

## Psalm 136 - The Steadfast Love of God Never Ends

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**Prop:** Understanding the ‘endless love’ of God should bring confidence to us in trial.

### Introduction

Martin Luther King delivered a speech on the steps of the Lincoln memorial to over 250,000 people, and his 17-minute speech remains one of the most famous speeches in American history. It was given at the rally during the march on Washington in 1963, a march intended to bring the nation’s attention to the need for Civil Rights legislation. He said a number of moving statements in his speech, about needed equality for black Americans. It was delivered 56 years ago, and is a speech that is still remembered, and referred to by one repeated phrase. This one phrase, or refrain, became part of American History. These 4 words, that he repeated 8 times in 8 successive sentences became synonymous with Martin Luther King himself, and the Civil Rights movement in the 60’s. Those 4 words are, *‘I have a dream’*. His effective use of that refrain connected his audience with his message in a memorable way. His speech, with the refrain, *‘I have a Dream’*, has now been remembered by Americans for over 50 years and counting.

A Refrain - is the line that is repeated in a speech, or in music or poetry. A refrain is like the chorus of a song. Martin Luther King used his refrain effectively. Today we will see how our psalmist uses a certain refrain in a powerful way.

The author of our psalm today repeats this refrain more times in a single context, than we find anywhere else in the bible. This alone gives it emphasis. Through the psalmist, God wants to draw our attention to this refrain, to a truth about himself, repeated 26 times in 26 verses. This must be an important truth about God that he wants us to know, to embrace, and to remember.

My goal in this message today is for you to remember this refrain, and depend upon the truth of this refrain, because it will help you each and every day of your life.

Our passage today, is Psalm 136. It is thought to be one of the ‘Hallal’ psalms. These are specific psalms chosen to be sung at important celebrations, like at the Passover festival. Psalm 136 calls on the worshipping congregation to give thanks

to the Lord. Each one of the 26 verses in this psalm has the refrain, *“for his steadfast love endures forever”*; one cannot miss the theme of the psalm.

It is believed that the psalm was to be sung responsively, with a priest leading with the first line of each verse, and a Levitical choir or the whole congregation replying with the refrain. The Refrain it is intended to be forceful, not a monotonous repetition.

Simply Repeating information that is not important to you is quickly forgotten. Let me give you an illustration:

- A pre-flight review. We have all experienced them every time we fly, however, how important is the information to us? How much do we remember? How intently do we listen to it? I wonder how many of us would know how to respond in an air emergency even though we have been told what to do 100 times?

This psalm can help us see more clearly the various dimensions of his love for us. The refrain in our psalm today is an important truth about God’s love for us. As we become familiar with what this statement is saying about God’s love for us, that refrain can then be something not simply repeated, but declared with meaning and passion.

We will read portions of the psalm together and review why the psalmist has chosen these statements to undergird the refrain of this psalm.

## **Pray**

**This psalm has 4 movements that I will review as my 4 points today**

### **I. (1-3) Thank God for His steadfast love**

A. *1 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;*

B. *‘Give thanks to the Lord, for his is good.’* We are to acknowledge the Lord and give thanks to him for his goodness towards his people. This

call to give thanks is seen in the first and the last verses of this psalm, and throughout the psalm this call to *'give thanks'* is not written into each verse, but is understood as the appropriate response for what actions God has done, described in each verse.

- C. However, his motive for his actions towards his people is the repeated refrain - *'His Steadfast Love'* (one word in the Hebrew - 'hesed') endures forever - or - His love has no end...
  - a. His 'hesed' love: Loyal love, Covenantal love, is without end. This term is used in the OT 191 times describing the love of God towards His people.
- D. We see from the first of this psalm, that God's motive in all of his actions toward his people is because (the word 'for') of his love. His motivation is his steadfast love.
- E. We see his 'steadfast love' expressed as the very foundation of his goodness towards us - The Lord is good, because his steadfast love towards his people endures forever.
- F. (v2,3) The 'God of gods and Lord of lords' is not acknowledging the existence of others gods, but declaring that the Lord alone is sovereign, and exercises his rule over all things as the one true God - why does he exercise this authority? - out of his steadfast or eternal love..
- G. The reason for the action stated in the first half of each verse... is always the same, that ... for (because) *his steadfast love goes on forever...*
- H. We then see this love reflected throughout history, beginning with Creation see in verses 4-9.

