

Give Thanks for God's Enduring Love

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[0 : 0 0] Well, next month is Thanksgiving Day holiday in America. I don't know if you realize that. It's always in the fourth Sunday or fourth week of November. It was originally, of course, about the pilgrims who traveled from England to America, and they gave thanks for their first harvest after a bitter winter.

In fact, as the story goes, they had a three-day feast and invited some of the native Indians along. And there they thanked God for his goodness. Today in America, the focus seems to be more on the turkey than on God, so much so that they have the famous Macy's Day parade, and they have giant turkeys in it like that on the screen.

I mean, that is one big turkey. There's all these turkey jokes, like one turkey visits another fortune teller turkey and says, I see you surrounded by family.

Well, not your family. Or I like this one, turkey with a sign that says, eat ham instead. Well, there are no turkeys in the oven today, but I do want us to focus on God as the pilgrims did.

And to help us do that, we're going to be looking at Psalm 136, which is a psalm of thanksgiving and praise. In fact, in the Jewish tradition, it's known as the great halal, you know, the great psalm of praise, perhaps in part because it's a responsive psalm, where Israel would respond by singing the refrain in italics there, his love endures forever.

[1 : 3 8] So we're going to do that today. I won't make you sing it. But we won't either do the whole thing in one hit now, because if we did it all in one hit, we might start off with an enthusiastic, his love endures forever.

And by the end, this refrain endures forever. So we're going to do it in parts as we go through the sermon. Speaking of parts, the psalm actually follows a kind of sandwich, or to use my burger structure again.

So you know how you've got the bun on the top and the bottom? Well, this psalm begins and ends with God's character. The verses aren't even, but the topic matches.

And then on the next bit inside, you've got thanking God for his creation. And then in the middle, this burger is a double whopper. It's got two bits of meat. The psalm thanks God for his salvation of Israel.

And when he does that, it does change. The Hebrew does change the grammar a bit, but the topic is still the same in terms of salvation. And so we've got to follow those topics as we go through the psalm, starting with his character.

[2 : 5 2] So we're at point one in your outlines and verse one in your Bibles. We're going to read verses one to three, and then the bottom of the bun, verse 26, responsively.

Do we need to practice? No, we'll be right, we'll be right. Okay, here we go. All right, it's just one line, right? Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. Give thanks to the God of gods.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords. And the end, give thanks to the God of heaven. Well done, all over it.

Here, the psalmist clearly gives thanks to God for his character, doesn't he? At first, for example, in verse one, that God is good. Which means, by the way, we can know that his word to us is always good.

Even when sometimes we find it hard to understand. And we do sometimes, don't we? Even if we find some of the parts of his word hard to accept. More and more these days, people are rejecting parts of God's word.

[4 : 05] Even some church leaders. But because God is good, then we can trust everything he says in his word for us is also good.

Even if it's hard to understand or sometimes accept. And what's more, since God is good, it also means we can trust he'll always work for our good. Even when it sometimes feels like he's not.

You know, when we're suffering or lonely or in strife. Of course, the good he works for is not to make us healthy and wealthy. He may do, but he never promises those things.

Rather, the good he does promise to work for is to sustain us and grow us more like Jesus. I was talking with someone who has just recently gone through some significant suffering.

And it wasn't until they looked back that they were saying they could see how God had sustained them through it. And in fact, it had forced them to trust God more.

[5 : 08] And they felt like their faith had grown. Their trust in God had grown because of this experience. And so you see, they'd become more like Jesus who trusted his father even to the cross.

That's how it works. But the point is, because God is good, then we can know his word to us is good. And that he always works for our good. So that's worth giving God thanks for, is it not?

But so too is the fact that he is God. So verse 2, he is the God of gods. Or verse 3, the Lord of lords. Or verse 26, the God of heaven. And this is worth giving thanks to him as well.

Why? Well, because it means God not only knows what's good for us, but has the power to achieve it. End of year exams are coming up for school kids.

I think VCE starts this week. My kids are not at that stage yet. But they do have exams, including German. And I might want to help them do good in their German test.

[6 : 14] But I only know one word in German. Nein! That's it. And so I may have the desire to work for their good, but I have no power to achieve it, you see.

Yet God does. And so we're not wasting our time worshipping some lesser God or something like that. We have the real deal.

The God of gods, who is also good. And that's worth giving him thanks for, is it not? Well, not just for his character, but also his creation.

So point to verse 4. We're going to do verse 4 to 9. And then verse 25, which is the bottom bit of lettuce. All right, here we go. Verse 4.

Give thanks to him who alone does great wonders. Who by his understanding made the heavens. Who spread out the earth upon the waters.

[7 : 18] Who made the great lights. The sun to govern the day. The moon and stars to govern the night.

And then down to verse 25. He gives food to every creature. So hopefully you can, it's reasonably straightforward, isn't it?

It's giving thanks to God for his work of creation and sustaining that work. And it's worth giving God thanks for this because despite the fact that our world groans with natural disasters because of sin and judgment.

And because humanity, even though humanity has done a lot to ruin our world, there's still great beauty in it, isn't there? Like on the next slide, this is Milford Sound in New Zealand.

