be in chaos.

We wouldn't be able to plan or order our lives. And so as I look and I see what God has done, I see how He's cleverly made the earth, for example, to rotate on its axis, but not vertically, slightly, just slightly at an angle, a tilt.

[10 : 58] At the same time, its orbit around the sun is not dead center, is it? It's elliptical, slightly off center. And just by doing that, not just by doing that, yeah, God can just by doing that, but just by doing that, we have both regularity and variations.

So we get seasons in the year, but we cycle through them and we know when they come around again. We also get climate variations between different parts of the world so we can enjoy different kinds of trees and flowers and also the different types of fruits, the tropical fruits or, you know, more temperate climate fruits.

Now imagine if the earth spun around like a crazy marble, you know, without any pattern. There would be chaos, wouldn't there? Australia would be in the south one year and then the next year we might be in the north.

You might think it's a good thing, but we would never know from year to year when winter would end and spring would start, would we? But as it is, our world is orderly and yet has amazing variety. I just got one example. We've just one animal species like the fox. We have both the desert fox. Never knew they had such huge years, but, and then we have the little cute arctic fox.

[12 : 19] Both are foxes and yet both are beautiful and varied, aren't they? For us to enjoy. And God does this because He loves us. He doesn't want us to just merely exist in this world.

He wants us to enjoy living in it. He wants us actually to enjoy it the way He Himself enjoyed creating it and is sustaining it. just like a gardener enjoys the garden she pours her heart into. That's the way God has poured His heart into creation and He wants us to enjoy it as well. Well, that's the first way God shows His haset in creation.

Now let's turn to the second way, but before we do that, we're going to read the rest of the psalm together again. So, what I think I'll do is I will, you know, repeat verse 1. We will repeat verse 1 and then we'll jump to verse 10 so that we're not sort of starting in the middle with a preposition.

Okay, are we ready? Still with me? Okay. 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.

[13 : 31] 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 to Him who led His people through the wilderness to Him who struck down great kings and killed mighty kings and gave their land as an 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. Well, as I said, the second has said or where God has displayed His love is that of redemption and in verses 20 to 24 we have an account of the rescue of Israel by God from slavery in Egypt.

Now, if you recall in verse 4 there was a reference to God's great wonders in creation. Well, there's a similar sense of wonder here as well in redemption except the phrase that's used is in verse 12 and what it says is it's God's mighty and outstretched arm.

And so, from verse 10 to 24 what we see is verse after verse God's miraculous power in rescuing His people from enemies more powerful than them and then finally bringing them to a land of promise.

[15:28] And so, in verse 10, with great power God strikes down Egypt's firstborn but on the other hand He rescues His own firstborn Israel. Verse 13, He parts the Red Sea taking Israel safely through it but then overthrows Pharaoh's mighty army in it.

and then after leading them through the desert God then strikes down more kings verses 17 to 20 and then finally bringing them into their land.

But each time the picture we get is of Israel as small, weak, powerless, her enemies are strong and mighty and yet we have God who is stronger still.

so, in verse 23, He prays for remembering Israel in her low estate. God remembers His covenant, His promises with her and comes to her rescue in her time of need and powerlessness freeing her from her enemies.

So, this is a God whose love is for those He has chosen and then for those He remembers because He has chosen them. And then finally in the last 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.

[16:49] Now, I say verse 25 returns to creation because although the main point is actually giving thanks for God's provision, notice that God gives food not merely to Israel or His people but actually to every creature.

So, God not only creates but He sustains and feeds all that He creates. And I think by extension we can take it that if He feeds every living creature then how much more will He care and feed those He's rescued for Himself.

I think that sense is implied even though it's not explicit in those words. Well, there we have it. It's a rather simple Psalm really, isn't it?

But what I wanted to now then do is just reflect on three ways where I think we can then apply this Psalm to our situation. First, please consider the focus of thanksgiving in the Psalm and in particular I want you to notice the weight that's given to creation and redemption.

Now, I don't think this Psalm is saying that therefore we can't give thanks to God for daily provision or whatever other material blessings that we have from God. I think that's what verse 25 is there for.

[18:09] It is right for us to thank God for feeding us, for clothing us, for giving us jobs, giving us shelter and all those good things. But in terms of thanking God as we gather each week, 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 from God stems from the fact that He's created us and as Christians that He saved and redeemed us. Now, I think as we read the Psalm today, that bit, that first bit about creation probably resonates with us quite easily because we look out and the creation we see is the same creation that the Psalm is sore.

The redemption story, however, probably doesn't quite resonate with us immediately. I'm not sure but I'm guessing no one's been a slave in Egypt here or been attacked by kings like Sihon and Og. And yet, in Christ, we too know God as a Redeemer, don't we? Our enemy is not Pharaoh. 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 has enslaved us.

Every lie we've told, every hurt we've inflicted, often to people we love, every hateful thought, all of which have been powerless to stop.

[19:41] And yet, at the same time, we know they're wrong. God has freed us from their power and penalty in Christ. And God did it with outstretched arms too, didn't He?

