

## Virtual Prayer Meeting for Kelham Baptist Church

April 29, 2020

SONG: "Give Thanks"

<https://youtu.be/047xtru0ZR0>

SONG: "Wonderful, Merciful Savior"

<https://youtu.be/z8T0br5JfAA>

**Psalm 136, often called "The Great Hallel"** ("Hallel" being the Hebrew word for praise) comes immediately after the "songs of degrees" or songs of ascent. Last week I mentioned their history, organization, and theories of authorship and origins; so I will skip that this week. Psalm 136 speaks powerfully, in part because of its repeated refrain: "For his mercy endureth forever." That refrain, or chorus, likely sung or chanted by the assembled congregation in response to the reader in worship, appears no less than twenty-six times, once in each verse, in this great Psalm of praise. The same exact phrase appears only nine more times in the Old Testament (1 Chron. 16:34; 2 Chron. 5:13; 7:3; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; and Jer. 33:11). Since this was likely a festival song (one of those sung at the three annually prescribed pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem), its words would have been ingrained in the minds and hearts of worshipers, almost like the Doxology was among Baptists in the 1950s. That means every other instance of its appearance would have reminded them of this great Psalm and its association with the celebrations of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Those memories in turn would have reminded them of its origin—when David first moved the ark of the covenant, representing the visible presence of God among His people, to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16:34; 2 Chron. 5:13; 7:3). Those memories would likely have included God's fire coming down from heaven to devour the first sacrifices and the appearance of the Shekinah-Glory and cloud. This phrase echoes as well in Jehoshaphat's prayer and God's encouragement in what turned out to be a great victory in the face of overwhelming odds (2 Chron. 20:14-21). These words

undergirded the restoration prophecy of Jeremiah when he gave God's promise, "I will cause to return the captivity of the land" (Jer. 33:11). These memories again must have been strong in the minds of the people after the Captivity when they began again to build the Temple in Ezra's day (Ezra 3:8-11). Memories of good in the past root themselves in our hearts as well in times of trouble and hardship. Remember when you got saved? Remember how you felt when you were baptized? The fact, not the feeling, is what matters, but as human beings we are emotional beings, and those emotions can either lift us up or drag us down.

**Psalm 136:1 begins with a call to worship**, "O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever." The first verb, "give thanks," properly translates a word that includes the idea of confession. Leviticus 5:5 uses the word in that sense: "When he shall be guilty in one of these *things*, that he shall **confess** that he hath sinned." It appears in the same sense in Proverbs 28:13: "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso **confesseth** and forsaketh *them* shall have mercy." "Give thanks" includes confession as well as thanksgiving. It involves confession "of sin or of God's character and works. The term was employed in reference to the sacrificial system of Israel. One could bring a 'thank-offering' (or 'praise-offering') in which he would make declarations of praise to God and/of confession of sin to God as he offered his sacrifice" (Alexander, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 365). Kidner suggested that "O give thanks," which appears in the first three verses of the psalm and the last verse, appears "unheard [in] every verse of sequence of this psalm (*Psalms 73—150*, p. 457).

**The call to worship offers a reason for worship:** "For he is good" (Ps. 136:1). The Hebrew does not contain the words "he is." They were supplied by the translators to provide flow to the text. *Young's Literal Translation* captures a little of the sense of the Joe Friday ("just the facts, ma'am") tone of the Hebrew: "Give ye thanks to Jehovah, For good." God *is* good. He is always good. He is absolute good. James wrote, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (Jas.

1:17). God's goodness does not change. God is good all the time. He deserves our thanks.

Furthermore, the psalm tells us, "For his mercy endureth for ever" (Ps. 136:1). This chorus sets the theme throughout the psalm; so understanding it is important. "Mercy" translates the Hebrew word חסד (*hesed*), which could be translated "steadfast love" or "unchanging love." Kidner described it as "faithfulness to a covenant, to which marital devotion gives some analogy. It is the word which older versions translated 'lovingkindness', before its connection with covenanting and its strong element of fidelity were fully appreciated" (*Psalms 1—72*, pps. 87-88). The phrase, the chorus, reminds God's people that God is ever faithful. His love continues. Note the word "endureth" is in italics, letting us know that was also added by the translators for smooth reading in English. "For His mercy forever" adequately renders the idea.

