

SI: We’re going to finish Nahum eventually,
but today we’re going to study Psalm 136

I read it last week in my devotions and I was struck by how appropriate it is
for Thanksgiving. And I’ve never preached a sermon on this Psalm.

The Jew call it The Great Hallel.

That means, The Great Psalm of Praise.

It’s unique among all the Psalms for its repetition of a refrain.

“His love endures forever” is repeated twenty-six times.

Some scholars think that in the Hebrew worship service,
this refrain was sung by the congregation.

The song leaders, the singers, would sing the first part of the verse—
and then the congregation would respond—His love endures forever.

So that’s what we’re going to do this morning.

I’m going to read the first part of the verse,

and then all of you are going to respond: His love endures forever.

Your particular Bible version might say:

His mercy endures forever or his steadfast love endures forever.

We’re going to talk about that, why this phrase is translated different ways.

But for our reading,

we’re going to use the translation from the New International Version—

His love endures forever. That’s your part.

Now, for this to work, you can’t sound like a bunch of Presbyterians.

You have to sound like Pentecostals.

You have to pretend you’re up the street at Spirit Life Church of God.

You have to belt it out. His love endures forever.

Let’s practice. I’m going to read verse 1, and if you really put your voices into it,
then we’ll start over and go all the way through. Ready?

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good . . .

Pace yourself, because you’re going to say it 26 times.

Really build up the last few times so that it sounds like a crack of thunder.

INTRO: Last month I read an old book called *Love-Feasts*.
The early church had fellowship meals as a regular part of Sunday worship.
That practice lasted until the third century and then died out.

In the very earliest years, the meal was connected to Communion,
but in later centuries, the fellowship supper was after worship or later in evening.
They called the meal: The Agape.

Agape is a distinctively Christian word for love that Christ often used.

One of the points the author made that really jumped out at me was how often the
Bible speaks of believers eating together.

Think of all the feasts of the Old Testament church, not to mention the sacrifice
called the fellowship offering, that involved eating part of the cooked meat along
with the priest and other worshippers.

Also, think of how often the Gospels tell of Jesus eating with people.
Some of those meals were good times with his friends and disciples
like Mary and Martha. At those good meals, hearts were warmed and
commitment and love for God was deepened.

On the other hand, there were some very awkward dinners with Pharisees
and other religious leaders. The attitudes of hearts were exposed there too.
Some people at those awkward dinners came to faith in Christ,
but others were confirmed in their unbelief.

I never realized until I read that book the spiritual importance of the dinner table.

There is a sense in which every time we sit down at a meal, especially a big meal,
like a holiday feast, or a banquet for a special occasion—it is a sacrament.
A sacrament is a pipeline, a conduit, that God has established as a channel of grace.

Of course, the Lord's Table is the true sacramental meal.

But whenever we feast, it is a conduit of God's grace to us.
And we can either respond to that grace in the feast, and strive to be more gracious,
and thankful and generous and kind, or we can disregard that grace in the meal,
and become more selfish and ungrateful.

Tonight we have a fellowship supper here at the church.

It's been a tradition of our body since the beginning—Sunday before Thanksgiving.

Our family moved to Cullman on November 15, 1996.

The second Sunday we were here was the Sunday before Thanksgiving,
and we ate with this church family for the first time.

Don't downplay the importance of eating with God's people as a means of grace.
God uses dinner tables to make you a better, more grateful, loving Christian.
That's going to be one of the highlights of heaven—feasts and fellowship meals.
So with that in mind, let's look at Psalm 136.

Instead of giving you a two point sermon or a three point sermon,
I want you to imagine a Thanksgiving table.
Four legs. A table top. And on the table, an abundance of good food.

The four legs of this Thanksgiving table are the four commands in this Psalm.
Verses 1, 2, 3, and 26 say: Give thanks, Give thanks, Give thanks, Give thanks.
These are the four sturdy legs that hold up this table.

Next the table top. End to end it's made of 26 identical pieces of wood joined
together with the carpenter's skill. Those 26 pieces are the chorus of the Psalm.
His love endures forever, His love endures forever.
And finally, on this beautiful table top is a feast. It's the Thanksgiving meal.
It consists of an appetizer, two main courses, and a dessert.

