PSALM 136: “For His Steadfast Love Endures Forever”

This psalm is known as “The Great Hallel” or The Great Praise. It is a magnificent psalm of praise. What stands out is that every verse, all 26 verses, ends with the phrase, “For His steadfast love endures forever!” The Jewish people would sing this in the temple with one choir against another—point, counterpoint—one side sings the first part of the verse and the other side responds by singing, “For His steadfast love endures forever.” Now, it could be sung with (1) two choirs or (2) a leader and a choir or (3) a leader and a congregation, whatever the case, you get the idea. One commentary I looked at said that the line that gets repeated in all 26 verses of the psalm in English seems a bit tedious because there are anywhere from 7 to 12 syllables in it depending on the translation. However he suggested (I have not checked this to verify) in the Hebrew it would have been only 6 syllables. So, if that’s the case, this psalm would have had a good flow to it, a good metre and rhythm.

I believe that it is this psalm that was sung in two different times and places that are recorded for us in scripture. One is in 2 Chronicles Chapter 20. Jehoshaphat was the king of Judah. He was a good king and committed to the Lord. In Chapter 20 Judah is invaded and attacked by a coalition of hostile nations (Moabites, Ammonites and others). Jehoshaphat calls his people together to pray and to seek the Lord’s help. The king himself leads the assembly in prayer. God answers their prayer and promises, thru one of His prophets, Jahaziel, that He will give His people victory. The battle will be won by God Himself, by Him alone. Jehoshaphat and his troops then set out confidently to meet their enemies and along the way they sang a song of praise to the Lord, v 21, “Give thanks to the Lord, for His steadfast love endures forever!” A singing army! Very likely it was the Great Hallel, Psalm 136 that they sang. The rest of the chapter tells how while Jehoshaphat and his army were approaching the invading enemy singing, God intervened and caused their enemies to fight against themselves, and they ended up killing off each other. The scripture says “they destroyed one another.” READ 2 Chronicles 20:24-25.

The second place this psalm was sung is found in Ezra Chapter 3 during the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Of course that followed the 70 year exile of God’s people in Babylon. A remnant returned to the Promised Land, back to their homeland, under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. One of the first things they did was to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem which had been destroyed by Nebucchadnezzar. Ezra 3:11 tells us: “And they (workers on the temple foundation) sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.’ And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.” Again, this is very likely the Great Hallel that they sang.

It’s interesting that in both of these stories the Great Hallel is not being sung in a worship service per se, but by an army enroute to battle and by workers on the job. It was a song they all knew by heart, probably taught to them when they were children. What I want you to see is that this would have been a familiar and popular praise song of the Jewish people. So with that introduction let’s take a look at The Great Hallel, Psalm 136…

READ Psalm 136:1-3

This psalm is a call to praise the Lord, to give thanks, to acknowledge God publicly and it tells us why we should do this. Yes, God desires and even commands that His people praise Him. But God doesn’t just tell His people to praise Him, He tells them why. And this psalm gives us three basic reasons why His covenant people ought to praise God. First and foremost, because of WHO He is. And that’s what these first three verses tell us. V 1 says “He is good.” God is fundamentally good. V 2 says He is “the God of gods.” In other words He is supreme. He is above all others. He is unique. He is the one true living God. V 3 says that He is “the Lord of lords.” He is sovereign. He is the Master. He is the Ruler. There may be human leaders, kings, lords, but God is sovereign over all of them. So the people of Israel were to praise God, to give Him thanks because He is good, supreme and sovereign.

Before we go on any further let me talk briefly the refrain which we see throughout this psalm – the ESV translates it, “for his steadfast love endures forever.” The RSV translates it the same way. The KJV says, “for his mercy endureth forever.” The New Living Translation says, “His faithful love endures forever.” The New English Translation says, “for his loyal love endures.” The NIV says simply, “His love endures forever.” The NASB says, “For His lovingkindness is everlasting.” The American Standard Version says, “For his lovingkindness endureth forever.” So there are many different translations of this in our English Bibles. Let me try to clarify what the real meaning is. *[show Hesed slide]*

The “hesed” character of God is everlasting. It is forever, because God is eternal and unchanging.