Kidner points out that the Hebrew is much more rapid and pointed than the English. The Hebrew is three short words (read right to left—*Ki laolom hesedu*: לעולם חסדו כי). Kidner held out the translation of Jacques Gelineau as capturing the feel and sense of this phrase: "For his love has no end." This truth is driven home not in a liturgical rote sense but in believing response in each verse of Psalm 136. (You might try reading it aloud using a higher or lower voice for this refrain to get the feel.) This psalm was a worship song, and it had the same feel as a responsive reading, because it likely was done responsively with priests and people or priests and other priests opposite them variously reading and responding antiphonally.

The link below is an arrangement of Psalm 136 antiphonally. You may not fully appreciate the arrangement, but you should be able to hear the chorus repeated, "For His mercy endureth for ever." Whether Psalm 136 was sung or chanted in

<https://youtu.be/VK8FBpRC T8>

this way we do not know. In any case, the theme, "For His mercy endureth for ever" would be indelibly recorded on the hearts of God's people.

Having dealt with the chorus thoroughly, we will simply mention it each time it appears and try to point out any particular significance it may have in context.

Verses 1-3 are almost exactly the same. The difference, however, comes in the divine name mentioned: "LORD," or Jehovah, in verse 1; "God of gods" in verse 2; "Lord of lords" in verse 3. We should be familiar enough with the meaning of "LORD" in verse 1, the self-revealed name of God as the self-existing One, the uncaused Cause, the Sovereign Being of the universe. "God of gods" is literally *Elohim Ha Elohim*. The critical scholars of the Old Testament believed the Pentateuch was compiled by various editors who each expressed his own preference for the name of God. They spoke of the sources as J, E, P, D: Jehovah, Elohim, Priestly, and Deuteronomic. The Priestly editor supposedly produced Leviticus, which is concerned with priestly matters of holiness. The Deuteronomic editor supposedly compiled Deuteronomy. The critics sliced and diced the text of the Pentateuch according to the particular name for God the editor used. The problem with this approach are too numerous to mention, but Deuteronomy 32:15-19 contains Jehovah and Elohim as well. "Elohim" expresses God's character as powerful or mighty. The superlative "God of gods" does not acknowledge other gods but is, in fact, a superlative for God's might over any imagined gods of any kind. "Lord of lords" (Ps. 136:3) translates Adoni Ha Adonim, the Sovereign of sovereigns. One commentator called "Adonai," a word often substituted by pious Jews when they came to the ineffable Name, Jehovah, in the text while reading aloud, a word for "boss" or "master." He is the Master of all imagined masters. In sum the three divine names, coming as they do, emphasize God's covenant relationship with Israel ("LORD"), His might above all others ("God of gods"), and His sovereignty above all imagined beings. It is a trifecta of praise.

**Verse 4 stresses that God** "alone doeth great wonders." "Wonders" almost always refers to supernatural acts beyond human ability. These were not merely "wonders"; they were "great" wonders. God alone works miracles. C. S. Lewis wrote, 'Miracle is, from the point of view of the scientist, a form of doctoring, tampering, (if you like) cheating. It introduces a new factor into the situation, namely supernatural force, which the scientist had not reckoned on. ...This perhaps helps to make a little

clearer what the laws of Nature really are... They produce no events: they state the pattern to which every event... must conform, just as the rules of arithmetic state the pattern to which all transactions with money must conform...The divine art of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern.” God intervened and intervenes in history to deliver His people, and the psalm covers in turn Creation (vss. 5-8), the Exodus (vss. 10-15), the wilderness experience and conquest of the land (vss. 16-22), and God’s ongoing care for His people, Israel (vss. 23-25), ending with a renewed call to God, this time calling Him “the God of heaven” (vs. 26).

