

Giving Thanks to God

SERMON

By

Everett C. DeVelde

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TEXT: Psalm 136

PROP: If the steadfast love of Yahweh endures forever, our praise should endure forever.
If his goodness never ceases, our thanksgiving should never be silent.

Psalm 136

- Give thanks to the Lord , for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- 2** Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- 3** Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

We are shortly to come to another of our national holidays and as usual Satan beclouds the issue. The devil will not have us to render thanks to the true and living God. Satan wants us to give thanks to a host of gods if we give thanks at all. He sees to it that we concern ourselves with the most trivial of matters and the matters most vital to us go begging. He would have us to be like the Pharisees who were only interested in tithing mint and anise and cummin, the making broad of the borders of one's garments, the wearing of phylacteries, and straining at gnats. But what could be more important than the healing of our souls. What could be more important than obedience to Yahweh.

What indifference toward Yahweh our creator, what shallowness we face today when we have to fight for a minute of silence in our schools to pray inwardly to God. Now we come to Thanksgiving day which most of the United States will spend on activities that have little or nothing to do with God. Satan is still at work to diffuse and render impotent the worship of Yahweh. Why should we give thanks to Yahweh, the God of gods and Lord of lords? With little motive to do this it is no wonder our nation is so careless in the matter of rendering thanks to God. We cannot even agree on the God we should thank and our national concept of thankfulness is execrable. We must understand that for thankfulness to have any meaning at all it must be directed to Yahweh our creator and our redeemer. It is in fact our chief end to glorify Yahweh God and to enjoy him forever. What a simple yet profound reason for our existence! Had man not fallen into sin in the Garden of Eden there would have been no question about glorifying God. It would have been our very nature and our greatest delight to give thanks to Yahweh. Even now the rest of God's creation glorifies him without ceasing.

We hear of no rebellion in the sun, moon and stars, no revolt against the law which holds them to their celestial courses. As great and magnificent as they are they remain obedient to their maker. And where there is intelligence as long as it remains as God made it, there is no revolt against his will. There is no cursing and blasphemy of the Holy One. Were we today what we were as God created us, it would be our nature to love God, to serve him and obey his law. It would be our great pleasure to glorify God and bless his name. We would not need the psalmist to urge us to give thanks to the God of heaven. But as it is, we all sin and fall short of the glory of God and we need the preaching of the word to call us to duty and urge us to obedience.

The psalm before us was obviously meant to be sung antiphonally. A cantor would chant, "Give thanks to Yahweh for he is good," and all the assembly would chant in response, "For his steadfast love endures forever." The cantor would chant, "Give thanks to the God of gods," and the assembly would respond with, "For his steadfast love endures forever." Again the leader who chant, "Give thanks to the Lord of lords," and the assembly would sing, "For his steadfast love endures forever," and so on for the rest of the psalm. Everyone is to join in singing this psalm for the psalmist has so worded the song that all should sing, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, believers and even unbelievers. As we read on in the psalm we notice that all creation is to give thanks to God and all to whom God's creation providence is extended are to praise him. The light from the sun is universally enjoyed for without it we would live in perpetual darkness if indeed we lived at all. The moon affects the global tides that nurture the marshland creatures the basis for the food chain in the oceans that greatly benefits everyone. The food we all eat depends on photosynthesis that depends on the sun's energy. Plants feed the animals we all eat and provide building materials for our homes. Even the gasoline that fuels our automobiles is obtained from vegetation. Therefore all mankind are to give thanks to God for the earthly comforts they receive from his bounteous hand. Yet God is most to be thanked for his steadfast love that endures forever.