## II. (4-9) His love is seen in creation

- A. *4 to him who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever; 5 to him who by understanding made the heavens, for his*

*steadfast love endures forever; 6 to him who spread out the earth above the waters, for his steadfast love endures forever; 7 to him who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever; 8 the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever; 9 the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever;*

- B. You can begin to see the emphasis God is placing on this recurring refrain, and how important it is for us to understand it.
- C. It is not hard to marvel at God's creation. Everywhere we look we see the wonders of his creative wonders, and the heavens are no exception. During the monsoon season here, I love to watch the thunder storms roll in and see the amazing displays of lightening. All a part of the wonders of God's creation.
- D. God's creation of the heavens and the earth has us in view. Creation was an expression of his glory, glory seen in his covenantal love for his people. Not only space was created by God but time is God's gift to his people too, symbolized in its two great markers, the sun and moon. (verses 8 and 9).
- E. With each expression of the great wonders created by God, that the Israelites can see and experience, thankful praise comes forth. This thankful praise declaring that the very motive for God's creation of all that we see is indeed his glory seen in His love for His people!
- F. How can that not be a passionate refrain? His steadfast love, which never ends, was his motivation in creation!
- G. The psalmist then begins to move through the Israelite history, citing examples of God's wonders done for them.

### **III. (10-22) His love is seen in redeeming His people**

- A. The Psalmist first looks at the deliverance of Israel from Egypt in verses 10-16, and then takes us to the conquest of Canaan in verses 17-22. Let's first look at verses 10-16, Israel's deliverance.
- B. *10 to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, for his steadfast love endures forever; 11 and brought Israel out from among them, for his steadfast love endures forever; 12 with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures forever; 13 to him who divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever; 14 and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his steadfast love endures forever; 15 but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, for his steadfast love endures forever; 16 to him who led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures forever;*
- C. The narrative then fast forwards from creation to the 10<sup>th</sup> and last plague God brought upon Egypt. (Thanks again is understood) ...*to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt...* through this plague, and Pharaoh's response to the death of the first born all over his kingdom, including his son, God ...*brought Israel out from among them*. His deliverance of Israel from Egypt was a product of his love for Israel. How? *With a strong hand and an outstretched arm*.
- D. You can see how singing this at the Passover would remind the Israelites of the history behind the Passover. This aspect of redemption, God sparing them from death, passing over every family that was protected by the blood the lamb placed on their door posts and thresholds.
- E. God then reminds them of their complete deliverance from the bondage of slavery, through the wonder of the crossing of the Red Sea. They were not only brought out from Egypt, but they were also delivered from Egypt, never to be under Pharaoh's rule again. God '*overthrew*' Pharaoh who was the mightiest king on earth at the time. When it says he overthrew them, he literally 'shook them off' in referring to the power of Egypt and of Pharaoh.

- F. The redemption of the people, the deliverance of the people, was all action taken by God, motivated out of the *steadfast love of God that endures forever*.
- G. The psalmist in verse 16 fast forwards the historical review and reminds his people that they were not only delivered from bondage to freedom, but they were successfully led *...through the wilderness...* to see their promised inheritance.
- H. We then see an interesting, and even surprising, review of the conquest of Canaan as we read verses 17-22.
- I. *17 to him who struck down great kings, for his steadfast love endures forever; 18 and killed mighty kings, for his steadfast love endures forever; 19 Sihon, king of the Amorites, for his steadfast love endures forever; 20 and Og, king of Bashan, for his steadfast love endures forever; 21 and gave their land as a heritage, for his steadfast love endures forever; 22 a heritage to Israel his servant, for his steadfast love endures forever.*
- J. The question comes to mind, why is this part of the conquest recorded? Why not the victory over Jericho, or the crossing of the Jordan? However, God, through the psalmist, focuses their attention, not on a single victory, but on the completed promise of deliverance, the end of the wilderness wanderings, and the first experience in their promised land.
- K. The two kings that are mentioned, were defeated under the leadership of Moses as they prepared to cross the Jordan river. After the defeat of these kings, Moses would then turn over the leadership of the Israelites to Joshua and he would lead them across the Jordan into the continued conquest of the promised land, their inheritance.
- L. Why mention these two Kings? These two kings were significant because they were the first two kings defeated in the conquest of Canaan, at the end of the wilderness wanderings. They were prominent kings that had extensive territory. Their defeat said to the Israelites, like

Pharaoh, no authority can stand before God, no Pharaoh can keep his people in bondage, and no king can hold land that his people are promised to inherit and inhabit, no power on earth can keep God's covenantal promises from being realized by his people. His motive for this?... *for his steadfast love endures forever...*





<https://static.esvmedia.org/media/esv-study-bible/images/medium/map-06-07.jpg>

- M. Sihon, king of the Ammorites is mentioned 34 times in the OT, and is the first king vanquished by Moses in the conquest of Cannan.
- N. Og king of Bashan, was the second conquest, and was the last descendant of giants (the Rephaim) who is recorded as having an iron bed 13.5 feet long. (Deut. 3:11) He was a giant, like Goliath, a fearful type of enemy. He controlled 60 cities in his lands.
- O. The names of these two kings may now be familiar to us, but they would be familiar to the Israelites, and bring to mind thankfulness for the power of God.
- P. Then the psalmist concludes the psalm by bringing history up to his current day. He changes his references to the 'current Israel'.

