

## Everlasting Love

### Psalm 136

So, what are you most thankful for during this thanksgiving season? I suppose most of our minds naturally turn to the dinner table, laden with turkey and dressing, cranberry sauce, all kinds of vegetables – oh, and don't forget the pumpkin pie! As Americans, we should give God thanks for the fertile soil and generous rains with which He has blessed us, and the abundance of food they allow our farmers to produce. But giving thanks for food isn't where Psalm 136 begins – no it's right at the very end, in verse 25. That doesn't seem to be the psalmist's top priority.

No, he seems to be much more interested in what he describes in verses 23 and 24, where he focuses on how God remembered His people when they were in big trouble and how God rescued them from the hand of their enemies. In fact, the psalmist spends verses 10 through 22, almost half of the psalm, giving specific examples of how God saved His people throughout their history, focusing on the time of the Exodus from Egypt. He recalls the plagues God sent on the Egyptians, including the killing of all their firstborn. He marvels at how God parted the Red Sea to allow His people to pass through in safety, while drowning the Egyptian army when they attempted to give chase. He remembers how God allowed His people to defeat Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. Who can doubt that such wonderful deliverance is a great reason to give thanks to God?

And maybe some of you have experienced a similar sort of rescue this year. Oh, not perhaps in a military way, but don't we all know folks who have received good medical reports, or who have made progress in their struggle with chronic illness? Some are rejoicing that their cancer is in remission, or that their rehab after surgery is going well. Others can point to jobs gained or retained, or to breakthroughs in difficult relationships. Whenever we experience deliverance from circumstances beyond our control, we have good reason to give thanks to God.

But that's still not on the top of our psalmist's list. For before he thanks God for His provision or His protection, he thanks God for the wonder of His creation. In verses 5 through 9 the psalmist recalls the amazing truth that God made everything that exists, calling it all into being with but a word. He marvels at the wisdom, the skill God used to create the Heavens, to stretch out the dry land, and to surround it with oceans. He is amazed at the brilliance and warmth of the sun and the steady, predictable motions of the moon, the planets, and the stars overhead.

And given our much greater scientific knowledge, how much more should we modern folks give thanks to God for the majesty of His creation! We know the sun is more than 90 million miles from the earth, and yet is still able to make us sweat, as it is 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit at its surface. So dependent are we on its heat that meteorologists tell us we are in for a cold winter just because it has had fewer sunspots this year.

Moreover, we know just how carefully God designed our solar system, with the Earth being just the right size to retain our atmosphere and orbiting the Sun at just the right distance to allow water to liquefy. And to top it all off, God made the moon and the Sun precisely the same size from the earthly viewer's perspective – this allows us to experience the wonder of lunar and solar eclipses. There's no way all that happened by chance. No, the psalmist was absolutely right to thank God for the wisdom and skill we see in His creation.

And that brings us back to the beginning of the psalm, and to the greatest reason we should all give thanks this Thanksgiving season – we should give thanks to God, not so much for the things He has done or for the things He has made, but most of all for God Himself.

Oh, to be sure, there are lots of other gods that people worship – gods of money and fame that feed our pride, gods of employment and busyness that feed our self-confidence, gods of pleasure and happiness that satisfy our fleshly desires. We might even be tempted to put our trust in things like these, or to make them the primary focus of our lives.

But anyone who has lived for any length of time has discovered that none of these things are really gods. None of these things can really give lasting meaning to our lives, for all of them are fleeting and unpredictable. Our best days don't last forever, and there always seems to be another difficulty around the bend.

So, isn't it good news that, as verse 2 says, our God is the God of gods? Our God is the One Who is really in charge of all the conditions, all the situations, and even all the blessings in our lives. Whether we are passing through the Red Sea, personally experiencing God's deliverance, or whether we are wandering through the wilderness, wondering where in the world we are going, God is still God, and He is still guiding and protecting us, no matter the circumstances that we face.

Of course, there is another powerful rival for our affections, another one in whom we are sorely tempted to put our trust. It's so easy for us to turn away from King Jesus and to turn to Caesar, to look to worldly rulers, to rely on all sorts of politicians who make all sorts of promises. It's easy for us to imagine that if we only put the right people in office, they can solve all our problems and straighten out all the difficult circumstances of our lives.

