

Psalm 136 is a companion psalm to Psalm 135 and celebrates the same themes found in the preceding psalm: the sovereignty of God over creation and redemption and Yahweh's compassion for his people. The theology of Psalm 135, drawn from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, is transformed into antiphonal worship in Psalm 136. The psalm opens and closes with a call to thanksgiving and repeats the centering theme, "His love endures forever," twenty-six times. Derek Kidner argues that our English translations make the refrain more cumbersome than it needs to be. Gelineau translates the six Hebrew syllables tersely, "for his love has no end."¹ Eugene Peterson translates the theme, "His love never quits" (Ps 136:1-26, *The Message*). Allen Ross renders it, "for his loyal love endures forever."²

Whether or not the refrain feels repetitive may depend on the worshiping congregation and the musical setting. We can imagine Anna, who "never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37), praying this refrain and never tiring of its truth. To see everything from creation to redemption in the light of God's love is not boring, but inspiring.

We can picture Jesus praying this psalm as a prelude to his upper room discourse on love. The covenant, redemptive love of the Lord, the love that never quits, becomes the basis for our love for one another. Jesus said, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). It is this Trinitarian love, the love between God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this love that never quits that is the love that makes our relationship with God and others possible. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love" (John 15:9-10). Jesus knew when he prayed Psalm 136 that the Son's love is always a reflection of the Father's self-sacrificing, truth-keeping, life-giving love. He also knew that the love that never quits would lead him to the cross (John 15:12-15).

Call to Thanksgiving

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

His love endures forever,

Psalm 136:1-3

It may be to our advantage that we don't know the specific occasion for Psalm 136. It may have been prayed in the temple at one of the feasts or it may have been prayed on any day of the week around the family table. The psalm fits with Solomon's dedication of the temple of the Lord. The

¹ Kidner, *Psalms*, 457.

² Ross, *Psalms*, 773.

people “worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, “He is good; his love endures forever” (2 Chron 7:3,6). King Jehoshaphat, sixth king of the Davidic kingdom, echoed the refrain on the day of battle, “Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.” Jehoshaphat led the people of God in a model prayer against fear. In the shadow of the temple he prayed, “Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you” (2 Chron 20:6-12). Jehoshaphat courageously led the army of Israel into the desert to confront a massive army threatening to drive Israel from the land. On the morning of the battle, Jehoshaphat appointed men “to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever’” (2 Chron 20:21). The miraculous victory to follow was joyfully attributed to the Lord whose love never quits.

Following the Babylonian and Persian exile, the refrain of the psalm were sung at the dedication of the second temple. When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord the priests “with praise and thanksgiving” sang to the Lord: “He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever” (Ezra 3:11). Psalm 135 appears to mark special occasions when the people of God marked significant milestones. But it is not only a psalm for Israel to dedicate the Lord’s temple or celebrate military victories, it is also a psalm for the people of God today. The high point of salvation was reached in the death and resurrection of Christ and the Lord has proven that “his love never quits.”

Reason for Thanksgiving

*to him who alone does great wonders,
His love endures forever,
who by his understanding made the heavens,
His love endures forever,
who spread out the earth upon the waters,
His love endures forever,
who made the great lights –
His love endures forever,
the sun to govern the day,
His love endures forever,
the moon and stars to govern the night;
His love endures forever,
to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt
His love endures forever,
and brought Israel out from among them
His love endures forever,
with a mighty hand and outstretched arm;
His love endures forever,
to him who divided the Red Sea asunder
His love endures forever,*

*but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea;
His love endures forever,
to him who struck down great kings,
His love endures forever,
and killed mighty kings –
His love endures forever,
Sihon king of the Amorites
His love endures forever,
and Og king of Bashan –
His love endures forever,
and gave their land as an inheritance,
His love endures forever.*
Psalm 136:4-22

The poet swiftly moves from the creation of the cosmos to the history of redemption. The God of gods, the Lord of lords, is responsible for the sun and stars and for liberating Israel from Pharaoh's bondage. The Lord of the universe is the hope of the world. Creation and redemption are bound together in the understanding of God. Truth unites what the modern academic experience divides.³ Meaning is a gift, revealed in the Ultimate-Knower.

The ideological captivity of modern culture by scientism sees the origin of the cosmos as an accidental product of an impersonal universe, subject to blind chance and random forces, existing in a sphere of energy devoid of promise, plan, purpose and fulfillment.⁴ The psalmist sees reality differently. He begins with the *who* in order to explain the *what-where-when-why*. The universe has its origins in God, *who* alone does great wonders, *whose* understanding made the heavens, *who* spread out the earth upon the waters, and *who* made the great lights.