#### **IV. (23-26) His love is seen in remembering 'us'**

- A. *23 It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever; 24 and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures forever; 25 he who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever. 26 Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.*
- B. The psalm moves from remembering the historic moves of God on their behalf to the present, in verse 23. *...It is he who remembered us in our low estate. He remembered them (the Israelites singing this psalm) 'in our low estate', and rescued us from our foes.*
  - a. At this point in the recitation of the psalm, they would be encouraged by the psalm to have their own areas come to mind where God has moved with wonders on their behalf, in their lives.

- C. This psalm would then have current application for each and every Israelite, as they add to the wondrous works of God their more recent remembrances. It becomes a psalm that spans the historical landscape and brings the expression of gratitude forward to their 'today'.
- D. *...he who gives food to all flesh...* is an expression of how God gives provision for everyone. God is a gracious God!
- E. Then the psalm ends with the expression of thanksgiving that bookends this psalm, this theme of thanksgiving to God, frames the psalm.

‘The supreme reality is not the Lord’s status (1–3), nor his work in creation (4–9) and history (10–22), nor even his goodness to Israel (23–25) but what he is in himself, the one whose *love endures forever*. To this point of emphasis and reiteration everything returns. His status would by itself inspire awe; his creatorial works, marvel; his power evident in history, submission; his goodness, gratitude. But when we see that all these greatnesses spring from an unchanging love which delights to manifest power in mercy and provision, then the Lord is truly acknowledged with wonder, love and praise.’ Carson

- F. Is the refrain *...for his steadfast love endures forever...* now becoming less of a phrase repeated over and over, and more a passionate expression of how God loves and relates to his people? More of an important aspect of God’s love, that you want to be reminded of, and a refrain you want to remember?
- G. The repetition and celebration of this refrain should not end with the Israelites. Verses 23 and 24 also speak to all reading and singing this psalm.
  - a. *...It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever, and rescued us from our foes; for his steadfast love endures forever...*

‘What is it to us that he is good, supremely exalted, the Creator, the Lord of history, the benefactor of people in time past, if there is not also the unchanging love which brings us too into the warm embrace and keeping of such a God?’ DA Carson

- H. We need to simply look to John 3:16 to see how God, motivated out of his love, ... *remembered us in our low estate, and rescued us from our foes*:
  - a. *John 3:16 - For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son. That whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.*
  - b. *Romans 8:5 - but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*
- I. Therefore we, with our pilgrim brothers and sisters of the OT church, can retrace our foundational pilgrimage from Egypt to Canaan, from bondage to sin, to freedom in Christ, and sing with them at every step that *...his steadfast love endures forever.*
- J. I have three areas of application that I would like to suggest to you from this important psalm:

## **V. Application 1: Continue the refrain**

- A. Our first application of this psalm today, is to continue this refrain. A listing of the works and wonders of God will never be complete. His people should continue to add more and more stanzas to their praise.
- B. We need to remember who God is and what he has done for his people through His steadfast love for us. Our experience of the goodness of God, the deliverance of God, the rescue of God, the provision of God is as real to us as it was to the Israelites. Do we see that all that God has done for us, is motivated *...for his steadfast love endures forever.*

- C. His goodness is seen in Christ, His steadfast love is seen in Christ, His deliverance is seen in Christ, His rescue is seen in Christ, His provision is seen in Christ.
- a. *Ephesians 2:4 - But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Jesus Christ, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*
- D. Do we see God's goodness in our lives? Are we grateful? Are we aware of his steadfast love for us? Are we grateful? Are we aware of His current presence with us with power to rescue? Are we grateful?
- E. This love, this steadfast love, is not simply an Old Testament love that is recorded for us to read. It is a love, for the people of God, that never ends, wherever the people of God are on the timeline of history. This love is steadfast, and was steadfast for them, it is for us and it will be for those to come.
- F. Do we see, and experience by faith, God's steadfast love? Do we lose sight of this love as we endure the challenges that daily life brings? The psalmist could not emphasize more strongly the reality of the steadfast love of God than he does to Israel. Does it serve us in the same way?
- G. Psalm 136 was familiar to the Israelites when talking about the love of God. We can see this love of God, and the truth that his love will never end for his people, echoed in the book of Romans in a place that might be more familiar to you.
- a. *Romans 8:35, 37-39 - Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure*

