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Psalm 136

Praying with God:
His Love Endures Forever

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As I prepared this week I listened to a sermon on Psalm 136 where a pastor asked his **congregation** to write down “**One thing** God has **changed, saved, or redeemed** in my life.” We’re going to do the same thing. Would you write down “one thing God has changed, saved, or redeemed in my life”? We’re going to come back to these as part of the service, so write something you’re **comfortable** with others **hearing**. Would you do that? (**pause** for writing) Once you’ve written your one thing would you **pass** the piece of **paper** to our volunteers? Thank you. Let me **pray**.

Our Psalm today is all about the ways God has been faithful to the nation of Israel. We don’t know when it was written but this Psalm is a **salvation-history** Psalm.¹ That means it recounts the ways God has saved his people, specifically the nation of Israel. It starts with **creation**, then how God brought his people out of slavery in **Egypt**, the **Red Sea** crossing, Israel’s wandering in the **wilderness**, when they encountered **two kings, Sihon and Og**, and ends with God giving them the **promised land**.

According to **tradition**, Psalm 136 is known as “**The Great Hallel**.” Hallel is the **Hebrew** verb for “**praise**.” It’s where we get the word **hallelujah**, which means “praise Yahweh.” Although that Hebrew word isn’t in our Psalm. There was a number of other “Hallel” Psalms but only this one is known as the Great Hallel and would have been recited more often. Tradition says the Israelites sang this song during **Passover** and other festivals and celebrations like **Pentecost**.²

The **Priests** or **Levites** could have sang the **first half** of the verse, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” Then the people would have **responded** with the **second half** of the verse, “His love endures forever.” (1 Chr 16:41; 2 Chr 5:13, 7:3, 6; Ezra 3:11)³ It’s a **call** and **response** Psalm. So today I’m going to read through the text and I’d like you to **call the refrain** back to me, “His love endures forever.” Do you think you can do that? Does anyone need a Bible? Let’s give it a try with the first **three** verses.

Psalm 136

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

2 Give thanks to the God of gods.

His love endures forever.

3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords.

His love endures forever. (NIV®)

The beauty of this Psalm is it gives the **congregation** a chance to praise God **together**. In other words, it gives us a chance to praise God in **unison**. Together, we can recount God’s faithfulness and praise him for it.

¹ Stuart, Douglas. How to Read Your Bible for All Its Worth.

² HALLEL,” Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, paragraph 7361. https://accordance.bible/link/read/Holman_Dictionary#7361 (accessed 5/24/18).

³ Zondervan NIV Study Bible. Kindle Edition. Psalm 136 footnote. (accessed 5/24/18)

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

This Psalm truly is a **corporate prayer**. It's an opportunity for us in one voice to **pray** and **praise**. As we pray and praise through this song, I want you to have my **big idea**, since it can be **easy to miss** in our text...

His love endures forever. (v1-3)

I'm not kidding. This refrain is **so common** it's easy to let your **eyes gloss** right over it and miss it. But let's **pause** and think about it. We've just heard about the **character** of God in verses 1-3. We've heard about the Lord, who is **good**, who is the God of gods (that means the only **one true God**), and who is the Lord of Lords (which means he is in control over everything). And this God. This good, true, all-powerful God loves us! His love for us with an everlasting love.

This word for **love** is a word I've talked about so many times it's easy to let it grow **dull** and **boring**. It's the "**hesed**." But don't let it grow dull and boring because this is a special **covenant love**. That means this good, true, all-powerful God doesn't just give his people his love and then **revoke** it. No. It means God loves his people no matter what, even when we **don't deserve** it. He **promises** his love to us.

I'm **married**. My wife made **vows** to love me even when she doesn't feel like it. I made vows to love her even when I don't feel like it. We promised to give our love to each other and then signed our names on a marriage **certificate**, a binding promise with **legal ramifications**. We live in a culture that says, "If you really love each other, you don't need to get married." That's a love you can **walk away from** at any moment. That's **not safe**. That's **not secure**. God's love is a special, covenantal, unbreakable promise.