**Creation is certainly a miracle.** Scientists have researched and pondered for millennia why something instead of nothing exists. The laws of nature, so-called, would seem to dictate what is called *homeostasis*, standing still. The first law of thermodynamics says, loosely speaking that energy cannot be created or destroyed but it can be changed. But Nothing is Nothing. The second law of thermodynamics says that a closed system tends to become more disordered (entropy) than ordered. Things run down. They fall apart. They decay. Even the Big Bang Theory suggests first, something was there; second, something happened to transform that something into everything. Life, they tell us, came from nonlife (in my ignorant opinion biogenesis seems to violate the second law of thermodynamics at its core). Materialists (those who believe nothing but Matter exists) would say, Energy was injected into the system. From where? They don’t know. Even the renowned atheist evolutionist Richard Dawkins seems to be stumped. In a video from 2018, Dawkins said, “Something pretty mysterious must have given rise to the origin of the universe.” Go to <https://youtu.be/v34QjYPuiEA> for the five-minute video in which Dawkins explains that Nothing is not Nothing .

**The psalmist calls for giving thanks** to “him that by wisdom made the heavens” (Ps. 136:5). Compare verses 6-9 with Genesis 1:9-18. “Wisdom” translates a word that means wisdom, insight, “knowledge superior to the mere gathering of data. It is necessary to know how to use knowledge” (Goldberg, *TWOT*, Vol. 1, p. 239). As our knowledge of the universe on macrocosmic and microcosmic levels grows, we can

better understand the incredible complexity of the physical universe. Dr. Danny Faulkner noted, “The sun and all the stars that we can see are members of the Milky Way galaxy, a vast collection of more than 100 billion stars spanning nearly 100,000 light-years. The term “stellar distance” normally refers to measuring distances of stars within the galaxy. The first stellar distance measurement was in 1838. There are billions of many other galaxies, each of them being millions or even billions of light-years away. We say that the distances of other galaxies are extra-galactic” (for more information and math that will make you remember why you didn’t like it in school go to: <https://answersingenesis.org/astronomy/how-big-is-the-universe/>). The dynamics of the planets, galaxies, and space itself have resulted in sciences like astrophysics in an attempt to discover, categorize, and comprehend the universe. How the heavenly bodies interact with each other in complex manners—the earth revolving around the sun in a certain number of days, the moon revolving around the earth, the effects of solar radiation and lunar gravity—all these are examples of God’s mysteries to be studied.

Then consider on a microcosmic level the wonder of DNA. DNA is an incredibly complex information system for encoding life. Dr. Duane Gish of the Institute for Creation Research said of the human genome, “The genetics are so incredibly complex and can be so marvelously interrelated that it’s absolutely going to demand an intelligent source. The idea that all of this could have come about by random accidents, genetic errors, and so forth is just simply beyond comprehension.” “A single strand of DNA is thousands of times thinner than a strand of human hair. One pinhead of DNA could hold enough information to fill a stack of books stretching from the earth to the moon 500 times” (<https://answersingenesis.org/genetics/dna-similarities/dna-a-summary/>). If that doesn’t wow and amaze you, I don’t know what could. Certainly creation of the “heavens” took God’s “wisdom.” Note that the Hebrew word for “made” here is usually translated “formed,” not the Hebrew word in Genesis 1:1, “Created.” “Made” appears in Genesis 1:7, where we are told, “God made the firmament.”

**The narrative of Creation continues** the litany of praise: “To him that stretched out the earth above the waters” (Ps. 136:6). The word pictures beating out or stretching out something. Gill observed “above” has the idea of “besides the waters,” indicating close by but securing the earth from them.

**God is praised as “him that made great lights”** (vs. 7), a term for the sun, moon, and stars, whose existence and function follow in verses 8-9. Throughout the Psalms, we are called to ponder the created universe to gain insight and understanding (Ps. 8, 19, 33, 104, 147-148). Romans 1 condemns humanity for rejecting the testimony of the physical universe: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (vss. 18-22). The sun, created to “rule by day” (Ps. 136:8) has often been an object of worship for fallen humanity. The sun delineates the passing of time. China today has only one time zone, Beijing Standard Time

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/11/china-only-has-one-time-zone-and-thats-a-problem/281136/>). Prior to the Communist revolution in 1949, China had five time zones, but the CCP decided for national unity to have only one time zone. Of course, it makes for problems. Totalitarian governments almost always attempt some control of time. During the French Revolution, decimal time, dividing the day into 10 decimal hours, was adopted.