*that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

H. We should believe this refrain. We should continue this refrain...*for his steadfast love endures forever...*

## **VI. Application 2: Recognize other refrains**

A. This refrain, *the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever*, should continue and be our refrain throughout the ages, until Christ returns. Is this the refrain in your life? If not, what is?

a. *The steadfast love of the Lord...does not include me... Why?*

1. You would have given me a spouse by now
2. You would take away my pain
3. You would not let be out of work again
4. You would not let me be so alone for so long
5. You would not let the report of cancer have come

b. *The steadfast love of the Lord...doesn't last forever... Why?*

1. I will never really be good enough
2. I don't deserve his love
3. I will eventually fail, it is only a matter of time...
4. God loves good people, and I am not that good...

c. *The steadfast love of the Lord... is too good to be true...Why?*

1. I feel more of the weight of my sin than God's love
2. God knows me too well to love me this way....
3. I should always feel his love, and I don't, and haven't for a while now

B. When I don't feel God's steadfast love, or feel that his steadfast love has been put on pause, it is still there for me, as one of his covenantal people. I should believe God's message of love for me over what

message our experiences say. Or feelings say, ...over what our history says.

- C. I want to be more aware of the love of God for me that never ends, rather than the trials that I face that will end, the suffering that I endure for a while, and the fears that entrap my thinking today. When I see his steadfast love, 'on display' as he shows in this psalm, by rising above my life experiences, may the same refrain be heard echoing in my soul, and so may it be in my life.
  - a. Remember, there is a reason that the psalmist repeated these 26 times in one context. We need to be reminded, and we need to place truth over feelings.
  
- D. It is interesting to note that the way in which God describes his love is not in comparison to the failure of his people, but the works and actions of God himself towards his people. There was much in their history that could be recounted with the failures of the Israelites - Golden calf, constant murmurings, and many other expressions of their unbelief. God did not speak of their failures...
  - a. ...because the steadfast love of the Lord was never affected by their failures.
  
- E. Don't we see something similar today? We can feel that our failures determine how much or how long we experience the love of God. However, the gospel tells us that our failures can never stop the love of God from being expressed towards us. As a Christian, we know that our sins, our failures, have been placed on Christ. He bore the complete punishment for our sins, our sins no longer define us, our life in Christ is what defines us.
  - a. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name.  
Chorus: On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.

When he shall come with trumpet sound, oh my I then in him be found. Dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.

- F. Christ has become our substitute, taken our sins, born our punishment, redeemed our lives, and give us access to the steadfast love of the Lord that never ends. Since this has been secured by Christ for us through his death and resurrection, we have secure hope that we can declare for our lives that... *the steadfast love of the Lord never ends.*
- G. Resist any other refrain.

## VII. Application 3 - A Gospel connection

- A. As Christians, we experience *the steadfast love of God, that never ends.* There is never a day that we do not experience this love from God. That steadfast love is given to all of his children, all of his people throughout history, past, present, and future, without reservation or hesitation. It is not earned, it is a gift ... his loyal, covenantal love.
  - a. If you are not a Christian, this love is not your experience. However, that can change today. To become a Christian, you simply need to put your faith in Jesus, that he died on the Cross for your sins, and rose from the dead victoriously overcoming and defeating all sin and going on before us to heaven in the resurrection. He will be returning one day at the end of time to bring us all home to the eternal promised land of heaven.
- B. That is a reality for all who put faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, because there was a day when the steadfast love of God was withheld. That one day, on that one man, Jesus the Son of God, who cried out, *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* That day, for a time, Jesus did not experience God's steadfast love.

- C. Because of that day, God's steadfast love was withheld from Jesus, so that we would never have a day where his steadfast love would be withheld from us. And for this we should ever be thankful, singing at the top of our lungs, *...for his steadfast love endures forever'...*
- D. Martin Luther King said, 'I have a dream.' As the people of God, we can say, we have a reality. Our reality is *'the steadfast love of God endures forever' ...for us.*

### VIII. Close - ending with responsive reading

Psalm 136

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

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7 to him who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever;

8 the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever;

9 the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever;

10 to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, for his steadfast love endures forever;

11 and brought Israel out from among them, for his steadfast love endures forever;

12 with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures forever;

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14 and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his steadfast love endures forever;

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20 and Og, king of Bashan, for his steadfast love endures forever;

21 and gave their land as a heritage, for his steadfast love endures forever;

22 a heritage to Israel his servant, for his steadfast love endures forever.

23 It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever;

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26 Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.