So, isn't it good news that, as verse 3 says, our God is the Lord of lords? It is our God, not ballots or bullets, Who decides which worldly rulers are in charge. As we read in the book of Daniel, "It is He Who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings. The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes." No matter who our human leaders may be, and no matter what policies they might have put in place, it is God Who deserves all the glory. It is God Who deserves to receive all our thanks and praise.

But there is an even greater, a more central reason that we give thanks to God during this season. Yes, we thank Him for His provision and His protection. Yes, we thank Him for the wisdom and power He has exhibited in creation, and the way He rules over all the circumstances of our lives. But if that's all we knew about God, we still wouldn't have good reason to be so thankful for Him. And that's because we wouldn't know that we can trust Him.

For think about it. Let's grant that God has sufficient power and wisdom to create and control everything and everyone that exists. And let's admit that God has chosen to bless His people in the past with His protection and provision. Is any of that a guarantee that God will keep on blessing His people in the future? More specifically, how can we be sure that He will protect us the way He did when He led His people through the Red Sea? How do we know He won't drown us instead, the way He destroyed the Egyptians? We all know powerful people who are moody, who are capricious. What if God were like that?

That's the way the ancient Greeks looked at their gods – as just more powerful versions of fickle, petty human beings. That's basically the same opinion both ancient Egyptians had and modern Muslims have – they have no assurance of their salvation, but simply hope that the good things they have done throughout their lives somehow outweigh their bad deeds. Just knowing that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, just knowing that God rules over all things isn't necessarily a recipe for trust and thanksgiving – it could just as easily be the foundation of the most pervasive sort of fear.

That's why the psalmist says what he says in every single verse – he repeats over and over again the most important reason we have to give thanks to God. Our greatest reason to thank God isn't His provision or protection, it isn't His wisdom or power, it isn't even His sovereign rule over His creation. No, the reason all these things give us the greatest hope instead of the greatest fear, the reason that everything we know about God moves us to praise and thanksgiving is because His mercy endures forever. It is God's mercy that is the foundation of our faith.

But what does it mean that God is merciful? The word translated here as "mercy" is the Hebrew word, "hesed." This word means God's faithful, covenant love, the sort of love that married couples pledge to each other. This is the sort of love that is as unselfish as it is unconditional, the sort of love that is determined to bless the beloved regardless of the cost to the self. This is a love that, once it is promised, can never be taken back. This is a love that never fails, a firm, unshakable commitment that endures forever.

This is why we can give thanks to God for His provision and His protection, for His wisdom and power, for His might and majesty. For we can be sure that God has not only protected and provided for His people in the past, but that He will continue to do the same in the future. We can be sure that God will use His amazing power not to destroy His people, but to deliver us from our enemies. We can be sure that God not only created the Heavens and the Earth and the sea and all that is in them, but that He will rule and govern them for His glory and for the good of His people forever.

But how can we be so sure that God is so loving and faithful? How can we be sure that God won't go back on His promises? Well, how can we be sure of any human being's faithfulness? Don't we look at their history, of how they've kept their promises in the past? Don't we tend to trust people who have proven themselves to be trustworthy, especially in their dealings with us over many years?

So, maybe that's why the psalmist rehearses so much of the history of God's people in this psalm. He's building a case for believing in God, for trusting the God Who has so patiently and steadfastly and faithfully cared for His people for so many years. It's precisely because God did all the things he recorded in this psalm, indeed, because God has kept all the promises and fulfilled all the predictions He made through all the prophets throughout the Scriptures that we can be sure that His mercy, His faithful, covenant love endures forever.

But we Christians have an even greater reason to trust in God's love, don't we? For we know the full extent to which God went to prove His love. As we celebrate in the Advent season which is right around the corner, God in Jesus Christ chose to become a man, just like you and me. He chose to enter into all the sufferings of our sinful world. He even chose to die on a cross, even while those for whom He died were denying and betraying Him. And He rose from the dead to prove that He is able to forgive all who would trust in Him, to cleanse all who would surrender to Him as our Savior, to pardon all who would bow the knee to Him as our Lord. He did all this not only to fulfill all the things the prophets said

about Him, but to prove to us beyond a shadow of a doubt that He is not only worthy of our praise, but worthy of our trust.

So, let's give thanks to the Lord, not only for the things He has done, but even more importantly for Who He is. Let's give thanks to the Lord not only in this Thanksgiving season, but all year long, because He is good, and because His faithful, covenant-keeping, self-sacrificial, unconditional love endures forever.