

Thank God for his steadfast love (Psalm 136)

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Occasionally some things bear repeating, meaning sometimes words and phrases are worth saying more than once. But the question is why? Why would we ever want to say the same thing more than once??? It's because of the importance of the information. If it's really important to get it right the first time (like with instructions), or if we want to elevate the importance of a thought (like when we emphasize a theme, or root cause), or if something has so overwhelmed our minds that we really can't think or say anything else (like when folks shout "they won, they won" after a football game)... then it's worth repeating. This brings us to Psalm 136. Where the psalmist is going to say the exact same thing not just two or three times but 26 times in a row. And so, as we read through it now, I want you to fight the urge to tune out, and instead think about why this divinely inspired author felt the need to say the same thing over and over again throughout the psalm. It's here for a reason... What's so important??? Let's look at it together this morning and find out. Please stand with me for the reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word...

Read Psalm 136. Pray

The first thing to notice about our psalm this morning is that it's even more repetitious than it sounds. Yes, the phrase "for his steadfast love endures forever" gets repeated after every verse, but there's also this repeated command to "Give thanks" throughout the passage. Look back for a moment to the first few verses with me. Verse 1 says "Give thanks to the Lord", then verse 2 says "Give thanks to the God of gods", and verse 3 says it again with "Give thanks to Lord of lords", then look way down at the end of the psalm (verse 26) where it says one last time "Give thanks to the God of heaven". Now compared with how many times we read "for his steadfast love endures forever" (26), the loose phrase give thanks to God is repeated only 4 times which may not seem quite as impressive but take another quick look it. Verse 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 17 all start with the words "to him", and so the obvious question to ask is who's the "him" it's talking about??? Well, given the context it's God of course. So, there's 8 more times that the command to give thanks to God is given (which if you're keeping count brings us up to 12 so far). But wait there's still more... (After all) every single verse says, "for his steadfast love endures forever", so who do you suppose it's talking about there and what do you suppose we're called to do in response??? Here comes the captain obvious answer of... every single verse in this psalm is calling us to Thank God for his steadfast love. It's the theme of the whole psalm, and the command is found in every single verse. It's a thought that's so important it's worth repeating not just once or twice but 26 times in a row, because it's a combination of every good reason to repeat something. Here in Psalm 136 God is commanding us to do it, so it's worth repeating for the sake of our memory and understanding. God is also elevating the importance of it, so we understand that it's pivotal to our relationship

with him. And here the psalmist is so overcome by the awesomeness of God's steadfast love that he can't help but confess his thanks to him over and over again. So, if the theme of this whole psalm is calling us to Thank God for his steadfast love (which endures forever), why take 26 verses to say it? Or maybe more to the point, why not just leave it there and repeat just that phrase 26 times? Well, I'm going to argue that it's because the psalmist is trying to persuade his readers to actually do it, and so the writer is going to carefully lay out 4 reasons why we should Give thanks to God for his steadfast love. First... because it's shown in God's Character, second because it's shown in God's Creation, third because it's shown in God's Salvation, and lastly because it's shown in God's Continuing Providence. So, let's look back at those first three verses and see how God's steadfast love is shown in his character.

Read verses 1-3

Do you notice anything missing in these three verses that's present in the rest of the psalm? In these first few verses God's steadfast love isn't displayed by any particular work on his part, rather it's simply tied to declarations of who he is. He is the Lord, He is Good, he is the God of gods, and he is the Lord of lords. So, we see first that steadfast love is wrapped up in the very nature of who God is. And it makes sense to start there, doesn't it? After all, as a church we've been enjoying a study on the nature and work of God in our Sunday school time (which if you haven't been coming I'd really encourage you to do so). Logan and Cliff have been doing a great job explaining the various attributes of God, a couple of which are in view here. First (as we see elsewhere in scripture) God is love. The very nature of God is an eternal triune relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit of which love has always been present in its fullness. To say that God is love, is not to say that God is love because he does things for others that are loving, but rather to say that his very being is love itself, and so everything that comes from him will be loving. If this is sounding like Logan's recent sermon on James 2 (faith without works is dead) then you're on the right track. Unloving people can occasionally do things that are loving. After all, even sinners like us know how to give good gifts to our own children, but is that who God is? Thankfully the answer is no. When God says he is love, he's saying that there is something unique about him that's not true of anyone else in the universe. It's not true of other gods (lower case g), its not true of other lords. Meaning it's not true of any other ruler or authority to be found anywhere in heaven or on earth. Steadfast love has always been wrapped up in the character of God, which sets him apart from everyone else (including each and every one of us here this morning). As the Lord Jesus would put it in Mark "No one is good except for God alone". So, our first reason to thank God for his steadfast love (which) endures forever, comes from the very character (or nature) of God himself. God is the only being in the universe who can be described as perfect love. If the whole chapter was only these three verses long, it would be more than enough reason to thank God for his steadfast love that endures forever.