But before we look at this Thanksgiving table of Psalm 136,
I want to give credit where credit is due. I listened to a fantastic sermon
on this Psalm by Dr. Miles Van Pelt. He is a professor of Old Testament and
Biblical Languages at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Miss.
His insights are tremendous and I'm humbled to pass them on to you.

The legs

The legs of this table are the four commands to give thanks.

As I've already pointed out—verse 1,2,3 and then the last verse 26.

In between these commands to give thanks is a rehearsal of all the good things God has done for his people.

What does give thanks mean? What is the Psalm telling us to do?

You sometimes hear people say that the Thanksgiving Holiday

is about being thankful, feeling grateful, having an attitude of gratitude..

But Psalm 136 doesn't say, Have a thankful attitude.

It says, Give thanks to the Lord.

This Psalm, and the rest of the Bible, defines true thanksgiving

as a public, audible expression of gratitude to God.

It is saying out loud, so other people hear you: I'm thankful to God for this or that.

The Lord is good. God blessed me. God led me. God helped me.

Not that the attitude of your heart unimportant. Of course it is, vitally important.

But if you don't express your thanksgiving publically, then you are not truly thankful, because you are denying God the credit he is due.

And you are implying that all you have is by your own achievement.

When I read or listen to a sermon that helps me understand the passage

or arrange it sermonically in a way I would never have come up with on my own,

I acknowledge that.

I say: I want to give credit where credit is due. You've heard me do that.

I tell you the preacher's name because I want you to know I'm dependent on him.

If I didn't, it would be plagiarism. I would be stealing the credit due another man.

It's like footnotes in a paper.

You put a little number at the end of the sentence that says see so-and-so.

That signifies to the reader this is not your idea or your words,

you got it from someone else.

Giving thanks to God publically expresses your dependence on him.

It's like living your life with a big footnote tattooed on your forehead.

Note number one: For all good things in my life, see God.

Someone says to you: What wonderful children you have, what a lovely home you

have, congrats on your business success, congrats on your good grades—

and you say: God is good. I'm thankful to the Lord for my family, my success.

You are giving credit where credit is due.

For Christians, an attitude of gratitude is not enough.

True thankfulness acknowledges publically, verbally, that all you have, and all you are, and all you accomplish is from him.

These four table legs have one more detail that drives home your total dependence.

Did you notice that God is referred to in four different ways?

Give thanks to the LORD. Give thanks to the God of gods.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords. Give thanks to the God of heaven.

Give thanks to the LORD. It's printed in all capital letters.

That means this is the name Yahweh. God's personal name, his covenant name. It's the name he used to reveal himself to Abraham, and call him in into a personal, saving relationship.

If you are watching television and you hear an athlete say: I want to thank God—that strikes you in a positive way. You say to yourself, good for him.

But when you hear an athlete say: I want to thank Jesus Christ—that takes it to a whole new level. That's a personal, saving name.

Give thanks to the God of gods.

This is a way of saying that he ruler over the invisible realm, all spiritual powers. Give thanks to the Lord of lords.

Notice, this is not printed in all capital letters. This is not Yahweh.

This is the Hebrew word Adoni—which means master, ruler.

This means that God is ruler over the visible realm, over all earthly authorities.

Give thanks to the God of heaven.

This is an unusual way of referring to God that the Bible rarely uses. The term "God of heaven" comes from Canaanite religion.

The Canaanites were polytheists. They worshipped many local gods like Baal. But they also believed in a supreme deity who they called the God of heaven.

They considered him distant, unknowable, and unapproachable.

This is a common feature of polytheism. The unknown God of the Athenians.

So the Psalm is making a magnificent declaration.

Yahweh is not only our personal God and Savior, the ruler over the visible and invisible, he is the unrivaled chief of every reality and system.

And it is to this God that you are called give thanks—publically, verbally.

Do you do that? Do you give thanks to God for all his goodness to you?

The top

Let's move from the legs of the Thanksgiving table to the top.

It's crafted of twenty-six pieces of beautiful wood from end to end—
each piece of wood says, His love endures forever.

Whenever the Bible repeats something, it causes us to sit up and take notice.

Four times it tells us, A man will leave his father and mother and
be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

Nine times it tells us, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

But forty-one times the Bible tells us: His love endures forever.