**“The moon and stars to rule by night” (Ps. 136:9)** points to God’s wisdom in creating nighttime lights and guides. Seasons and navigation depend upon the position of the moon and the stars. Two hundred years ago, the average person could locate himself fairly accurately by the position of certain stars and constellations.

**Praise then moves to God’s actions in Israel’s history:** “that smote Egypt in their firstborn” (Ps. 136:10), a clear reference to the tenth plague that killed all the

firstborn of Egypt (Exod. 11—12) at Passover. Exodus observes “that it came to pass, that at midnight the LORD smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment” (12:12). This judgment was directed against Egypt’s false worship. The next verse is a continuation of the words before the chorus: “And brought out Israel from among them” (Ps. 136:11). They are two sides of the same coin, destruction of the firstborn and deliverance of God’s people. God knows His own (cf. 2 Pet. 2:7-9, where Peter made clear God could distinguish between His own and unbelievers—even though we cannot). Psalm 136:12 continues the thoughts of verses 10-11: “with a strong hand and stretched out arm.” God judged Egypt at the same time He rescued His people with His might. Thirteen more times the Old Testament refers to God’s “stretched out arm” (Exod. 6:6; Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 11:1; 1 Kings 8:42; 2 Kings 17:36; 2 Chron. 6:32; Jer. 32:17; Ezek. 20:33-34). It almost always indicates God’s ability to act, even at a distance. Jeremiah 32:17 is one of the most noteworthy: “Ah Lord GOD! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, *and* there is nothing too hard for thee.” The context of that was God’s promise to return the nation to the land after the Captivity. God Himself spoke and said, “Behold, I *am* the LORD, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for me?” (vs. 27).

**God’s power and strength in miraculous intervention** in the subsequent events of the Exodus is remembered in verses 13-15. He “divided the Red sea into parts” (vs. 13; cf. Exod. 14:21-22). The Hebrew describes the Red Sea as having been “cut apart” (Leupold, *Expositions of the Psalms*, p. 931). Was the body of water what we know as the Red Sea today? Unger observed, “The topography of this region has been altered to some degree since the digging of the Suez Canal. Lake Ballah has disappeared” (Unger’s Bible Dictionary, p. 914). The problem we have is we do not know what the geography and topography were like in Moses’ day. Scholars disagree on the point of crossing. I tend to lean toward the location as being the modern Gulf of Aqaba, still part of the Red Sea proper. (For more information:



<https://www.bible.ca/archeology/bible-archeology-exodus-route-goshen-red-sea.htm>).

**“Made Israel to pass through the midst of it” (Ps. 136:14)** is described graphically by John Phillips: “What a sight it must have been—those towering walls of water held back by omnipotent power, and Israel’s multitudes, with flocks and tents, hurrying down that long, rumbling lane to the other side of the sea” (*Exploring the Psalms*, Vol. 2, p. 536). Hebrews 11:29 says, “By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry *land*.” If some scholars are right (and I do not believe they are) and it was merely the Sea of Reeds, merely a marshy area, that it was dried up is alone a miracle. It was then truly a miracle that God “overthrew Pharaoh and his hosts” (Ps. 136:15) in an area like that. Hebrew 11 says the Egyptians were “drowned” (vs. 29). “Overthrew” renders a word that means to shake. Pharaoh was shaken into the sea.

