

# The Steadfast Love of God

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## Introduction.

- A. As most of you have probably figured out by now, I'm very interested in hymns and in making our worship as pleasing to God as possible. In consequence, I spend a lot of time evaluating hymns and figuring out what works and what doesn't. One aspect I pay attention to is repetition. The songs that we use to teach our children about the Bible tend to be very repetitive, because we know that young minds need a lot of repetition to get ideas down. However, that same kind of repetition isn't needed in the realm of congregational hymns. We grasp ideas much more quickly, so repetition tends to turn our brains off rather than stimulate them.
- B. As support for this idea, I offer the Bible itself, particularly the Old Testament hymnal that we have as the book of Psalms. Even though the Psalms are typically much longer than our hymns, they use much less repetition. Instead, the Psalms are very concise and move quite quickly to make their point.
- C. To this, there is one exception, one place where Psalms, and indeed the entire Bible, uses repetition. We find it in Psalm 136. This is a unique way for the Holy Spirit to make an argument, and because this text is so repetitive, it tells us that what is repeated is that important. It's not enough to say that the steadfast love of God endures forever just one time, nor even to say it twice. Instead, according to God's divine judgment, the only way to make that point as strongly as it needs to be made is by repeating it throughout the entire psalm.
- D. And yet, even though the steadfast love of God is that important, I fear that it's often something we forget. We get so caught up in the whirl and bustle of our everyday lives that we DON'T constantly stop to remind ourselves that God loves us. Let's address that problem this morning by considering the steadfast love of God.

## I. God's Love in Creation.

- A. We find the first division within this psalm in Psalm 136:1-3. As you might have noticed, it's not immediately obvious how some of the things the Psalmist describes apply to us. Here, however, that's not the case. God has changed His commandments to us since that time, but He has not changed His nature. We find one of the most important observations this psalm makes about God in the first line. We should praise God because He is a good God. Sometimes, I think this is an idea we zip right through because we're so used to it. Yeah, God is good, so what's the next line say? The thing is, though, that there's no reason WHY God has to be good. He is absolutely powerful, and we know what generally happens to humans who gain that kind of power. It corrupts them and they become evil. Not so with God. He is a good God who blesses all of us with good things. He desires what's best for us and gives freely of His own, all because of His steadfast love for all of us.
- B. All these things are true, but some people today take them too far. They emphasize His goodness and love at the expense of His other attributes, with the result that He becomes to them something like a cute, cuddly Care Bear up in heaven. That's a distortion too. As this passage notes, God is superlative and supreme. He is the most powerful King that can be thought of; He is the greatest God who could be imagined. His nature should awaken reverence and awe within us, not cozy familiarity. The only reason why we should even dare to present ourselves before such an august being is because of the love that leads Him to hear us.
- C. The psalmist continues emphasizing the dual power and love of God in Psalm 136:4-9. We see the raw omnipotence of God perhaps most clearly in His creation. Our minds simply can't get around the idea of making something from nothing. How would any of us go about doing that? God, though, made everything from nothing. He created the earth on which we stand. He spread out the heavens with a word, and filled the empty skies with sun and moon and an infinity of stars. Power like that is unimaginable.
- D. However, even as we praise God for His greatness in shaping all of these things, we cannot forget His love. All the wonder of creation was created for us, because of His mercy and His love toward us. God is good and loves us, and so He made us a place to live that is beautiful and good. When we gaze up at the stars at night, and we're lost in admiration and awe at the vastness of what we see, that's because God made them that way to please us. When we go driving through the mountains and are struck by their majesty, we are seeing what our Creator wanted us to see and enjoying what He wanted us to enjoy. Even when we do something as simple as eat a good meal and sigh in satisfaction, we're only echoing Him who first called those things good.
- E. Once we recognize all these created things as the sign of God's power and the expression of His love, it changes both the way we see the creation and the way that we interact with it. Scripturally, there's no question that God has given us dominion over all these things, but just as any of us would take care of a gift we have received from a loved one, so too it's appropriate for us to take care of the physical realm we have received from Him. He has given us all things richly to enjoy, not to despoil and ruin for those who come after us. Let's remember that as we are stewards of so many other things from God, we are stewards of this place in which we live, and our treatment of the gift is an expression of our attitude toward Him.

