

Give Thanks for God's Enduring Love

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[0 : 00] Well, next month, as some of you may know, in America is the Thanksgiving Day holiday. It was originally about the pilgrims who travelled from England to America, thanking God for their first harvest after the bitter winter.

And as the story goes, they had a three-day feast and even some native Indians joined in, where they thanked God for their goodness and apparently had turkey.

They don't know, actually, what the menu really was. But today, the focus seems certainly to be on the turkey and not God. So much so that they have a famous Macy's Day parade with massive turkeys.

They even have these jokes about turkeys going around, like one turkey visiting a fortune teller turkey and saying, Well, I see you surrounded by family, but not your family.

Or like this one, a turkey wearing the sign saying, Eat ham instead. And on it goes. Well, today there are no turkeys in the oven, though I think there's chicken coming later on.

[1 : 14] But I want us to focus on God, as the pilgrims did. And to help us do that, we're going to be looking at Psalm 136, which in the Jewish tradition is known as the Great Halal.

That is the Great Psalm of Praise. Perhaps in part because it's a responsive psalm, where Israel would respond by singing the refrain, which is in your Bibles there in italics, His love endures forever.

So we're going to do that tonight. Not the singing part, but the responsive part. But we're not going to do the whole thing in one hit. Otherwise, we'll start off with an enthusiastic, His love endures forever.

But by the end, we'll be all thinking this refrain endures forever. So we're going to do it in parts, as we come to each part in the psalm.

Speaking of parts, the psalm, just by the by, follows a sandwich, or what I like to call the burger structure. So here's a burger, you've got a bun on the top and the bottom, and then you've got a bit of lettuce in the middle, and the next bit, and so on.

[2 : 17] It's uneven in the psalm, but it starts and ends with God's character. That's like the bun. And the next bit, it kind of goes to creation, and then creation, and it's a double whopper, because there's two bits about salvation in the middle.

And so we're going to follow those kind of topics as we go through. So let's begin with His character. Point one in your outlines, verse one in your Bibles. We don't need to practice this, do we?

You good to go? It's one line, right? So you'll be right. Okay, here we go. Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. Give thanks to the God of gods.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords. And then down to verse 26, give thanks to the God of heaven. Yeah, well done.

Here the psalmist clearly gives thanks for God's character, doesn't he? So first, verse one, he says, give thanks because the Lord is good, which means we can know His word to us is good, by the way, even if we sometimes find His word hard to understand, or even hard to accept.

[3 : 25] More and more these days, people, and in fact churches, are rejecting parts of God's word. You know, I like this bit, but I don't like that bit. And so they get to sit in judgment of God and decide what's what.

But more than that, because God is good, then we can trust His word to us is good. It's for our good. Again, whether we understand it completely, or even sometimes find it hard to accept.

But since God is good, it also means we can trust He'll always work for our good. Even when we suffer and it doesn't feel like it, of course, the good He works for is not to make us healthy and

wealthy.

He can sometimes do that, but He doesn't promise to do that. What He does promise to do, what is a true good for us, is to sustain us and grow us more like Jesus.

I was talking with someone recently who was going through some pretty significant suffering in their life, and as they look back, they were telling me they could see God not only sustaining and providing for them and their needs, but how it forced them to trust God more.

[4 : 35] And as a result, they were doing that. They were handing things over to God more and more. And whether they realized it or not, it was actually growing them more like Jesus who trusted His Father completely, even to the cross, didn't He?

That's how it works. But the point is, because God is good, then we can know His word to us is good, and He will always work for our good. And that's worth giving God thanks for, is it not? But so too is the fact that He is God. Do you see verse 2? He is the God of gods. Verse 3, the Lord of lords. Verse 26, the God of heaven. And this is worth giving Him thanks too, because it means God not only knows what is good for us, but He also has the power to achieve it.

At the end of year is upon us, and I think exams are all around, whether you're at school or uni. A VCA, I think, starts this week. My kids are not quite at that stage, but they have exams, including a German test.