But we've still got 23 verses to go, and so the psalmist naturally moves from focusing on the Character of God to the work of God (which flows from his character). Here again in verse 4 the writer picks up the idea of God's uniqueness again but this time because he "alone does great wonders". This not only serves to remind us of what we just covered, but also to emphasize that he's the only being capable of doing the types of things we are going to read about in the rest of the psalm. Everything that follows is God's work, and only God can take credit for it. So, what is the first example of God's work? Creation! Verses 5-9 elaborate on his creative power, but the writer of the psalm asks us to focus in on how creation displays God's steadfast love and thank him for it. So how is God's steadfast love shown in creation? Well in at least two ways really. The first is in the fabric of what he made, and the second is the benefit we receive from it. Let's start with the first. As one would expect everything that a uniquely good and loving God creates is in fact declared by God himself to be good. God wasn't obligated to make the universe in any particular way. Everything he made flowed naturally out of his own creativity. And as such everything was indeed good, and his love is reflected in the tender care he put into everything he made. Ultimately on the 6th day he would create both Adam and Eve who were simultaneously made to be in a loving relationship with God himself and with each other. To them he gave dominion over (and a command to fill) the earth and so the earth itself was destined to be the home of mankind. Again, God didn't have to give mankind a home filled with every physical thing they would ever need. He didn't have to make it beautiful. He didn't have to make it orderly, for that matter he didn't have to make it at all. The very fact that he did all of this, tells us that he loves his creation. Think about it, even though we live in a fallen world (corrupted by sin and death), the sun feels warm on your skin, food (for the most part) tastes good, the world around us is orderly and predictable allowing us to live without constant fear, God given relationships are full of love and beauty, sunsets are gorgeous, even the snow outside sparkles in the light, God even loved his creation enough to give them nightlights. Have you ever just sat back and thought, man if it looks and feels like this now (after sin entered the world), what must it have been like before when absolutely all of it was declared good by God himself. That's what love looks like in creation, but it's not all of it. We know from the book of Romans that creation wasn't Just made for our enjoyment, but was also designed to point us to the existence and character of God. It's important that we pause here and understand that because creation flowed from the heart of an eternally loving God, it would of course reveal his perfect character, which would be an enduring testimony for us in a fallen world. God designed everything for his glory knowing full well that mankind would rebel against him and fall into sin. So, it's not an afterthought that looking up into an infinite sky at night makes us feel small or looking at the vast ocean makes us feel weak or looking at ancient mountains makes our lives seem short. Even animals like sheep were not just convenient sermon applications for Jesus... He created

them exactly as they are so that we would understand something about ourselves. Defenseless Sheep don't stupidly wander away from loving shepherds by chance. They wander because God loved us enough to give us a vivid and enduring example of the sinful rebellious nature within all of mankind that causes us to stupidly run from God. "All we like sheep have gone astray" is the refrain from Isaiah 53, and it only hits home because a God showed steadfast love to us (his rebellious creatures) by giving us a hard-hitting example of how we were responding to him. The fundamental truth is that God not only showed steadfast love when he blessed us with the created order, he also showed it by using creation to proclaim his character and ours. So, it is abundantly fitting that we Thank God for his steadfast love shown in creation.