Ever been there? This is my father-in-law's favorite place. Or how about this? Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. I mean, that's spectacular, isn't it? Or how about the lavender fields in France?

[8 : 27] I mean, look at that color. Or what about Socrata Island in Yemen? I mean, this is not out of a Hollywood movie. This is a real place. It's extraordinary, isn't it? Or how about Banff National Park in Canada?

Or even the fjords in Norway? I mean, check out the house, the bottom right there. I mean, imagine having that as a holiday house, waking up to that in summer, in the morning.

The list goes on. God has generously given us such beauty, hasn't he? But also variety. I mean, we just saw a variety of environments.

There's also a variety of foods and even a variety of animals. I saw a children's prayer to God one time where she said, Dear God, did you mean for a giraffe to look like that?

Or was it an accident? Norma. No, Norma. This giraffe is part of God's generous variety to us. And then there's the seasons of the year.

[9 : 30] There's day and night. There's such variety in his creation. And yet at the same time, there's also regularity. That's what the word govern in verse 8 and 9 seems to imply.

And we know roughly when the seasons come. I say roughly because this is Melbourne. What was that, 33 degrees the other day? 17 today. But we can plan and pace ourselves, which helps us to live.

We need that regularity, that routine. I mean, when you travel through time zones and come back, you often get, what do you call it? Jet lag, don't you? Because we need that routine to help us sleep and live and so on.

And God has given us that regularity, that routine. And what's more, he's also given us, verse 25, food for every creature, including us.

You see, in God's generosity, he's given us beauty, variety, regularity, and every dietary thing we need, and then some. I don't know about you.

[10 : 33] I often remember to say grace at a mealtime, you know, give thanks for the food. But then take the rest of God's generosity to us in creation for granted. Forget about it.

Until it stops. And so I can't remember the last time I thanked God for rain until I saw the photos of the drought areas in New South Wales in Queensland. It's often like that, isn't it?

We forget and take it for granted. But God has been very generous to us in creation. And so it's worth giving him thanks for it, is it not? Well, the psalmist now moves from creation to salvation.

So we're at point three. And he draws special attention to God's salvation for Israel because it stands in the middle of the structure. Remember, it's the meat of the burger.

It's also the longest part of the psalm. And so its place and length both suggest that salvation is especially worth giving God thanks for.

[11 : 33] But because it is the longest and then doing it responsibly, again, we might start off enthusiastically, but then it might drag. So I'm going to read 10 to 22.

And then I'll invite you to join in at verse 23, where the Hebrew language changes a bit. And the psalmist summarizes. So follow along at verse 10.

So give thanks to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt and brought Israel out from among them with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Give thanks to him who divided the Red Sea asunder and brought Israel through the midst of it, but swept away Pharaoh and his armies into the Red Sea.

And to him who led his people through the wilderness, to him who struck down great kings and killed mighty kings, Shion, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan, and gave their land as an inheritance, an inheritance to his servant Israel.

He remembered us in our lowest state together. And freed us from our enemies. And here the psalmist traces God's salvation for Israel, starting with the final plague in Egypt that forced Pharaoh's hand to let Israel go.

[12 : 53] And then bringing them through the Red Sea safely while swallowing up Pharaoh's army that pursued them to kill them. So that Israel would know they were truly saved.

No longer do they have to look over their shoulder and wonder if this Pharaoh is going to come back and get them. And then defeating those kings that stood against them until finally bringing them into their inheritance, the promised land that he promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In other words, as the psalmist says, he remembered Israel in their lowest state and freed them from their enemies. This was the great act of salvation for Israel.

It's why they remember it every year with festivals like the Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles. And it's why they were to especially give God thanks for it.

Of course, this part of the psalm looks different for us, doesn't it? You can see you can apply the other parts directly. So, for example, we can give thanks to God for his character, just like Israel.

[14 : 07] We can give thanks to God for his creation, just like Israel. But unlike Israel, we were not freed from earthly enemies like Egypt, were we?

And yet, as you know, God has given us an even greater salvation. He has freed us from something much worse, from sin and judgment and death.

You see, we will all sadly one day die. And after that, we will face judgment for our sins. Have to give an account. As the writer of Hebrews says on the slide there, just as people are destined to die once, and after that, face judgment.

I remember a Christian guy was looking for a place to rent, and the real estate agent was showing him around with a few other people. And as the people were looking around, he was talking to the real estate agent, and they got onto taxes for whatever reason.

And the real estate agent said, well, you know what they say. There's only two certainties in life. What's the saying? Death and taxes. That's right. But the Christian man responded by saying, well, some people seem to get around paying taxes these days.

[15 : 14] I think the only two certainties in life are death and judgment. He didn't get the unit. But he's right. And that doesn't bode well for us who have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

For God will call us to account and punish us as our sins deserve. But that's only part of the verse. But that's only part of the verse. And the verse continues by saying, just as man is destined to die once and face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many.

To save us from judgment. And he will appear a second time. Not to bear sin this time, but to bring full salvation.

It is to raise our bodies to be new and glorious like him, to live in a new creation for all who are waiting for him.

