

The Steadfast, Forever Love of God

Repeat this line 26 times: “His steadfast love endures forever.” It’s what the writer of Psalm 136 was saying when he wrote it. It is the most common worship chorus in the Bible. In Psalm 136 it is repeated 26 times. In addition to this Psalm it is repeated no less than 15 other times in the Bible as being a part of the corporate worship of God’s people or given to be used in the corporate worship of God’s people.

Psalm 136 has 26 verses, and this line is like a refrain, found at the end of each of all 26 verses. It seems to express the boundless joy the writer of this Psalm finds in the truth of God’s covenant love and seeks to reinforce this great reality in the hearts of God’s people who would use it in worship.

There are four verses at the beginning and two at the end of the Psalm that are like an introduction and a conclusion to it. In both, we are reminded that this God of lovingkindness is good and great. In the opening verse worshippers would sing together, to one another “give thanks to the LORD for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” After this it says, “He is the God of gods...He is the Lord of Lords...who alone does great wonders...”, with our chorus repeated after each line. In the last two verses of the Psalm we see again his goodness and greatness, as God is describes as “He who gives food to all flesh” and as we are reminded to “give thanks to the God of heaven.”

The heart of the Psalm is verses 5-24. The smaller part of the heart of this Psalm, verses 5-9, celebrates that God is creator of the world. The much larger part of the heart of this Psalm, celebrates that God is the deliverer of his own. In these verses, 10-24, Israel is reminded of God rescuing them from Egypt, and in the desert again and again, before entering the Promised Land. These 15 verses, by far the longest part of the Psalm, lead us to focus at length on the God who rescues his people.

Israel’s deliverance is what is specifically celebrated, as thanks is given and God’s love is remembered. But, the language used about Israel in the Old Testament is used in the New Testament to refer to the church and all its members, and the story of God bringing Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land is seen as a picture of salvation in Christ. The Exodus was the greatest story of redemption and act of covenant love in the Older Testament, but the gospel is the ultimate story of God redeeming his people through Christ. It is the supreme work of covenant love in history.

In view of this, Christians can know that this love is ours in Christ. This faithful, forever love of God is ours because of what Christ did through his life, death and resurrection.

This greatest of all loves, God’s faithful and forever love, is offered and received by grace, through faith in Christ. Believers need to be reminded of this love again and again. To use Martin Luther’s words, “Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others and beat it into their heads continually.” Luther was referring to the gospel, which is how we become the recipients of God’s steadfast love that endures forever. It seems this Psalm is meant to beat the unchanging, unbelievable love of God, that is ours in Christ, into our heads. This can only mean that God’s people have a hard time really digesting this incomprehensible reality without chewing on it for a long time.

Timothy Keller said, “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.” Repeat after me, “His steadfast love endures forever, and it is mine in Christ.” This should be the chorus of our lives. Now, repeat that thoughtfully at least 25 more times!