

Summer in the Psalms

Psalm 136

Exodus 34:6-7; Micah 6:8, 7:18;
Psalm 25:6, 10, 32:10, 86:5, 103:8, 10; Isaiah 54:8, 10;
1 Samuel 15:6; Job 6:14; Nehemiah 13:14; Esther 2:17;
Lamentations 3:22; 2 Timothy 2:13; Hosea 10:12; Mark 12:29-31

1. Creator God (vs. 1-9)
- Psalm 19:1-4

2. Rescuer God (vs. 10-25)

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West Valley Church
Michael W. O'Neill
July 28, 2019

Summer in the Psalms Psalm 136 – Liturgical Psalm¹

Today we are in the fourth Sunday of our sermon series called “Summer in the Psalms.”

If you are like most people, you’ve read a few of the Psalms when you were dealing with a particularly difficult issue, or maybe you passed by them on your way reading through the Bible. But many of us have missed the incredible depth and richness of the Psalms. The Book of Psalms in the Old Testament is designed for this purpose:

Psalms is a book of prayers to help you obey God’s Word and stay faithful to the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

That’s what it is going to help us do this summer and hopefully for the rest of our Christian lives. Our goal is that, by the time we are through, you will have a greater ability to pray with more depth and authenticity, no matter what it is you are praying about or what you are going through.

We started out this series by looking at an overview of the entire book of Psalms and how it is organized, and why it is organized that way. If you weren’t with us, I encourage you to go to our website or on our church app and find the first sermon and listen to it or read it – it will give you important background information and a context for this series.

Then we talked about the different types of Psalms – there are different styles or types that we recognize and can group them in. Today the type we are looking at is the “Liturgical” Psalms. These poems were to be used in worship settings, like we are going to do today. So let me first explain what they are.

The word “**liturgy**” comes from the Greek word meaning “public service.” It is used to describe “**customary religious rituals or practices in worship.**” Usually if we’ve heard that word, it is associated with Catholic or Anglican or Greek Orthodox

¹ Sources of research:

- Stephen J. Lennox, *Psalms: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1999)
- Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973)
- Allen P. Ross, “Psalms,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985)
- John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ps 136
- W. Graham Scroggie, *The Psalms* (Old Tappan New Jersey, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973)
- Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* “Chesed” (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 125–126

Church rituals. But generally, it can be used to describe *any* regular church worship practice. For us – for sure, it applies to the way we do baptisms and communion. But it also could be used to describe our typical Sunday practices; we bring greetings, we greet each other, we sing, we pray, we give tithes and offerings, we hear a message from the Bible, and we have some kind of prayer of commitment or benediction at the end. Right? That could be called a liturgy also, because we have a regular practice of worship.

So that's the idea of liturgical Psalms as a style; they were used as a part of the Jewish worship practice. And actually, *all* the Psalms could be considered liturgical in Jewish worship because at some time or another, they were all used that way as prayers, either sung or recited. But the ones that are more specifically classified as liturgical styles were very *clearly* written specifically for that purpose; they have a sort of predetermined, participatory style to them that shows they were specifically for worship. Does that make sense? The one we are looking at today is one of those – **Psalm 136**. The Jews called this Psalm "**The Great Hallel**" or "**The Great Praise**," **not because it's such good praise for us to recite, but because it focuses on the greatest thing about God for which we can praise and thank Him**. That's important to remember, and it will be obvious what that *greatest thing* is that we praise him for.

Typically in Jewish worship it was used either "responsively" or "antiphonally." "Responsively" means that one of the priests would read the first half of the verse, and the people would respond by reciting the second half. "Antiphonally" means that one half of the congregation would say one part and the other half would say the other part, back and forth like that.

So we're going to start by reciting Psalm 136 responsively, okay? I'll read the first part, and your part will come next. Your part will be in bold on the screen. You'll have the same line throughout, so you'll probably have it memorized. And here's a hint: the part you recite – *that's* the greatest reason that we praise God. So stand with me as we do this together:

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.

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.

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.

¹⁶ to him who led his people through the wilderness;

His love endures forever.

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.

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.²

Great job! You can be seated. For all the great things that God is and that God does, what is the greatest thing we can praise him for? *His love endures forever.* And when you understand even more what that phrase means and what the Psalm is talking about, you'll know *why* we praise him so much.

