

# "Gratefulness for the Steadfast Love of the Lord"

## Psalm 136

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please open your scriptures to Psalm 136. We'll be reading verses 1 to 9, and then jumping down to 23 to 26. And reading responsibly.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. For his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods. For his steadfast love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords. For his steadfast love endures forever. To him who alone does great wonders. For his steadfast love endures forever.

To him who by understanding made the heavens. For his steadfast love endures forever. To him who spread out the earth above the waters. For his steadfast love endures forever.

To him who made the great lights. For his steadfast love endures forever. The sun to rule over the day. the moon and stars to rule over the night.

[ 1 : 08 ] And jumping down to verse 23, it is he who remembered us in our low estate and rescued us from our foes.

He who gives food to all flesh for his steadfast love and numerous forever. Give thanks to the God of heaven for his steadfast love and numerous forever.

If you do a quick Google search online, not now, but maybe later on, look up how to have more gratitude or whatever, some kind of phrase that has gratitude in it plus I want to get better. And you'll see that a number of hits will come up describing gratitude as a key part of developing and maintaining close friendships, maintaining a strong social network and how this is a key indicator, especially as life goes on to living a robust, healthy, not necessarily longer, but maybe life. Psychologists, a lot of them, they will say this is actually the most important factor. I mean, eat your vegetables, get some exercise, all fantastic, but really have excellent, excellent relationships.

[ 2 : 30 ] Gratitude is a huge part of that. And yet, there's a real struggle with giving thanks and showing gratitude. I'll speak for myself, but I think I'm also similar to many of you.

It's easy for me to catalog the wrongs done against me than to think about the mercy shown to me or the kindness shown to me or the love shown to me.

Why is it easier to hold a grudge than to show gratitude? You know, the problem with ingratitude is really, and we'll find this in the text, it's less of a behavioral issue than it is a spiritual one.

In this age of the individual, this hyper-individualistic life era that we live in, we struggle more than ever to show gratitude, gratitude, and especially gratitude in the transcendent God.

And we'll see in our psalm today that will actually affect the way we live. So we're gonna jump right into Psalm 136. If you have a Bible, you'd do me a great service and do yourself a great service if you'd open it up.

[ 3 : 47 ] And we're gonna consider what gratitude is and how to show more of it. And as we do so, we'll consider the transformative nature of gratitude, the communal joy of gratitude, and then the eternal benefit of gratitude.

So these will be the three points that will guide us as we open Psalm 136. The transformative nature of gratitude, the communal joy of gratitude, and then finally, the eternal benefit of gratitude. You guys are doing great. Let's just jump right into it. Look with me at verses one to three and also verse 26. One to three and verse 26.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever.

And then down at verse 26. Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever. You see, the entire psalm begins and ends with the same command, to give thanks to the Lord.

[ 4 : 58 ] The command governs not just verses 1 to 3 and verse 26, but the entirety of Psalm 136, all 26 verses. The psalm has been known for centuries by Jewish people as the great Hallel.

Think of Hallelujah. It's the psalm of great praise. Given to God, and we see the reason why. So what exactly is it calling us to do?

How is it calling us to give thanks to the Lord? I mean, it's not merely just to affirm God's goodness. God is good, so give thanks to him. But with anything, when it comes to proclaiming God's goodness or praising God, there is always inherent in that a confessional aspect.

So when we affirm God's goodness, we are also confessing it aloud. Declaring agreement that God is indeed good. That he is the supreme leader, right?

He is the Lord of lords. But he is also so utterly different in his magnificence. So much more glorious than any other small g gods or powers or authorities.

[ 6 : 12 ] That he's really incomparable. He is the only God. That's what verses 1 to 3 is really hammering home. The only one who is worthy of worship. And therefore, we ought to worship him.

We are commanded to do so. The only one whom we should direct our genuine praise toward. It is a call to worship and to thank God for who he is.

This single Hebrew word for steadfast love, it's this word *hesed*. If you have been familiar at all with the Old Testament, this word comes up a lot.

