

+ Meditations for Thanksgiving Eve + Psalm 136 + 23 November 2016 +

Give Thanks to the LORD for His Person – Psalm 136:1-3 (CW 234 – Praise to the Lord, the Almighty)

“Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.” Sound familiar? That would be the prayer of thanksgiving that we often use to close our meal prayers here at church. Perhaps your family uses those words to give thanks for the food that you’re about to eat. They’re familiar words—and they’re not exclusive to Psalm 136. These words were a common prayer of thanksgiving spoken by God’s Old Testament people. In fact, this psalm was designed to be sung by two choirs singing the words back and forth in the Passover worship service in the temple. This psalm calls on God’s people to praise him for who he is and what he has accomplished—how he has not only remained faithful to his people, but has performed mighty deeds of love and mercy on their behalf, mighty deeds recorded on the pages of Holy Scripture.

Over two thousand years after the birth of Christ, our reasons for giving thanks to the Lord of free and faithful grace—the God who saves his people—are just as numerous. Our God is not like any other false god or idol or anything or anyone else to whom we give higher priority or attention. All of those created things don’t hold a candle to the Creator himself, who is **“God of gods”** and **“Lord of lords,”** but who is this God who is above all others, who is greater than any other person, thing, or idea in all of history, in all the universe? To find out who our God is whom we praise, you simply need to go right to that first verse—and to the refrain of every verse in the psalm. **“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His faithful love endures forever.”**

Why did God’s Old Testament people give thanks to the Lord? They gave thanks because he is the **LORD**. Notice that that’s all in capital letters in your worship folder (and in your Bible!). Why is that? The translators want you to notice that you are reading a very special name for the Lord—the name *Yahweh*, a name that doesn’t emphasize God’s power or strength, but instead it emphasizes his free and faithful grace, his unconditional love, his compassionate mercy which moves him to act on behalf of his people, to save them, the loving kindness that moved him to use his power to rescue them from destruction and disaster, the loving kindness that moved him to set aside that power to become a lowly human being to save us from eternal disaster. This is the God of gods and Lord of lords—the true and only God, who rescues us with his merciful love. So give thanks today and always to the Lord of free and faithful grace for his person!

Give Thanks to the LORD for His Power – Psalm 136:4-9 (CW 260 – Let All Things Now Living)

Thanksgiving gives us an opportunity to pause to give thanks for what we typically forget to be thankful. While you’ll likely give thanks for family and friends and spouses and stuff and tables groaning under Thanksgiving feasts, how about giving thanks for what you don’t typically think about? When was the last time you gave thanks for the air you breathe? How about the rain and snow that water the earth? How about the starry sky? How about waking up in the morning. How about a functioning furnace or a safe vehicle or warm clothes or a watertight roof over your head? I remember once giving thanks for a chain-link fence because it prevented an out-of-control vehicle hurtling down an on ramp from launching into traffic and the vehicle in which I was riding.

Thanksgiving is a fantastic time to give thanks for all the physical blessings that we have received, as Martin Luther put it in his explanation to the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed—**“clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own, and all I need to keep my body and life.”** Yet while you and I can be thankful for the countless physical blessings that we enjoy in this land of plenty, let’s focus not so much on the created things we enjoy, but rather on the One who created them. That’s what the Psalmist encourages God’s people to do in the verses we just read.

Give thanks to the One who alone does great wonders in nature, who created the universe simply with the Word from his mouth—**“by his understanding,”** yet took special, personal care in creating man from the dust of the earth and woman from the rib of the man. Give thanks to the One who **“spread out the earth upon the waters,”** who created day and night and sky and marked out the dry land and the seas, who created the vegetation that covers the earth in all its beautiful array, who placed the sun, moon, and stars in the sky to mark days and months and years, and who populated the earth with fish and birds and land animals and us. Give thanks to the One who created with merciful love every detail of this vast universe down to the finest grain of sand and that little circle in the middle of your tummy known as a belly button. Give thanks because our Creator-God still provides food and life both to the evil and the good—though we all reject him by nature. We gladly acknowledge that our God preserves our world and blesses us continually because of his faithful, merciful love. So give thanks today and always to the Lord of free and faithful grace for his power!