Biology is awed that human beings are so closely related to fruits and vegetables and that over 60 percent of human genes are the same as those in fruit flies. The scientific view of the human person is inevitably and understandably reductionistic, breaking down the person into component parts, reading DNA, mapping genomes, and discovering proteomes. This effort is true as far as it goes. The old biology aims to explain the *what, where, when, and how*, but it doesn't come close to explaining the *who*. Meaning has no casual connection to molecular structure, but there would be no molecular structure without it. For the psalmist there is a dynamic synergy between creation and redemption. Separately and together they inspire thanksgiving to the One who alone creates and to the One who alone redeems.

We are in a position today to behold the wonder of creation and redemption in a way that the psalmist could never have imagined. Yet from his limited trajectory along the arc of salvation he has given us a psalm in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that never has been more true. Salvation is woven into the very fabric of creation and history. As *history* moved toward the cross, *creation* moves toward the Resurrection. If the history of God's revelation points to the cross, the nature

³ Webster, *Second Thoughts for Skeptics*, 15.

⁴ Webster, *Second Thoughts*, 114.

of God's creation points to the resurrection. We are prepared for the resurrection through the "big bang," the language of DNA, the human quest for knowledge, the Periodic Table, mathematical patterns and formulas, the human capacity for beauty, the anthropic principle of the universe, the incredible complexity of the living cell, and the meaning of the human drama. The divine necessity of the resurrection is hidden in the mystery and complexity of nature. Philosophical commitments to reductionism and materialism preclude the possibility of even entertaining the notion that the beauty, complexity, and meaning of creation can be derived from anything other than "a more-or-less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents" reaching back in time.⁵ Yet to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear *creation* testifies to the logical coherence and meaningful power of the resurrection. *God's revelation declares its meaning in the context of nature's wonder and human need. Salvation is woven into the very fabric of creation and history.*⁶ We are not cosmic orphans alone in the universe. We are God's holy possession, personally chosen by God, predestined for communion with God, adopted into the community of God's people, recipients of God's grace, redeemed by his personal sacrifice on our behalf, and signed, sealed and delivered by the promised Holy Spirit.⁷ Michael Wilcock sums it up beautifully, "From the beginning of creation to the climax of redemption, from the first making of the heavens to the final inheritance of the saints, all is to be seen against the background of the love of God. That love is both indestructible, because it is covenant love, and boundless, because it endures forever."⁸ *The Lord's love never quits.*

Call to Thanksgiving

*He remembered us in our low estate
His love endures forever,
and freed us from our enemies,
His love endures forever,
He gives food to every creature,
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of heaven,
His love endures forever.*

Psalm 136:23-26

Psalm 136 inspired the seventeenth century poet John Milton to write a hymn that is sung today in Anglican churches. Milton's hymn begins, "Let us with gladsome mind, praise the Lord for he is kind, for his mercies ay endure, ever faithful, ever sure."⁹ But somebody more famous than Milton may have been inspired by Psalm 136, when she wrote, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of *the humble state* of his servant. . . *His mercy extends to those who fear him* from generation to generation. . . He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:46-55). Mary's *Magnificat*

⁵ Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (New York: Basic, 1977), 154.

⁶ Webster, *Second Thoughts for Skeptics*, 125-126.

⁷ Webster, *Second Thoughts*, 114.

⁸ Wilcock, *Psalms*, 251.

⁹ *The Hymnal 1982*, The Church Pension Fund, 1985. 389

resonates with the psalm's themes. The Lord of the cosmos "remembers us in our low estate" and meets even our most basic needs. Against all the challenges and worries of life, we are reminded to give thanks to the Lord and remember that his love never quits. The more we meditate on Psalm 136 the easier it is to see its influence on the apostles and the early church. Psalm 136 echoes in the apostle Paul when he writes, "Love never fails" (1 Cor 13:8). We hear its melody in the apostle John's encouragement, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

The final admonition, "Give thanks to the God of heaven," is unique in the Psalms, although it can be found on the lips of Jonah (1:9), Cyrus king of Persia (Ezra 1:2), and Nehemiah (1:4). This designation is an affirmation of the Lord's absolute sovereignty over all. It is stated in such a way that a pagan or pluralistic culture could understand. Yahweh is God of gods (Ps 136:2), Lord of lords (Ps 136:3), and the God of heaven (Ps 136:26). His covenant love endures forever. Or, as the apostle Paul said, nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).