Now, steadfast love, I think, is a fine translation. But it's one of these words that isn't easily translated into English. It carries with it the idea of, of course, steadfast love, but also goodness. Also mercy. And especially this idea of grace. This unmerited favor given to us. It's a very robust word to describe God's love and kindness and mercy and grace toward us.

[ 7 : 19 ] So when we read steadfast love 26 times, okay, one for every verse, 26 times in this psalm, the psalmist is drawing our attention to something about who God is.

And we ought to give thanks to him for it. Praise and glory to his name. So what happens when we give thanks? Okay, what happens? Is it merely we just carve out an hour and a half on a Sunday morning to praise his name?

We get some excellent music. We sing as robustly as we can. We listen. We pray. We stand. We sit. We stand. We sit. We gather around the table. Fantastic.

This is giving thanks. This is worshiping. This is worship to God. And then we go our own way. Is this what happens when we give thanks? You know, I want to suggest to you that what we worship is what we become.

So as we worship God, as we give him thanks and praise, as we extol him for his steadfast love, we become governed and shaped by the very one who we give thanks and praise to.

[ 8 : 33 ] We begin to see our future not through a lens of the unknown with fear and a lot of trepidation, but rather we begin to see our future through the *hesed*, the steadfast love, the mercy, the kindness, the goodness, the grace of who God is and what he has done in the past.

But this shouldn't surprise us. If we spend any time glorifying something, again, we are shaped by it. We will always be in the business of glorifying something. So then, by extension, we are always being shaped and formed. What you spend your time on, your time, your talents, your treasures, this is the very thing that will begin to shape your life.

So an interesting example. I went to see, to get some work done on my ailing body, okay?

I think I'm 25, maybe 30. I'm not. So I find I need to get some treatment. And I went to see my RMT and he is, well, he's a very big and strong man.

[ 9 : 50 ] He is a giant. I described him outside earlier to some guys as a specimen. Like he is 6'6", like a brick house. And he was a super nice guy down to earth.

He's telling me, though, that come June of next year, so in 11 months, he's going to enter into a bodybuilding competition. So I'm not. So he has really mapped out the next 11 plus months where the ultimate goal will fashion the way he lives for the next 11 months.

Okay? I don't, by the way, I'm not like condemning him for this at all. I'm just using it as an example because it's going to affect the way he eats, when he goes to bed, how he schedules his days, the vacations he takes or doesn't take, the things he celebrates.

I mean, if he is as serious as I think he is, this will completely, completely shape him. Now, listen, it's fine to have goals, and even for a season to maybe be a bit, a touch extreme.

But nevertheless, what you put your time and talent and treasure in will begin to shape you. This means that as we praise and worship the Lord, we must also think about the things that we are currently engaged in that, in worship that aren't the Lord.

[11:21] Okay? So, as we turn our praise to God, it ultimately means turning our praise away from something else. Jesus is abundantly clear throughout the Gospels.

You cannot serve both God and money, and money is a bit of a placeholder. I mean, money is big temptation for all of us, but money is a bit of a placeholder for anything.

You can't serve both God and other things, is what Jesus is trying to say. So, as we turn our praise and worship to the Lord, there is also a turning away from.

False worship is a real thing. And what's inherent in Psalm 136, as we praise the Lord, is to not give praise to others. So, we are being transformed by the one true God.

And this is a remarkable thing, because so much of our day right now, it is fashioned by a lot of self-help, a lot of self-improvement, a lot of really good principles to live by and to consider.

[12:27] But there is underlying it an idea that we can engineer our greatest self. And the more one lives, the more one realizes that this is a fallacy.

So, worshipping the Lord, as it shapes us to be more like Him, turns out to be the best way by which we can engineer ourselves.

And by the way, this means that we're not engineering ourselves at all. We're looking to God to do the work. And it will happen as we worship. The theologian James K.A. Smith, he articulates this very well in his book from a number of years ago, this book called *You Are What You Love*.

And he says just this, quote, Worship works from the top down. In worship, we don't just come to show God our devotion and give Him our praise.

We are called to worship because in this encounter, God remakes and molds us top down. Worship is the arena in which God recalibrates our hearts, reforms our desires, rehabilitates our loves.

[13:37] Worship isn't just something we do. It is where God does something to us. Worship is the heart of discipleship because it is the gymnasium in which God retrains our hearts.