## II. God's Love in Salvation.

- A. However, the psalmist continues to explore not just the lovingkindness of God in the creation, but in the way He saved the children of Israel from Egypt. We see him take up this theme in Psalm 136:10-16. Now, as always when we look at some aspect of Israelite history, we have to ask, "Why should we care?" In this case, the reason is quite simple. Although we often talk about the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh, God is really the main character of the Exodus, and His nature hasn't changed a bit since His salvation of Israel.
- B. Consider the situation of the Israelites before God began to work. They were slaves of the mightiest nation of the ancient world, completely without the ability to rescue themselves. Pharaoh hated them and their God, and would almost rather have died than let them escape. It's into this bleak picture that God interjects Himself. With wonder after wonder, He breaks the pride of Pharaoh and causes him to let the Israelites go. When Pharaoh changes his mind and pursues Israel with an army of chariots, God leads the people through the sea dryshod, but causes Pharaoh and his army to perish in the waters. He then preserves His people through forty years of wandering in some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth. Why do all this? Because God loved Israel so much that He was willing to do whatever was necessary to gain His people their freedom.
- C. This same love of God that worked so powerfully to free His people then is still at work to free us today. Each one of us was once bound to a slavery far greater than that of Egypt. We were all the unhappy subjects of the kingdom of Satan. But God, because of His lovingkindness toward us, once again came to our aid and accomplished our salvation. This time, though, it wasn't the son of Pharaoh who died. It was the Son of God. That death made our escape from bondage possible. Just as the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom, we pass through the waters of baptism to be freed from our sins. That time, Pharaoh's army perished in the waters; this time, it is our old man of sin that dies. The Israelites journeyed through the physical hostility of the wilderness of Sinai; we face the spiritual hostility of a world bent on evil. However, the God who sustained them in their journey will surely sustain us in ours. Once again, none of this happens because we have a right to demand to be saved. It happens only because of the steadfast love of God.

## III. God's Love in Protection.

- A. This same love is reflected in the way that God continues to protect His people, a topic which the psalmist considers in Psalm 136:17-26. Remember, folks, even after the Israelites came out of Egypt, their situation was still a long, long way from perfect. Today, on the evening news, the various talking heads make a big deal out of refugees. They talk about the hordes of people who are driven from their homes by the latest war or natural disaster, and pityingly shake their heads over the plight of people who are reduced to having nothing more than they can carry. Friends, that's exactly what the children of Israel were during their wilderness wanderings. They were refugees. They had no homes, hardly any possessions, really nothing and no one except God. There wasn't anywhere they could go back to, so their only choice was to go forward, to conquer a people that lived in walled cities, far more numerous and wealthy and advanced than they were. If they failed in battle against such a superior force, they would be doomed to dwindle and die in the wilderness.
- B. It's fair to say that the Israelites were in a situation from which nobody could rescue them but God, but thankfully for them, God is exactly who they had on their side. In all their victories, God's power was what turned the tide of battle for them. The Canaanite kings had the latest weaponry: horses and chariots that should have been more than enough to disperse the Israelite rabble. The Israelites probably didn't have anything more than the farm implements they were able to scrounge on the way out of Egypt. Didn't matter. Dozens of the kings of Canaan came against God's people, fully expecting to defeat them, but every one of those kings was destroyed instead. The land that had belonged to the Amorites probably since the time of Noah now passed into the hands of the Israelites, to be their possession for as long as they obeyed God. Once again, why did all of this happen? Certainly not because the Israelites were so special and so good. It happened because God loved them and chose to bless them so richly, even though they didn't deserve it.
- C. When we think about it, if the Lord were not on our side, our situation wouldn't be any better than the situation of the Israelites in the wilderness. Yay, we've been saved from our sins, but the fact still remains that unless Jesus returns first, every last one of us is still going to die. We can't fight the Grim Reaper on our own, nor would we on our own be able to come up with a road map to our eternal possession in heaven. That's where God enters the picture once again. Certainly, Christians still die physically just as other men do, but unlike other men, we don't have to fear it. Like Paul and the other early disciples did, we can look forward to death, because death is the passage to our promised land in heaven. We don't know the way ourselves, but Jesus tells us that He is the way, and if we follow Him, He can lead us to an eternity spent at the feet of our Father. Death is a powerful foe, but through Christ, he will be robbed of his victory over us. Once again, this isn't something we deserve or can claim to have earned. God blesses us in this way not because we are righteous, but because He is a good God and loves His people. He loves us so much that He did all of these mighty works for us, not only so that we could have the opportunity to spend eternity in heaven with Him, but so that He could spend eternity in heaven with us. I can think of no more humbling thought.

**Conclusion.** If you want to know the love of God and live in heaven with Him, repent and return to Him this morning.