And I'd love to help them study for that, for their good, but I just don't know any... I know one word of German. You know, nein! That's it! I'm done. And so I may have the desire to work for their good, but I have no power to achieve it, you see.

[5 : 54] God has both. He is the God of gods, who is also good. And so we're not wasting our time worshipping some lesser God.

No, we have the real deal. A God who is good and has the power to work for our good, and that's worth giving Him thanks for, is it not? Well, it's not just for His character that the psalmist gives thanks, but also His creation.

So point to verse 4. So you ready for the response? So verse 4. So give thanks 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, who made the love in Jesus Christ, who made the love in Jesus Christ, who made the moon and stars to govern the night, who made the love in Jesus Christ. And then down to verse 25. He gives food to every creature. who made the love in Jesus Christ. Yeah. I think it's reasonably clear that the psalmist is now talking about God's work in creation, the wonders he's done.

And again, this is worth giving God thanks for because despite the fact that our world groans with natural disasters because it's under judgment for sin, and despite the fact that humanity has done a lot to ruin our world, there is still great beauty in it, isn't there?

[7 : 24] Like perhaps this place in New Zealand, Milford Sound, that's my father-in-law's favourite place. Or in Zimbabwe, the Victoria Falls, I mean that's pretty spectacular.

Or how about the lavender fields in France, I mean such rich colour. Or even Socrata Island in Yemen, I mean this is not out of a Hollywood movie, I mean I know it looks like it, something like Avatar or whatever it was.

But this is a real place, it's incredible, isn't it? Or about Banff National Park in Canada, or the fjords in Norway.

I mean imagine having that house right there and waking up to that view each morning in summer. God has generously given us such beauty. But also variety, we just saw a variety of environments, there's a variety of foods, there's even a variety of animals.

I saw a kid's prayer to God where she asked God on the next slide here, Did you mean for giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?

[8 : 31] Norma. No, Norma, the giraffe is part of God's generous variety. The seasons of the year, night and day and so on. And yet there's also regularity in that.

That's what the word govern in verse 8 and 9 seems to suggest. And so we roughly know when the seasons come. I say roughly because this is Melbourne. Was it 33 degrees last Thursday or Friday, whatever it was?

But we need that routine and regularity that helps us plan and survive. I mean it's when you travel overseas and you go through time zones and you get jet lagged, your body's knocked around.

We need routine and regularity and God gives it to us. And also verse 25, he gives food for every creature, including us.

You see, God's generosity has given us beauty, variety, regularity and even dietary requirements and then some. I don't know about you, but I often say grace before a meal time.

[9 : 37] That is, say thank you to God for this food. But then it kind of stops there in terms of the creation stuff. I kind of take the rest of God's generosity to us in creation for granted until it stops, of course.

So I can't remember the last time I thanked God for the rain until I saw the photos of the drought in New South Wales and Queensland. But God has been very generous to us in creation.

And that's worth giving him thanks for, is it not? Well, the psalmist now moves from creation to salvation, which is point three in the outlines. And he draws special attention, I think, to God's salvation for Israel because it stands in the middle of the psalm.

It's the meat of the burger, if you like. And it's also the longest part of the psalm. And so its place and length suggests that salvation is especially worth giving God thanks for.

But because it is the longest, then doing the response thing may drag. So I'm going to read from 10 to 22, and then I'll invite you to join in at verse 23, where the psalmist changes the language a bit and summarizes the salvation.

[10 : 54] So from verse 10, you follow along. So give thanks to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt and brought Israel out from among them with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Give thanks 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 that stood against them, and Shion king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan, and gave their land as an inheritance, an inheritance to his servant Israel.

He remembered us in our lower state together. And freed us from our enemies. Here it's, again, I think quite obvious that the psalmist is thanking God for his rescue of Israel.

He starts there in verse 10 with the final plague that forced Pharaoh's hand to let Israel go, and then bringing them through the Red Sea while swallowing up Pharaoh's army who was pursuing them to get them, so that Israel would know they are truly saved.

