

Read responsively.

**Introduction: “For His Steadfast Love Endures Forever”**

In the early church, the reader would start by chanting a line from the psalm,  
and the whole congregation would echo it back.

That line became the *refrain*.

The reader would then chant a stanza from the psalm,  
and then the congregation would reply with the refrain.

Psalm 136 is the first example we have of this approach.

Psalm 136 is also a song that tells a story.

It recounts the great events of redemptive history,  
from the Creation to the Exodus to the Conquest –  
when Israel entered their inheritance.

Not surprisingly, it was regularly sung at Passover,  
as the people of God remembered and celebrated their great deliverance

And even so *we* should sing Psalm 136 as we remember God’s faithfulness in Jesus Christ –  
our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Inheritance.

The key word in Psalm 136 is *hesed* –  
the word translated “steadfast love” in the refrain.

In Hebrew the refrain is “*kiy l’olam hasedo*”  
“because his steadfast love is to the ages.”

A central theme running throughout the OT – and *especially* in the Psalms –  
is the *hesed* of God – the steadfast love of God –  
that the LORD is *faithful* to his covenant –  
(some people have proposed translating it “covenant faithfulness”  
or “covenant loyalty”).

The idea is that when God says that he will do something – *he does it*.

It’s curious to note that the idea of *hesed* doesn’t show up much in the NT.

In the LXX it was usually translated by “*eleos*” – mercy –  
a word that occurs 353 times in the Greek OT –  
but is used only 27 times in the NT.

But it’s not just the *word* that is absent.

One of the fundamental differences between the OT and the NT  
is that in the OT the *big question* is always

“Will God be faithful to his promises?”!  
But in Jesus Christ that question has been answered once and for all!  
God *has been faithful*.  
He has done what he said he would do.  
There can be no question as to *whether* God will do it!  
Jesus *has* done it!

That’s the gospel – the good news!

Indeed, in the NT, the *gospel* plays the same role that God’s *hesed* played in the OT.  
The good news in the NT is that one through whom God created the world  
is the one through whom God has reconciled the world.  
In fact, the structure of Psalm 136 –  
giving thanks to God for Creation, Exodus, and Inheritance -  
is paralleled by the NT emphasis on Creation, Redemption, and Consummation.

But within the Psalter, what is Psalm 136 doing?

Book Five of the Psalter is the longest collection – from Psalms 107-150 –

Book One: 1-41 (41 psalms)  
Book Two: 42-72 (31 psalms)  
Book Three: 73-89 (17 psalms)  
Book Four: 90-106 (17 psalms)  
Book Five: 107-150 (44 psalms)

Books One and Two conclude with the line,

“the prayers of David, son of Jesse, are ended.” (Ps 72:20)

The songs and prayers of books one and two generally assume a Davidic context –  
namely, the king is on the throne – and even if things are not as they should be,  
Israel is living in the land, and seeking (more or less) to walk before God.

Book Three (Psalms 73-89) is very much a book about Exile.

The troubles of book three are not the ordinary trials of life in the land.

God has seemingly abandoned the house of David.

Indeed, Book Three ends by asking “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,  
which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” (89:49)

Book Four (Psalms 90-106) provide an answer to Book Three.

It starts with Psalm 90 – the prayer of Moses –  
remembering that God is our dwelling place.

It ends with Psalm 106 – a retelling of the story of the Exodus –  
reminding Israel of the steadfast love of the LORD through all ages.

Book Four is very much focused on the faithfulness and steadfast love of God.

Book Five is a little harder to categorize.

There are certain sections of book five that are easy:

- 1) Psalm 119 – with its 22 stanzas,  
each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
- 2) Psalms 120-134 – the Songs of Ascents
- 3) Psalms 146-150 – the closing doxology of praise to the LORD.

Many of the songs in Book Five are plainly “later” in their composition.

Psalm 137 was probably composed in Babylon during the exile (or later).

Psalm 136 – which we are looking at tonight –

uses some grammar and vocabulary that suggests an even later date.

It shares a lot of vocabulary and themes from Psalm 135.

In fact, it would appear that Psalm 136 is a responsorial version of Psalm 135.

If you take the main themes of Psalm 135,

and add the refrain, “for his steadfast love endures forever” –

then you end up with Psalm 136!

Psalm 136 begins and ends with “give thanks.”

Indeed, verses 3-22 (at least) are a single sentence,

all building off the imperative verb in verse 3 –

“give thanks...”

### **1. Give Thanks to the LORD... (v1-3)**

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

<sup>2</sup> *Give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

<sup>3</sup> *Give thanks to the Lord of lords,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

How often do you say “thank you” to God?

Sinners have a tendency towards ingratitude.

We owe everything to God.

We could not breathe a single breath without his wise and gracious providence,  
and yet we use so few of those breaths to thank him!

I want you to think about this in the coming week.

Ask yourself, “How often do I say ‘thank you’ to God?”

And, what’s more, *what do I thank him for?*

Compare your giving thanks with the thanksgiving of Psalm 136.

I thank God for my food – I thank God for my family – for my job – for my ...

