

# Psalm 136

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Date: 27 August 2012

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's now turn back for a short time this evening to Psalm 136, that passage in the book of Psalms that we read earlier.

Psalm 136. I'd like us to consider the whole of this Psalms teaching. Obviously that means we're going to go through it in a way that looks at the main features of it and not at any great depth in any part of it.

And indeed that's something which is important to do with the likes of this passage in this Psalm. It would be a liturgical disaster to sing this Psalm slowly.

I know that's not likely to happen in Stornoway, but it could happen and it would not be fitting for us to sing this Psalm too slowly. Because the Psalm is set out in such a brilliant way in the Hebrew poetry of the Psalm that you get as you read through it, as you well know, this repeated line, for his steadfast love endures forever.

And in the Hebrew language it's just really a few syllables. So that you've got this like a kind of sharp trumpet note which is sung after every other line.

[ 1 : 19 ] Probably we're told by scholars that it would have been sung in Israel in antiphonal style, that the congregation would sing in response to the line that first begins, the lines that are in between this line for his steadfast love endures forever.

And the congregation would likely sing that line for his steadfast love endures forever. Be that as it may, it is that kind of Psalm.

The form of the Psalm, the way it's structured, is in keeping with the content of it. It's a Psalm about praising the Lord as well as a Psalm of praise to God.

It's a Psalm that gives us reasons why we should praise him and different ideas as to how we should praise him. And therefore the structure of the Psalm itself is set deliberately so that the praising of God is something that we don't just study as you come to that passage.

You are also able to sing that praise using these words in the content that they have about God, about his creatorship, about his redemption, and about his companionship, as we'll see, all of these things.

[ 2 : 37 ] But we're given the words to sing it and the structure to sing it with that emphasis, with that quick note of praise. And of course that reminds us that our worship and praise of God is always to be thoughtful worship and praise.

That is to say, we don't come to sing this Psalm or any Psalm or engage in any aspect of the worship of God if we follow the teaching of the Bible as to our worship and our frame of mind for worship without having thoughtful application to it, without using our minds, without pondering, without thinking deeply over what we're saying and why we're saying it and what they mean to ourselves.

You couldn't possibly think of singing this Psalm without really thinking about why it's structured this way, about what it contains in the form of it and substance of it.

And it's a reminder to us that we should always seek to give thoughtful praise to God. It's very easy to fall into the trap of mere repetition or mere habit when we become used to the words that we're singing, when we become used to aspects of the Psalms that we sing so often.

It would be all too easy just to be content with the form and not really ponder. Even if we sung them hundreds of times before, it's still important the next time we come to see it, sing it, that we sing it thoughtfully, with our minds engaged as to what the meaning of the words is.

[ 4 : 19 ] Well then, here's a Psalm of praise and about praise. And there are four things in regard to giving thanks to God as the Psalm divides itself up very easily into these four different categories or sections that are tied together with this repeated refrain, this resonant note, for his steadfast love

endures forever.

First of all, in verses 1 to 3, you have the Psalmist thanking God as the God of gods and the God, the Lord of lords.

Then verses 4 to 9, he's giving thanks to God as the creator. And then verses 10 to 22, he's thanking God our Savior.

He talks about redemption and rescue and bringing them out of their circumstances, which is, of course, in terms of rescue from Egypt and all of that entailed.

As we know from the scriptures, that is a pattern for us or a representation of our spiritual redemption in Christ from the bondage of sin. And fourthly, in verses 23 to 25, he comes to give thanks to God as our friend, the one who is close to us, the one who follows us in all our concerns, the one who remembered us in our low estate.

[ 5 : 46 ] These four things, just very briefly. Thanking the God of gods. Give thanks to the Lord for his good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords. In other words, he's beginning this Psalm with an emphasis on the supremacy, on the superiority of God.

God. And, you know, that gives us many things to ponder in a practical sense as well. All the theology of the Bible is theology for our practical concerns, for our practical application.

Even the greatest theology in the Bible about God himself, somewhere or other, it impinges upon our practice, upon what we are in our behavior, what we do as Christians, what the church should be in the world.

And as you look at this supremacy of God, he's the God of gods. The psalmist isn't afraid to use the word gods, because he knows that the nations around Israel had their gods.

[ 6 : 51 ] And so often in the book of Psalms, you'll find references to the nations and to the nations' gods, to the nations' idols. And the great difference between these gods and the God of Israel.

And here is the psalmist giving thanks to the God of gods. Giving thanks to God for his supremacy. Doesn't matter what people will say tonight about the Bible, will say about the teaching of the Bible, of the Gospel.