So let's start by looking at the focus and central theme of the entire Psalm: "his love endures forever." It's a difficult phrase to translate into English, because it becomes so long and clunky. In Hebrew it is essentially two words: "chesed olam." You can see how powerful it would be to pray that entire prayer, and respond with two words, four syllables. Chesed olam! Each time you would say it throughout the prayer, it would just build and build until the end, you'd be shouting it! That refrain is the purpose of this Psalm: to celebrate God's eternal love that is evident in all that he has done and all that he is.

In fact, the keyword in that is the first one: "chesed." The literal translation of that one word is "steadfast love." You could also say, "eternal love," but it means way more than just its duration.

We must spend a little bit of time on this, because this word is so incredibly important to understand, and to understanding in this psalm, and, actually, to understand and experience God in our lives.

Many words are used in the Bible to describe God's character. But the single most prominent attribute the Bible reveals is His "chesed" – his love, his mercy, his kindness. In revealing Himself to Moses, the Lord declared His great love:

"And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...'" (Exodus 34:6-7, niv)

The prophets take great pains to remind Israel of this key characteristic of God's divine love. Micah in particular poses a powerful question to God:

² *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ps 136:1-26.

“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.” (Micah 7:18, niv)

God does not only love, but *relishes* the opportunity to give us his love. This primary, central characteristic of God, as Micah shrewdly states, also sets God apart from the hundreds of pagan gods that seemed to keep catching the eye of the Israelites. At best the pagan gods could be described as fickle; their goodness was contingent on the whim of the moment more than any kindness on their part. And actually, with the pagan gods, if an action could even be called loving, they would never give it to humans who were considered the least worthy of it.

God, on the other hand, is *free* with His loving kindness. One author, Brennan Manning, who is a hero of mine, calls God’s love “reckless” and “irrational.” David wrote in Psalm 25 that all the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful (Psalm 25:10). His very nature is to show continual and everlasting love without limit (Psalm 25:6; Isaiah 54:8, 10). But what does the Bible mean when it says that God is *chesed*? This word paints a beautiful picture of this aspect of God’s love. The word is not used exclusively in the Bible to describe God, though more often than not this is the case. *Chesed* is used to refer to general kindness or hospitality (1 Samuel 15:6), showing pity on the afflicted (Job 6:14), about good deeds (Nehemiah 13:14), and showing someone good favor when it’s not even deserved (Esther 2:17). At its root, however, there is a more basic meaning. God responds with love towards those who are afflicted, poor, the immigrant and alien and stranger, and the sufferer; *that is “chesed.”* This love is *especially* poured out on those who deserve it the *least*: those who violate God’s commands (Psalms 86:5; 103:8; Lamentations 3:22). In other words, God loves sinners.

Listen: all over the Bible it reminds us that God does not deal with us as we actually deserve:

“He does not punish us as we deserve or repay us according to our sins and wrongs.” (Psalm 103:10, gnt)

God’s love for us is *rooted* in the covenant relationship He has established with humanity. Even though we don’t deserve it, God offers His grace and love to us and begs us to receive it:

“You are good to us and forgiving, full of constant love *for all who pray to you.*” (Psalm 86:5 gnt)

and

“If we are not faithful, he remains faithful, because he cannot be false to himself.” (2 Timothy 2:13, gnt)

When we trust him and his love for us, believers are surrounded by His love (Psalm 32:10; Hosea 10:12). That’s *chesed*.

When we accept his love, then God immediately expects us to extend this love to each other and others. Again, the prophet Micah plainly reminds us that:

“...He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love (*chesed*), and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8, ceb)³

Does this sound familiar? Didn't Jesus say that the greatest, most important command in the Bible is this:

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31, niv)

So “chesed” is freely given to us to accept, and when we do, it's expected from us to others.

I'm going to quickly take us through this Psalm, but please keep in mind that we are being reminded throughout it all of God's incredible “chesed” – his grace and love – and *equally* also the fact that we are commanded to give it to others.

The first section of this Psalm calls us to consider our...