Those things are all important –

and we *should* give thanks to God for all those things! –  
but if my thanksgiving is all about *me* and *my stuff* –  
then we are out of whack.

We've just finished a series through the book of Ecclesiastes –  
a book that tends to focus on *me* and *my quest* to understand life under the sun.  
But the Preacher has warned us that the only solution  
is found precisely in the basic message of Deuteronomy and Proverbs:  
'fear God and keep his commandments' (12:13).

Psalm 136 helps reorient us to the foundations of that basic message.  
*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.*

Verses 1-3 use a triple repetition of the verb "give thanks"  
in order to establish the basic command of the song: give thanks to the LORD!!

You see these three-fold patterns all over the OT.  
God had not yet fully revealed his Tri-unity,  
but these patterns of threes all point us in that direction.

And this first three-fold pattern calls us to *give thanks to God* for who he is:  
he is good –  
he is God of gods –  
he is Lord of lords.

*So thank him!!*

Here the Psalmist draws on the language of Deuteronomy 10:17.

In the context of reminding Israel of the mighty deeds of the LORD in the Exodus,  
Moses had said in Deut. 10:17,  
"For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords,  
the great, the mighty, and the awesome God,  
who is not partial and takes no bribes."

Now, Psalm 136 says,  
Give thanks to the LORD for he is good –  
he is the God of gods –  
he is the Lord of lords.  
The gods of nations are idols – demons –  
they are not in any way worthy of being compared with the one true God.  
Sure, in one sense there are many gods and many lords –  
but "for us there is one God, the Father,  
from whom are all things and for whom we exist,  
and one Lord, Jesus Christ,

through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (1 Cor 8:6)

And so verses 4-22 set forth how we ought to give thanks to the one true God –  
in three ways! (another triple pattern!)

In verses 4-9, for his great wonders in creating the heavens by wisdom,  
in verses 10-16, for his mighty arm in redemption from Egypt,  
and in verses 17-22, for his gift of Canaan to his people as an inheritance.

Creation, Redemption, and Inheritance.

## **2. ...The One Who Made the Heavens by Wisdom (v4-9)**

Verses 4-6 remind us of the great wonders of creation:

<sup>4</sup> *to him who alone does great wonders,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>5</sup> *to him who by understanding made the heavens,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>6</sup> *to him who spread out the earth above the waters,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

The word “wonders” is usually used for the work of redemption –  
the ‘wondrous works of God’ in the Exodus, for instance.

But here the Psalmist uses it for creation –  
and especially God’s work of forming the heavens, the earth, and the waters.

Verses 5-6 speaks of the three realms of creation –  
the heavens, the earth, and the waters.

This deserves to be classified with God’s “great wonders” of redemption.

We concluded Ecclesiastes by saying, “Remember your Creator.”  
Psalm 136 agrees.

Remember – and *give thanks!*

Ecclesiastes 12:1-2 says,  
“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth...  
before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened.”

The same words occur in verses 7-9 –  
<sup>7</sup> *to him who made the great lights,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>8</sup> *the sun to rule over the day,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

<sup>9</sup> *the moon and stars to rule over the night,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

Remember your Creator –  
and *give thanks* to him to made these lights!

For the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness”  
has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God  
in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

Whenever you see the sun – give thanks to God!  
Whenever you see the moon and stars – give thanks to God!  
Whenever you see light – give thanks to God!  
because he uses that light to illumine our hearts –  
to show us his glory in the face of Jesus!

As Paul goes on to say at the end of 2 Corinthians 4, verses 14-15,  
“knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus  
and bring us with you into his presence.  
For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people  
it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”

Notice how Paul connects this revelation of *light* with the theme of *thanksgiving*.  
As God illumines more and more people,  
the result is a people who increase thanksgiving.

So we should not be surprised that the list of mighty deeds  
moves directly from the creation of the heavenly lights  
to the redemption of Israel from Egypt!

### **3. ...The One Who Delivered Israel from Egypt (v10-16)**

In verses 10-16, there are three things for which we give thanks:

<sup>10</sup> *to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>11</sup> *and brought Israel out from among them,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>12</sup> *with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

First, in verses 10-12 we give thanks to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
and brought Israel out with a strong hand and outstretched arm  
(drawing again from the language of Deuteronomy)  
Here we see how the LORD is the “God of gods”!  
In the contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh,

*someone's* firstborn son is going to die!  
As Pharaoh had slaughtered the male children of Israel,  
now Yahweh takes vengeance on Pharaoh  
by slaughtering the firstborn of Egypt.

How can we give thanks to God for smiting Egypt?  
Because we believe that vengeance belongs to the LORD!  
It is not for us to take vengeance.  
But we give thanks to God because *he* takes vengeance –  
*he* makes all things right.

And you see this as well in the second “to him” in verses 13-15:

<sup>13</sup> *to him who divided the Red Sea in two,*  
*for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>14</sup> *and made Israel pass through the midst of it,*  
*for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>15</sup> *but overthrew<sup>[a]</sup> Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea,*  
*for his steadfast love endures forever;*

We give thanks to the one who divided the Red Sea –  
and brought Israel through on dry land –  
*and* overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea.  
When it says that he “overthrew” Pharaoh,  
the Hebrew says “he shook off” Pharaoh and his host –  
as though they were a bug that he was shaking off his garment.  
This is the same verb used in Exodus 14:27,  
in the description of the crossing of the Red Sea.