**God’s manifest blessings continue in the litany** of praise in verse 16: He “led his people through the wilderness.” I have often remarked that we call this time the Wilderness Wanderings, but God says He led His people. Recall the pillar of cloud and fire, the visible representation of the presence of God in the Shekinah-Glory. When the cloud arose, the people arose. When the cloud stopped, the people stopped (Exod. 13:21-22; 14:19, 24; Neh. 9:19). We take navigation for granted today. When I first started traveling, I had the benefit of my father’s counsel (he had traveled widely in business) as to which roads to take to get to various places. I also had maps. Now I have a navigation system in the car and similar things on my phone. Israel had none of those benefits. In the Book of Joshua, God instructed the people to follow the ark of the covenant “that ye may know the way by which y must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore” (Josh. 3:4). Our lives are much the same. As we reach various stages of life, we’ve never passed this way before. Youth, young adulthood, parenthood, middle and old ages: they are all new places in our journey in life. Just as the Israelites had to follow God (as exemplified by the ark of the covenant and the pillar of cloud and fire), we must follow His leadership and seek His direction.

**The conquest of the land as one of God's "great wonders"** (Ps. 136:4) is detailed in verses 17-20. "Great" (vs. 17) and "famous" (vs. 18) kings like the Amorite king Sihon and Og the king of Bashan may have faded from the memory of historians (archaeology throws little light on their identities), but Israel remembered them as two great enemies. Numbers 21:21ff details how Sihon (descended from Canaan according to Genesis 10:16) refused to allow Israel to take a peaceful shortcut through his country, instead going out to defeat in battle. Og was another Amorite king who opposed God's people (Num. 21:33-34). The land was given by God "as an heritage unto Israel" (Ps. 136:22). Psalm 136:23 exclaimed that God "remember us in our low estate." These descendants of Jacob had been enslaved four hundred years. God granted them the means to feed, clothe, and care for themselves by the defeat of these Amorite peoples. We might wonder, Why these people, the Amorites? Recall when God made His original promise to Abraham, He revealed their captivity in Egypt, their Exodus, and the judgment of the Amorites (Gen. 15:13-16). God gave four hundred years for the Amorites to repent, and they did not. Judgment fell.

**"Hath redeemed us from our enemies" (Ps. 136:24)** uses a term meaning to tear apart or tear away. The Egyptians had not wanted to lose the valuable Hebrew workforce that powered its hierarchical society; yet God had torn them away. He also provided "food to all flesh" (vs. 25). Is this a reference to the manna in the Wilderness? It could be. The word "food" is the Hebrew word for "bread," and Numbers 21:5 referred to manna as "this light bread." Or it could refer to God's provision of crops in the land when they conquered it (cf. Deut. 6:10-12). Or it could refer to God's continual provision for all of His Creation.

Finally, the call to worship returns in its full expression to the words of verses 1-3 in its conclusion in verse 26: "O give thanks unto the God of heaven." Here God is addressed by a different term. He is not Jehovah (vs. 1) or "the God of gods" (vs. 2) or "the Lord of lords" (vs. 3); He is simply "the God of heaven." The God who is God everywhere in all time above all of His own. He is God of the whole universe.

“His mercy endureth for ever” (Psalm 136:26) is repeated for the twenty-sixth time. How could Israel not remember who God is and what He is like after such a psalm as this? Yet I think of us and how glibly we sing a songs like “I Surrender All,” which J. Vernon McGee said makes liars of us all. Far too often our singing is more orthodox than our living. May we remember God’s mercy endureth for ever. It reminds of the last verse of the Twenty-Third Psalm: “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (vs. 6). It is that confidence, despite our shortcoming, failures, blunders, and sometimes outright rebellion, that allows us to “give thanks unto the LORD” (Ps. 136:26).

Song: “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow”

<https://youtu.be/Mk4p3rihONU>

**Prayer Requests:**

Jolene Rogers—health

Johnnie Hughes—health

Connie Adams’s brother-in-law, Donald Cheeseman, surgery

From Capital Baptist Association:

**Connie Harjo**, wife of Legus Harjo, pastor of First Indian . . . ill with Covid19, family in quarantine

**Scott Allen and Guests at Grace Rescue Mission . . .** Praise: Covid19 test was negative, off lockdown

**Kevin Hanel**, pastor of Beverly Hills . . . still experiencing health issues

**Betty**, 91-year-old aunt of Phyllis Poe, wife of Jack Poe . . . ill with Covid-19