

Creation Psalms

Psalm 136 - Earthed and Connected: Memory, Covenant and the Land

For your reflection

Read the psalm out loud, omitting the refrain (“for God’s steadfast love endures for ever”). Then read it again, with the refrain. What difference does it make to the message of the psalm and to how it makes you feel?

Many English translations have one sentence running from verse 3 to verse 22, even though they put gaps in the text here and there. How does this long sentence impact how you understand the psalm? If you were going to break it down into shorter sentences to make it easier to read, where would you put the full stops? Do these breaks affect the meaning of the psalm at all?

In vv.3-9, the psalm refers to days two and four of the creation narrative in Genesis 1, but not to other days. Read Genesis 1.1-2.3 and write extra verses for Psalm 136 so that it covers all seven days of creation. Don’t forget to include the psalm’s refrain!

The psalm’s list of God’s deeds finishes with the conquest of the land by the Israelites (although vv.23-24 may refer to the exile). If you were going to bring the psalm up to date, what would be some of the significant events that you would want to include as loving acts of God? You could focus on Israel’s subsequent history, or the New Testament period, or the history of your Church, or your own spiritual journey.

My Reflection

Psalm 136 is a text of corporate liturgy, with its refrain repeated in every verse: “for God’s steadfast love endures forever”(NRSV). You can imagine a worship leader calling out the first half of each verse and the congregation responding with the refrain. In the first three verses, this refrain feels very comfortable. The psalm begins with a three-fold call to give thanks to God. The first gives its own reason: “for he is good”, and of course the refrain gives a reason for thanks. These three verses would be very suitable as a call to worship, invoking God’s greatness, God’s goodness and God’s steadfast love that endures forever.

The psalm then moves into a catalogue of God’s acts, and the refrain starts to feel less natural. E.g. v.5: “Who by understanding made the heavens, for God’s steadfast love endures forever.” With each act of God, whether in creation or deliverance, the refrain asserts that behind each one is God’s eternal, steadfast love. I suspect that this may be more than a liturgical device. The refrain sets every aspect of God’s character and action on a foundation of God’s love and thus makes everything God is and does relational. According to this psalm, God did not create the world because there was nothing better to do, or even because God’s nature is to create, but because God’s nature is, fundamentally, to love. This is a psalm of thanks and praise to a covenant-making God; a God who loves, who desires to bless and who is in relationship with the creation. This becomes even more important, perhaps, in vv.10-25, verses that survey Israel’s history of liberation from Egypt and settlement in the promised land. These acts of God’s deliverance were not because Israel deserved them, or because they were somehow entitled to them, but because of God’s steadfast love. It would be an interesting exercise to insert Psalm 136’s refrain into the Apostles’ Creed and see how it changes the way you feel as you say each line. Biblical faith has never been about giving assent to the right doctrinal formulations, but about living faithfully within a covenant with the God whose steadfast love endures forever.

Likewise, it is vital to keep this steadfast love of a covenant-seeking, covenant-keeping God at the forefront of our thinking about nature and our relationship with the majority-creation. It is not just that the creation is held in God’s love, but that God’s love is woven throughout creation’s fabric. It is as big a mistake to try to separate God and creation as it is to confuse them. Psalm 8 invokes the sense of the enormity of the universe, felt by many who pay attention to nature, whether it’s the stars or the insects living in a tree: a sense of awe and wonder, of something much bigger than you. Paying attention to nature also can foster a

feeling of care towards it. In his wonderful book, 'Common Ground', Rob Cowan writes about being moved by such a sense of awe and love:

Right now I can sense something bigger in the curvature of the horizon, the birdsong, the unearthly crawling of insects and the immeasurable flowers. Something exquisite, enriching, frightening, indifferent, immortal. And I realize it doesn't care whether I'm here or not. Everybody loves nature, but I wonder if, deep down, what we really want is for nature to love us back. That's the impossibility of our obsession. It won't. It can't.¹

Perhaps that is the driving force behind early religions, in which nature is deified, from water-sprites through to gods of storm, fertility and sun. We are desperate for nature to love us, or at least give a damn about us one way or another, at least now and then. But nature is not divine. It doesn't care. Psalm 136 insists, however, over and over again, that the Creator cares: that God's steadfast love endures forever and is enmeshed with every act of God, however great or small. However great the universe may be, the God of gods, who is greater, is a God of unconquerable, immortal, eternal steadfast love: for me and for every creature, from the stars to the mud. Nature may not be able to care about me, but God does, and that love of God is an essential, living dimension of everything that exists. I think there is a challenge in this: I can care; I can give a damn; I can act in love towards other creatures; I can recognize my inter-relatedness with other creatures and honour them and care about them. As I discover more of the reality of that steadfast love of God within and over all things, I will discover new ways of relating lovingly with God's creation. Nature may never love me, but I may discover love within nature, because the steadfast love of God - for all - endures forever, and my love is active within it too. I think it should be impossible to recite this psalm and feel indifferent. It is a psalm of salvation.

Following on from this, another function of the Psalm's refrain may be to dismiss any distinction between God's acts of creation and those of salvation. Each is equally grounded in the steadfast love of God. It may be that vv.5-9's similarity to Genesis 1 evokes the idea of creation as deliverance from chaos, but that may be going too far. But the psalm places the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and settlement in the promised land within the brackets of the creation of the heavens and earth in vv.5-9 and provision of food for "all flesh" in v.25 and thus casts the exodus, conquest and life in the land as part of God's work of creating

¹ Rob Cowan, *Common Ground* (2015, Windmill Books), p.204

and sustaining, with the refrain unifying and connecting every act of God into one whole expression of steadfast love.