God has revealed his *steadfast love* – his covenant faithfulness –  
precisely in distinguishing between his people and his enemies.

And that’s the third “to him” in verse 16:

<sup>16</sup> *to him who led his people through the wilderness,*  
*for his steadfast love endures forever;*

Up until this point the Psalmist has always said “Israel.”  
Now he says, “to him who led *his people* through the wilderness.”  
Until this point God had *promised* Abraham that he would adopt Israel as his people,  
but only when they arrived at Mt Sinai  
did God demonstrate his *hesed* – his covenant loyalty –  
his faithfulness to his promises!

So first, we give thanks to God for his great wonders in forming the heavens by wisdom.

And second, we give thanks to God for his mighty deeds in Redemption.  
And then third, we give thanks to God for giving his servant an Inheritance.

**4. ...The One Who Gave His Servant the Land as an Inheritance (v17-22)**

<sup>17</sup> *to him who struck down great kings,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>18</sup> *and killed mighty kings,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>19</sup> *Sihon, king of the Amorites,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>20</sup> *and Og, king of Bashan,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>21</sup> *and gave their land as a heritage,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>22</sup> *a heritage to Israel his servant,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

Verses 17-22 consists of a single “to him” statement.

Give thanks to him who struck down great kings,  
who killed mighty kings...  
and gave their land as a heritage to Israel his servant.

These verses recount Israel’s first great victory –  
even before they entered the Promised Land.

Sihon and Og were kings on the *east side* of the Jordan.

Their land was inherited by Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

There is no explicit reference here to the Conquest under Joshua –  
but then again, in the first section, we were only told that God formed the *heavens*  
the earth and the waters – along with the lights –  
and we were left to remember the rest of the story of creation!

Even so, in this section, we only hear of the victory over Sihon and Og,  
and are left to remember the rest of the story of the Conquest!

So far, this sounds remarkably particular.

God loves Israel.

We thank him because he killed our enemies and gave us their stuff!

Thank you, Jesus!

Verse 22 is the key to understanding this.

He gave their land as a heritage to Israel his servant.

What does this mean?



Israel is the servant of the LORD.

Isaiah will spend 20 chapters fleshing out what this means!  
But the simple version is that Israel was called as the Servant of the LORD  
to restore humanity and bring light to the Gentiles.

Yes, sometimes that would mean that Israel was the agent of judgment,  
who would be the instrument of God's wrath against sin.  
But the long purpose –  
the ultimate end –  
was so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the nations.

Indeed – his steadfast love endures forever!

And that is the point of verses 23-25, which finally introduces a new sentence!

### **5. He Remembered Us (v23-25)**

<sup>23</sup> *It is he who remembered us in our low estate,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>24</sup> *and rescued us from our foes,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;*  
<sup>25</sup> *he who gives food to all flesh,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

In every other verse in the Psalm, the main verb is “give thanks.”  
But in these three verses, the main verbs are –  
he remembered (v23) and he rescued (v24).

Who did?

The one who gives food to all flesh! (v25)

Here at the end of the Psalm  
we are reminded that the God who has done all these things for Israel  
is the God who gives food to all flesh.

The Creator of all things is the God who has remembered us.

And he has delivered us from our enemies.  
The word ‘from our enemies’ is ‘mitzareynu’  
which sound a lot like ‘mitzraim’ (Egypt) –  
from earlier in the Psalm.

One commentator [Allen (*WBC*, p. 234)] points out:  
“the saving events of the Exodus and its sequel are shown to be archetypal,  
not only by the resuming vv 23a, 24a but by the accompanying refrain.

Like the crucifixion and resurrection in the NT,  
they pledge God's everlasting love for the people of the covenant.  
His continuing guardianship and guidance are hereby guaranteed....  
The closing strophe [verse] reinforces the relevance of the divine care;  
it also widens its range.  
Yahweh's blessing is confined neither to the past nor to the chosen people.  
His fatherly care (cf 104:27) embraces all animate creatures,  
universal God as he is ("God of heaven").  
By such means part of the way is paved  
for the universality of God's saving grace in the NT."

Verse 26 sums up the whole Psalm:

**Conclusion: Give Thanks to the God of Heaven (v26)**

<sup>26</sup> *Give thanks to the God of heaven,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

Give thanks to the one who created you!  
Give thanks to the one who redeemed you with his own precious blood!  
Give thanks to the one who has given you an inheritance with the saints in the light.

Because while we were helpless – while we were not just *oppressed* by enemies,  
but while we *were* enemies – aliens – without hope, Christ died for us!

As John Brown of Haddington (*PODIM*) said,  
“While I sing it, let my heart be melted, and all inflamed,  
with the loving-kindness and mercy of God in Christ.  
Let me behold, believe, and admire the unbounded extent,  
and everlasting duration thereof.”

And therefore,  
let us *give thanks!*