

God's Goodness

Psalm 136

Our Psalm begins with the words, “Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. Oh, give thanks to the God of gods! For His mercy endures forever. Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords! For His mercy endures forever.”

The opening three verses of this magnificent Psalm use the three most common words for God—Yahweh, Elohim and Adonai.

These names are used with reverence, awe and wonder; they are worshipful. “The third commandment requireth the holy and reverent use of God’s names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word and works.”¹

Yahweh is the proper name of the God of Israel. It is a name, not a title, just as your name might be Garrett or Josiah or Joshua. Elohim, on the other hand is a title: God. In this case it refers to the true God. Adonai is a form of the word meaning *Lord* or *Master*. To say Adonai is to say, “God, you are great. I am your humble servant, ready to obey you.” No one can say Jesus is Lord without the Holy Spirit; that is, no one can truly desire to worship and serve God unless his heart is moved by the Holy Spirit, unless he is “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.”

Readers of this Psalm can’t help but notice the repetition. There are 26 verses in this Psalm, and each of them ends with the same refrain, “For His mercy endures forever.” Why the repetition? God wants us to learn that his mercy endures forever; it will not run out.

The word for “mercy” is רַחֲמִים. It occurs 248 times in the Bible. In the KJV it is translated as “mercy” 149 times, “kindness” 40 times, “lovingkindness” 30 times, “goodness” 12 times, “kindly” five times, “merciful” four times, “favor” three times, “good” once, “goodliness” once, “pity” once. The basic meaning is *covenantal faithfulness*. God can never cease to be רַחֲמִים. He can never be anything but רַחֲמִים. He can never cease to be faithful to his covenant. His רַחֲמִים endures forever, and we can never stop thanking him for that, for our eternal salvation depends on it.

The meaning of רַחֲמִים depends on the context. But how to translate it in Psalm 136? The various English versions translate it as “love,” “faithful love,” “steadfast love,” “loving devotion,” “lovingkindness,” “gracious love,” “mercy.” Our *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, which we sang a few moments ago, renders it “love.”

It is appropriate that we consider Psalm 136 in this Thanksgiving season. The first three verses all begin with the words “Oh, give thanks,” setting the tone which pervades the entire Psalm. Thanks at all times must be rendered to the God of

¹ Shorter Catechism 54, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

heaven for all his mercies shown to us in Christ. We must never cease being thankful. To cease to be thankful implies that we give all credit to ourselves.

For the balance of this message I must give credit to J. I. Packer in his little book *Concise Theology*. He cites the first verse of Psalm 136 in the New International Version, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever” and makes the point that God is love. What does this mean?

The endless life of the triune God is one of mutual affection and honor. “The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand” (John 3:35). Moreover, Jesus said, “that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31). Clearly, the members of the Trinity love and honor one another and have mutual affection for one another. This is the basis for us as people loving God and loving one another. The summary of the Ten Commandments is love—love for God, and love for his people. In so loving, we show that we have been born again. In loving God and other people we show the work of the Spirit in our hearts.

Aren't you profoundly glad that the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, and that the Father and the Son love the Spirit, and that the Spirit loves the Father and the Son? Sometimes in our human families there are disagreements, disputes, falling-outs. We do not always model the love that exists between the members of the Trinity. Such failings ought to trouble us greatly. We ought to confess them to the Lord and pray for grace to do better in the future. Christian families don't always model the inter-trinitarian love. Church families don't always, either. “They will know that we are Christians by our love,” not in a syrupy, Hollywood way, but by doing positive acts of kindness and love as we live out God's law in the world. Psalm 136 assures us that “his love endures forever.” As Packer puts it, “God made angels and humans to glorify their Maker in sharing the joyful give-and-take of this divine life according to their own creaturely mode.” What a privilege to be able to live out the life of God as his born-again people!

The apostle John explicitly says that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). How did he show this love? by actually saving us formerly lost sinners who now believe. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God”—we didn't—“but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (vv. 9–10). Who is meant by these pronouns “us” and “our.” Packer helpfully explains that

As always in the New Testament, “us” as the objects and beneficiaries of redeeming love means “us who believe.” Neither here nor elsewhere does “we” or “us” refer to every individual belonging to the human race. New Testament teaching on redemption is particularistic throughout, and when “the world” is said to be loved and redeemed (John 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 John 2:2), the reference is to the great number of God's elect scattered

worldwide throughout the ungodly human community (cf. John 10:16; 11:52–53), not to each and every person who did, does, or shall exist. If this were not so, John and Paul would be contradicting things that they say elsewhere.

This is the doctrine of particular redemption. When Christ came to earth, he came for the purpose of saving—that is, doing everything necessary, from start to finish, to accomplish the salvation of his people. When he died on the cross he uttered the words, “It is finished,” for he had fully carried out everything he had come to earth to do. One author insightfully observes that “the cry, τετέλεσται, ‘it is finished,’ was not the gasp of a worn-out life, but the deliberate utterance of a clear consciousness that his work was finished, and all God’s purpose accomplished.” Salvation is the work of God, not the work of sinners. It is not: “God has done his part,” now it’s all up to you”; it is fully accomplished in Christ.

This sovereign redemptive love is one facet of the quality that Scripture calls God’s goodness, that is, the glorious kindness and generosity that touches all his creatures (Ps. 145:9, 15–16) and that ought to lead all sinners to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

“The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works. . . . The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing” (Ps. 145:9, 15–16).

Other aspects of this goodness are the mercy or compassion or pity that shows kindness to persons in distress by rescuing them out of trouble (Ps. 107; 136) and the long-suffering, forbearance, and slowness to anger that continues to show kindness toward persons who have persisted in sinning (Ex. 34:6; Ps. 78:38; John 3:10–4:11; Rom. 9:22; 2 Pet. 3:9). The supreme expression of God’s goodness is still, however, the amazing grace and inexpressible love that shows kindness by saving sinners who deserve only condemnation: saving them, moreover, at the tremendous cost of Christ’s death on Calvary (Rom. 3:22–24; 5:5–8; 8:32–39; Eph. 2:1–10; 3:14–18; 5:25–27).

God’s faithfulness to his purposes, promises, and people is a further aspect of his goodness and praiseworthiness. Humans lie and break their word; God does neither. In the worst of times it can still be said: “His compassions never fail . . . Great is your faithfulness” (Lam. 3:22–23; Ps. 36:5; cf. Ps. 89, especially vv. 1–2, 14, 24, 33, 37, 49). Though God’s ways of expressing his faithfulness are sometimes unexpected and bewildering, looking indeed to the casual observer and in the short term more like unfaithfulness, the final testimony of those who walk with God

through life's ups and downs is that "every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (Josh. 23:14–15). God's fidelity, along with the other aspects of his gracious goodness as set forth in his Word, is always solid ground on which to rest our faith and hope.

God is a good God. He is good, no matter the circumstances we might be going through. If we are going through hard times, we might be tempted to think that he is *not* good, that he is purposely trying to make our lives uncomfortable for no reason. But we must never think that way! As the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's day 9, assures us, "he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends upon me in this vale of tears. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father."²

² *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 876