End quote. I think it's a very fine quotation that really captures what happens when we look to the Lord and we begin to praise Him and our lives get fashioned or refashioned or remade and molded as Smith says.

You see, our problem is not that we fail to worship, but that we worship the wrong things. This is the perpetual problem with humanity.

Instead of worshipping God, we will worship small g gods. Instead of magnifying the Lord of lords, we try to become a Lord, worshipping whatever will give us the thing that we want.

It promises that we will become great, then we will worship it. But if we give thanks and praise, even if our lives may not become more materially rich or full of even more friendships, we will learn how to participate in the business of sharing and giving this chesed love, this steadfast love of the Lord.

[14:59] This is what will happen when we begin to worship the one true God. And friends, I'll put forward to you that this is where the real joy is. So, let's jump right to point two and we'll look at the communal joy of gratitude.

That at the very heart of gratitude is a life of joy. We find here that giving thanks to the Lord will always be a communal event.

Throughout the scriptures, it is always a communal event and never only a solo act. This is the case for two ways. Here's the first. The first is that to experience a true chesed of God is to be a part of God's people.

That there is no true enjoyment of God's steadfast love apart from being a part of God's people.

Read with me verses 10 to 16.

10 to 16. To him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, steadfast love endures forever, and brought Israel out from among them.

[16:12] For his steadfast love endures forever with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. For his steadfast love endures forever. To him who divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever, and made Israel pass through the midst of it.

for his steadfast love endures forever. But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, for his steadfast love endures forever.

To him who led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures forever. You see, constantly, the steadfast love of the Lord is extended not just to individuals, but to a people. God, he is rescuing not individuals from Egypt, but all of the nation of Israel. Right? Verse 16, to him who led his people through the wilderness.

God is always, he is always rescuing a people. This doesn't somehow negate individual faith. That is affirmed time and time again in Scripture, but it is important and critical for us, especially again in this hyper-individualistic culture that we live in, is to understand that this psalm commands thanksgiving for the grace of God that is shown to a nation or to a people or especially to a family. [17:41] You know, evangelicalism has really struggled with this. I think, you know, especially from the 60s on, this was really the golden age of modern evangelicalism.

Again, steeped in an individualistic culture and instead of resisting as, like with incredible intent the individualism, evangelicalism has really adopted a lot of it.

And it's in some ways the very lens by which now we read Scripture as individuals. And I think it's fine to read Scripture as an individual but not at the expense of a communal reading of it or a familial reading of it.

It's a real problem when churches they highlight the individual. So, case in point, without giving any names. Our church, by the way, has enough warts so you can talk to me about it afterwards.

But there are at least two churches in this city that advertise church your way. Have it your way at your time, at your convenience. worship the way you want, with the songs you want or that you don't want, on the comfort of your couch, on the road, next week, next month, I don't know, next year.

[19:04] Just make sure you send us the check. Now, they're not saying that. Again, our church has a ton of warts, so this isn't me in an ivory tower, that's for sure. But we have to understand that God is always saving to bring in.

He is always creating and expanding the fellowship that exists, that has always existed between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

That God saves two individuals in order to help them to belong. Okay? God is always saving as a reflection of who he is and he is a God that enjoys fellowship and the joy in fellowship.

You know, in our day, we desire belonging and sectarianism seems to be at an all-time high. But the sectarianism of our day, what does it promise us?

It promises us belonging, but it's always at the expense of our individuality. Okay? We end up becoming a homogenous group. We look the same, we dress the same, we talk the same.

[20:23] Or, we decide that we're going to go at it solo and then we don't belong to anything. But it's only in the gospel where we can be our true selves and belong.

The church is this incredible, incredible family where we have the same Lord, we have the same Father. Okay? We believe in the same core truths, but we worship in different tongues.

Okay? We dress different ways. We have different styles of music. There's different aspects of the gospel that are different cultures, can help each other to understand.

So then we have belonging, but we also maintain a joy in our individuality, in the various cultures that make up the church. It's a really beautiful, beautiful thing.

The second way to experience this chesed of God communally, to enjoy it with others, is to share it.

