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HIS LOVINGKINDESS IS EVERLASTING

Psalm 136

By

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His Lovingkindness is Everlasting
Psalm 136

If I were a better planner, I would have worked it out so that this sermon came on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, because this psalm is all about thanksgiving. The command to give thanks is repeated in verses 1, 2, 3, and 26, each time with the same reason given, "for His lovingkindness is everlasting." Arguably, the same command is implied for every verse of the psalm, because the same reason concludes all 26 verses of the psalm, "for His lovingkindness is everlasting."

But as you know, we're not supposed to give thanks to the Lord only one day each year, when we stuff ourselves with turkey and all the trimmings. Giving thanks to our gracious God should not be seasonal, but perpetual: "Always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father" (Eph. 5:20). "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18). And so this psalm is appropriate for any and every day of the year. It tells us,

Always give thanks to the Lord,
because His lovingkindness is everlasting.

It is a unique psalm in that the same refrain is repeated 26 times. The only thing close is when Psalm 118:1-4 repeats, "His lovingkindness is everlasting" four times. Probably, Psalm 136 was designed for public worship. The Jews called it the Great Hallel (= Praise), and it was especially sung at the Passover. Perhaps the worship leader would recite the first line of each verse, followed by the congregation repeating together the response, "for His lovingkindness is everlasting." John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Psalm 136, p. 181) says that the repeated refrain teaches us that to praise the Lord properly, we must acknowledge that everything we receive from Him is bestowed by His grace.

Commentators note how similar this psalm is to Psalm 135, and that both psalms cite frequently from other Scriptures, especially Deuteronomy. For example, the title, "the God of gods" and

“the Lord of lords” (136:2, 3) comes from Deuteronomy 10:17. The reference to God’s strong hand and outstretched arm (136:12) also comes from Deuteronomy (4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8). It refers to God’s display of His strength. In verse 15, it literally says that God *shook off* Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea. The same Hebrew verb is used in Exodus 14:27, “then God shook off [lit.] the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.” Many other expressions in the psalm come directly from other Old Testament Scriptures.

The lesson for us is that it is important for us to know Scripture (including the Old Testament!) so well that we respond to trials and other situations in our lives with biblical language and thought patterns. Spurgeon once said of John Bunyan, “Prick that man anywhere and his blood runs bibline.” He meant that Bunyan was so full of the Bible that it ran in his veins. The stories in the Old Testament that Psalm 136 alludes to “were written for our instruction,” so that we would not crave evil things as they did, nor be idolaters, nor try the Lord, nor grumble (1 Cor. 10:6-11). If you are not familiar with these stories, so that they shape your worldview, you will not apply them when you most need to. Rather than thanking the Lord for His everlasting love, you will fall into grumbling with the rest of the world.

We can divide the psalm into three sections: The call to give thanks (vv. 1-3); the causes for giving thanks (vv. 4-25), which are God’s power in creation, in salvation, and in provision for His creation; and, a final call to give thanks (v. 26).

1. The call to give thanks: Give thanks to God for His goodness and sovereignty, which display His everlasting love (136:1-3).

The opening verse is identical to Psalms 106:1, 107:1, and 118:1, “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.” The Hebrew word for *give thanks* means to confess or acknowledge, and thus “calls us to thoughtful, grateful worship, spelling out what we know or have found of God’s glory and His deeds” (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 457).

The first reason given for us to give thanks to the Lord is that “He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.” In his classic

work, *The Existence and Attributes of God* ([Baker], 2:210, 211, 212), Stephen Charnock points out,

God is only originally good, good of himself. All created goodness is a rivulet from this fountain, but Divine goodness has no spring.... God only is infinitely good.... God is only perfectly good, because only infinitely good.... The goodness of God is the measure and rule of goodness in everything else. God only is immutably good.... There is not such a perpetual light in the sun as there is a fulness of goodness in God.