Twenty-six of those times are in this Psalm.

There is no other place in all of Scripture where there is a similar level of repetition.

This phrase was the most common liturgical element in OT worship.

You probably could not have attended a service without hearing it at least once.

It's obvious that the Holy Spirit wanted to impress this on God's people,
he included it so many times in the Bible.

So let's look at it carefully.

If you are reading another Bible version,

you will have noticed that it is translated different ways in English.

King James Version says: His mercy endureth forever.

New American Standard says: His lovingkindness endures forever.

English Standard says: His steadfast love endures forever.

Others have translated it great love, steadfast love, covenant love.

Those are all attempts to translate a Hebrew word that defies simple translation.

We don't have a single English word that captures it.

The Hebrew word is *hesed*.

What is God's *hesed*?

What is the meaning of this word that was the center of Old Testament worship?

Lamentations 3:22 actually defines *hesed*.

The good old King James Version translates it best:

It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.

The Lord's *hesed* is that we have not perished, we have not been destroyed,

because his compassion for us, his mercy towards us never runs out.

In other words, *hesed* means the Lord does not treat us as our sins deserve.

He treats us with compassion and mercy because of his covenant.

I've used this illustration far too often, but that pivotal scene in Victor Hugo's famous novel *Les Miserables* is probably the greatest literary picture of not being treated as our sins deserve.

You know the scene I'm talking about. It's when the convict Jean Valjean, who is homeless, is given a night's stay in the bishop's home.

He repays the bishop's kindness by stealing his silverware.

He is caught by the police with the silver and brought back.

He's facing prison again, this time for life.

But the bishop says: This silverware belongs to him, I gave it to him.

And friend, you forgot the silver candlesticks—here take those too.

And then, when the police have been dismissed, the bishop says:

“Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw from it black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”

Instead of being sent back to prison as he deserved,

he was set on a path of life and blessing. That's hessed.

And it's not fiction. It's not just a novel.

God has bound himself to you in Christ.

So even when you are faithless, he remains faithful.

Even when you break your covenant with him, he remains connected to you through Christ, who is the mediator of the covenant.

You've sinned against the people you love

and you've hurt them with your foolishness—His love endures forever.

You've doubted God's goodness,

you've blamed God for the troubles in your life—His love endures forever.

You've become bitter—His love endures forever.

You're depressed—His love endures forever.

You're overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and shame—His love endures forever.

Now, with that background, let's consider this table top again.

Twenty-six pieces of fine wood, joined together with a craftsman's skill from end to end form the top of this beautiful Thanksgiving table.

And on each piece is the inscription: His hessed endures forever.

His love—that does not treat you as your sins deserve.

His love—filled with mercy and compassion—that love endures forever.

Don't you want to eat at this table? You can. Jesus invites you.

The meal

That brings us to the meal spread on the table top of his hewed love.
It's more than a meal—it's a feast.

The feast starts with an appetizer.

Since we're imagining Thanksgiving, this is sneaking by the table and popping a deviled egg in your mouth, or snagging a piece of ham when mother not looking. An appetizer whets your appetite and creates an expectation for the main course.

The appetizer of this meal is verse 4—"to him who alone does great wonders." The word "wonders" in Scripture means the great and mighty things God does on behalf of his people. Mostly used to refer to all he did to bring them out of Egypt and through the desert. Christ's miracles sometimes called wonders. So that's the appetizer. We're about to feast on God's wonders on our behalf.

His wonders comes to us in two courses—

turkey and ham, along with all the traditional side dishes that go with each.

The Lord's first wonder is creation. Verses 5-9.

Those verses speak of him making the heavens, spreading out the earth on waters, making the great lights of the sky—the sun and moon and stars.

It's not a detailed account of creation, it doesn't mention vegetation and animals.

But the heavens and the earth, sun, moon, and stars is a shorthand way of saying all creation. Every part of it.

By calling creation one of God's wonders, the point is that he made creation for us. Think about the Israelites who first sang this Psalm.

They were surrounded by nations that worshipped the sun, moon, and stars.

They were in fear of them, had to placate them so that lives and harvest continue.

But God says to Israel:

No, don't serve these created things, I've made them to serve you.