[21:26] Because sharing is the way we really enjoy something, is it not? Make a fantastic meal, and just eat it by yourself. Set up nice candles, okay?

I make the food, I don't set the table, okay? So whatever you have to do for the table, and sit there by yourself, and try your best to enjoy that meal, by yourself. Do the same thing for others, and invite them, and linger long over the dish, over the glass of wine, over the piece of cake, to enjoy that coffee, to laugh, to sit at the table, and fellowship.

It's a different thing, okay? The flavors change somehow, magically, okay? There's something different about it. You hear a wonderful song, you're humming it, you want to sing it with others, you enjoy the bliss of a newfound love, or a rekindled friendship, and you know what you do?

You tell people about it. You share the joy that you have with others, in the things that you begin to worship, or that you begin to embrace.

It's the same with God. Praising God for who he is, and what he has done, it certainly is a personal act, but you can't enjoy God in his fullness unless it is done with others.

[ 22 : 53 ] C.S. Lewis, on his reflection on this psalm, and in the Psalter in general, he says just this, and I'll quote him here.

Quote, I have noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it. Isn't she lovely?

Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent? The psalmist, in telling everyone to praise God, are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about.

I think we delight in praise that we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses, but completes the enjoyment. Okay, I'll read that one more time. I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses, but completes the enjoyment.

It is, it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are.

[ 23 : 59 ] The delight is incomplete till it's expressed. That's the end of the quote. Lewis is on to something here, is he not? We are all evangelists at heart.

We will share what we're excited about. In fact, we cannot not share what we're excited about, what we value, what we love. Okay, I use the example of a recipe, but I mean, think of anything that brings you joy, and I'll be surprised if you're able to just keep it to yourself.

You want to share it. It's worth sharing, so you have to proclaim it. But this isn't easy when it comes to the Christian faith. We can struggle with sharing our faith, even if it is the most precious thing, the thing that excites us the most, because it is the thing that goes to the very deepest core of who we are, and for those that haven't yet put their trust in Christ, it can be an offensive thing, and you know what?

I don't like offending people. I don't like feeling uncomfortable. There's neighbors on my street that, confession time, that I will try to change the subject if it is going to a spiritual matter, not all the time, but it has happened, so that I don't run the risk of either offending them or feeling uncomfortable.

Does it mean that I do not love Jesus? Say no, but what it is exposing is that there's something else I value more. Maybe it's an issue sharing the gospel with a friend because you know that they've had an abusive history with the church.

[ 25 : 48 ] Or maybe there's an adult child that you're struggling to share the faith with because they are wayward and you think that they don't have ears to hear. Maybe it's been the source of a fight in the past.

Sharing our faith, even though it is the very thing that we want to take joy in, is a difficult thing. So how can we overcome this? And this brings us to our third and final point.

I'll read scripture in a bit, but this is, I think, a genius, a genius, genius insight from St. Augustine.

Okay, St. Augustine in his commentary on Psalm 136, he is asking the question about the constant refrain, his steadfast love endures forever, and he poses a remarkable, a remarkable question.

And this is what, I'll try to sum it up. How are we to praise God for his steadfast love? And this is the key to Augustine here, because he translates hesed to mercy.

Okay? How are we to praise God for his steadfast love, for his mercy forever, if the showing of God's mercy in Christ renders the guilty innocent, and thus mercy has run its course, or put it another way, at the final judgment, there will be no people who are worthy recipients of God's mercy, because either the time for repentance has run out, or mercy has been shown, and guilt is no more.

[ 27 : 25 ] How then is it possible for God's steadfast love, or God's mercy, or God's hesed to endure forever? It's an interesting question Augustine asks. I think Augustine's answer to it is so key, and it's actually helpful for us if we think about maybe the struggles that we might have in proclaiming the good news of Christ.

Okay? His answer is so key for us, because this is what he says. Rightly, may his future mercy be understood to be forever, which he bestows on his saints and faithful ones, not because they will be miserable forever, and therefore will need his mercy forever, but because that very blessedness which he mercifully bestows on the miserable, that they cease to be miserable, and begin to be happy, will have no end.

