

## **“His Steadfast Love Endures Forever”**

*Psalm 116:1-19; Romans 12:1-2*

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**B**eloved Congregation of Christ: We often hear people exclaiming, “Hallelujah!” when they are so happy that something that they had been waiting for has come. For most people today, this word is nothing more than “Hooray!” or “Yippee!” For the Beatles, hallelujah is merely a praise word for their Hindu God Krishna in their song “My Sweet Lord.” In the movie Shrek, “Hallelujah” became the most popular song. But in this song, the Jewish writer, Leonard Cohen, laments “the feelings of shame, brokenness, and [a world] marred by sin.”<sup>1</sup> That is why he calls this state of humanity “a cold and broken Hallelujah.”

In Jewish tradition, Psalm 136 is called “The Great Hallel.” Another group of psalms, Psalm 113-118, is also called “The Great Hallel” or the “Egyptian Hallel.” Most Bible scholars agree that Psalm 118 was the “hymn” that Jesus and his disciples sang after they celebrated the Passover meal on the night he was betrayed. You may have noticed the word “Hallel,” which is the first part of the word “Hallelujah.” *Hallelu* is an imperative Hebrew verb which means, “You praise.” And *yah*, spelled with a “j” in English, is a contracted form of *Yahweh*, because Jews cannot say the name of God. Therefore, “Hallelujah” is a command to praise God.

Psalm 136 is an antiphonal chant. A leader chants, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,” and the congregation chants in response, “*For his steadfast love endures forever.*” In 26 verses, the worship leader chants the different ways in which God has shown his steadfast love. So, 26 times, the congregation will say the response. So when I criticize contemporary praise songs as repetitious, and we read Psalm 136, you might say, “But even the Bible is repetitious!” But this repetition is not like this popular Michael W. Smith song,

Our God is an awesome God he reigns / From heaven above with wisdom, power and  
love / Our God is an awesome God

What’s the difference? This praise chorus – and most others – is repeated for as many times as the song leader wants, maybe 5, 10 or 20 times. This is one reason why the congregation does not participate in singing – they just get tired. Why is God praised? Because he is an “awesome God.” That’s it; nothing else. In contrast, what did you notice about Psalm 136? In each verse, we read one new reason why God is praised and given thanksgiving.

### **Call to Worship God Who Alone Has Steadfast Love (verse 1-3, 26)**

The first three verses and the last verse serve as bookends to the middle part of the psalm. They are a call to worship God. That’s why we used them as our Call to Worship. Why do we

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Rynerson, “The Cold and Broken ‘Hallelujah’ of the Evangelical Subculture,” *Christ and Pop Culture*, January 25, 2013. <https://christandpopculture.com/the-cold-and-broken-hallelujah-of-the-evangelical-subculture/>. Retrieved November 20, 2017.

worship and thank God? The psalmist answers with God's three names: because he is "the LORD"; because he is the "God of gods"; and because he is "the Lord of lords."

The psalmist calls God the LORD of Israel. He calls him Yahweh, LORD, the name God revealed to Moses in the burning bush (Exo 3:14). When God made covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, he appeared to them as Yahweh. So we call God our Covenant God. God is also called the "God of gods." This verse and other verses that refer to "gods" are often used by Mormons to teach that there are many gods, and all Christians may become gods, just as the God in heaven used to be a mere man who became God. But when the Bible says "gods," it refers to angels (Psa 82:1), or kings (Psa 58:1), or idols (Isa 37:19). Thirdly, God is called "Lord of lords" because there is no power or dominion above him. Scripture uses this language often: God alone is King, but there are other kings. God alone is Lord, but there are other lords. As God himself says in Isaiah 44:6, *"I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god."*

This is the basis for our doctrine of the Trinity. When God made his covenant with Israel, Moses called to Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4, *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."* There is one God, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:5, *"for us, there is one God."* Yet, in this one God, the Bible also clearly teaches that there are Three Persons, all co-equal, all the same essence, all having the same attributes: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Anyone who rejects this doctrine is no different from cults like Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Oneness Pentecostalism, and is not a Christian.

This is also the basis for our worship of God: we worship him because we believe that he exists. We worship him Lord's Day after Lord's Day because we believe his entire Word is true, written by him through the Holy Spirit, inerrant, infallible, sufficient and authoritative.

### **His Steadfast Love for His Creation (verses 4-9)**

Why then do we worship this one true God of Scripture? The psalmist gives three main reasons in Psalm 136. He divides the whole psalm into three parts of thanksgiving. In verses 4-9, he worships God because he is the Almighty Creator. While the Bible refers to God's "great wonders" often to his mighty works in Egypt, the "great wonders" that the psalmist praises here are the works of creation. His wonders in Egypt are in the next part of the psalm.