I've made them for your good. You can feast on that.

Yesterday was the funeral of Woody Jacob's mother, Dean Jacobs.

The earth has revolved around the sun 83 times since she was born,

the moon has gone through its cycle almost 1,000 times. Stars and galaxies space.

But Mrs. Jacobs was not tiny cog in the wheel of an impersonal universe—

she was a child of God of heaven, a daughter of the God of gods, Lord of lords.

The sun served her. It gave her light to see the work God called her to do.

It gave heat to grow her gardens, and feed the people she loved.

She did not fear the material world, she was not a slave to it—it served her.

Because God made it for his people.

We don't have time to work out the implications of this, but whatever you are idolizing in your life—family, health, money, job. Why? Why be enslaved? Feast on the wonder that God has made those things to serve you.

The second main course is redemption.

Verses 10-22 recount the events in the book of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy when God saved his people by bringing out of Egypt.

Look what this Psalmist chooses to highlight about God's salvation.

He set them free from slavery by striking down the firstborn of Egypt.

He brought them through the Red Sea, sweeping away Pharaoh and his army.

He led them through the desert, striking down great kings who opposed them.

He opened the land of their inheritance by killing Sihon and Og

What's the common theme? Killing people.

The Lord's hewed love is displayed in his willingness to kill on your behalf.

He killed the firstborn of Egypt, killed Pharaoh and army, killed kings of Canaan.

The Lord is so committed to you that he does violence to anything and anyone who stands in the way of you gaining your promised inheritance.

What on earth does that mean?

It means in the big, historical sense, nations and empires, the proud and powerful who attempt to destroy the church and advance of Gospel will be swept away.

Where is Assyria? Babylon? Piles of dirt in desert, fragments in museums.

Where are the Roman emperors who fed Christians to lions? Dust.

Where are Lenin and Stalin and Mao and their atheism? Dead. Killed.

So if you are the type of person who worries about the big things.

Don't. The Lord will see to it that all opposition will be crushed.

But there is a more personal application.

The Lord's hewed love for you is so strong that he is willing to do violence unto death to anything in you that stands in the way of your inheritance.

Your enslaving sins, your idols—those things you trust to give you what God alone can give. The things you look to for your sense of worth, security, comfort, acceptance apart from Christ.

He is willing to drown those things and cut them down in a moment,

if they threaten to do your soul permanent harm by pulling you away from Christ.

That means everything that comes into your life, especially the things that knock you around, are the strong love of God for your redemption. How exactly, you might not know until you get to heaven—but but it's the Lord's work to set you free from bondage and lead to heaven.

That brings us to the dessert. Verse 23-25.

The whole Psalm up to this point is in the third person. It refers to Israel.

But here it changes to the first person. It says us. It's personal.

“To the one who remembered us in low estate, who freed us from our enemies.”

When the Scripture says God remembers, it doesn't mean he forgot, came to mind.

It's a way of saying that he sees and he will act.

Exodus says the Lord heard the groaning of Israelites in slavery and remembered his covenant with Abraham. That meant he acted on their behalf.

Well, here's the dessert.

He has seen us in our low estate, in our slavery to sin and he has remembered us.

The Lord's deliverance of Israel from Egypt was just a foreshadowing of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

The Creator of the heavens and the earth, the sun, moon, and stars

humbled himself and became part of creation. Born as a baby, laid in manger.

The Redeemer who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, who killed mighty kings willingly became the firstborn struck down, and the king killed on the cross.

It's the old, old story of Jesus and his love, all for us.

And then the very last bite of dessert is amazing:

“Who gives food to every creature.” It's evangelistic.

God's hesed love reaching out to those who do not yet know him.

How is God love communicated to every creature? One big way is by your giving thanks. By your public, audible expression of gratitude to God.

By you saying out loud, so your children, your friends and neighbors hear you:

The Lord is good to me. God blessed me. God led me. God helped me.

Those expressions of gratitude testify to the love of Jesus Christ—and they can sink in deep, change hearts, draw people to him.

You have a special opportunity to do that tonight at our Thanksgiving service.

At the end of the service we'll open the floor so you can give thanks to the Lord for his faithfulness this year.

I hope to hear many of you say: His love endures forever.