We need to be reminded often of God's goodness because the enemy of our souls repeatedly tries to get us to doubt it, especially in times of trials. That's why Peter warns us, in the context of suffering, to be on the alert because our adversary, the devil, is seeking to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8). It's during trials that the enemy whispers, "If your God is so good, why is He letting you suffer like this? Why doesn't He deliver you?" Peter tells us to resist such temptations, firm in our faith, knowing that the God of all grace will perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish us (1 Pet. 5:9-10).

The psalmist goes on to say that we should give thanks to God for His sovereignty. He is "the God of gods," and "the Lord of lords." This is not to imply that there are other gods. There is only one God, creator of heaven and earth, the only sovereign over all angelic and demonic powers, who are created beings. Satan is powerful, but only by the permission of the God of gods and Lord of lords. At God's ordained time, Satan will be cast forever into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10). There are no heavenly or earthly powers that can thwart in the slightest degree the eternal plan of the God of gods and the Lord of lords. By the way, when Revelation 19:16 refers to Jesus as the Lord of lords, it is a clear assertion of His deity. There is only one Lord of all other lords, and He is the eternal triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The sovereignty of God is truly a reason to give thanks to Him, because it means that His predetermined purpose for His people will be carried out without any glitch or delay. It means that His everlasting love, covenanted to His chosen people, will never fail. As Paul so beautifully explains at the end of Romans 8, God's goodness, sovereignty, and love mean that all things work together for good for us, because He has chosen us and called us according

to His purpose. Therefore, no trial, however severe, can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:28-39). Thus we should give thanks to God for His goodness and sovereignty, which display His everlasting love.

2. The causes for giving thanks: God's power in creation, in salvation, and in provision displays His everlasting love (136:4-25).

A. Give thanks for God's power in creation, which displays His everlasting love (136:4-9).

The psalmist begins by extolling God's power in creation (v. 4), "To Him who alone does great wonders...." Of course, the Bible begins by bringing us face to face with the Almighty Creator, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). It doesn't argue the point. It confronts you with it!

When the psalmist says (v. 6) that God "spread out the earth above the waters," he is referring to the third day of creation (Gen. 1:9), where God separated the dry land from the waters. Verse 7 refers to day four (Gen. 1:14-16), when God established the sun and moon to govern day and night. Just as this psalm affirms that God is both the Creator and that He is good, so Genesis 1 affirms repeatedly that God saw all that He made and it was good. He designed the earth for humans to live in and be stewards of as we reflect His image.

Verse 5 says (literally), "To Him who made the heavens with understanding." The same Hebrew word is used in Proverbs 3:19, "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens." The earth is situated at just the proper distance from the sun to sustain life. Any closer and we would burn up. Any further away and all plant and animal life would freeze. Also, if the earth were a few miles smaller in diameter, the density of our atmosphere would be greatly reduced. The thinner air would not retain enough heat to sustain life. If the earth were a few miles larger in diameter, the thicker atmosphere would result in too much heat being retained, which would also kill all life. We should bow in wonder and thanks before God as the Almighty Creator, who made the heavens by His word (Ps. 33:7). "For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (Ps. 33:9).

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God subjected the creation to the fall (Rom. 8:20), but even in its fallen condition, it still reflects God's glory. Paul writes (Rom. 1:20), "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." You cannot study the intricacy, balance, and design of creation without marveling at the wisdom, understanding, and power of God. Whether you go out to the vastness of the universe or down to the amazing intricacies of the atom or DNA molecules, there is obvious, inescapable evidence of an infinitely brilliant, powerful Creator. Paul explains that the reason people reject God as Creator is that they "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). They love their sin and they do not want to submit to God as Lord of their lives.

You have two choices when it comes to creation. Either God alone did these great wonders by His great power and wisdom (v. 4), or it all happened by random chance over time. The second option is simply absurd! The fact that so many educated, otherwise intelligent, people believe in evolution is evidence of how darkened by sin the human heart really is. The wonders of God's creation should cause us to give thanks to Him and marvel at His everlasting love that made these wonders so that we would worship Him.