Doesn't matter what they say about the Christian life, about Christian morality, about the morality of the Bible. Doesn't matter how they dismiss that. Doesn't matter what they say about the judgment of God, about the way in which the Bible holds for us eternity as heaven and hell.

Every aspect of that in the Bible can be absolutely jettisoned and is in our modern age. That doesn't alter anything. God is God.

God is God. He is the God of gods. He is the Lord of lords. And his character is described really there in that one word, good.

[ 8 : 04 ] For he is good. You might say that everything that comes through the psalm to flow towards the psalmist in the steadfast love of God, you can say that that really issues from his goodness.

And the goodness of God is absolutely foundational and basic to everything we enjoy as Christian people. Where does it come from?

It comes from the goodness of God. Why does it come to us from God? Because God is good. God is good. God is good. And it also gives us in these few verses and in this expression of supremacy where God has no rivals, where there is none to challenge him really, though some people will be bold enough to challenge him in the created order of things, especially among human beings.

But actually God is unchallengeable. It's not good to change God in himself or God's plan or God's purpose or God's work.

He's absolutely committed steadfastly, unchangeably to that. But there is in that part, at least, of your mandate as a church, your mandate as Christians to evangelize.

[ 9 : 21 ] Evangelize. Here is what lies behind God actually sending his people into the world to be his witnesses, a people who praise him for his supremacy and a people who actually promote that supremacy.

He is the God of gods. He is the Lord of lords. Therefore, your concern is to bring all those who serve other gods under the reign, under the rule, under the love, under the provision of this God.

And you find the same often in the Psalms. Just this morning, reading through Psalm 113, I was struck by that emphasis, that same emphasis there in Psalm 113, who is like the Lord our God, where he says there, his name is to be praised from the rising of the sun to its setting.

The Lord is high above all nations. That's the mandate you have to evangelize, to go forth with the gospel, because there is nothing else that human beings need more than that gospel and more than to bring them to know this God.

The Lord of lords. And of course, that's come. You can follow that through into the New Testament, into the incarnation of Christ and then his ministry and through to his exaltation and his glorification at God's right hand.

[10:50] He is the Lord of lords. And much more could be said about that. So he's thanking God as the God of gods.

Secondly, he's thanking God as our creator. Verses 4 to 9. To him alone who does great wonders. Him who by understanding made the heavens.

To him who spread out the earth above the waters. Him who made the great lights. The sun to rule over the day. The moon and stars to rule over the night. He is our creator.

But these verses set out God as the creator in very interesting ways. Because first of all, it sets out that he's the creator who has created things out of his wisdom.

Out of his own knowledge or logic, you might say. Because he says there, he did great wonders. He does great wonders. He by understanding made the heavens.

[11:55] Everything that we see in the creation that has been made by the hand of God has been made with deliberate, careful, divine calculation.

The New Testament refers to Christ as the word. Which in Greek is logos.

From which we get a word logic. Something that has an emphasis of a specific pattern to it. Or an order in terms of what has been created as you look at it in terms of God's creation.

There is a logic to it. There is an order to it. There is a specific arrangement to it. And that conflicts, of course, with a lot of the teaching that you find in modern secularism or atheism.

Where you find this idea of not just the existence of God. But the idea of the universe having actually been created. And created deliberately. And set where it is set.

[13:02] By a creator. By God. And it is, of course, so largely dismissed. And publicized. So much as being just fanciful.

And, of course, without going into the argument at all. It is set forth. As if science has actually done away with the idea of this created order.

Or the order being created. Well, here is the psalmist here saying something that you find elsewhere, as you know in the Bible. That he, by understanding, made the heavens.

He made it by wisdom. The wisdom of God. This divine plan. This mind of God. As he set all the things that he created where they came to be set.

It is his wisdom. And that wisdom actually governs our providence as well. The events that take place in our experience. They are not random.

[14:12] They are not things that we ourselves somehow have cobbled together. Or brought about. Without any control at all over them. Without anyone really having a hand over them.

In a governing way. It is God and his wisdom. Who by his understanding. For ordained whatever comes to pass. It's no wonder we don't.

Understand. A lot of why things are as they are. We don't understand it. Not because we are not scientists. But because it's God that has done it.

And we seek to understand as much as we can. But don't be surprised that there are lots in the creation itself that you cannot understand. Only God understands it all.

And only God understands the order of it. Why it's the way it is. And then he speaks about the power of God as the creator. He spread out the earth above the waters.

[15:16] And you have the idea of something being stretched out to cover something else. And it's an image of course. It's a picture that's given us. That gives us an idea as to how we are to think of God's immense power.

