



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



# The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 136

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# Introduction

- This Psalm has no title in the Hebrew, nor in any of the other translation versions to indicate the author, or to explain the occasion on which it was composed
- Some say it was very probably composed by David, and given to the Levites to sing every day, 1 Chronicles 16:41
- Solomon his son followed his example, and use it in singing at the dedication of the temple, 2 Chronicles 7:3; as Jehoshaphat seems to have done when he went out to war against his enemies, 2 Chronicles 20:21
- And some believe it was written after the captivity



# Introduction

- Psalm 136 has been called the Great Hallel, or Great Psalm of Praise
- It is a liturgical Psalm, closely resembling Psalm 135
- It is a special, with each one of its 26 verses repeating the refrain, *His mercy endures forever*
- This refrain was evidently sung as a response, either by a choir of priests and Levites answering the choir or the singer who chanted the first line; or by the whole congregation
- Probably a priest or Levite would call out a reason to give God thanks, and His people would respond with, *“For His mercy endures forever.”*





# Introduction

- The sentence is used several other times in the Old Testament, each time in the context of some kind of public praise or declaration
- His mercy endures forever is found:
- In David's Psalm of praise recorded in (1 Chronicles 16:7-36)
- In the assignments of the priests in David's day (1 Chronicles 16:41)
- In Israel's praise at the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chronicles 5:13,7:3,6)
- In the record of the Lord's victory over the Ammonites as the Israelites praised (2 Chronicles 20:21)



# Introduction

- In the future praise by Israel after the destruction experienced in the Babylonian conquest (Jeremiah 33:10-11)
- In the dedication of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:11)
- The Psalm contains nothing but praise
- It is a reminder that repetition has a place in worship
- Repetition helps us to think on what is true, to reflect on that truth so that we remember and believe
- Also, in the collective reflection of our worship in the church, such repetition brings the entire body to focus on the same words, expanding our joy together with each repeat



# Introduction

## Psalm Outline

- Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4
- Give Thanks to God the Creator of the World 136:5-9
- Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22
- Give Thanks to God Our Redeemer 136: 23-24
- Give Thanks to God for His Providential Mercies 136:25-26



# Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4



- As in the previous Psalm, this Psalm gives thanks and praise to God for His goodness
- The exhortation is intensely heartfelt: the psalmist pleads with the Lord's people with an "Oh", three times repeated in the first three verses
- Thanks are the least that God's people can offer
- The fact that God *is good* is fundamental to all that He is and does
- He is is the source of good
- He *is good* in Himself, and to all His creatures

# Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4



- He *is good* especially to His people, who should give thanks to Him daily for all blessings temporal and spiritual
- *For His mercy endures forever*; This is the first of 26 times this phrase is repeated in this Psalm and it was probably the refrain
- 1 Chronicles 16:37-41 suggests that *His mercy endures forever* was sung daily as part of the morning and evening sacrifices
- *His mercy* is the same as His love, which is from everlasting to everlasting
- *God is love* (1 John 4:8 and 4:16), and that love is an expression of His goodness; this is a wonderful reason to give thanks to the Lord



# Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4



- Commenting on the expression: “For His mercy endures forever”, St. Augustine says that “God grants His mercy to His saints and believers. Saying ‘forever’, does not mean that they will be miserable here on earth, then He will bring them forth to an eternal happiness; but it means that, by His mercy, He will turn them, while still here on earth, from misery to happiness; their happiness here will never cease nor end, but will endure forever; by becoming holy after being wicked; good after being corrupt; living after being dead; and happy after being miserable. All that, thanks to His mercy.”

# Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4



- St. John Chrysostom says, “by saying ‘forever’, he means that God does not practice His compassion and mercy sometimes, and ceases some other times; as is done by humans, who are governed by temper, hindered by meanness, or preoccupations...No, God, although applies His mercy in many ways, yet He is always merciful, and will never cease to be compassionate upon His creatures.”
- *Give thanks to the God of gods...to the Lord of lords:* Reasons are repeatedly found to thank and praise God
- Here each reason is connected to *who God is*

# Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4



- He is greater than any of the supposed *gods* or *lords* of the nations
- This idea may be drawn from Deuteronomy 10:17
- He is the supreme God; the God superior to all that is called *gods*, or that is worshiped by the nations of the earth
- According to St. Augustine the word gods may point to men, “*I said, ‘You are gods, And all of you are children of the Most High.’*” (Psalm 82:6) “*Jesus answered them, ‘Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, ‘You are gods?’*” (John 10:34); or it may point to the idols worshiped by the heathen



# Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4



- Or ruler of all in authority, *lords*, all kings, princes, “*the king answered Daniel, and said, ‘Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret.’*” (Daniel 2:47)
- St. Augustine says, “The whole then of that question the Apostle has briefly expounded, when he says: “For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us *there is* one God, the Father, of whom *are* all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom *are* all things, and through whom we live, (1 Corinthians 8:5-6)”

# Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4



- And St. John Chrysostom explains and says, “As he said in the previous Psalm, then, that He is above all gods, here on the other hand his words go still further, the He is their Lord and Master both, whether you mention idols or demons. You see, even if the demons were dishonored and gave offense, they were still slaves and subjects.”
- *For His mercy endures forever:* The ground of praise here is, that it is a characteristic of the supreme God that He is a merciful Being; eternal mercy with infinite power are unified in His character

# Give Thanks to God for His Goodness 136:1-4



- After declaring that He is the Lord and Master of the gods, the psalmist offer proof and support of this declaration
- *To Him who alone does great wonders*, God's people were invited to praise Him as the God of true power and miraculous *wonders*
- He alone does marvelous things; none besides can do such things, and He does them without the assistance or advice of any other
- St. John Chrysostom says, "He does not say: 'did great wonders, but says: 'does great wonders', confirming that God unceasingly gives gifts, and does wonders; not only through His authority, but through His compassion, as well."



# Give Thanks to God the Creator of the World 136:5-9



- Creation is the work, not only of God's power, but of His wisdom also
- Things were made as they are by the efforts of His prudence and understanding, *"The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens."* (Proverbs 3:19)
- *"In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will,"* (Ephesians 1:11)
- The motive of creation lay in the eternal lovingkindness of God
- Creation is an act of Divine love

# Give Thanks to God the Creator of the World 136:5-9



- According to St. John Chrysostom God did not make these for ten or twenty years, or a thousand; rather He made them last all human lifetime which reflect that *His mercy endures forever*
- He says, “What is really amazing is that while He made them and gave them at the beginning thus made, yet when human beings disobeyed, He did not exclude them from those things, instead, what He had given to them when they were sinless, He let them live with even after sin and did not restrain their use of them after sin.”
- Beginning from verse 6, the psalmist describes the work of God as it was described in the first four days of creation (Genesis 1:1-19)

# Give Thanks to God the Creator of the World 136:5-9



- Because each of these is an expression of His never-ending mercy toward His people, one can say that God created the heavens and the earth with His people in mind
- St. Paul echoed the same truths in Lystra when he taught the Gentiles there that God: “did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” (Acts 14:17)
- According to St. Augustine, the expression of *the earth above the waters*, refers to the continents surrounded by the oceans in the world like an island, surrounded by water on all sides



# Give Thanks to God the Creator of the World 136:5-9



- However, St. Jerome believes that this verse refers to baptism
- *To Him who made great lights*, What could men have done without light?
- Those *great lights* are the sun, the moon, and the stars, which were worshipped by many nations; here, the psalmist reveals as great creations by God, granted to us through His mercy
- In God's great mercy He has not left human being in darkness
- They are said to *rule*, not only because they govern the seasons of the year, but because they are useful to the world
- The influences of the sun are too many for us to count them all

# Give Thanks to God the Creator of the World 136:5-9



- *The sun to rule by day and The moon and stars to rule by night,* and yet all are subject to God's direction and positioning
- And no one hour is left without rule
- These rulers, therefore, which the Gentiles idolized, are the world's servants and God's subjects
- The description of creation in this Psalm calls the Christian not to focus on or dispute over cosmological theories but to delight in God's creation as a work of His lovingkindness and mercy

# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- The previous Psalm mentioned the deliverance from Egypt and the striking of the firstborn (Psalm 135:8-9)
- Here again God is praised as the One who rescued Israel from their slavery and humiliation in Egypt – another expression of His never-ending *mercy*
- According to St. John Chrysostom the psalmist constantly repeats the wonders that were done in Egypt because of the Israelites deep ingratitude and their forgetting it despite having heard it repeatedly



# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- The psalmist described God's great wonders happening perfectly from the work of creation described in Genesis 1 to the work of deliverance described in Exodus
- The Exodus account is a historical account, describing what really happened
- Therefore, the context and flow of this Psalm demonstrates that what God described in Genesis 1 really happened
- The psalmist does not treat them differently, as if one were a legend and the other actual history
- Of all the plagues of Egypt, none is mentioned but the death of the first-born, because that was the victorious plague

# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- By that God, who in all the plagues distinguished the Israelites from the Egyptians, brought them at last from among them with a strong hand and an arm stretched out to reach far and do great things
- Liberating the children of Israel from the bondage of Pharaoh, was not realized by natural means, but by the intervention of the amazing hand of God, and His exalted mercies
- Not only the matter but the manner of the Lord's mighty acts should be the cause of praise
- It was in mercy to His people and was the means of their deliverance from bondage

# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- Bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt, the house of bondage; when they cried unto Him, and He sent them a Savior to deliver them out of their distress, Exodus 2:23
- It was a symbol of the grace and mercy of God, in delivering His people from the bondage of sin and Satan
- By the power He has to control the common course of nature He *divided the Red Sea in two*, between which He opened a path, and made Israel to pass between the parts
- He who causes the waters of the sea normally to remain as one mass can with the same speed divide them



# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- God not only divided the sea, but according to St. John Chrysostom, gave His people courage to go through it when it was divided, which was an instance of God's power over men's hearts, as the former of His power over the waters
- God led them down into the deep and up again on the further shore in perfect order, with the utmost safety, so that not one was lost, keeping their enemies back by the thick darkness of the cloudy pillar
- St. Augustine comments on *To Him who divided the Red Sea in two*, and says, "He divided also in such wise, that the same baptism should be to some unto life, to others unto death."

# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- God did not only bring the Israelites out of Egypt, but He also delivered them from Pharaoh's attempt to re-capture them
- In *mercy* to Israel, *God overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea*
- It was in mercy to Israel that Pharaoh and his host were destroyed, who threatened them with ruin
- Therefore, they sung of judgment and of mercy, and gave thanks to God for this instance of His vengeance on their enemies
- Severity to their adversaries was "mercy" to Israel, who could not otherwise have been delivered

# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- This chastisement, although it reached the limit of death, yet the Lord remains anticipating the world would take a lesson, so as not to fall into what Pharaoh and his men have fallen
- For God does not wish for the sinners to die, but wishes them to return to Him and live
- St. John Chrysostom says, "Pharaoh's army, partaking of the sinners of their leader, and chasing the Israelites, they were worthy of punishment and recompense."
- This was a symbol of the destruction of Satan, and of his principalities and powers, by Christ, who thereby has saved His spiritual Israel out of their hands



# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- It is also a symbol of casting God's people sins into the depths of the sea, never to be seen any more
- *To Him who led His people through the wilderness, Where there was no path*
- St. John Chrysostom says, "Leading them through the wilderness for forty years, was not less miraculous than letting them cross the Red Sea. There were a multitude of probable troubles that could easily swallow them, and bring them forth to death: hunger, thirst, intense heat, wild beasts, and absence of the necessities of life in that horrifying wilderness."

# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- This the Lord did by going before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night, to show them the way in which they should go, Exodus 13:21
- God provided guidance, food, water, structure, leadership, healing, victory, and many other things to Israel *through the wilderness*
- The Lord by His infinite power and wisdom conducted a whole nation for forty years through a desert land, where their garments did not wear out on them, nor did their foot swell
- These were all demonstrations of the never-ending *mercy* of God

# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- Psalm 135 described the defeat of *Sihon king of the Amorites* and *Og king of Bashan*, and the giving of Canaan to Israel *as a heritage* (Psalm 135:10-12)
- *famous kings*, Famous for their power and strength, their courage who were not only smitten and put to shame, but slain in battle
- They were *famous kings*, yet God subdued them as easily as if they had been the least, and weakest, and meanest of people
- They were wicked kings, and then their greatness and fame would not save them from the justice of God
- St. Augustine says, “From us too He smites and slays the deadly powers of the devil.”



# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- *Sihon king of the Amorites*, The idea in the whole passage, in view of the divine intervention in slaying the mighty kings, and in giving their land for a possession to the Israelites, is that it was a proof of mercy
- This mercy may be manifested further, not merely in removing the wicked, but in transferring their possessions to those who will make a better use of them
- Thus, the possessions of these mighty kings, *Sihon and Og*, were transferred to the people of God
- The lands which had been devoted to the service of idolatry and crimes became devoted to serving and worshiping God

# Give Thanks to God the Israel's God and Savior 136:10-22



- *Og king of Bashan*, was a mighty king and God granted the Israelites victory over his forces
- And Moses and the Israelites possessed Bashan, a fruitful land east of the Jordan River
- The victory was significant because of the remarkable strength of Og and the relative inexperience of the Israelite forces
- St. Augustine comments on *gave their land as a heritage*, and says, “For He gives them, whom once the devil owned, for a heritage to the seed of Abraham, that is, Christ.”
- The refrain, *His mercy endures forever*, is designed to show the relevance of every act of God