So far, the psalmist has led us to Give thanks to God for the steadfast love shown in his character and creation, so let's continue and consider how Psalm 136 calls us to God for his steadfast love shown in salvation. Now I know that the word Salvation is loaded with personal significance for all the believers here, and of course that's where we're headed. But I don't want us to jump there in our minds just yet, because God's work of saving Israel from slavery, and wonderfully providing for them is the next major historical example of his steadfast love. Think about it for a moment. The biblical account of Israel's exodus from Egypt and entrance into the promised land is absolutely amazing all by itself. Here we see God's work in powerfully rescuing his people from the clutches of Egypt, the dangers of the wilderness, and all the other nations they would face on the way to the promised land. Look at the language that is used in this section. God strikes down, brings out with might, divides the Red Sea in two, makes Israel pass through it, but then drowns the Egyptians in it, then God leads Israel through the wilderness, striking down and killing kings and nations who opposed his people, so that he can turn around and give their land to Israel as an over-the-top blessing. This is a ridiculous display of God's power to save Israel from the nations. But what kicked it all off? Why did God do all of this in the first place? He did it because of his steadfast love. Listen to what it says at the beginning of Exodus... "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel-and God knew." Take a second and let that sink in. Everything that God did on behalf of his people was because of his promises, and his understanding of their plight. God heard, God remembered, God saw, God knew, and because of that God acted. If you were an Israelite this was all the proof you needed that God loved you, and you were in a privileged relationship with him. What else could you have done but Thanked God for his steadfast enduring love shown to you by the saving of your people. And if you're a Christian, everything I just said should be blowing trumpets in your mind stirring up your own response of Thanksgiving to God for his work on your behalf. On this side of the cross we rightfully see God's work in our own salvation here as well. Because we were saved by the same God, showing the same love to us. Brothers and Sisters, we were hopelessly in bondage to Sin, powerless to do anything about it, doomed to

life of slavery to a horrible master followed by an eternity of affliction in hell. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Christian, this is your story! And it should have the same effect on you that the exodus had on the early Jewish readers... but a billion times more so. Because in all of history there isn't a greater display of God's steadfast love than the one that led our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ to live the life we couldn't, die the death we deserved, and raise in triumph three days later! When Paul thought about it, he proclaimed “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” And that is exactly the response it should generate within each of us who are his people this morning. As Christians, we should always look back to the cross and Thank God for his steadfast love in Salvation.

Now we might be tempted to stop there, looking back to the cross and rightfully basking in the glory of God's love revealed to us on it. But the psalmist doesn't stop there. He goes on to summarize the content of the entire chapter in a way that takes the past and applies it to the here and now which effectively brings us to our last point this morning, where we are called to thank God for his steadfast love shown in his Continuing Providence meaning God's present day loving provision. Listen to what he says and see if you can spot any differences in how these last few verses are phrased.

Read 23-26

The first thing to notice is what verses 23-24 are doing. Like I just said They take the events of the past and bring them into the present. He remembered (past) us (present), He rescued (past) us (present). The folks he's talking to in this psalm aren't the children of Israel who experienced the Exodus, they are his present day readers. Now those statements are cool and may lead us to think that the psalmist is simply telling his fellow Israelites how they received their national identity. Similar to how we teach the events of the Revolutionary war to kids in school. It helps them understand where they came from, and value their country and citizenship. But that falls short of what the psalmist has done here. So perhaps a better analogy would be teaching our kids about the value of the constitution. You see unlike a simple history lesson; the constitution is still part of our everyday lives. It guarantees our freedom and defines our government in such a way that it's just as important, and just as active right now as it was 200 years ago. A person may bicker over the details of the Battle of

Bunker hill, and it really doesn't change much. But appoint 9 Justices to debate the details of the constitution and our whole lives are immediately affected. Babies are born instead of killed, rights are protected rather than taken, and law is applied to us all equally instead of with favoritism. To study the constitution is to study our current relationship with government. That's the type of application we see in the last section of psalm 136, and we can say that because of what happens to each verse when you add the refrain of the whole chapter after it. It's not just He remember us... it's He remembered us because his steadfast love (for us) endures forever. The writer of psalms 136 is not teaching an empty history lesson about God's work long ago, He's revealing God's heart toward us as shown in his Character, Creation, and Salvation and then going a step further and letting us know that God loves us right now, this very second, with that exact same love. The last 2000 years haven't changed God's love, all the time that has passed since the beginning of creation hasn't changed God's love, God's love is no less strong today than it was from eternity past, and it won't change a bit for all of eternity yet to come. In the words of Augustus Toplady...