But the "chesed" of Yahweh translated here as "steadfast love" must always be reserved for his chosen people who sing of redeeming love. The psalmist goes on to speak of "*-- him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,-- and brought Israel out from among them, -- with a strong hand and an outstretched arm* " (Psalm 136:10-12, ESV) Israel was redeemed from slavery in Egypt through the blood of the lamb, just as we are redeemed from slavery to sin, "*Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*" (1 Peter 1:18-19, ESV) The redemption wrought by Christ through his death on the cross is our constant and favorite theme for thanksgiving. Let us not refuse to bless the God of heaven for his saving grace, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a*

propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins." (Romans 3:23-25, ESV) The steadfast love of God endures forever! "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." (Psalm 103:1-5, ESV)

As the psalmist continues he reminds us of the mercies of the Lord that we have experienced through all the days of our lives. Those of us who have grown up in the ways of the Lord can add a force and weight to the song of thanksgiving that no other can bring to it. He gives thanks, *"to him who divided the Red Sea in two, -- and made Israel pass through the midst of it, -- but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, -- to him who led his people through the wilderness, -- to him who struck down great kings, -- and killed mighty kings, --Sihon, king of the Amorites, -- and Og, king of Bashan, -- and gave their land as a heritage, -- a heritage to Israel his servant, for his steadfast love endures forever." (Psalm 136:13-22, ESV) We who are fathers and mothers in Israel, who have matured in our pilgrimage as sojourners and exiles are to bless the Lord who has led us safely to this present point in our lives. We have not seen the Shekinah glory of God in the cloud as Israel did yet we have been led through the trials and vicissitudes of life in safely and well. We did not gather manna as did Israel but as Jesus said, "-- Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (John 6:32-33, ESV) We did not drink water from the rock but as Jesus told the woman of Samaria, "-- Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14, ESV) Our great enemies have been slain by the sword of the Lord. We have been able to bear our trials and temptations because, "Yahweh is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him." (Nahum 1:7, ESV)*

What is our experience worth if it does not move us to give thanks to Yahweh, the God of gods and the Lord of lords? To what end has God caused all his goodness to pass before us if we do not delight ourselves in the Lord and bless his name. Do we not remember how God led us these forty years through the wilderness? Do we not remember how the Lord has hedged us about and kept off our enemies and granted to us the peace of God which surpasses all understanding and guarded our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus? (Philippians 4:6) If we are slow to praise God for these tender mercies which we have experienced all our lives are most ungrateful. Therefore let us give thanks to God for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Let us, *"Praise Yahweh! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise*

him according to his excellent greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise Yahweh! Praise Yahweh" (Psalm 150, ESV)

There is much more for us in this wonderful Hebrew word "chesed" which we properly translate "steadfast love." Each of the refrains of the psalm before us contains this blessed word. Many of us have seen the great battle fields of the Civil War. Even with the monuments placed there, it is hard to envision the blood and gore of battle now covered by grass and gardens. The great coliseum of Rome now in ruins bears no sign of the tens of thousands who were torn in pieces and tortured for the pleasure of sadistic Caesars and bloodthirsty citizens. In like manner, the "chesed" of God has covered up the cruelty of man.

Bubonic plague was visited upon London England during the years 1664 to 1666 lasting for approximately 18 months It claimed more victims than any of the previous plagues in London. Sufferers were confined to their households, and corpses buried in mass graves. Nearly 70,000 burials of plague victims were recorded over the period. But all this was brought to an end by the worst fire in the history of London. It started in a baker's shop in Pudding Lane, close to the bank of the Thames River, on September 2, 1666, and lasted five days, destroying almost all of the medieval City of London proper. Driven by a violent gale, the fire burned from east to west across London, and even King Charles II and the duke of York took part in the firefighting efforts. Finally, after citizens had blown up several houses with gunpowder in an effort to control the blaze, the wind abated and the ravages of the fire were brought to an end. About 13,200 houses, nearly 90 churches, and 6 chapels were destroyed, as well as the Guildhall, the Royal Exchange, the Customhouse, Saint Paul's Cathedral, and 4 prisons.

While these catastrophes were taking place, London preachers proclaimed the judgment of God just as they did when the buildings of the World Trade Center were destroyed by terrorists. But in retrospect we see the hand of God in it. The London fire brought an end to the terrible plague that took so many lives and threatened to claim many more. Thus we see that the steadfast love of God endures forever. If Yahweh God should send earthquake or tornado or hurricane, steadfast love covers the destruction with grass and flowers and trees. Homes are rebuilt and life goes on. As it has been well said, "Mercy still abides and judgment is but for a little season." Witness the sins of Israel and God's judgment upon his people, yet from their dispersion and distress the Messiah came as abundant evidence of the eternal steadfast love of God.

