



Psalm 136 - God's Work in Creation and in History

Introduction

This hymn calls on the worshipping congregation to give thanks to the Lord, who has shown his steadfast love throughout the history of God's people: from creating the world, to bringing Israel out of Egypt and leading them through the wilderness, to giving them victory over those who opposed them as they took the Promised Land. The psalm includes more recent acts of God's deliverance and care, interpreting them as the continuation of God's enduring commitment to his people. Each verse in this psalm has the same refrain: <<***for his steadfast love endures for ever***>>; one cannot miss the theme. Perhaps the psalm was to be sung responsively, with a priest leading with the first line of each verse, and a Levitical choir or the whole congregation replying with the refrain.

Psalm 136:1-3 - Give Thanks to the One True God.

The song opens with its main thrust, to call God's people to give thanks to him: he is good, he is the God of gods, and he is the Lord of lords. As the psalm develops, it will be clear that this affirmation of the Lord's supremacy never makes him remote; instead, it shows why his steadfast love, which endures forever, is effective for his people.

¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Psalm 136:1

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. As in the previous song of the collection, Psalm 136 gives thanks and praise to God for his goodness. The fact that God is good is fundamental to all that he is and does. It is widely known and accepted that God is love: <<***Whoever does not love does not know God, for***>>

God is love>> (1 John 4:8), and: <<*So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them*>> (1 John 4:16), and that love is an expression of his goodness. This is a wonderful reason to give Yahweh thanks.

Derek Kidner commented, “Give thanks is not the whole meaning of this word (which introduces not only each of the first three verses and the final one, but also, unheard, every verse or sequence in the psalm): it basically means ‘confess’ or ‘acknowledge’ (e.g. Leviticus 5:5; Proverbs 28:13, in a less happy context), and therefore calls us to thoughtful, grateful worship, spelling out what we know or have found of God’s glory and his deeds.” Spurgeon added, “He is good beyond all others; indeed, he alone is good in the highest sense; he is the source of good, the good of all good, the sustainer of good, the perfecter of good, and the rewarder of good. For this he deserves the constant gratitude of his people.”

Because humankind is made in God’s image as confirmed in Genesis 1:26-27, people know something of what is good. Because humans are fallen: <<*For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous*>> (Romans 5:19), their knowledge of good is corrupted and they are unable to do that good. Yet their entire concept of good is rooted in God and his goodness. Those who question God’s goodness do so according to some standard of what is good and what is evil. The very existence of that standard connects them to something beyond themselves, something back to the creator who made them in his image.

For his steadfast love endures for ever. Psalm 136 is a special psalm, with each one of its 26 verses repeats this phrase. Psalm 118 repeated that phrase five times, and through the Hebrew Scriptures the phrase has somewhat of a liturgical sense to it, as if the assembled people of Israel said or sung it in response to the direction of the Levites leading singing and worship. Ezra 3:11a indicates that this phrase was part of a responsive singing among God’s people: <<*and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever towards Israel’*>>.

As already noted, the phrase is used several other times in the OT, each time in the context of some kind of public praise or declaration. The phrase, his mercy endures forever was used:

- In David’s psalm of praise recorded in 1 Chronicles 16:34.
- Written into the assignments of the priests in David’s day and recorded in 1 Chronicles 16:41.
- As part of Israel’s praise at the dedication of Solomon’s temple; refer to 2 Chronicles 5:13, 7:3, and 7:6.

- As sung by the Levites in battle, as the Lord defeated the Ammonites as they praised; refer to 2 Chronicles 20:21.
- It was promised to be part of Israel's praise once again, after the destruction suffered in the Babylonian conquest; refer to Jeremiah 33:10-11.
- As part of Israel's praise at the dedication of Ezra's temple; refer to Ezra 3:11.

Therefore, Psalm 136 creates a picture of a great multitude of the people of God gathered in the temple courts. A priest or Levite calls out a reason to give God thanks and his people respond with, "for his steadfast love endures for ever."

For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever. The Lord is full of generosity: <<*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long*>> (Psalm 23:6), and: <<*Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord! Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way*>> (Psalm 25:7-8). This thanks and praise is right in recognition of God's goodness. He is good in his plans, good in his grace, good in his forgiveness, good in his covenant, and good in every aspect of his being. These terms evoke: <<*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, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation'*>> (Exodus 34:6-7); the foundation of joy for God's people is his enduring character of gracious love, of keeping his promises.

² O give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

³ O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;

Psalm 136:2-3

O give thanks to the God of gods, to the Lord of lords. Reasons are repeatedly found to thank and praise God. Here each reason is connected to who God is. He is greater than any of the supposed gods or lords of the nations. This idea may be drawn from Deuteronomy 10:17. Spurgeon noted, "All lords in the plural are summed up in this Lord in the singular: he is more lordly than all emperors and kings condensed into one."

The term God of gods is found six times in Scripture. The other four being in Joshua 22:22, Psalm 84:7, Daniel 2:47 and 11:36. Lord of lords is also used three more times in 1 Timothy 6:15, Revelation 17:14 and 19:16.

