

Psalm 136 | Restoring the Chorus

Introduction | Psalm 136

In order to ensure the sermon schedule worked as we needed it to, I inserted a Psalm. The word “Psalm” means “melody”—it is a collection of lyrics to be sung to music. The book of Psalms is the largest book in the Bible and, arguably, it is the greatest collection of hymns, prayers, and poetry known to man. There are over 150 Psalms, more than half written by King David, others written by men like Moses and Solomon, several written by entire families, and still others whose authors are unknown. Generally speaking there are songs of praise, songs of lament, songs calling for judgment on enemies, songs for special occasions used in public worship or celebration, and even royal Psalms memorializing the past monarchy. **Psalms are full of truth and emotion, teaching us about who God is and showing us how to relate to Him.**

Psalm 136 is recognized as a praise Psalm focusing on Israel’s history from creation, through deliverance from Egypt, and into the Promise Land. The structure of this song likely made it a favorite among the congregation because it was simple and memorable. **By Jews, the Psalm is known as the “Great Thanksgiving” calling Jews to look back to what God has done in order to look forward to what God will do through His coming Messiah.** This 26 verse song opens with three praises to God, using three different praises for God, thanking the one God who is good, powerful, and sovereign. The song continues, giving six praises to God as Creator; six praises to God as Deliverer; and seven praises to God as Protector. Finally, the song ends with a summary of all that was said, and a final call to thank the God of heaven—a title used nowhere else in the Psalms. **But the heart of the song is the phrase that is repeated 26 times in each of the 26 verses— “the steadfast love” of God which endures forever.”**

In deciding what to preach for this stand-alone sermon, I asked my one sons. Without hesitation, he suggested that I preach on God’s love because I say so much about God’s holiness/wrath. Fair enough. I determined, therefore, to find the Psalm which spoke most loudly about God’s love, knowing that there is a lot of confusion about God’s love. More than anyone else, the Apostle John had much to say about the love of God, going so far as to write in 1 John 4 that GOD IS LOVE. For some that means that God is personal and affectionate, for others that mean God is affirming and tolerant, essentially, it has come to mean that God is how man defines love. **According to Psalm 136, God’s love is so worthy of praise because it is so incomprehensible by man.**

The Word for God’s Love | Chesed

The Hebrew word translated “steadfast love” is CHESED. Chesed is one of the thirteen attributes of God that the Jewish sages derived from God’s revelation of himself to Moses in **Exodus 34.6-7**. ***6 The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”***

There is no precise English equivalent to this Hebrew word. **The ESV translates the word as steadfast love.** The KJV = mercy, NIV = Love, NASB = Lovingkindness. The first English word used was “lovingkindness. It was a biblical word invented by Miles Coverdale who was responsible for the first complete English translation of the Old and New Testaments in 1535. Coverdale used the word only in cases where there is some recognized relationship between that two parties concerned. The word was never used indiscriminately of kindness in general. **He was careful to use lovingkindness only when it referred to God’s love for his covenant people.** Otherwise he would use words like goodness, mercy, or great

kindness to describe God's attitude toward man. He would use "kindness" to describe man's attitude toward man. It was said that Scottish theologian Sir George Adam Smith, suggested "LEAL-LOVE" because it combined the concepts of loyalty and love. Unfortunately, it did not convey the equally important idea of **steadfastness** and **active persistence** of God's relentless love toward his people.

God's "loving-kindness" or "steadfast love" is that sure love that will not let Israel go. Despite their perpetual tendency to rebel, complain, and wander, God refuses to give up on the people he has chosen. In view of what Israel actually deserves, this kind of steadfastness adds to the meaning of this one word, the concepts of mercy and forgiveness. So when we talk about God's love toward us, we are talking about his disposition relationally toward a people he's chosen. **To say God loves, is to declare that he is faithfully committed, bountifully gracious, radically merciful, deeply compassionate, absolutely forgiving, and relentlessly providing for us.**