Do you want that kind of love? Do you need that kind of love? Maybe you've **experienced** that kind of loving promise in your own life? That's a **dim picture** of the kind of love God offers you. Or maybe you've **never** experienced love that's lasting and safe. God **offers** it to you tonight. *His love endures forever!*

His love has endured from our beginning (v4-9)

We're going to read responsively from verse 4 through 9. As we read these verses, notice where the Israelites **start** their song of praise. They thank God for the **beginning**, for **creation** all the way back from **Genesis 1**. As we recite these words, thank God for creating this **world**, the **sun**, and **moon**, and **stars**, **oceans**, and **human beings** like you.

4 to him who alone does great wonders,

His love endures forever.

5 who by his understanding made the heavens,

His love endures forever.

6 who spread out the earth upon the waters,

His love endures forever.

7 who made the great lights—

His love endures forever.

8 the sun to govern the day,

His love endures forever.

9 the moon and stars to govern the night;

His love endures forever. (NIV®)

I know our **heads** aren't **bowed** and our **eyes** aren't **closed**, but **we're praying**. We're speaking to God. We're thanking him. We're praising him. That's what prayer is. *His love has endured from our beginning.*

His love endures in both captivity and deliverance. (v10-15)

Although we **don't know who** wrote this Psalm, it's written for the **nation of Israel** because it jumps over most of the book of **Genesis** and goes straight to **Exodus** and the **formation of Israel** as they came out of captivity in Egypt. As we recite verses 10 through 15 notice how we praise God for two events, the **Exodus** from Egypt and the **crossing** at the Red Sea.

10 to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt

His love endures forever.

11 and brought Israel out from among them

His love endures forever.

12 with a mighty hand and outstretched arm;

His love endures forever.

13 to him who divided the Red Sea asunder

His love endures forever.

14 and brought Israel through the midst of it,

His love endures forever.

15 but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea;

His love endures forever. (NIV®)

Egypt was one of the **first-world countries** of its time, and the Lord absolutely **crushes** them to deliver his people. But that was only **after 400 to 430** years of captivity in Egypt under hard **cruel** slave-labor (Gen 15:13; Exod 12:40). Do you think in those 400 years the Israelites ever **despaired**? Do you think they ever doubted God and wondered where he was? Do you think they ever wondered when they would be **free**?

When we're captive to something it's easy to despair. When you're tied-up by a **boss** or **coworker** who is cruel, by a **sickness** you just can't shake, by an **addiction** to drugs, alcohol, or pictures, by **bitterness** so deep you don't know if it will ever leave, God doesn't love you **any less**. Even if the captivity is your fault, if you've chosen your shame, **God still loves** you. He loves us because he **poured** out all his **anger** at our sin upon his Son, Christ Jesus. Jesus suffered and died to set the captives **free**. The **cross** displays God's love.

God **supernaturally delivered** the Israelites by sending **plagues** on the Egyptians, striking down their firstborn and **drowning** Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. Just like it's a real **temptation** to believe God loves me less when I'm trapped in my sins or life's **not going well** it's just as much a temptation to believe that when God finally delivers me from those things it must be because I've finally gotten **something right** and God can really love me now. God promised his people his love no matter what. *His love endures in both captivity and deliverance.*

His love endures even when we wander. (v16)

We're just responding to one verse this time.

16 to him who led his people through the wilderness;

His love endures forever. (NIV®)

I just want to point out that God took the Israelites out of Egypt and then to Sinai and all the way to the border of the promised land, but because they **didn't believe** they had to spend the next **40 years** wandering in the wilderness. Have you ever seen a **missing persons** poster? Families put those up not because they're mad at their family member for being lost, but because they love their family member and want them to come home. When our **hearts** wander, when we run away from our **church family**, when we get into **relationships** we shouldn't, when we **fail**, his love still endures. *His love endures even when we wander.*

His love endures when others attack us. (v17-22)

As the Israelites wandered the wilderness they encountered hostile kings and their armies, but rejoiced because even in the face of aggression God's love endured.

17 to him who struck down great kings,

His love endures forever.

18 and killed mighty kings—

His love endures forever.

19 Sihon king of the Amorites

His love endures forever.

20 and Og king of Bashan—

His love endures forever.

21 and gave their land as an inheritance,

His love endures forever.

22 an inheritance to his servant Israel.