Only this time, it was the outstretched arms of His Son on the cross, dying for us. And that for us is actually the greatest act of *Hesed*, isn't it?

By God for His people. He did not spare His own Son which He loved. God remembered us when we were parlous to save ourselves. He freed us from sin and death and brought us into a share of inheritance with His Son.

In our New Testament reading today, Paul encourages us to give thanks for this as we meet each Sunday. We are to, he says, remember the message of Christ that is in the Gospel in not just psalms but songs and hymns as well.

And that brings us to our second application which is that we are to maintain the habit of corporate thanksgiving. Now again, this is not new to you. We do that each week. But I want you to know this

as I put the verse up again, Colossians 3 verse 16, that we're to let the message of Christ dwell richly in us.

[21 : 00] Yep. But two things happen when we do that. First, we express our gratitude to God which is the right thing to do because we are to give thanks because God deserves it.

But secondly, can you see the other thing that happens? There's an added purpose of building ourselves up as we teach and admonish one another with the wisdom of the Gospel.

And so you see, God actually uses our hearty singing even when it's off key to strengthen the faith of our brothers and sisters here.

Some of whom may come feeling discouraged, grieving, struggling with doubt. You see, it's not just the band up here or the singers that do ministry each week, is it?

All of us, when we gather, we minister to one another. I remember having the privilege of going to the London Men's Convention one year, some time ago now.

[22 : 04] It was in the Royal Albert Hall and if you know that place, that's where they hold the last night of the proms each year. they sing Rue Britannia, you know, that thing. And I remember being incredibly, incredibly moved as 5,000 men sang in unison.

Not many of us were good baritones, but boy, did we sing our hearts out and we just, we just had our lift, our spirits lifted when we did that.

Likewise, school chaplains once shared that as he was battling depression, he would turn up each morning to a local Anglican church early in the morning at prayer book service, 745 like the ones we have here.

And there, even though he himself could not sing or read or do anything, he would allow the members of the church to minister to him. Because as they prayed, as they read the liturgy, as they sung the hymns, all of which was rich in God's word, God was using them to minister to him, even as he was in his depression.

And so friends, that is the joy that we have each Sunday as we come. Not just to lift ourselves up, which is great and we should do that, but also to lift each other up, to minister to one another.

[23 : 29] I think about Psalm 136 as the people of Israel gathered at the temple, probably thousands of them, as they recited this psalm, probably yearly, I don't know, how encouraged they would have felt or been hearing the words of this psalm.

And that's the sort of same thing we can do, not just with psalms, but with the reading of the Bible, with hymns, with songs, with our prayers. which brings me to the last point of the application, and that is to be disciplined in the practice of thanksgiving.

And by that I mean we are to be disciplined even when life isn't going well at present. And that I think is sort of the value and beauty of focusing our thanksgiving on God's creation and redemption. Because these are the two fundamental gifts that God has already achieved in our lives and in this world. I don't know whether you've noticed as you read the psalm, but every point of thanksgiving is a past act of God.

There is only one, verse 25, which is in the present tense, the one that says God feeds His creatures. But everything else is past. God has already done it.

[24 : 49] And that's really wise, isn't it? Because if we simply 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 becomes a bit like a yo-yo, doesn't it?

It goes up and down, up and down, depending on whether we feel God is loving us or not or doing good things in our lives or not. I don't know whether you've played this game as young lovers, or maybe you're still young lovers, but remember teenagers used to sometimes take petals of flowers or take a flower and then they would peel them off one at a time saying, she loves me, she loves me not.

Maybe it's just on TV. Anyway, but we tend to have that same temptation, don't we? To say, God loves me, God loves me not, God loves me, depending on what's happening in our lives.

But really, God's not like that, is He? Because in His creation and in His redemption, we already know that God loves us, that He hasn't changed, that He's not, He loves me, He loves me not, but He loves me, He loves me lots, all the time, because His hesed is forever.

Israel, I think, as they, this Psalm, actually Psalm 136 is in part, book five of the Psalter, which means it was actually compiled at the end or after their return from exile.

[26 : 18] And so as they did that, they would have just come through a tough period in history. And even though they were back in the land, there was hope, it was actually still a difficult time for them in the land because gone were the glory days of the monarchy and Israel themselves were still under foreign rule.

And yet, they chose to preserve this Psalm, to discipline themselves, to remind themselves, to keep looking back at God's great wonders in creation and redemption.

they recalled that God remembered them in their lower state, that He continues to be good to them because His love endures forever. And so I think as a church, we would do well to practice the same things.

No matter our personal trials, which are, yes, difficult, no matter the situation the church faces itself in society, which, again, doesn't look very rosy, with attacks coming from the media and all sorts, but even in the midst of that, let us remember, let us remind ourselves that God has seen us in our lower state.

He's already freed us from sin and death. And so we actually can take it for granted that He will feed us, He will care for us. And not only that, that He'll bring us to our final place of inheritance.

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