Furthermore the love of God continues eternally in all its fullness. We may make great demands on the love of God but it will never be diminished or depleted. Therefore give thanks to Yahweh for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. His promise is that

the earth will never be destroyed by flood and as God told Noah, "*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.*" (Genesis 8:22, ESV) The psalmist concludes his song of thanksgiving saying of God, "*It is he who remembered us in our low estate, -- and rescued us from our foes,-- he who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever.*" (Psalm 136:23-25, ESV)

Great God, how infinite art Thou!
What worthless worms are we!
Let the whole race of creatures bow,
And pay their praise to Thee.

Thy throne eternal ages stood,
Ere seas or stars were made:
Thou art the ever-living God,
Were all the nations dead.

Eternity, with all its years,
Stands present in Thy view;
To Thee there's nothing old appears—
Great God, there's nothing new.

Our lives thro' various scenes are drawn,
And vexed with trifling cares;
While Thine eternal thought moves on
Thine undisturbed affairs.

When we reflect upon the infinite longsuffering of God we must bring to mind how great our sins are before the Lord. The offenses perpetrated against us as human beings are by a drop in the ocean compared with the monstrous affront to the living God we commit against him. Nothing can be said behind his back. No blasphemy can be uttered against him that he does not know. The psalmist has said, "*O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.*" (Psalm 139:1-4, ESV) Most have become so hardened to their sin and their tongues so jaded to iniquity that they take little thought of God who sees it all and hears it all. So great are our sins that the death of his beloved Son was alone sufficient to atone for them. Indeed, "*The (chesed) steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*" (Lamentations 3:22-23, ESV)

All the while we sin against God we as God's own possession wear the righteousness of Christ and enjoy his loving providence. Yet we continue to insult the Lord who bought us with his own blood. Consider, too, the sins of the ungodly; those who do not belong to God. Pagan wretches wear the clothes God provides, eat his food, breathe his air, enjoy the beauty of his earth and his gifts of beautiful music and art yet they rail against their maker and persecute his people. What infinite patience God has even with his enemies! Can we understand how great is his steadfast love? Add to this the insult of hundreds of millions who worship false Gods, images of created things, extensions of their human imagination. Hideous abominations they are to the most holy and pure God, yet God is pleased to offer the gospel to all and continually puts before the world of sinners the word of God. Never in the history of mankind has the Bible and its message been more available and its message more widely heard. Sinners everywhere are urged to repent and warned of the judgment to come yet they multiply their sins and their wickedness becomes more egregious. That all mankind are urged to repent through the universal offer of the gospel is abundant testimony to the eternal steadfast love of God who would have all kinds of people to be saved. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. "*-- As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die -- ?*" (Ezekiel 33:11, ESV)

Now if God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, neither should we. We should pray for the salvation of our enemies and forgive those who persecute us even as Christ asked God the Father to forgive those that tortured him on the cross. If in his eternal steadfast love God calls upon all men to repent we should not hesitate to preach the gospel to all who will hear us. Jesus said, "*-- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*" (Matthew 5:43-46, ESV) And our Lord taught us to pray, "*-- forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,*" (Matthew 6:12, ESV) Opening this precept to our understanding he continued, "*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" (Matthew 6:14-15, ESV)

Because the steadfast of God endures forever, we must never cease from hoping for the salvation of those around us who are unsaved. We have no right to give up hope for the most wretched of sinners. A mother's love for her unsaved children must never die out and a father's patience with ungodly children must never cease. If God is longsuffering with sinners surely we should be. And all of this goes for ourselves. Though we like Paul may be the chief of sinners we must never give up hope that God will forgive us. There is no sin that

God will not forgive save for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Many feel that divorce precludes them from the love of God but divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Even the most heinous murderer on death row may come to Christ for forgiveness. It is never too late to turn to Christ for his saving grace for his steadfast love endures forever. "*Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.*" (Psalm 136:26, ESV)