The opening stanzas refer to the one to whom reference is made throughout, by using the three great names by which God is known: Yahweh, the title of grace (v.1); Elohim, the name of might (vv.2); and Adonai, the title of sovereignty (v.3).

Psalm 136:4-9 - Give Thanks to God for His Great Wonders in Creation.

In terms based mostly on Genesis Chapter 1, the next section celebrates the wonders that the Lord did in making the universe and all that is in it. The OT is often at pains to remind God's people that the God who has redeemed them is also the very God who created the world. Sometimes that reminder is given to reassure the people of God's power; and sometimes, as here, that reminder is given so that the people will see their own lives in relation to God's continuing commitment to his creation.

⁴ who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;

Psalm 136:4

Who alone does great wonders. God's people were invited to praise him as the God of true power and miraculous wonders. Most of the rest of Psalm 136 describes many of these great wonders that were and are an expression of his great mercy, his *hesed* to his people. Spurgeon observed, "His works are all great in wonder even when they are not great in size; in fact, in the minute objects of the microscope one can behold as great wonders as even the telescope can reveal."

Wonders is also translated as marvels, this word is usually applied to works of redemption, i.e. to God's deeds of rescuing his people and protecting and caring for them; for examples refer to Exodus 3:20 and 34:10, and Psalms 9:1, 78:11 and 98:1. Here it is applied specifically to creation, showing that God's creating work is wonderful, too.

⁵ who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
⁶ who spread out the earth on the waters,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
⁷ who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;

- 8 the sun to rule over the day,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
- 9 the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;

Psalm 136:5-9

Who by understanding made the heavens. Here the singer went back to Genesis Chapter 1 and saw God's creative work as a demonstration of his never ending mercy to his people. Understanding has more of the sense of wisdom. Alexander Maclaren commented, "The psalm looks at the story of Creation from an original point of view, when it rolls out in chorus, after each stage of that work, that its motive lay in the eternal loving kindness of Jehovah. Creation is an act of Divine love." In v.4, the psalmist said God alone does great wonders, and it can be said that creation is the beginning and not the end of such wonders.

Who spread out the earth on the waters. In this section the work of God as creator is described with elements from the first four days of creation, which are recorded in Genesis 1:1-19. Because each of these is an expression of his never ending mercy towards his people, it can be said that God created the heavens and the earth with his people in mind. According to Kidner the theme of creation in Psalm 136 "invites the Christian, not to wrangle over cosmological theories but to delight in his environment, known to him as no mere mechanism but a work of 'steadfast love'. No unbeliever has grounds for any such quality of joy."

Paul echoed the same truths in Lystra when he taught the Gentiles there that <<yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy>> (Acts 14:17).

Psalm 136:10-16 - Give Thanks to God for Deliverance from Egypt.

The next section recounts, in terms based mostly on Exodus and Deuteronomy, how the Lord brought Israel out from among the Egyptians with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and led his people through the wilderness. Echoing the Pentateuch, these are clear deeds of his steadfast love.

- 10 who struck Egypt through their firstborn,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
- 11 and brought Israel out from among them,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
- 12 with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,

for his steadfast love endures for ever;
13 who divided the Red Sea in two,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
14 and made Israel pass through the midst of it,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
15 but overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
16 who led his people through the wilderness,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;

Psalm 136:10-16

Who struck Egypt through their firstborn. The previous psalm mentioned the deliverance from Egypt and the striking of the firstborn; refer to Psalm 135:8-9. Here again God is praised as the one who rescued Israel from their slavery and degradation in Egypt – this work an expression of his never ending mercy. The singer recounted God’s great wonders flowing seamlessly from the work of creation described in Genesis Chapter 1 to the work of deliverance described in the Book of Exodus. The Exodus account should rightly be regarded as historical, describing what really happened. Therefore, the context and flow of Psalm 136 argues that what God described in Genesis Chapter 1 really happened. The psalmist does not treat them differently, as if one were a legend and the other actual history.

Who divided the Red Sea in two. God did not only bring Israel out of Egypt, but also delivered them from Pharaoh’s attempt to recapture the Israelites. God overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, giving further expression of his never ending mercy. God’s use of history in Psalm 136 is important. As in countless other places in the Scriptures, God used his work in the past to give hope, faith, and confidence to his people both for the moment and for the future.

Maclaren observed, “The word for dividing the Red Sea is peculiar. It means to hew in pieces or in two, and is used for cutting in halves the child in Solomon’s judgement; [1 Kings 3:25] while the word ‘parts’ is a noun from the same root, and is found in Genesis 15:17, to describe the two portions into which Abraham clave the carcasses. Thus, as with a sword, Jehovah hewed the sea in two, and his people passed between the parts, as between the halves of the covenant sacrifice.”