His love endures forever. (NIV®)

You can read the story of the Lord delivering the Israelites from **Sihon** and **Og** in **Numbers 21:21-35**. **Moses** had to lead the Israelites through the land of the **Amorites** and so he sent word to king **Sihon** saying he and his people wouldn't eat from their **vineyards** or drink from their **wells** if **Sihon** would let them pass through. But **Sihon** was an evil king and he attacked them. God defeated him and gave Israel their lands.⁴ When people **attack** and **hurt you** unfairly, God can use it for your **good** because he **loves** you.

When the Israelites sang verse 19 it reminded them of God's love for them **in the past**. When we recite **verse 20**, how God defeated the mighty **Og** king of **Bashan**, it can remind us of God's love **for us today**. **Bashan** was a lush countryside full of wild **bulls**. When have we talked about **Bashan** before in our **sermon series** in the Psalms?

Psalm 22:12

Many bulls surround me;

strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. (NIV®)

Do you remember how Psalm 22 is a prophecy of the **Messiah**? When Jesus was surrounded by a whole company of **soldiers** (Matt 27:27-31), as many as **600** men who struck him, beat him, and spit on him, I think he was symbolically surrounded by the **forces of darkness**, the **spiritual descendants** of **Og** king of **Bashan**.⁵ **Moses** defeated **Og** king of **Bashan** **foreshadowing** how one day Christ Jesus would defeat the bulls of **Bashan** by **dying** and **rising** again. Jesus died to defeat our bulls of **Bashan**, to defeat our sin and rebellion and the hurt and attacks in this world.

⁴ To understand why this is so significant we need to go back to **Genesis 9** and **Noah's** three sons, **Shem**, **Ham**, and **Japheth**. After the flood Noah planted a **vineyard**, got **drunk**, and fell asleep **naked** in his tent. Ham saw and **dishonored** his father but Shem and Japheth walked into the tent backwards and **covered** him (Gen 9:18-29). So Noah curses the descendants of Ham, the people of **Canaan** (Gen 9:25). The Canaanites are ancestors of the Amorites. Canaan and the Amorites are the **historic enemies** of the descendants of **Shem**, or the **semites**, the Jews (Gen 10:21). God promises Abraham in **Genesis 15** that he will give his descendants the land of the Canaanites and Amorites (Gen 15:18-21). So when **Sihon** king of the Amorites attacks the Israelites God uses this to **fulfill his plans** to give the Israelites their land.

⁵ Deuteronomy 3 tells us **Og** was a giant said to be related to the **Rephaites**, who were the spiritual descendants of the **Rephaim** (Gen 6:4; Deut 3:11).

Did you know according to **tradition** the Priests, Levites, and people sang Psalm 136, the **Great Hallel**, when they **sacrificed** the **Passover lamb**? The Bible tells us **Jesus** and his **disciples** sang a hymn as they left the **Passover meal** to go to the **Mount of Olives** (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26). Jesus fulfilled **Psalm 22** as he **hung** on the cross and he may have sung **Psalm 136** on his **way** to that **cross**. Can you hear Jesus **singing out**, “His love endures forever” as he **walks** towards the **cross**?

When I feel like I’m surrounded by strong bulls of Bashan, when people as powerful as Sihon and Og attack me, or I am oppressed by the spiritual forces of darkness, I can **think of Jesus** surrounded by strong bulls of Bashan, **reciting**, “His love endures forever.” If you trust in Jesus you too can whisper, “Jesus’ love endures forever.” *His love endures when others attack us.*

His love endures forever! (v23-26)

As we think about everything **Jesus** did, would you join me as we recite the last part of our Psalm? This section brings us full circle back to the same God who made the **heavens**.

23 He remembered us in our low estate

His love endures forever.

24 and freed us from our enemies.

His love endures forever.

25 He gives food to every creature.

His love endures forever.

26 Give thanks to the God of heaven.

His love endures forever. (NIV®)

Andy has **gathered** the ways God has **changed, saved, and redeemed** our lives. He is going to lead us in our own brand-new Cornerstone **worship song**. When I listened to the **other church** do this, I was so **encouraged** I thought this would also be a nice moment for us to share. He’s gone through the slips of paper and removed any ones that were **repetitive** or **too private** and now he’s going to come up and read them. And after he’s read one, **we’ll all recite**, “His love endures forever.” We’ll keep going until Andy finishes them and that will lead us into our final worship song and the offering. Would you join me in **proclaiming**, “*His love endures forever!*”

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church.

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