So in verses 4-9, the psalmist lists God's works of creation, mainly the creation of the heavens and the earth, the sun, moon and stars, in Genesis 1. Who else can create something out of nothing? Has any scientist done this? Can any scientist do this? They can send men to the moon and satellites beyond the solar system. They can clone animals, produce in vitro fertilization, transplant human organs. But is there any possibility of creating something out of nothing?

But many people today believe that the universe was created out of nothing through chance. They believe that the entire vastness of the universe was compressed into a hot, dense mass just a few millimeters across. They theorize that several billion years ago, a massive blast called the "Big Bang" caused all this mass and energy to expand with incomprehensible speed

from its pebble-sized origin to its astronomical expanse today. But who created this minute mass and energy? Did it come out of nothingness? And what caused this “Big Bang”? Was this an uncaused cause? And by mere chance and by itself, this great mass evolved into the most complex natural systems and billions of species of plants and animals! Evolution is such an unbelievable and ridiculous theory that even some of the most brilliant, non-Christian scientists today do not believe in it.

And what is the result of this belief in an atheistic evolution? Those who don’t believe in a Creator have no accountability to a Creator. If they’re not accountable to a Creator, ultimately, all sense of accountability and responsibility to all authority crumbles. Why do you think there’s so much disrespect, dishonor and violence in families, schools, and in the streets today? Because unbelievers, if they’re not accountable to God, the highest Authority, will not be accountable to any lesser authority. That’s why Paul describes atheists in Romans 1:28-32 with these words of condemnation,

*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

This wickedness is exactly what we see in our atheistic culture today. And wicked people want all others to join their wickedness.

### **His Steadfast Love for His People (verses 10-24)**

Next, the psalmist praises the LORD for his steadfast love for his people Israel. He redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. He divided the Red Sea so they could cross on dry ground, and then sent the waters back to drown Pharaoh’s army. For 40 years in the wilderness, he gave them food and drink, and fought for them against enemies along the way. Once inside Canaan, God fought for them again and again until he had given them all the land that he had promised their forefather Abraham. These verses echo the words of Moses in Exodus 15:13, *“You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.”*

As God’s people, we Christians must trust God’s steadfast love, grace and mercy. If we doubt his love, we will not trust him to provide for all our needs for body and soul. Then, we would be doing everything our own way, rather than God’s way found in his Word. We would not even be inclined to share our resources with others in the church, community and the world because we would not trust his providence. And if we doubt his steadfast love, why would we trust that he would save us from our enemies, as he saved Israel from Egypt and the Canaanites? We would be shamed by our brothers and sisters in the Middle East who are persecuted, tortured and martyred daily by their enemies, but trust God to the end of their lives.

Most importantly, if we Christians doubt God's enduring covenant love, we will not repent from our sin. God's works of creation, redemption and providence are intimately connected. Did you notice that those who do not believe in creation, also do not believe in redemption? Why would they turn from their sins if they are not accountable to a Creator? Why would they trust in Providence, the God who created and provided everything for his creation, if he does not exist? And if they are not accountable to a Creator, why would they need a Savior from their sins? Why would they need to believe that this Creator is also their Redeemer who sent his only-begotten Son to redeem them from slavery to sin?

That is why God's steadfast love is most important to Paul, who said, *"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Rom 5:8). When he saw us in our state of misery in sin, he rescued us from the tyranny of the devil. God's eternal and immeasurable love is shown in the unbroken chain of salvation from eternity to eternity, *"Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified"* (Rom 8:30). No one and nothing can break this chain because God's steadfast love endures forever. That is why, again, Paul is in awe of God's love, *"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"* (Rom 8:38-39).

### **His Steadfast Love for All Mankind (verse 25)**

In verse 25, the psalmist gives thanks to God because of his enduring love for all mankind, *"he who gives food to all flesh."* He goes back to verses 4-9 where he praises the LORD for his wonders of creation. Even if it is now under the curse of sin, death and decay, God still loves his creation. God sends rain and sun on both the righteous and the wicked, both undeserving of his mercy, because all are sinners and rebels against him. What merciful God is this who provides food, shelter and clothing to those who raise their fists and shout blasphemies against him, calls him unjust, and blames him for all the sufferings in this world?

David knows God's providence toward all mankind in Psalm 145:15, *"The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season."* Because God's love for his creation is forever, and even if this world is full of wickedness, he will not destroy it. Rather, he will redeem it – together with his people – from sin, and restore it to its fullest eternal glory, as Paul says in Romans 8:18–21,

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

Therefore, let us give thanks to the Lord, because his steadfast love, his grace, his mercy for his creation and for his people endures forever!