

“HOW PRECIOUS IS YOUR STEADFAST LOVE, O GOD!”

Readings: Psalm 36:5-9 (text); John 7:37-39

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Dear Congregation of Christ: As the whole world is alarmed by the outbreak of the coronavirus, reactions are striking. A pastor in Nebraska tells that God is telling America not to fear, “Why do you fear, United States? I have extended and opened a window of mercy to this nation at this time. Therefore ... my mercy is the quarantine that shall be greater than what they have spoken to you, United States.” Another pastor says this virus is God’s judgment against the world. What is also astonishing—and funny—is that many of the health and wealth churches have also suspended their “healing” services. Others believe that this is China’s biological warfare against our nation.

This is a worldwide event that has caused great fear to people everywhere. Our whole lives, including our health, businesses, services, and even entertainment, are affected. Most especially, many churches in the affected areas have suspended their worship services and other activities. This is one of the most unprecedented and sad events in the life of the church in our time.

However, we must keep this pandemic in perspective. As of today, there has been about 6,000 deaths due to the coronavirus and 160,000 people infected with it. Compare this with the 25 million people in Turkey and Europe who died in the Plague of Justinian in the 6th century; 50 million—half the population of Europe—due to the Black Plague in the 14th century; 25 million worldwide due to the Spanish Flu (swine flu) in 1918-19; and 25 million—mostly in Africa—due to HIV/AIDS from the 1980s to the present. Therefore, unless it is God’s will, this coronavirus pandemic pales in comparison to the severe plagues in the past.

Our county thus far has had no confirmed cases of coronavirus, so we still hold our worship services onsite. But we are taking precautions primarily to obey God’s command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” We are not overreacting, because as you all know, our congregation has mostly elderly people, and these are those who are the most vulnerable to this virus. But our faith and assurance are fully grounded in our merciful and loving God and all that he has promised in his eternal word.

So our theme today, then, is **“HOW PRECIOUS IS YOUR STEADFAST LOVE, O GOD!”** in two headings: first, **Its Immeasurable Bounds**; second, **Its Abundant Provisions**.

Its Immeasurable Bounds

David opens the psalm with a condemnation of the wicked as having no fear of God in his thoughts, words and deeds. But he quickly turns his attention to praising the LORD for his steadfast love. What is God’s “*steadfast love*”? This is a very important word in the Old Testament, used 248 times. Among others, it means God’s love for his covenant people Israel, as in *“the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand*

generations” (Deu 7:9); or when he promises them, “*and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David*” (Isa 55:3; see also 1 Kgs 8:23; Neh 1:5; 9:32; Dan 9:4).

“Steadfast love” is also related to God's saving love towards his people, as in Psalm 136:11 when he “*brought Israel out from among [the Egyptians], for his steadfast love endures forever.*” It may also refer to brotherly love for one another, as the love between David and Jonathan (1 Sam 20:8). Since its full meaning cannot be conveyed in English, various other words have been used to translate it, such as lovingkindness, grace, mercy, unfailing love, faithful love, favor and goodness. For example, in the metrical version of Psalm 136, the refrain sung responsively is, “His *grace* abideth ever,” or “His *mercy* faileth never.”

David praises the LORD's boundless steadfast love and saving love for his covenant people. In verses 5-6, he compares the LORD's steadfast love to the expanse of his creation: the heavens, the clouds, the mountains, and the great oceans. In these two verses, the words synonymous to steadfast love are faithfulness, righteousness, and judgments. One of God's attributes is that he is immense, and his character reflects it. His steadfast love is immeasurable as the heavens and the clouds; his righteousness is as unmovable as the highest mountains; and his judgments based on his Word are as deep as the deepest ocean. Therefore, be assured in these uncertain times of the coronavirus pandemic that God's steadfast love will never fail us or leave us, because it is boundless.

Man's love is insignificant compared with God's, as he is but a speck in God's immense creation. His love extends only to his family and friends. His righteousness can change in a moment, according to his feelings and situations. His judgments are as shallow and foolish as his finite mind and knowledge. No wonder David exclaims in Psalm 8:3-6, “*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.*” God has his eyes on the human race that is the crowning glory of his creation, so he is ever mindful of him, loving him with his boundless love.