And he moves on from that to speak about the purpose that's in his work as well. He made the great lights. The sun to rule over the day. The moon and stars to rule over the night.

There isn't just a logic and an order to the universe. There's a purpose in it. And there's a divine purpose in it. And there's a purpose in it that's designed especially to be of benefit to human beings.

Sad isn't it? That without at all decrying scientific analysis and scientific discovery. It's perfectly proper to engage in those sort of things.

But nevertheless it's sad. To spend billions of dollars in sending a robot to Mars. To find out if there had ever been any water there.

[16:21] When there are millions of children dying for want of water in the world. God. As God.

In his wisdom and in his purpose. Set things for the benefit of human beings. That sadly. As sinful human beings. We so largely waste and exploit and misuse.

And then of course we blame God. Well there's purpose to it. And the purpose in it is something which. Like Hebrews 11 for example.

Reminds us of how we come to understand that purpose of God. And that there is a purpose in the creation that God has created. By faith we understand.

That the heavens were formed. Or framed. By the word of God. Again the same sort of idea. That you have in the psalm here.

[17:25] That these things in the heavens. In the created world as you see it. In the universe around us. They were framed by the word of God. They were deliberately crafted by the word of God.

The great craftsman that God is. Crafted it out of his own mind. And we praise him for that. That's why there's a great difference between.

A Christian watching. Frozen planet. And an atheist watching it. Or commentating on it. You can admire. The scenery. You can admire. The events that are happening.

You can marvel at. The whole of. What you see in front of you. And the way it's filmed. And the behavior of the animals. Or birds. Or whatever it is. But the Christian can do it in a way that.

Only the Christian can. With praise to God. With thanksgiving to God. The God of gods. The God of creation.

[18:24] The God whose wisdom. Who by understanding and with purpose. Created the world. And just incidentally. You notice the pattern there. In Hebrews chapter 11 verse 3. It doesn't say that.

We understand the world. And then we come to believe. It says by faith. We understand. That's why the.

Dawkins and his. His. Supporters. Don't. Understand. The world. Do you need faith first?

And it doesn't matter. How good a scientist you are. You don't have the same understanding. Or the amount of understanding. Or the depth of understanding. Or the expanse of understanding. That a Christian has.

Because a Christian. Is given faith. The faith that sees God. In it. The faith that admires God. The faith that praises. God.

[19:25] For his handiwork. Thanks to the God of gods. Thanks to God. Our creator. Then thirdly. Thanks to God.

Our savior. In verses 10. To 22. He struck down. The firstborn of Egypt. He brought Israel out. From among them. With a strong hand.

And an outstretched arm. He divided the sea. The red sea. In two. He made Israel pass. Through the midst of it. But overthrew Pharaoh. And his host. In the red sea.

And all the way down there. To verse 22. You have an emphasis on God. And what he did. In leading his people. Out of Egypt. Through the wilderness. On towards the promised land.

And as you well know. That is. Very much a pattern. For us. Of redemption. In terms of. Not applying every single detail. Of it. In terms of looking for something.

[20:22] That corresponds to that. In our Christian salvation. But nevertheless. The pattern of it. Is there. In terms of God. Coming to rescue people. God coming to lead them on.

From that rescue. And guiding them. And God finally coming to bring them. Into an inheritance. Which he had prepared. Before and advanced for them. That is what it is. To be saved. And if you look at it.

In more detail. Again. The rescue. Is in verses 10 to 15. There. He came into Egypt. He actually. With a strong arm. Outstretched arm. He divided the Red Sea.

He made Israel. Pass through it. And he overthrew Pharaoh. And his host. In the Red Sea. That is what Jesus did. With sin. With your direst enemy.

Of sin. And of death. He conquered it. By his death. By his resurrection. From the dead. That is what you were remembering.

[ 21 : 18 ] In the Lord's Supper. That is what you are giving thanks for tonight. That here is a pattern. In Psalm 136. Of the conquering.

Christ himself. The one who conquered death. By the death he died. As well as by the resurrection. With which he rose from the dead. And it highlights for God's people.

What it means to be amongst his people. What it means to belong to these people. What it means to be on a spiritual pilgrimage. What it means to belong to God.

And to be taken by God. As his own inheritance. As well as have an inheritance. That God has provided. That waits for us at the end of the journey. Pilgrimage is not about trying to discover. Where we are going. As much of liberal theology says to you. It is not about people coming to be joined together in fellowship. And trying to work out what the truth is.

[ 22 : 19 ] And where the truth might take us. And somehow or other. Where do you find God in all of this? Pilgrimage is walking with God. Pilgrimage is knowing God as your rescuer.