And therefore his mercy is forever. For that we shall be just from being unjust, whole from being unsound, alive from being dead, immortal from being mortal, happy from being wretched, is of his mercy, but this that we shall be will be forever, and therefore his mercy is forever.

Wherefore, give thanks to the Lord, that is, praise the Lord by giving thanks, for he is good, nor is it any temporal good that you will gain from this confession, for his mercy endures forever, that is, the benefit which he bestows mercifully upon you is forever.

End quote. Listen, it's a bit of a long quote. This is what Augustine is suggesting, and I think he is a genius in suggesting it. He is saying that because God's steadfast love, which begins in this life and makes us glad, and transforms us to be joyful, will continue into the life to come, and because it will have no end, it means that joy will progressively grow in us forever.

[ 29 : 34 ] It means that instead of enjoying something for a bit and getting bored of it, you will never get bored. Unlike having something that is new, that it is, that it tickles your fancy, it is wonderful, it's tremendous, but then it kind of plateaus.

The love and joy and mercy of God will never plateau. Okay? Every good vacation comes to an end. Every fantastic meal is eventually finished.

The bliss of love or the joy of friendship eventually ends with death. But the joy we have in Christ, this blessedness that is given to us, again, remember, in our low estate, we'll read it in a moment, verse 23, in our low estate, where we have real foes, where we have death that is breathing down our necks, and a deep hunger and thirst that are impossible to fill.

This is reversed in the life to come, and not just reversed, but that we will progressively enjoy God and his goodness forever. It's hard to understand because every good thing we love and enjoy in this world, it comes to an end, it plateaus, we get bored, we move on, we need something new.

But what Augustine is saying is that given 26 times the psalmist is saying, but the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever, it means just that.

[ 31 : 12 ] It will endure and continue to grow exponentially for all of eternity. Okay? It is difficult for us to conceptualize it, because we only know joy that ends, but the promise of God's love endures forever.

Okay, going back to the end of our second point, why do we struggle? Okay, on one hand, why don't we struggle with sharing a good meal or telling people about a wonderful movie we watch, but then struggle when we're proclaiming the goodness and grace of God?

I think it's because, okay, I'm saying this to myself, so again, no ivory tower over here, because we make less of God and much of ourselves.

We do. We fail to grasp that it's not just joy for a moment or joy for a year or joy for a decade, but progressively growing joy for eternity in heaven.

That makes the joy and the goodness of this life pale in comparison, and yet the joy that we experience in this life is, it's like a foretaste, it's like a Costco sample, terrible example, but it is like a little taste of what's to come.

[ 32 : 31 ] How feeble and foolish are our attempts to create unending joy in this life. We have a very bloated view of our own abilities to do so, and a deflated view of God's.

We'll wrap it up with verses 23 to 26. It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever, and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures forever.

He who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever. Listen, we are so prone to forget this wonderful chesed love of God found in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And the psalmist, really the Lord, but through the psalmist, knows this. Again, 26 times, all right, he is hammering the point home into our hard skulls, into our hard hearts, because he knows that we are given to forget.

God's steadfast love and mercy are key to every aspect of God's creative and redemptive work. Everything that God does is an outpouring of his chesed, of his steadfast love.

[ 33 : 59 ] That is why we must never grow bored of the gospel, the truth that God is proclaiming in the life, death, and resurrection of his son, which is the pinnacle of God's chesed, the pinnacle of his steadfast love.

You see, in the gospel, God himself shows chesed by giving mercy to the undeserved, to those in a low estate. He gives grace upon grace to those that had not asked, but who desperately needed. His love is steadfast. In fact, it is the only steadfast love there is. This is the God whom calls us to gratitude and praise, and we begin to see how gratitude, rightly pointed, will transform our lives, will rightly order how we live.

So, Messiah, let us give thanks, not just for God's benefits, but for who he is, that he is a covenant making, covenant keeping, steadfast love giving God.  
Let us make much of God. Let us make much of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I want to end how Dave began by reading verses, just verses one to three.  
[ 35 : 22 ] Again, I'll open with the opening line, and you respond, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord for his steadfast love endures forever.  
Give thanks to the God of gods for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords for his steadfast love endures forever. Amen.