- B. Give thanks for God's power in saving His people, which displays His everlasting love (136:10-24).

The major part of the psalm rehearses God's love and grace on behalf of His chosen people, Israel. The history of His dealings with them, in spite of their repeated rebellion and idolatry, displays that His lovingkindness is truly everlasting. This history of physical Israel is a picture of our spiritual history, of how God chose us by grace alone, redeemed us from bondage to sin, and saved us to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). There are five aspects of God's saving power and love as seen in these verses:

- 1) God's saving love is a particular love.

If God loves everyone on earth equally, how do you explain verse 10, "To Him who smote the Egyptians in their firstborn, for His lovingkindness is everlasting"? You could add verses 17-22,

which describe God's slaying Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, and giving their land to the Israelites. It was not just the kings who died, but also all of their people (Num. 22:35). They experienced God's judgment, while Israel experienced His everlasting love.

Many in our day object to the doctrine of election, saying that it denies John 3:16, which they interpret to mean that God loves everyone on the planet equally (a blasphemous example is Dave Hunt, *What Love is This?* [Loyal Publishing]). But clearly, God's love was on Israel in a way that it was not on the Egyptians or the Canaanites or, for that matter, on any other people on the earth.

Moses states this quite clearly (Deut. 7:7), "The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples." He goes on to explain that it was because of His covenant with their forefathers that He brought them out of slavery in Egypt (see, also, Deut. 4:37). In other words, God saved Israel because of His sovereign, gracious choice of Abraham, who was an idolater living in an idolatrous city, and His covenant promises to him (Josh. 24:2-3; Gen. 15:1-21).

Paul lays this out very clearly in Romans 9, where he shows how God loved Jacob and hated Esau (Rom. 9:13). He anticipates our objection, which is that God is unfair (v. 14). His answer is that God has the sovereign right to show mercy to whom He desires and to harden whom He desires (v. 18). Again, he anticipates our objection, that then God couldn't hold us accountable. But this time he simply retorts (Rom. 9:20), "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" As the divine potter, God can show mercy to whom He chooses and leave others to be the objects of His wrath. No one will be treated unjustly, because all deserve His wrath. Those who receive mercy should bow before Him in worship and marvel at His everlasting love. Apart from it, we, too, would perish.

You may ask, "But what about John 3:16? Doesn't it teach that God loves everyone equally?" In the context, "world" means both Jews and Gentiles. Nicodemus (with whom Jesus was speaking) would have been astounded. He thought that God only loved the Jews. Jesus was saying that God's message of salvation through

the cross now would extend to the whole world. The offer of the gospel should go out to everyone. Those whom God has sovereignly chosen will believe unto eternal life (Acts 13:48; 18:10; 2 Tim. 2:10). Those who are not chosen will reject His love as shown on the cross.

- 2) God's love does not negate His judgment of the wicked.

Many argue that God's love means that everyone will be forgiven and saved. Many deny the doctrine of eternal punishment, because they think it negates God's love. But the Bible clearly affirms *both* God's love *and* His righteous judgment. In His inscrutable wisdom, God chooses some as vessels of His mercy to make known the riches of His glory. He leaves others in their sin for judgment, to display His perfect justice (Rom. 9:22-23). But none can accuse Him of being unfair. The wicked will get what they justly deserve.

- 3) God's love for His people is secure against all enemies.

Pharaoh, Sihon, and Og were all impressive kings. Pharaoh came after defenseless Israel with his powerful army. Og was a giant (Deut. 3:11). But none of them could thwart in the slightest God's covenant promises to His people. No one can stand against His "strong hand and outstretched arm" (Ps. 136:12), which can divide the Red Sea, sustain several million people in the barren, scorching desert for 40 years, and give them the promised land.

This means that if God has given you eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ, He will keep you until the day of eternity (Phil. 1:6). Although foes will assail you and you may lose a few battles, the overall victory is secure. He "is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy" (Jude 24).

- 4) To appreciate God's everlasting love, you must be brought low.