The Proof of God's Love | Creation - Restoration

The Psalm is called the "GREAT THANKSGIVING" by Jews. It is bookended with calls to give thanks TO THE GOD WHO IS OR DID THIS _____ FOR HIS "STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER." In other words, the emphasis is not on thanking God for what has happened as much as it is on trusting Him for what is going to happen because he loves. Particularly, we are called to trust that God, motivated by His love, acted toward an undeserving people and will never cease to act that same way into the future. It is not merely, God blessed. God saved. God provided. **It is that God will bless! God will save! God will provide!** The song offer three different proofs of God's past love to help us trust in His future love:

Verses 4-9 recounts the love of God CREATION. God alone gives us all things. There are only two things in existence, God and creation. All that we have is from Him. He made everything out of nothing, while not obligated to make anything. God created wisdom. God created light. God created the sun. God created the moon. God created the stars. God gave us life. God gave us our minds. God gave us our bodies. God gave us our strengths. God gave us our personalities, our preferences, even our opportunities. In love, God gave us all that we have. God created for the purpose of demonstrating his lovingkindness and steadfast love. God created the world, blessed the world, preserves the world, and is committed to restoring the world. The gift of Creation itself is enough to thank God for. It is a testament to His goodness, His beautify, His power, and His love. **God's love is steadfast, he makes sure he gives us everything we needed, and everything he gives us is good. We are thankful for what He has blessed.**

Verses 10-15 recount the love of God in REDEMPTION. In Creation, God loved all people. But in redemption, he chose to love a particular people. God brought His people out of Egypt. He brought them out of Egypt. He delivered them from an invincible enemy and a cruel condition. The Exodus is the story of God's deliverance of His people from slavery. Redemption is personal. God himself confronted evil. God overthrows the prince of the known world. God brings the kingdom of darkness to its knees. With a strong hand, God saved His people—nothing could separate them from His love. It is God who literally does what is impossible, that his people might be freed from slavery. And even when they complain about how wanting to return to their pitiful condition, God will not let His people go. **God's love is steadfast, he does not abandon his chosen, even if they abandon Him. We are thankful for how he has saved.**

Verses 16-22 records the love of God in PROVISION. God not only brought them out of Egypt, he brought them into a land. He delivered them FROM and then he led them TO. He saved them from death AND he gave them life. **God's love did not end at deliverance. He led His people, protected his**

people, and provided for his people—“he led them and he fed them (Matthew Henry)”. His love was not a momentary action, but a commitment to a continual relationship. God loved Israel beyond the Red Sea, through the wilderness, and into the battlefield. It was not enough to deliver them and send them off he delivered them and walked with them. **God’s love is steadfast, He makes sure we never got lost again, he brings to completion what he began at salvation. We are thankful for how he is leading.**

This Psalm is about God’s great love toward us. God loves us in that he remembers us. God not only remembers us, he rescues us. And God not only rescues, in love, he continues to fight for us. We thank him for love that blesses us, love that delivers us, and a love that promises to bring us home.

The Song of David | Restoring the Chorus

Even though we are not worthy of a thought, God is thinking about us a lot. As Charles Spurgeon said: *“God’s thoughts of you are many, let not yours be few in return.”* Psalm 136 is not merely designed to teach us about God’s love, it is designed to be sung by God’s people.

The author of this Psalm is unknown, but we do know that the chorus was sung when David brought the Ark into Jerusalem. After the death of Saul in battle, David was formally anointed as King of Israel. This occurred at Hebron, incidentally, the same place where Abram built an altar and settled in Genesis 13. From Hebron, David goes to Jerusalem builds a tent for the ark to dwell. When they had placed the ark inside the tent David had pitched for it, he made offerings and he appointed “special” Levites to minister in Jerusalem and Gibeon. He ordered them to regularly make music and give thanks to the Lord. ³⁹ **And he left Zadok the priest and his brothers the priests before the tabernacle of the LORD in the high place that was at Gibeon ⁴⁰ to offer burnt offerings to the LORD on the altar of burnt offering regularly morning and evening, to do all that is written in the Law of the LORD that he commanded Israel. ⁴¹ With them were Heman and Jeduthun and the rest of those chosen and expressly named to give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever. ⁴² Heman and Jeduthun had trumpets and cymbals for the music and instruments for sacred song.**

