

Growing in Faith by Giving Thanks

Read Psalm 136 and Pray

Tomorrow is a New Year. You don't need to look at a calendar to know this. Just go to a local store and you will see sales on fitness equipment or organization supplies. Turn on the TV or your computer and you will see gym membership advertisements or blog posts about how to become a better you in 2018.

A new year is like a fresh start in life. So we reflect on the past year and come up with resolutions; things that we resolve to do in the next year. Now this can be a very helpful thing to do. It is good to reflect on what our priorities should be and the things we want to do next year. But there is something more important than our resolutions. There is something more foundational to life than what we resolve to do this next year. We need to know what God is resolved to do. Because he never fails in his resolutions. He never grows tired and he never forgets.

Maybe 2017 was a very difficult year and you don't know how you are going to get through another year. Perhaps you feel like you can only face a day or a week at a time right now. Psalm 136 was written for you. Or maybe 2018 is going to be the most difficult year of your life and you don't even know it yet. Psalm 136 will prepare you to face what is coming and to handle it well.

Psalm 136 is all about God. It is a Psalm of thanksgiving that fuels our faith in God's faithfulness. When we give thanks for what God has done in the past we grow in confidence that he will do it again in the future. And we begin to see God more and more as who he really is: The God of heaven whose steadfast love endures forever.

Now here is how this Psalm works:

1. Who God is (1-3)
2. What God Did for Israel (4-22)
3. What God did for Us (23-24)
4. How We Should Respond (26)

Who God is

In verses 1-3, he is the good God of Israel who rules over all other so called gods and over all rulers on earth. In other words he is supreme; he is number 1.

Whether or not you acknowledge him as king makes no difference. He is king and he is working all things together for his own glory and for the good of his people. And there is no one that can stop him.

Verses 4-22 show us why this is true.

What God Did for Israel

Look at verses 4–6. Verse 4 tells us that he alone does great wonders then, in verse 5, the psalmist begins to tell us what these great wonders are: God made the heavens by understanding. Not only is he powerful enough to create this entire universe but he does it with understanding (or wisdom). He has a purpose for every single molecule. He knows how everything works. He has a plan for all of it.

Now, if he is wise enough and powerful enough to create and shape the whole earth he certainly is able to shape you, sustain you, care for you, and guide you in every single aspect of your life.

Now look at verses 7–9. The psalmist focuses on a specific aspect of creation: light. If you want to see this power and wisdom for yourself just go outside. Watch the sun rise in the morning. Look at the stars in the sky.

In Genesis 15, when Abraham doubts whether God will fulfill his promise to give him a son, God tells Abraham to go outside and number the stars. Then he says, “your offspring will be like that.” And Abraham believed God. God wasn’t just telling him the number of offspring that he was going to have. He was showing him that he was able to do it. He was saying, “I made every single one of those stars. So many that you can’t even count them all. Do you think that I am not able to give you a son?”

Now look at verses 10–12. God rescues his people from slavery. They were slaves in Egypt for over 200 years. Freedom for them seemed impossible. Then after 9 different plagues, Pharaoh still did not let them go. A hopeless situation? No. God has one last plague. He strikes down the firstborn male in every household in Egypt but he spares Israel by having them strike down a sacrificial lamb and put the blood on their doorpost and by this act he brings his people out of Egypt.

Next, look at verses 13–15. The people seem to be in another hopeless situation. On one side of them, there is the red sea and on the other side, the Egyptians are ready to get their revenge. At this point in the book of Exodus, the people begin to grumble against God. But what does God do? He parts the sea. In that culture the sea was a symbol for death and chaos. It was a scary place. But God brings them through the midst of it. He does not let the waters touch them. But for Pharaoh and his army, who oppose God’s people, he causes the sea to swallow them up.

Do you see a theme yet? This is how God works. He brings us to points where we cannot survive by ourselves. We cannot continue without him doing a miracle. He brings us to places that seem like dead ends and asks us, “Will you trust me? Will you believe that my steadfast love endures forever?”