They don't have to look over their shoulder and wonder if Pharaoh was ever coming after them again. And then sustaining them in the wilderness, then defeating those kings that stood against them, until finally bringing them into their inheritance.

[12 : 21] That is the promised land. In other words, he remembered Israel in their lower state, and freed them from their enemies.

Verse 23, 24. This was the great act of salvation for Israel. It's why they remembered it every year through festivals and the like.

They had the Passover festival, and they also had the Feast of Tabernacles, and so on. The Ten Commandments started with a reminder how God had rescued them from Egypt.

And because it was such a great act of salvation for Israel, then it's why they were also to especially give thanks to God for it. Of course, this part of the psalm looks different for us, doesn't it?

I mean, we can apply the other parts directly to us, so we can give thanks to God for his character, just like Israel here. And we can give thanks to God for his creation, just like Israel here.

[13 : 21] But unlike Israel here, we were not saved from physical enemies, were we? Like Egypt. And yet, as you know, we were saved from something much greater, weren't we?

God has given us salvation, freedom from sin and death. You see, we all will sadly one day die, and after that we will all have to give an account of our lives.

We will all have to face God's judgment seat. As Hebrews puts it on the next slide there, it says, I remember a Christian guy looking for a place to rent, and the real estate agent was showing him and a number of other people around.

And as some people were looking around the unit, the Christian guy got talking to the real estate agent, and they got on the topic of taxes. And the real estate agent said, well, you know, there's only two certainties in life, which are, do you know what the saying is?

Death and taxes. And the Christian guy responded by saying, well, some people seem to be able to get around paying taxes these days. I think the only two certainties in life are death and judgment.

[14 : 32] He didn't get the unit, but he was right. And that doesn't bode well for us who have all ignored God or sinned.

You know, we've lived life without reference to God. For God will judge us and give us the punishment our sins deserve. But that verse continues.

And it continues by saying, Christ, as you know, was sacrificed at the cross.

He died to pay for our sins, to take the punishment in our place, to free us from it. And so now, if we believe in Jesus, we need no longer fear judgment.

He gives us freedom from it. And death will no longer have the final say. For when we die, our soul will go to be with Christ. And one day, Jesus will return, not to bear sin, but to bring a full salvation.

[15 : 53] That is, to raise our bodies, to be like his immortal, glorious body, to be perfect, and live in our promised land, the new creation.

To enjoy perfect relationships with God and one another. And to enjoy a perfect creation, perhaps even waking up in that house at the fjords in Norway.

The point is, this salvation is greater than the salvation from Egypt. For it is from judgment and death, and guarantees us freedom and life eternal. And all because of what God did for us through Christ.

And that means we can have such certain hope in this life, doesn't it? In fact, I just was saying this to Sandra before the service.

We had our Thanksgiving Sunday down at St. John's last Sunday. And again, we had a sharing time. And at the early morning service, with some of the original St. John's folks there, one lady got up, and she said, she's got cancer, and she said, I've been to the doctors this week, and the news is not good, but I want to give thanks, that either way, I will see the Lord.

[17 : 14] Whether I die, or whether he returns. She has that certain hope, because Christ has died for her, and freed her from judgment, and death.

And it's worth giving God thanks for, is it not? But why has God done all this? Well, the same reason, he's given us this rich creation, the same reason he is good, and the God of gods.

It's because his love endures forever. That's why the psalm has this refrain, you see. In fact, in our English Bibles here, it's actually missing a word, at the start of the refrain.

It literally should say, well, it should start with the word, because. Because his love endures forever. And so, if you look at verse one, we are to give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, because his love endures forever.

You see, God is good, because he always loves. Or verse two, give thanks to the God of gods, because his love endures forever.

[18 : 28] We are to give thanks to God, not just because he is the true God, but because his love endures forever. It's central to what makes him the God of gods. It's at the heart of his character, if you like.