Here, in Solomon’s temple, and by Jehosaphat’s army, specific men assigned a job to sing “thanksgiving” every morning and every evening. As you approached the tabernacle to worship, or even walked nearby, you would hear trumpets, and symbols for the sacred chorus – ***His steadfast love endures forever.***

The Song of the world

This is why I titled this sermon: RESTORING GOD’S CHORUS. We will naturally sing the song of the world if we do not sing the song of God. This is a great chorus, but the world has its own choir, and its own song. It is a song that refuses to acknowledge God or thank him for what He has done. It is a song that praises creation, a song that casts doubt on the love of God, and celebrates the work of men. It is a song with a chorus that say: **The steadfast love of the Lord does not endure forever. It is a song that says I am not thankful but resentful— GOD IS NOT GOOD—HE WILL NOT GIVE ME HIS BEST. GOD DOES NOT SAVE—HE WILL NOT DELIVER ME. GOD DOES NOT PROVIDE—HE WILL NOT LEAD ME.** With every bad thing that comes into our life...with every mistake we make....with every battle we lose....we hear the chorus...**God does not bless. God does not forgive. God does not fight. God does not care. God does not know. God does not love me forever.**

In other words, it is easy to sing thanksgiving when things go my way. But what about when it is awful? it is hard to thank God when I don’t feel like he has blessed, saved, or led me out of trouble? In her book *The Hiding Place*, holocaust survivor Corrie Ten Boom tells a story about thanksgiving. Corrie and her sister

Betsie had been imprisoned by the Nazis for hiding Jews behind the wall of their Holland home, and Nazi prison conditions *pretty well unbearable*. The first barracks they were put in were found in the quarantine area. They were right next to the punishment barracks. All day long and into the night they would fall to sleep to the rhythmic beatings and screams of cruelty. In her own words” *“It grew harder and harder. Even within these four walls there was too much misery, too much seemingly pointless suffering. Every day something else failed to make sense, something else grew too heavy.”*

In the midst of suffering, the women prisoners around Corrie and Betsie found comfort in the little Bible studies they held in the barracks. When they were moved to Barracks 28, Corrie was horrified by the fact that their reeking, straw-bed platforms swarmed with fleas. How could they live in such a place? It was Betsie who discovered God’s answer in Philippians 4:“Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.” Betsie began to thank God for the Bible they had. The horrible crowds that made it possible for more people to heard the Word. Then she thanked God for the fleas. That was too much for Corrie who viewed the fleas as anything but a blessing.

Betsie believed in giving God’s thanks in all circumstances. The women were able to have Bible studies in the barracks with a great deal of freedom, never bothered by supervisors coming in and harassing them. They finally discovered that it was the fleas that kept those supervisors out.

Conclusion | The Song of Jesus

The cross of Christ reveals that those things which we are naturally most unthankful for, are the very things that proclaim God’s love most boldly. **We need a new background song on repeat.** In Christ, God has put a new song into our mouths. As Psalm 40.3 says: *“He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.* We need a new song and a new chorus which thanks for what has happened so that we can trust Him for what is going to happen. We need a new song that declares God’s justice and God’s love, God’s mercy and God’s grace. That is what the proclamation of cross of Jesus is, a new song on perpetual repeat saying: “In Christ His steadfast love endures forever.”

- **When you wonder whether God is in control of the chaos** - Look at the cross and declare, “In Christ His steadfast love endures forever.”
- **When you are unsure whether God is giving you his best** - Look at the cross and declare, “In Christ His steadfast love endures forever.”
- **When you doubt whether he will forgive you for what you’ve done** – Look at the cross and declare “In Christ His steadfast love endures forever.”
- **When you are fearful that he will provide what you need** – Look at the cross and declare “In Christ His steadfast love endures forever.”
- **When you are uncertain about where to turn and wondering if he will lead you** – Look at the cross and declare “In Christ His steadfast love endures forever.”

Romans 8.38-39 ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.