

Psalm 136: God's Reason for Rescue and Grace for Gratitude

Psalm 136 is the only psalm in the whole Psalter which has a *repeated refrain* in every verse. It is a far-reaching celebration of the love and covenant faithfulness of YHWH to his people, for steadfast love is the love which honors and works within the covenant. (Grogan, *Prayer, Praise and Prophecy*, p. 236)

Here's a list of the English words used in Bible translations of the Hebrew word **hesed**:

mercy, lovingkindness, mercy and loving-kindness, faithful love, his grace, God's love, steadfast love, loyal love, gracious love, tender love, his kindness

The terms *unfailing love, enduring love, and covenant love* are also often seen in Christian materials.

1. What is the impact of the repeated refrain, "God's steadfast love endures forever," or The Message paraphrase, "His love never quits," on you now? Think about how your understanding and experience of God's **hesed** has changed over time. What emotions and thoughts does that refrain evoke in you?

2. Here's an outline of **Psalm 136** with its introduction, conclusion and 3 stanzas:

I. Introduction: Verses 1-3 call us to *give thanks* to YHWH because he is *good* and because his *steadfast love* endures forever. Also read Psalm 100:5 and Exodus 34:6-7, YHWH's further revelation of his name and character to Moses. What hinders or helps you to trust the LORD's goodness and love?

II. Cosmic stanza: Verses 4-9 deal with YHWH's work of creation described in the opening verses of Genesis. Psalm 136 calls us to give thanks to LORD for his creation initiatives. How does the repeated refrain help you connect the *wonders of creation* with YHWH's *hesed*?

III. History stanza: Verses 10-22 lead us into summary statements of YHWH's initiatives in Exodus, Numbers, and Joshua. How does the repeated refrain here help you connect YHWH's *redemptive activity* for his people with his *hesed*?

IV. Continuing care stanza: Verses 23-25 speak of YHWH's continuing care of his people down to the present generation of believing people. YHWH remembers us in our "low estate," rescues us from enemies, and makes universal provision for food because of YHWH's *hesed*. Respond to this quote from Kellers' comments on p. 345 of *Songs of Jesus*:

...Paul hints that while God's greatness can be logically deduced from the created world (Romans 1:20), God's *love* is a complete

surprise and wonder. Looking at the human heart and history, you would never conclude that God loves us. But he does! Paul asks for help to grasp not God's righteousness but "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." (Ephesians 3:18) God's love is his most amazing trait, and likewise love should be his followers' most evident mark (John 13:35). It is yours?

V. Concluding Verse: Verse 26 is an inclusion, taking the reader back to the beginning with a final instruction to "give thanks" because YHWH's steadfast love endures forever. What is your experience with gratitude being a gift/grace of God?

3. Patrick Reardon, in *Christ in the Psalms*, observes that the triple structure of **Psalm 136**—*creation, deliverance, and continued care*—is identical with the triple structure of the Nicene Creed: *God made us, God saved us, God stays and provides for us all days unto the end*. In the Creed, this structure is explicitly Trinitarian: "one God, the Father Almighty, the Creator...one Lord, Jesus Christ...the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life." (Patrick Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, pp. 271-272) The Creed is on page 109 in the 2019 BCP.

How might his comparison deepen your understanding and enjoyment of both **Psalm 136** and the Nicene Creed?

4. Consider that the root of all of God's activity in you and in the world is his *hesed*, without beginning and without end. *Hesed* is the cause and reason for all God does. Encountering his *hesed* is the root of our worship; it is the explanation of every thought God has with respect to us.

The supreme reality is not the Lord's status (**1-3**), nor his work in creation (**4-9**) and history (**10-22**), nor even his goodness to Israel (**23-25**) but what he is in himself, the one whose *love endures forever*...

What is it to us that he is good, supremely exalted, the Creator, the Lord of history, the benefactor of people in time past, if there's not also the unchanging love which brings us too into the warm embrace and keeping of such a God? (*New Bible Commentary*, p. 577)

Think of both your past and more recent experiences with your "low estate" and your "fierce enemies." (**Psalm 136:23-24**) Read the poem on p. 346 in *Song of Jesus*.)

How do these humbling experiences and enemy attacks connect you with Jesus crucifixion experience, with "the way of the cross," a cruciform life?

Lord Jesus, fill us with wonder, love, and gratitude.