Pilgrimage is coming to be led by him. In a wilderness journey. A journey that is not easy. But a journey to which there are many promises attached.

A journey that is so much. So worth the taking. Not just for what lies at the end of it in heaven. That is of course a primary consideration.

But even along the way. To know God. To have the guidance of God. You see what he says in verse 16 there. To him who led his people through the wilderness.

How did he lead them through the wilderness? By being himself with them. Yes he said at one time. After they grievously sinned.

[ 23 : 22 ] In making a golden calf. That he would not go amongst this people anymore. That they were a stiff neck rebellious people. He would send his angel with them.

But he himself would not go. And you remember Moses reaction. The great leader. He fell down before God. And he pleaded with God. And he pleaded that God himself.

Would indeed go with them. For an angel was not enough. How then says Moses. Shall it be known? I and this people.

That we are your people. Is it not. In that you go with us. How do you know the people of God? There are very different ways of answering that question. But this is one of them. You know the people of God. Because God is with them. Because God is walking with them.

[ 24 : 19 ] Because God is present in their lives. And that's why we have to behave as we need to behave. In terms of following holiness.

And a circumspect life. And self-control. Because God is walking with us. And he has come to be our companion.

As our leader through the wilderness. In Jesus Christ. That is our great privilege. He's guiding us. But also giving us victory.

And you can say that. This is true along the way. But also especially. When it comes to finally entering into. The inheritance that God has provided for us. You notice what he says.

That he killed. Not only Pharaoh and his host. He overthrew them in the Red Sea. Also mighty kings. Sihon king of the Amorites. Sihon king of Sihon. And gave their land as a heritage.

[ 25 : 16 ] A heritage to Israel is servant. See everything that was standing in the way. And every attempt that was made by. The likes of Balak. Who hired Balaam to try and curse the people.

So they couldn't get further. And couldn't press on in their journey. And God intervened. And God did away with that. And God defeated them. And God put words in his mouth.

And said. That evil man Balaam. Had to actually come to confess. How can I curse. Whom God has not cursed. And how can I bless. Whom God has not blessed.

He is the one. Who is in charge. And I can't undo that. And this word steadfast love.

We haven't mentioned that up to now. But the word steadfast love in Hebrew is a great word. It means a covenant love. Or a covenant commitment. Sometimes translated loving kindness.

[ 26 : 12 ] Which really captures both sides of it very well. There's the element of love. But it's love that comes to do good. Love that comes in kindness. But it's a dreadful word for God's enemies.

Because there's a commitment on the part of God. In steadfast love to his people. Not only to be with them. But to be against their enemies. Not only to actually be their companion.

And their leader. And their guide. And the one who actually will bring them safely. Into their inheritance. Steadfast love on the part of God. In his commitment to his covenant. Means that he will overthrow his and their enemies.

There you find it. He overthrew Pharaoh. And his host in the Red Sea. For his steadfast love. Endures forever. Strange to some people. That you would sing of steadfast love. When he's talking about overthrowing people. Like Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea. But there it is. And you can't change that. And it doesn't make God cruel. And it doesn't actually make him out to be.

[ 27 : 18 ] A tyrant. Or some. Figure that. You'd rather be otherwise. This is God.

Absolutely committed. In his eternal. Steadfast love. To his people. To the. To his promises for them. To his covenant with them. And if that means overthrowing their enemies. That's what it will be. And you can take that for granted. You can take it that it's sure. Nothing that stands. In your way as a Christian.

Is going to be successful. In overthrowing you. Or the plans God has for you. Of course we fail. Of course we lapse. We have all sorts of things that we cause ourselves.

But this is God. And this is what God is like. And this is what God is committed to. That's what you give thanks for tonight.

[ 28 : 14 ] Amongst all our own failings. And despite all our own failings. And above all our own failings. We have a God who is committed to his covenant. And his steadfast love is committed.

To his people. And against his enemies. There's a note of triumph. In that. A victory. A victory that you find.

Expressed. In thanksgiving. So there's thanksgiving. To the God of gods. There's thanksgiving. To God our creator. There's thanksgiving to.

God our savior. And he finishes. Verses 23 to 25. Thanking God. Our friend. It is he who remembered us. In our low estate.

And rescued us from our foes. Who gives food to all flesh. Give thanks to the God of heaven. Now that's not really. A mere summary of the rest of the psalm.

[ 29 : 17 ] Because you notice there. He's saying. He remembered us. As if he's saying. And he really is saying. That everything that's come.

In the psalm. Before this. Has been directed. To this particular moment. To this particular issue. Of helping.