It says, you know, Christ was sacrificed at the cross. He died to pay for our sins, to take our punishment in our place so that we can be freed from it. No longer do we need fear judgment.

[16 : 30] And as the verse says, we do not need to fear death having the final say. For our soul will go to be with Christ when we die straight away.

And one day Jesus will return and not to bear sin, but to bring full salvation. That is to raise our bodies to be perfect and glorious bodies like his.

And enjoy life eternal in our promised land. The new creation. Where we will enjoy perfect relationship with God and others. And enjoy all parts of his creation.

Perhaps even waking up in that house by the fjords in Norway. Or for free, I might add. And so the point is, this salvation is greater than the salvation from Egypt.

For it is from death and judgment and guarantees freedom and life. And all because of what God has done for us through Jesus. Again, is this not worth giving God thanks for?

[17 : 35] But why has God done all that? Well, the same reason he gave us this rich creation. The same reason he is good and the God of gods.

Because his love endures forever. That's why the psalm has this refrain that runs all the way through. Because behind his character, his creation and salvation, is his love.

In fact, it's a little bit unclear in this English version of our Bibles. Because the refrain is missing a word at the start. The refrain should actually start with the word, because his love endures forever.

And so if you look at verse 1, we are to give thanks to the Lord for his good, because his love endures forever. You see, God is good because he always loves.

Or verse 2, give thanks to the God of gods because his love endures forever. We are to give thanks to God, not just because he is the true God, but because his love endures forever.

[18 : 42] His love is the central part of what makes him the God of gods. It's at the heart of his character. And his love is also the underlying reason for his creation.

I mean, God didn't create us because he was lonely. God in himself, his father, son, and spirit, is always in relationship. He always has company.

He didn't need to create us. So why did he and give us this creation to enjoy? Because his love endures forever. And his love, of course, is the underlying reason for his salvation for Israel.

Verse 23, he remembered them in their lowest state because his love endures forever. That's the same for us, isn't it? It was God's love that gave God's son.

I mean, what's that famous verse, John 3, 16? For God so... Yeah, that he gave his son. Now, of course, we hear about God's love all the time, don't we?

[19 : 42] And because we do, it's so easy to take it for granted, to forget just how extraordinary it is. But we need to remember, we need to pause and reflect, which is why, in part, we're having today.

To remember that God's love is no ordinary kind of love. I mean, that's what we heard in our Bible reading today. So it says from Romans there, in the middle, the pinnacle of human love is someone dying for another righteous or good person, perhaps a loved one.

But it rarely happens. That's why it makes the news when it does. Yet God's love, on the other hand, it's kind of an out-of-this-world soup of love.

It reminds me of another children's prayer, actually, which I think I might have shown you this one before, but he says, Dear God, I bet it's very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it.

Man. God does, doesn't he? In fact, sometimes there's only two people in our family and we can never do it. And yet God's love is an out-of-this-world super love, not just because he loves everyone in the whole world, but because he loved us while we were sinners, says the verse at the bottom.

[21 : 04] That is, while we rejected him, while we spat in his face, while we were unlovable to him, he still loved us. Christ still willingly went to the cross for us.

Now that's an out-of-this-world kind of love, isn't it? I don't know if you remember the shooting in El Paso earlier this year in August. A gunman burst into the Walmart store and shot 22 people dead.

From what I understand and read, he was targeting Hispanics and Mexicans and so on and so on. So it was racially driven. One couple called Andre and Jordan had just popped in to grab supplies for their barbecue party.

They'd just finished building their home and it was also their wedding anniversary and they were there with their two-month-old son. At the gunman opened fire, Andre, the husband, was shot shielding his wife and son.

Jordan, the mother, was then shot as she continued to shield her son. The two-month-old was nicked by a bullet but then saved.

[22 : 09] One of the headlines of a news article at the time said, a couple killed saving their child or something to that effect. Now, why did they die to save their child?

It's obvious, isn't it? Their love for their son. Imagine before they were shot, the police arrived and opened fire on this racist gunman and then Jordan and Andre jumped in front of the gunman and saved his life and died for him.

I mean, that's a crazy kind of love, isn't it? Who would do that? God. That's what he did for us. Yes, we're not gunmen, I acknowledge that, but our sin is just as bad in the sense that it's evil.

It makes us unlovable in his sight and yet he still loved us. And that's worth giving God thanks for, isn't it?

And so, I don't know how everyone's going in their lives at the moment, here today. I know some of you are going well and I know others are going not so well. But either way, it's worth giving God thanks.

[23 : 24] For if life is going well, then giving thanks helps us to be humble and to remember, not turkeys, of course, but God, whose hand has given us all we enjoy.

And if life is going not so well, and then giving thanks actually helps us to remember the good parts we still have and keeps us from becoming bitter and too depressed.

And whether life is going well or not so well, we can always continue to give thanks for God's character, his creation and his salvation in Christ and especially for his love that endures forever.

Can't we? And so, let's finish with the psalm in verse 26. It says, verse 26, give thanks to the God of heaven together, his love endures forever.

Amen. Amen.