It's also the underlying reason for his creation. I mean, God didn't create us because he was lonely, and wanted company. God is father, son, and spirit.

He's in a permanent relationship. He's always got company. And yet he went ahead and created us in his image, and gave us everything good in this creation.

Why? Because his love endures forever. His love, of course, is the underlying reason for his salvation of Israel, and his salvation for us.

It's why he sent his son. You know, the John 3, 16, that famous verse, for God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him, should not perish, but have eternal life.

[19 : 32] Now, I realize that we often hear about God's love, and because we often hear about it, it's, again, so easy to take it for granted, isn't it? And so, part of what we're doing today, is forcing us to slow down, and reflect a bit more on it.

That we might remember, God's love is no ordinary kind of love. That's what we heard in our reading from Romans. So, do you remember on here, on the slide, the middle paragraph there, is the pinnacle of human love.

A pinnacle of human love, is where someone dies, for another righteous, or good person. Perhaps, a loved one. But notice it says, this rarely happens.

Which is why, when it does happen in the world, it makes the news, doesn't it? Yet, God's love, on the other hand, is a kind of, out of this world, love. It reminds me of, another child's prayer, actually, where it says, dear God, I bet, it's very hard for you, to love all of everybody, in the whole world.

There are only four people, in our family, and I can never do it. I reckon, if there's only two people, in your family, you can never do it. And yet, God does. Yet, God's love, is an out of world, of this world love, a super love, and not just because, he loves everyone, in the world, but because, he loved us, when we were unlovable.

[20 : 59] While we rejected him, while we spat in his face, while we ignored him, he still loved us. As it says, down there, at the bottom, while we were sinners, that's when Christ, died for us.

I don't know, if you remember, the shooting, in El Paso, back in August, of this year, a couple of months ago, a gunman, burst into the Walmart, store, and shot, 22 people.

He was, aiming for Mexicans, and Hispanics, so he was a, a racist guy. One couple, called Andre and Jordan, had popped in, to get some supplies, for their barbecue party.

They, had just finished, building their, new home, and were celebrating, their wedding anniversary, and they were there, with their two month old, son, when the gunman, opened fire. Andre, shielded his wife, and son, and was killed, in the process.

Jordan, the mother and wife, continued to shield her son, and was killed, in the process. The two month old, was nicked by a bullet, but was saved. And, on the next slide, one of the headline articles, was the couple killed, saving their baby.

[22 : 10] The new future, was talking about, the new house, and so on. Now, why did they die, to save their son? The answer's obvious, isn't it? They loved him.

And, but imagine for a moment, before they were shot, the police arrived, and opened fire, on this racist gunman. And, Andre and Jordan, jumped in front, and shielded the gunmen, and were killed, in the process, to save him.

I mean, what kind of, crazy, out of this world, kind of love, must you have to have, to do that for your enemy? But you see, that's precisely, the kind of love, God has for us.

That while, we were sinners, oh yeah, we weren't racist gunmen, I get that. But we were still, just as unlovable, in our own sin.

And yet, it was while, we were sinners, Christ died for us. God's love, is no ordinary love, a love that, loves his enemies, and gives up, his only son, that he might make, his enemies, not just friends, but children, in the family, with life eternal.

[23 : 25] That's extraordinary. I don't know, how life is going, for you all, at the moment. I know for some, it's going well, and I know for others, it's going not so well.

But either way, it's worth, giving God thanks. For, if life is going well, then giving thanks, helps us, to be humble, and to remember, not turkeys, or chicken, but God, whose hand, has given us, everything we enjoy.

And if life is going, not so well, then giving thanks, actually helps us, to remember, the good things, we still have, and often overlook, and also helps us, from becoming bitter, and depressed.

And whether life is going well, or not so well, we can always, still give thanks, for God's character, his creation, his salvation, in Christ, and especially, for his love, that endures forever.

So let me finish, as the psalm does, in verse 26 there. Give thanks, to the God of heaven, together, his love, endures forever.

[24 : 40] Amen. Amen. Amen.