His people. As God the creator. As the supreme one. As God the redeemer. All comes down to this. From our. Personal needs. And personal experience. Point of view. It is he. Who remembered us. In our low estate. And therefore. You give thanks.

For God's friendship. That he has come. To reconcile us. To himself. And has done so. In Jesus Christ. He's removed.

[ 30 : 12 ] The enmity. And brought about. That. Relationship. With him. Which we ourselves. Had broken off. Maybe there's nothing.

In the psalm. As precious to you tonight. As this particular. Emphasis here. Of course. You give thanks. That he's the God of gods.

Of course. You give thanks. That he is. God. The creator. The creator. But you could have all of that. As an acknowledgement. As something that you give assent to.

And say yes. I know that that's all true. But then you might not have. This emphasis. That knows him personally. And says.

I give thanks to him. For he is my friend. He's the one who came. To my help. And there's this great word. Remembered.

[ 31 : 19 ] Where would you and I be tonight. If God hadn't remembered us. Where would you and I be tonight. If God's remembering of us.

Is something like. Our remembering of things. God's remembering. Is God's mind. Geared for action.

God's remembering is. God's look upon his people. To do them the good. That he has always purposed for them. Isn't it strange that.

Not strange. It's significant. In the Bible. How often you have a reference. To God remembering things. Not that God ever forgets. Of course. But what it means is that.

God. In his mind. Was focused. On this particular issue. Whatever it was at the time. And sometimes. It surprises you.

[ 32 : 15 ] How. That word. Remember. Is used of God. God. For example. When God was about to destroy. Sodom and Gomorrah. For their wickedness.

Lot. Was living there. At the time. And it says. In Genesis. That just prior. To the destruction. God. Remembered. Abraham. Strange. He was going to rescue. Lot. Lot. And Lot. Needed to be taken. Out of. The environment. Of Sodom. Before God. Came to destroy it. And yet. What it says. Is God. Remembered. Abraham. Because. It was with Abraham. That God. Had made. This covenant. And God. Was true. To his covenant. And when God. Remembered. Abraham. Lot. Was taken. To safety. And that. Follows through. Into God's. [ 33 : 11 ] Covenant. Dealings. With his people. Down. Through the generations. He remembers. His covenant. You see the rainbow. In the sky. When you see the rainbow. In the sky. What do you think of?

You think of all the beautiful colors. How they. Merged together. To form such a magnificent sight. And that's what God took. And that's what God said. When he said to Noah. When I. See. The rainbow. When I see it. I will remember my covenant. I will remember life.

Mercy. Grace. So here is the final note in the psalm. Thanking God. As our friend. Who rescued us. And rescues us. From our foes. And who gives food. To all flesh. There's an element there. Even of thanksgiving. For what's a ordinary. [ 34 : 14 ] Blessings. Or everyday blessings. Our very food. How many people. In Stornoway. Did not give thanks to God.

When they had supper tonight. Sadly. Very many. Why is that? Because they don't know. Where it's come from.

And they don't realize. They need to thank God. For it. Or if they do. They can't be bothered. But here. It's part of the package. Of thanksgiving. That the psalmist. Is giving to God. And you notice. The psalm finishes. The same words. As he has at the beginning. Give thanks to the God. Of heaven. For his steadfast love. Endures. Forever. It's like a kind of envelope. Where the psalmist. Opens it at the beginning. Then he takes out. The contents of it.

[ 35 : 09 ] And when he comes to the end. He puts it back in. And he closes the envelope again. And it's as it were. Handing it to us then. And saying. Isn't the content.

And even. The envelope itself. Isn't it special. Because it's about. The steadfast love. Of God. The God. Who is worthy. To be thanked. Let's pray. Gracious. Gracious and eternal God. We do give thanks. For all the good things. That we enjoy in life. For especially. The way in which you have given us. The recognition. That you are our creator. To whom we are answerable. We are the work of your hand. You have made us for yourself. You have given us the capacity. Of fellowship with you. Which belongs to us.

[ 36 : 09 ] Among the creation. And to none other. We bless you Lord. For all that you give to us. From day to day. And we come to give thanks tonight. Especially for our redemption.

For the way that you have. That you have provided salvation. For us. So richly and so fully. In our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for the prospect.

Of entering that inheritance. That we know you have prepared. For your people. We thank you for one another. And for the way that you used. Your people in their fellowship. To help each other on the way.

O Lord. Remain close to us we pray. Grant to us that concern. That we may ever speak of you. As our friend. And do so in a way.

That is not ashamed. That you should be our God. And our saviour. And our friend. Receive our thanks now we pray. For Jesus sake. Amen.

[ 37 : 07 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.