So the obvious question before us as New Testament believers who are not under the Old covenant is this: Does this apply to us? Does God have “hesed” for us as He did for Israel? As Christians we are under a New Covenant, which is what the Book of Hebrews explains. We are not under the Old Covenant, we are under a new covenant, a better covenant which is mediated by Jesus Christ Himself. He is our great High Priest. He ministers on our behalf. Hebrews 8:6 says, “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.” I would contend then that we as Christians are still covenant people, under a different covenant than the people of Israel in the Old Testament but worshipping and thanking the same covenant-keeping God as they did. We rest assured that God will keep His promises to us. I love Paul’s words of assurance in 2 Timothy 2:10-13: “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself.”

God is faithful. He is trustworthy. He keeps His promises. He did to Israel in the old covenant and He still does to us who are under a new and better covenant.

The second part of Psalm 136 is the longest section. It speaks about what God has done for His people. We are to praise and give thanks to God not only for who he is, but what He has done.

READ Psalm 136:4-22

*[Comments as you read passage to include:*

*God being the intelligent and good Creator of the world;*

*God’s delivering His covenant people out of Egyptian bondage (Passover celebration);*

*God’s mighty hand delivering His people from Pharaoh’s army;*

*God delivering His people from their enemies beginning with victory on the way to the Promised Land over the Amalekites, Exo 17;*

*God led His people by pillar of cloud and pillar of fire;*

*God gave Israel victories over Sihon and Og, Num 21, during the 40-yr wilderness wanderings (God remained faithful to His faithless people);*

*Eventually under Joshua the people of Israel went in and took possession of the land of Canaan which God had promised to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - He kept His promise.]*

We, as the people of God can look back at history – Biblical history, world history and American history and see clearly the providential hand of God working out the events according to His divine will. We can see God’s power, His extraordinary actions, His supernatural intervention, His many and mighty wonders. Not only that but each of us could give testimony to the hand of God at work in our lives at various times. So a major reason why we praise God, why we give Him thanks is for what He has done, for the countless blessing that He has showered us with.

The last few verses of this psalm focus on God’s providence care, how He works in our own lives. This is what God does and will do for each of us personally as believers, as followers of Jesus Christ. Phil 4:19 promises us, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

READ Psalm 136:23-26

God is at work even now meeting our various needs – physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual. I love v 23, that “He remembered us in our low estate.” In that great hymn, “It is well with my soul” one of my favorite lines says this: “Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, Let this blest assurance control, That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, And hath shed His own blood for my soul.” I often ask, “What is it that God saw in me that He would do something like that for me?” I can’t answer that. All I know is that He did. He remembered my low estate – a sinner, ordinary in every way, selfish, a bit narcissistic at times, lustful, prideful, often exercising poor judgment, lazy, self-absorbed way too often, not always faithful to Him… but God loves me anyway and He sent His Son to die for me on the cross so that I, unworthy as I am, could have eternal life. Amazing! And then on top of that, He provides for me physically. I never go hungry or thirsty. He has blessed me with a wonderful wife, family, friends and more material things than I ever needed. And He even deals with my enemies (yes, I do have some of them). What a great God! His goodness to me is humbling especially when I consider how unworthy I am. What other response do I have but “Thank you, O Lord, Your hesed, Your steadfast love, Your loyal love, Your lovingkindess, Your mercy, Your grace, will never end!

As I thought about what song we should sing, I realized that this psalm at its core is a psalm of thanksgiving (that’s how it begins and ends). And even though it’s July, I thought to myself, we should sing a song of thanksgiving, a thanksgiving hymn. So even though this song is one we normally sing in November as we celebrate Thanksgiving Day, I think it’s most appropriate for Psalm 136 – “We Gather Together,” an old Dutch Hymn composed in the late 1500’s but it conveys a timeless truth that God “forgets not His own.” One verse – sing it out to God! And with this we will close.