Who led his people through the wilderness. This short sentence describes many mighty and loving acts of God. Yahweh provided guidance, food, water, structure, leadership, healing, victory, and many other things to Israel through the

wilderness. Adam Clarke commented, “It was an astonishing miracle of God to support so many hundreds of thousands of people in a wilderness totally deprived of all necessities for the life of man, and that for the space of forty years.” This was a great demonstration of God’s never failing mercy. Spurgeon noted, “Their conduct in the wilderness tested his mercy most severely, but it bore the strain; many a time he forgave them; and though he smote them for their transgressions, yet he waited to be gracious and speedily turned to them in compassion.”

Psalm 136:17-22 - Give Thanks to God for Giving a Land to His People.

The next section recounts how God struck down great kings and gave their land to Israel as a heritage. The specific event here is the defeat of Sihon and Og; refer to the comments made on Psalm 135:8-12.

17 who struck down great kings,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
18 and killed famous kings,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
19 Sihon, king of the Amorites,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
20 and Og, king of Bashan,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
21 and gave their land as a heritage,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
22 a heritage to his servant Israel,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Psalm 136:17-22

Who struck down great kings. As mentioned in the previous psalm, the defeat of Sihon, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan, and the giving of Canaan to Israel as a heritage were all demonstrations of the never ending mercy of God.

Spurgeon commented, “The Lord who smote Pharaoh at the beginning of the wilderness march, smote Sihon and Og at the close of it.” And again, “What good was their fame to them? As they opposed God they became infamous rather than famous. Their deaths made the Lord’s fame to increase among the nations while their fame ended in disgraceful defeat.”

His servant Israel. The people as a whole can be God's servant: <<*O offspring of his servant Israel, children of Jacob, his chosen ones*>> (1 Chronicles 16:13), <<*But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend*>> (Isaiah 41:8), and the individual members are servants: <<*For to me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God*>> (Leviticus 25:55).

Psalm 136:23-25 - God Continues to Care for His People and for His Creation.

Now the song turns to an apparently more recent event, when the Lord remembered his people when they were low, down, defeated, and even humiliated, and rescued them from those who opposed and taunted them. Many think this represents the return from Babylonian exile, but even though that event would certainly qualify for this description, there is no easy way to date this psalm; thus there are many fresh instances of God's care for his people that put his steadfast love on display. The universal reference, food to all flesh, i.e. not just to Israel, returns to the theme of the Lord as the universal creator, whom it is Israel's privilege to serve.

- 23 It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
- 24 and rescued us from our foes,
for his steadfast love endures for ever;
- 25 who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Psalm 136:23-25

It is he who remembered us in our low estate. The song makes a sharp yet skilful transition from God's great wonders of the past to his faithful help in the present. It is good for his people to look to the past for evidence that his steadfast love endures forever, but even better for them to see the evidence in their own day. Kidner added, "After all, 'his steadfast love endures for ever', and the refrain is designed to show the relevance of every act of God to every singer of the psalm."

And rescued us from our foes or enemies. Spurgeon observed, "Sin is our enemy, and we are redeemed from it by the atoning blood; Satan is our enemy and we are redeemed from him by the Redeemer's power; the world is our enemy, and we are redeemed from it by the Holy Spirit."

Who gives food to all flesh. The psalmist asked God's people to praise and thank him not only for his work as deliverer, but also as provider: <<*Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your*

heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?>> (Matthew 6:26). This is more evidence of God's never ending mercy, and extended to all flesh, not only to Israel. Clarke commented, "By whose universal providence every intellectual and animal being is supported and preserved. The appointing every living thing food, and that sort of food which is suited to its nature, (and the nature and habits of animals are endlessly diversified,) is an overwhelming proof of the wondrous providence, wisdom, and goodness of God."

Psalm 136:26 - Give Thanks to the God of Heaven.

With the words <<*give thanks to the God of heaven*>>, the psalm returns to where it began. The title 'God of heaven' is found in all periods of Israel's history: <<*The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, "To your offspring I will give this land", he will send his angel before you; you shall take a wife for my son from there*>> (Genesis 24:7), <<*Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah*>> (Ezra 1:2), <<*When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven*>> (Nehemiah 1:4), <<'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land'>> (Jonah 1:9). It will endure until the end: <<*At that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven*>> (Revelation 11:13).

²⁶ O give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Psalm 136:26

O give thanks to the God of heaven. In directing God's people to do this, the psalmist not only had in mind their appropriate gratitude, but also to remind them that the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of heaven. He is the God who really exists and really reigns. Maclaren concluded, "Therefore the final call to praise, which rounds off the psalm by echoing its beginning, does not name him by the Name which implied Israel's special relation, but by that by which other peoples could and did address him, "the God of heaven," from whom all good comes down on all the earth."

For his steadfast love endures for ever. The singer has given twenty six reasons to respond to God with this statement, and God's people are persuaded. The never ending mercy of God – his loving kindness, his grace, his loyal love – will never stop finding a way to bless and help his people.

Spurgeon suggested many things Psalm 136 as a whole teaches:

- The past, present, or future will not end his mercy.
- The storms of life will not end his mercy.
- Distance from loved ones will not end his mercy.
- Death itself will not end his mercy.
- God's never ending mercy should make his people merciful to others.
- God's never ending mercy should make his people hopeful for others.
- God's never ending mercy should make them hopeful for themselves.