And the outcome of this boundless love of God is his provisions for all his creatures.

Its Abundant Provisions

In the last part of verse 6, David says, “*man and beast you save, O Lord,*” which serves as a segue to another part of this Psalm, a thanksgiving. For what does he thank God? We remember God's abundant provisions as well as his “precious” steadfast love in saving us from sin. It is as precious as treasures of gold and silver, too good to let it slip by. As God sends sun and rain to both the righteous and the wicked, so he does provide for all mankind. David uses the picture of a bird nourishing and protecting its young, “*The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings*” (verse 7). This is made clearer when we read the story of Ruth the Moabite, whom Boaz praised for trusting in the God of Israel, “*under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*” (Ruth 2:12).

God's steadfast love is as precious as food and drink for the nourishment of his covenant people, *"They feast on the abundance of your house"* (verse 8) evokes pictures of his people feasting on food offerings in the tabernacle or temple. Whenever God makes a covenant with his people, the covenant is confirmed with a feast of rich food and aged wine. David praises the LORD, *"you give them drink from the river of your delights,"* a picture of the river that flows out of the Garden of Eden to nourish the whole earth. In Psalm 46:4, *"there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High,"* which is fulfilled in the heavenly city of Revelation 22:1, *"the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb."* This river is *"the fountain of life"* (verse 9).

In addition to rich food and refreshing drink, the LORD provides salvation and light for his people, *"in your light do we see light"* (verse 9). "Seeing light" means experiencing light, which also means having life. The light of the LORD gives life. Without the light of God, man dies, and he *"will never again see light"* (Psa 49:19). Isaiah says that the people who walked in deep darkness are like the dead who never see light (Isa 9:2).

The LORD abundantly provides, so the psalmist exclaims in awe and thanksgiving, *"Oh, how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of the children of mankind!"* (Psa 31:19).

Do we praise God, give him our thanksgiving for his daily provisions, and most of all, for saving you from the darkness of sin and death? The wicked do not acknowledge God, therefore God does not provide them with the bread of life, living water, and the light of salvation.

Beloved brothers and sisters, the Apostle Paul says that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. He quotes David, *"There is no fear of God before their eyes."* With unrighteousness and ungodliness, the wicked *"not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."* As sinners, we do not deserve God's grace, a word that means "undeserved favor or merit." Paul says that no sinner is saved except through God's grace to those who have faith alone in Christ alone. No one is saved by good works.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the River of Delights and Fountain of Life. He is the Bread of Life. He is the Light of the World. No one has eternal life except through him. No one has understanding except through his Light. Christ invites you to come *"under his wings"* to be saved from sin, nourished with his Word and Spirit, and protected from his enemies. *"Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love"* (2 John 1:3).

All natural and manmade disasters, sufferings, and evil in the world are the result of man's sin. With these things, God reminds us that he is in sovereign control of all things. He builds and he destroys the works of man, sometimes in a split second, like the Tower of Babel, or the Roman Empire, which God destroyed over a period of five centuries. But if it is the Lord's will, and

because of his steadfast love for man, he will use science and technology to send a cure for the coronavirus, and this crisis will end. But when? We will find out in time.

Against the teaching of some “prophets,” the coronavirus, just as the terrible Plague of Justinian and the Black Plague in the past, will not be the end of the world. When these plagues ravaged Europe, “prophets” predicted the end of the world. But today, European nations are still some of the richest nations in the world.

Therefore, according to our Lord Jesus Christ, the end will come as a “thief in the night” (Matt 24:43; 1 Thess 5:2), when everything is business as usual, when people are *“eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”* (Matt 24:38). The coronavirus and all the evil and sufferings in the world do not mean the world is about to end, but are mere birth pains leading to the joy of childbirth (Matt 24:6-8). And that childbirth is the return of our Lord Jesus Christ from heaven to free us from all sin and sufferings in this world.