# Give Thanks to God Our Redeemer 136: 23-24



- The psalmist makes a sharp transition from God's great wonders of the past to His faithful help in the present
- It is good for us to look to the past for evidence that *His mercy endures forever*
- *in our lowly state*, The Israelites; either in Egypt when in bondage and distress and God sent them a deliverer
- Or in the times of the Judges, whom God raised up one after another, to save His people out of the hands of their enemies, by whom they were oppressed
- Or in the Babylonian captivity



# Give Thanks to God Our Redeemer 136: 23-24



- When they were few in number; when they were a weak people; when they were a people unable to fight such mighty enemies
- As God tells Israel through Ezekiel (16:2-6), He found them as an abandoned baby turning in their blood by the side of the road and He took them, cleaned them, and caused them to live
- This is a picture of our spiritual condition before He saved us
- We were dead in our sins, without hope and without God in this world (Ephesians 2:1-3,12)
- We deserved His wrath, but He showed us mercy, *“because of His great love with which He loved us”* (Ephesians 2:4)

# Give Thanks to God Our Redeemer 136: 23-24



- St. Jerome says, “The psalmist did not say that God remembered us in our wisdom, in our riches, nor in our learning; but He remembered us in our humility. Although He grants sources of strength to the elites, yet, unless man acquire humility, he will not be acceptable to God; For ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ (James 4:6).”
- According to St. Augustine the meaning of *remembered us in our lowly state* is redeemed us from our enemies
- *rescued us from our enemies*, Israel's enemies brought the people low; but the Lord intervened, and *rescued* them

# Give Thanks to God Our Redeemer 136: 23-24



- The expression implies that they had become like slaves, and were not set free without price
- Israel could never have escaped from Egyptian bondage if God had not exerted His power on their behalf
- They would have died in the wilderness if He had not sustained them
- They would have been destroyed by their many adversaries, but He rescued them
- Thus, the psalmist has shown two causes for giving thanks to God: His power in creation and in salvation displays His everlasting love



# Give Thanks to God for His Providential Mercies 136:25-26



- The psalmist asked God's people to praise and thank Him not only for His work as *deliverer*, but also as *provider*
- This is more evidence of God's never-ending *mercy*, which is extended to *all flesh*, not only to Israel
- God has no partiality, He loves all mankind; and cares for all, "*The Lord is good to all, And His tender mercies are over all His works.*" (Psalm 145:9)
- Verse 25 refers to God's promise to Noah after the flood, to sustain "all flesh" (Genesis 9:8-17)
- The idea here is the same as what Jesus said, that if God cares for the sparrow, He will take care of us

# Give Thanks to God for His Providential Mercies 136:25-26



- According to St. Augustine flesh is the Holy Eucharist
- He says, “*Who gives food to all flesh*, that is, to the whole race of mankind, not Israelites only, but Gentiles too; and of this Food is said, ‘My Flesh is meat indeed.’”
- In directing people to *give thanks*, the psalmist reminds them that the God of Israel, is *the God of heaven*
- *The God of heaven* is a favorite title of God in the Holy Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel (Ezra 1:2,5:11,12,6:9-10,7:12,21; Nehemiah 1:4-5,2:4,20; Daniel 2:18-19,37,44)

# Give Thanks to God for His Providential Mercies 136:25-26



- Verse 26 is final call to praise, which concludes the Psalm by echoing its beginning and does not name God by the Name which implied Israel's special relation, but by that by which other peoples could and did address Him, *the God of heaven*
- God rules from heaven, which He made, and thus rules over all
- So the Psalm begins with Thanksgiving, and it ends with Thanksgiving
- It begins, *Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good*, and it ends, *Oh, give thanks to the God of heaven! For His mercy endures forever.*
- And in between it gives us all these reasons to give God thanks



# Give Thanks to God for His Providential Mercies 136:25-26



- Psalm 136 commands us to give thanks through the highs and lows of life to the Lord who is always here
- In our past, our present, and our future, His unfailing love endures forever
- But why does the psalmist repeat 26 times *His mercy endures forever*?
- It is a reminder that God has done all things from this motive; and because His mercy never ceases, He will continue to multiply deeds of love world without end
- Remember that the enemy wants us to doubt His mercy especially when trials hit



# Discussion

- What does Psalm 136 say about God's character?
- What call introduces and concludes this Psalm?
- What is the emphasis of the Psalm's refrain?
- What specific event in Israel's history did the psalmist recall?
- How did the Lord help Israel conquer her enemies?



# Discussion

- Why do you think the psalmist chose to mention specific kings—Sihon and Og?
- How do the four concluding verses review the basic themes of the Psalm?
- What are the benefits of reflecting on God's great deeds for His people in the past?