The work which His goodness began, the arm of His strength will complete; His promise is Yea and Amen, And never was forfeited yet. Things future, nor things that are now, Not all things below or above, Can make Him His purpose forego, Or sever my soul from His love. (A debtor to Mercy Alone)

God's steadfast love that endures forever is just that... unchanging for all eternity! And why is that you may ask? Well... It doesn't change because it flows from the heart of God who doesn't change. That's the kind of love that a person can depend on. But how available is it? We've seen plenty of examples of God's love to his creation, and his people in this chapter. But what about people who are still rebelling against their creator, wandering sheep who have so far stubbornly refused to look into the past and embrace the significance of the cross in their lives right now? Maybe that describes you this morning... Is there any steadfast love available for you? Well Verse 25 gives us the answer. God gives food to all flesh because of his steadfast love which endures forever. Now that might seem like a strange way to answer the question at first but take a closer look and see who God is sustaining here. It's all flesh. Not just his people, not just Israelites, not just Christians, but everyone everywhere. This verse looks back at God's work in creation and lets us know that God still loves his creatures. That God is the one responsible for feeding and caring for his creation (right now), even though creation has fallen because of sin. That means that even if you hate God, he is lovingly providing for your physical needs. But there's something far better for you here than just food. God has offered his love to you in an infinitely more valuable way . Perhaps John says it best when he writes "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life". God loves us (all flesh) so much, that he gave us his Son Jesus. So that each and every one of us who looks back into history and believes that Jesus' death on a cross wasn't just a random historical fact (like bunker hill), but (more like the constitution) an

incredibly powerful display of love that means everything in the world to us right this very second. Because 2000 years ago Jesus didn't just die for random people's sins, he died for yours if you will just repent of them and embrace God's gift to you. If you find yourself wanting to do that, or perhaps just to know more about how you can personally experience God's love through Jesus Christ then please talk to Logan or I after the service. God's steadfast love is being offered to you right now, and God's word is calling you to thank him for it, by receiving it in faith. Don't treat it like an empty history lesson.

Now, how about those who have already embraced God's love in Christ Jesus. How are we supposed to respond to the message of Psalm 136? Well hopefully that's abundantly clear by now. We are supposed to "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love (that) endures forever". A love that is revealed to us in God's character, his creation, his salvation, and his continuing providence for us. But what does that actually mean? What does it look like to give thanks to God for his love? Well, first off, it's not just a warm fuzzy feeling of appreciation, or a quick "hey thanks for that". That type of thank you is commonly heard when you receive a gift you really didn't want all that much or isn't of any real value to you. If your spouse were to give you a half-eaten cold French fry for Christmas, your response probably would sound sort of like gee thanks... But is that the type of thanks we are supposed to be offering up to God? Are his gifts of creation, salvation, and provision just last-minute afterthoughts tossed our way at the last minute? No, not at all! God planned how he would show his steadfast love to us from all eternity past. Everything he did in history was building to the climactic moment when the ultimate display of his love would be hung up on a tree so that everyone could see him clearly. A gift this amazing should stir up thanksgiving within you like nothing else can. Our hearts should burst with gratitude, it should be on the tip of our tongue as we go throughout our day. People we meet and work with should see and hear how thankful we are to God for his love. Sure, we should thank him at mealtimes, but so much more than that we should thank him with our very lives! Thanking him with our time, our energy, our resources, everything is offered back to God in thanks for his love to us. Sunday morning service should never be just a gee thanks in our hearts, a way we check the box of thanking God like a quick prayer before we eat. It should be the highlight of our week, as it's an opportunity for us to thank him with our time (by coming), our energy (by joyfully participating, and serving), and our resources (our tithes, the overtime we might have earned at work, the cost of the meat we won't be able to shoot, or the cost of the things we bring to share with others)... Nothing is too small, and nothing is too big, all of it should be offered back to him in thanks. And just like a word or phrase worth repeating... Christians should repeat the work of thanking God with their lives again and again and again every single day we have here on earth, until we join the chorus of thanksgiving with our brothers and sisters in heaven, to carry on thanking God for his Steadfast Love for all eternity. "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" Let's pray...