God used this Psalm in my life this summer. It was one of the most difficult summers of my life. It seemed like one thing after another. Car problems, money problems,

health problems, dealing with death in our extended family, needing to find a new place to live, even feeling spiritually dry. It felt like all of the walls were falling in and I could not hold them up any longer. He brought me to a point where I could no longer depend on myself. I couldn't figure it out. I couldn't fix it. That is when I needed Psalm 136 to know that what was happening was not outside of God's purposes for my life and to know that despite my circumstances he was still faithful and he would provide what I needed when I needed it. I needed to know that his steadfast love endures forever.

Now look at verses 16–22. After verse 16, the structure of this Psalm actually breaks down. If you look at the beginning of the Psalm, it begins with three lines and each of the lines includes the command “give thanks.” Then all of the lines that follow assume the verb. This means that the person who wrote this psalm intended us to read it in groups of three lines. So the first three lines are about God's creating power. Then the next three lines are about God creating light. And the pattern continues on this way until we get the verse 16. After verse 16, we would expect two more lines that go with verse 16. Instead, the author starts a new topic. And tells us how God struck down these mighty kings named Sihon and Og.

So what is going on here?

Try to remember the biblical story at this point. What happens after God brings them out of Egypt and after he leads them through the wilderness?

He brings them to the Promised Land: The land that he is going to give them. The beginning of the book of Numbers is all about how God is preparing them to go in and take the Promised Land but when they get there, they get scared. They see how great and strong the people there are and they doubt God's promises.

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” (Numbers 14:1-4 ESV)

This angers God but Moses pleads with God saying,

“Please pardon the iniquity of this people, **according to the greatness of your steadfast love**, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.” (Numbers 14:19 ESV)

So God does not destroy them but he does discipline them. He makes them stay in the wilderness for 40 years. And it is during these forty years that God defeats the two kings, Sihon and Og.

Now here is what the author is trying to show us in Psalm 136:

This wasn't God's original intention for them. They disobeyed God and they failed to trust him. Their love for God failed. But God's steadfast love endures forever. The structure of this Psalm may break down but the refrain remains the same: His steadfast love endures forever. We may fail at many different points but he does not. Our love may wax and wane but his remains the same forever.

Many times our choices do have consequences but no matter what we have done or what we are doing, if we turn to him and cry out to him. He hears us. He will rescue us and provide what we need.

When life got difficult this summer it was like a vice squeezing me and what came out was not always good. I got anxious. That turned into anger toward my wife and others. I grumbled against God. Instead of crying out to God, I tried to take matters into my own hands and "figure it out myself." At many points, I failed. But he remained faithful. He continued to provide. He continued to forgive and restore me.

What God Did For Us

Now look at verses 23–25. Here there is a subtle but important shift in words. Up until this point, the Psalm has been talking about God's steadfast love as if we are watching it from a high mountain. We see it clearly but it is directed to those people in the past. In verse 23, it gets personal. "He remembered *us* in *our* low estate and rescued *us*. He gives food to every creature. His steadfast love endures forever." Verses 23–25 invite us to make this our song and to make this our God.

And the reason we can apply this Psalm to us is because it is, from beginning to end, all about Jesus. It points us, in every way, to Jesus. And as we take refuge in him, this song becomes our song and this God becomes our God. And his steadfast love endures forever for us.

He is the Lord of lords and the king of kings. He is God and was in the beginning with God. All things were created through him. He is the light of the world that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome him. He is the Passover lamb whose blood paid the penalty of death for our sins and causes God to pass over our sin. He is the one who frees us from our slavery to sin. He is the one who brings us through waters of death and raises us to new life. He is our shepherd who leads us through the wilderness, protects us, and is one day coming back to save us and to judge all who oppose him. He is God's Word to us proclaiming that "His steadfast love endures forever."

We may not be able to answer every "why" question. We may not understand every detail of God's plan for us but we can be sure that his steadfast love will endure forever; that, in everything he does, he is working for his own glory and our joy. His steadfast love endures forever.

Finally, the Psalm ends the way it began. After reflecting on all of the ways that God has been faithful, verse 26 is the only proper response. "Give thanks to the God of heaven for his steadfast love endures forever."