God "remembered us in our low estate" (Ps. 136:23). This refers to Israel's condition of bondage in Egypt. As God tells Israel through Ezekiel (16:2-6), He found them as an abandoned baby, with their navel cord uncut, squirming in their blood by the side of

the road. He took them, cleaned them, and caused them to live. This is a picture of our spiritual condition before He saved us. We were dead in our sins, without hope and without God in this world (Eph. 2:1-3, 12). We deserved His wrath. But He showed us mercy, "because of His great love with which He loved us" (Eph. 2:4).

The point is, to appreciate God's everlasting love, you must see the depths of sin from which He rescued you. If you think you're forgiven little, you'll love God little. When you know that you've been forgiven much, you'll love God much (Luke 7:47).

- 5) You cannot save yourself or deserve salvation; only God can save you by His grace and power.

Israel could never have escaped from Egyptian bondage if God had not exerted His power on their behalf. They would have died in the wilderness if He had not sustained them. They would have been destroyed by their many adversaries, but He rescued them (v. 24). It would have been absurd for any of them to claim that they got to the promised land by their own ingenuity or effort!

The biggest hindrance to salvation is the notion that you can do something to save yourself. If you think that you are good enough or that you deserve salvation, you don't get it. Only God can save you from your sins and He does it apart from anything that you can do. You must simply receive it as His gift by faith.

Thus the psalmist has shown two causes for giving thanks to God: His power in creation and in salvation displays His everlasting love. But he touches on a third cause for thanks:

- C. Give thanks for God's provision of food for all creatures, which displays His everlasting love (136:25).

Verse 25 alludes to God's promise to Noah after the flood, to sustain "all flesh" (Gen. 9:8-17). The idea here is the same as what Jesus said, that if God cares for the sparrow, He will take care of you. It also teaches us that we should give thanks for every bite of food that we eat, which is an evidence of God's enduring love.

So the psalm begins with a call to give thanks to God because of His goodness and His sovereignty, which display His everlasting love. He then gives us the causes for giving thanks: God's power in

creation, salvation, and provision, which displays His everlasting love. He concludes with...

3. A final call to give thanks: Give thanks to the God of heaven for His everlasting love (136:26).

The title, "God of heaven," occurs only here in the Psalms. It is used nine times in Ezra, ten times in other exilic and post-exilic books, and only four other times in the Old Testament. It is used twice in the Book of Revelation (11:13; 16:11). It points to God's sovereignty (John Martin, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament* [Victor Books], ed. by John Walvoord & Roy Zuck, 1:655). He rules from heaven, which He made, and thus rules over all.

To give thanks to God in the midst of difficult trials, you must submit to His sovereignty. You must acknowledge that He has orchestrated your circumstances for your ultimate good, and submit to Him as good and loving in His dealings with you (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28). If you find yourself grumbling about your trials, it is an indication that you have not submitted fully to the God of heaven.

Conclusion

Why does the psalmist hammer home 26 times the theme that God's lovingkindness is everlasting? It's because the enemy wants us to doubt it, especially when trials hit.

This truth was so important that David appointed singers whose job was to repeat at the tabernacle, "give thanks to the Lord, because His lovingkindness is everlasting" (1 Chron. 16:41). Later, when the ark was brought into the newly completed temple, Solomon appointed singers to sing, "He indeed is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (2 Chron. 5:13). God's response was to fill the temple with the cloud of His glory. Still later, Jehoshaphat appointed singers to lead the army into battle singing, "Give thanks to the Lord, for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (2 Chron. 20:21). Then the Lord routed the enemy.

These things are for our instruction. In every situation, "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (Ps. 136:1).

Application Questions

1. Why must we submit ourselves to God's sovereignty to be able to give thanks in the midst of trials?
2. Does the doctrine of election negate the truth of God's love, as some assert? Why not? Support your answer with Scripture.
3. Can a Christian believe in "theistic evolution"? What important and practical truths would this undermine?
4. Some argue that the doctrine of hell contradicts that God is love. How would you refute this biblically?

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