1. ***Creator*** God (vs. 1-9)

When we are told to “give thanks,” it means to confess, or to acknowledge, God's love. It calls us to thoughtful, grateful worship, and then the Psalm goes on to do so. Like threads on a loom, God's love is the framework that weaves its way through the back of *all* of Israel's history and human history – and *your* story, revealing on the front of the tapestry a beautiful, colorful picture of God's love for humanity. This is especially evident throughout all of creation. The Master Craftsman, working together in the Trinity and with great wisdom and insight, fashioned the world as an expression of his love. In Psalm 19 David wrote:

“The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.

They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.

Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.” (Psalm 19:1-4, niv)

The glory of God that is revealed in creation is his love for humanity. That's why it's impossible to go into the mountains or to the seacoast or look into the stars and not be in awe of the creator. His glory is *not* that he created it; his glory is that it reveals

³ Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 125–126.

his *chesed* – his unending kindness, grace, and love. He attended to the smallest detail; the tiniest flower petal – to demonstrate how much he loves you. There are no other “gods” who could do what God has done, let alone do it with such loving kindness, and toward us who don’t deserve it.

The first part of the Psalm reminds us of God’s love, demonstrated in the fact that he created everything. But then, even though we sinned against him, even though we reject him and are abusing and destroying his creation, nevertheless he is relentlessly the...

2. ***Rescuer*** God (vs. 10-25)

His love is also evident in his acts to save and rescue us. This part of the Psalm reminds Israel of how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. It reminds them of the two greatest miracles of that event – the tenth plague against the firstborns, and the crossing of the Red Sea. It then reminds them of how God miraculously brought them into the land by defeating the first two great kings that were occupying God’s land. The images include God as a warrior and as a loving, caring parent.

The phrase about God’s “mighty hand and outstretched arm,” it’s an image of a powerful right hand wielding a sword and sweeping away any obstruction. It’s also a symbol of protection, like a mom’s front-seat-car-restraint. Do you know what I’m talking about? When I was a kid, seatbelts weren’t mandatory and weren’t even standard yet. So when I went somewhere with my mom, when she had to brake suddenly, or even began to slow down, her right arm would immediately be across my chest to keep my from going forward, faster than an airbag being deployed! That’s the image of God’s mighty and outstretched arm, fighting and protecting us.

There’s a lot that we can say about these things that we don’t have time to go into, but let me summarize it by saying this:

There are two great “salvific” events or saving events in the Bible: the deliverance from slavery in Egypt as we see in the Old Testament, and the deliverance from slavery in sin as we see in the New Testament through Christ’s death in our place, his burial, and his resurrection from the dead. The amazing thing is that, all throughout the Old Testament saving events that happened, they are all symbols of what Jesus would ultimately do for us. *Everything* – from slavery, from suffering, from sparing the first born and the Passover supper, to the baptism in the Red Sea, to being delivered into God’s Promised Land, it all symbolizes and foreshadows what Jesus would ultimately do for us.

The Psalm ends talking about God’s tender and loving care, and then concludes like it starts, calling us to *always* confess and acknowledge God’s love in all that we see and all that he does, and to thoughtfully and gratefully worship him all throughout our lives. “Chesed Olam!” His undeserved love endures, abides, tenderly remains close to us and never stops – forever.

Story of “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” by Rabbi Harold Kushner, 3-year-old son diagnosed with degenerating disease that will make quality of life bad and not

live beyond teens, he asked, "Why, God?" and began to study Scripture and history. Answer? Chesed. Doesn't promise to take away difficulties and challenges in this sin-broken world, but he does promise to be close to us in all tenderness and nearness, and to walk with us through it and always love us. In Christ God has done so, and through Christ provides us strength, ability to redeem difficult things and give us meaningful suffering, and the promise of a repaired, redeemed, restored creation.

Let's do it together today. We're going to make our own "Psalm" and then we are going to recite it like they would in Jewish worship, antiphonally.

Here's what we're going to do: I want you to give me some reasons we can praise God, and we're going to write those down, then we'll recite them. Then, after each time, we're going to say, "God's kindness and love to us never ends!" Okay? It'll make sense here in a minute. First, give me, let's say seven reasons to praise God (seven's a good number!)...

Have the congregation stand, and then have one side say the first part, the other side say the second part, all the way through.

Dismiss: go praising God for his chesed and giving that undeserved love to others.