Walter Brueggemann, in his masterful book “The Land”, especially in the chapter on Deuteronomy, explores the importance of memory for Israel. Israel in the promised land faced the temptation to possess the land, secure it, manage it, monetarise it, and so risk losing it. If they fell for this temptation, it would be because they forgot that salvation, which biblically was to do with the land, can only be a gift from God. As soon as you grasp a gift and possess it as yours to manage, exploit and defend, it is no longer a gift. When the giver is God, the giver is able to withdraw the gift, and that’s the history of Israel in the bible, from Egypt through the conquest and the monarchy to exile. Psalm 136 is a liturgical aide-memoire, a recital of the history of God’s acts of love, a reminder and celebration of God’s gracious, steadfast love. Each verse lists something God has done for Israel, including deliverance from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea, the defeat of the Canaanite kings Sihon and Og, and the gift of the land as a ‘heritage’ (NRSV). With each act of God, the refrain gives the same reason: not because of hard work or privilege or their own strategy or strength, but because “God’s steadfast love endures for ever.” It was vital that Israel remembered this. When they forgot and started to treat the land as a commodity that belonged to them (forgetting that they belonged to the land and the land belonged to God), violated principles like the Sabbath and care for the poor and the foreigner, the result was exile and the loss of the land.

There is a danger in Christian worship in a culture of celebrity, success and money, that we forget that salvation is given by grace. It is that forgetfulness that opens a door to indifference (and worse) towards nature, land, people: all the worse when it’s at the hands of religious people who would claim allegiance to God. If we wish to live by grace – if we wish to *live*, rather than just manage - it is important that we use liturgical equivalents of Psalm 136 that remind us of our history. We haven’t made this up, either on Wednesday night in the pub or in 1972 or 1662 or 1517 or even 2000 years ago. We are part of a community of faith that stretches back to the beginning of all things, grounded in the eternal steadfast love of God. That’s why it’s important that some old hymns and liturgy are used and why it’s important that a varied diet of the bible is read and preached, including from the Old Testament. That’s why the eucharist is so vital, as we take simple elements of the stuff of earth – bread and wine – and remember together “the night on which he was betrayed” (1 Corinthians 11.23) and the gift of Jesus Christ of himself in death and resurrection for us all. Otherwise we may drift into thinking that our own hands have made all this, or that we owe our existence to a charismatic

founder or denominational leader. A church with living roots, familiar with scriptures like Psalm 136, will be filled with thankfulness for grace, knowing that they are being made new in the love of God purely because the love of God endures forever – love that brought the universe into being, love that called Abram and many others into covenant relationship, love that filled Jesus so that he emptied himself of everything else and died on the cross, love that raised him to life, love that holds and sustains all things and love that is making all things new – because God’s steadfast love endures forever. A church with living roots will refuse to distinguish between creation and salvation but will see all of life as embraced within the love of God, and will care for all life, human and majority-creation alike, body and soul alike.

The psalm ends as it began, expressing thankfulness to the eternal, holy, gracious, loving God - “Give thanks to the God of heaven, for God’s steadfast love endures forever”.

Ideas For Praying With Psalm 136

Outdoors

Spend some time in the company of a tree. Prayerfully read John 15.1-11. Talk to God about your roots and fruit.

Indoors

Ask God to show you significant people on your journey, both past and present, positive and negative. Share with God a prayer for each one.

Ask God to show you significant moments in your life when you’ve experienced the love of God. Write some verses of the psalm that give thanks for those times, “for God’s steadfast love endures for ever.”

Prayers

Call to Worship

Give thanks to the Holy One, for God is good:

God's love endures for ever.

Give thanks to the God of gods:

God's love endures for ever.

Give thanks to Creator, Saviour, Sustainer:

God's love endures for ever.

From Psalm 136.1-2, 26

Prayer of thanks

God's love endures for ever.

Thanks be to God.

Loving God, we thank you
for your goodness to us.

From sunrise to sunset

and through the dark of the night;

from mountain to meadow,

ocean's roar to gurgling stream;

from endless stars to the bright blue of a summer sky;

trees, flowers, birds, fish, insects,

wild animals, farm animals, pets;

from nebulae to quasars,

galaxies to snowflakes;

Creation declares your glory,

your goodness, your loving-kindness.

God's love endures for ever.

Thanks be to God.

Loving God, we thank you
for your goodness to us.
From earliest days to now,
in famine and plenty,
in war and peace,
in fire and flood,
in riches and poverty,
in sickness and in health,
in good times and bad,
you have not left us nor forsaken us.
Your crucified and risen Son declares your glory,
your goodness, your loving-kindness.

God's love endures for ever.

Thanks be to God.

Loving God, we thank you
for your goodness to us.
In Abraham and Sarah,
Moses, Ruth,
David, Isaiah and Esther;
in Paul and Peter,
Mary and Martha,
Antony, Aidan, Hilda;
in reform and renewal,
in martyrdom and mission,
in loving service and prophecy,
in word and deed,
your Holy Spirit declares your glory,
your goodness, your loving-kindness.

God's love endures for ever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Collect

God of time and space,
with us in every moment from beginning to end;
hold us in eternal arms and cover us with steadfast love,
that we may remember we are yours
throughout this day and all days
and give you eternal honour and glory,
through Jesus Christ, your love incarnate,
who died and rose again
to make us and all things new.
Amen.