Give Thanks to the LORD for His Plan – Psalm 136:10-22 (CWS 733 – Rejoice in God)

In Old Testament Israel, every time the Israelites gathered for worship or to celebrate a festival day, every time they offered a sacrifice, there was an element of thanksgiving. They gave thanks at the spring and fall harvest times. They gave thanks at different religious festivals like Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. They gave thanks with sacrifices at the Lord's altar, but if there was one day or festival that strongly encouraged God's people to give thanks, it was the festival of Passover.

Every year in the spring, hundreds of Jewish believers would travel to the ancient city of Jerusalem to recall the mightiest deed of the Lord that had been accomplished in the Old Testament—the rescue of nearly two million Israelites from centuries of harsh slavery in Egypt. It was a day of celebration because of the liberation that God accomplished for his people, but it was also a day of solemn thanksgiving as they recalled what God alone accomplished to rescue them. You see, it was all part of his plan to fulfill his promise to Abraham that he would make the land of Canaan—the modern land of Israel—their own. After 400 years of slavery, the Lord had used Moses to tell mighty Pharaoh—the absolute ruler of the kingdom of Egypt—to let God's people go.

When Pharaoh refused, the Lord sent ten plagues. While the first nine plagues devastated Egypt's economy and humiliated their false gods, the final plague was the most terrifying as the Lord sent the Angel of Death to wipe out all of the firstborn of Egypt from the household of Pharaoh down to the lowliest slave with one exception. Any who had the blood of an unblemished lamb painted on their doorposts would be "passed over" by the Angel of Death—and in that day, on that one night, the Lord rescued his people. The Lord continued to rescue them when Pharaoh had second thoughts and sent his army after them only to see his mighty soldiers drown in the depths of the Red Sea. The Lord provided for his people for 40 years in the barren Sinai wilderness between Egypt and Canaan—and then the Lord provided them victories over other kings, defeating King Sihon of the Amorites and King Og of Bashan and setting the stage for victory over the entire Promised Land. In so doing the Lord kept to his plan and gave his people the inheritance he had promised long ago.

...But all of that was just a single, important part of a far greater and far grander plan that God had put into place when Adam and Eve disobeyed him in the Garden of Eden. There he made a greater promise—that the Seed of the Woman would one day conquer the power of Satan and sin and death forever. God's rescue of Israel and settling them in the Promised Land was one part of the grand plan that would one day come to fulfillment in our Savior Jesus Christ. Fifteen hundred years after the Lord of free and faithful grace had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, the Lord put into play the final portion of his grand plan with the arrival of his Son, born of a virgin, born under law, to ransom us from the slavery of sin and death forever by his own sacrifice—as the Lamb of God—on the cross. By his wounds we are healed and life and liberation are ours all according to plan. So give thanks today and always to the Lord of free and faithful grace for his plan!

We sing Hymn 733 – Rejoice in God

Give Thanks to the LORD for His Provision – Psalm 136:23-26 (CW 392 – Not Unto Us)

Thanksgiving is often one of those holidays where we do a lot of remembering. Maybe you remember sitting at the kiddie table. Maybe you remember the last time the entire family sat around the table together. Maybe you remember the first Thanksgiving you celebrated with your spouse or how far you traveled or what snowstorm you went through to get to a Thanksgiving celebration.

When God's Old Testament people gathered to give thanks for the harvest or a religious festival—and especially with the Passover celebration, the Lord wanted his people to remember what his merciful and faithful love had accomplished for his people. They would recall how he "**remembered**" them in their lowest and darkest and most difficult points. They would recall how he had freed them from their oppressors and they would recall how he provided food and life for humans and animals alike—for all creation really. They would recall how the Lord's faithful and merciful love had done so much and provided so much in the past and would continue to do so forever and ever. They would look back and remember. They would look ahead and rejoice.

As you look back on the past week, the past month, the past year, the past decade, or simply all the years the Lord has given you and countless others before you in this life, remember! Remember that even when life was at its worst, the Lord of free and faithful grace was still there by your side. Remember how the Lord of free and faithful grace freed you from your oppressors—sin and Satan and death—and secured your eternal inheritance. Remember how the Lord has provided for you physically and spiritually from the moment your life began and will do so not just in the years to come, but for all eternity. Remember the Lord's merciful love and give thanks! Give thanks today and always to the Lord of free and faithful grace for his provision!