

An Inventory of Steadfast Love Psalm 136

Last month, Jessica and I found ourselves only about four hours from the Canadian border. I enjoy maps, so more than once I made completely unreasonable calculations about whether we could slip across the border and spend a couple of days exploring what looked like an endless maze of lakes and streams. However, on my return trip home, I ran across a story of something that happened in Canada a good distance away from the lakes and streams in my daydreams. In the early 2010's, Canadian cities and communities were abuzz with excitement because they were anticipating the arrival of the retail giant we know as Target. However, the excitement would be short-lived.

One Canadian paper released a story on Target's attempt to assimilate into Canada as a serious retail competitor. Before I read this article, I would have guessed that they quickly became just that. But in 2015 it became official: All 133 attempts at a Target store in Canada failed, and none are operating inside of Canadian borders as of this past Friday, last I checked.¹ Though this may not cause any of us to lose sleep, those in the business world a decade ago were stunned by the development. At the time, Target was the eighth largest retailer in the United States.² This popular chain hitting the prosperity bullseye seemed like a sure-fire thing. Economists, executives, and business analysts—bulls and bears alike—all asked the same question: How could something that seemed so certain fail so completely?

These things rarely turn south over one issue. It bombed partly because of bad assumptions. "It was a hit here! Why wouldn't it be just a few miles north?" It failed in part because of an unhealthy positivism by the leadership, burying their heads in the proverbial sand over a multiplicity of workforce problems and technological hiccups. One piece wrote that part of the reason the effort was botched was that they lacked standardization. For example, they made thousands of products which failed to fit in the store spaces and bays designated for those products.³ But maybe the largest nail in the Target-Canada coffin is hammered down through what this sentence exposed, "Ironically, even as [Canadian] consumers encountered barely stocked stores, Target's distribution centers were bursting with products."⁴ In other words, Target didn't have an inventory shortage. They just needed to take stock of what was already theirs and to make sure the right products got to the stores in a timely manner.

That phrase—*take stock*—describes something that takes place in Psalm 136. The composer is historian, theologian and practitioner. He looked back, looked up, and looked around, all leading him to sing of the riches he discovered as he did so. And he led the community to join him in taking stock of what God had done and revealed, with a call to respond to the unchanging depths of divine affection behind it all.

I. The inventory of steadfast love (4-22)

¹ [nytimes.com/2015/01/16/business/target-to-close-stores-in-canada.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/business/target-to-close-stores-in-canada.html)

² Today, they are between Walgreen's and CVS at number 7. www.nrf.com/research-insights/top-retailers/top-100-retailers/top-100-retailers-2024-list

³ quickbooks.intuit.com/r/inventory/how-poor-inventory-management-ruined-target-canada/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴ canadianbusiness.com/ideas/the-last-days-of-target-canada/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

It would do us well to establish what this psalm expresses through all twenty-six verses, that the LORD's *love* is described as *steadfast*. If we're to give thanks for this love with its many dimensions, as this psalm certainly does, then what does it mean? Well, that's like attempting to capture in a word or sentence the vibrant glories of the Great Barrier reef off the coast of southern Australia. There is no concise phrase or even a paragraph that could give us the full picture of the reef's life and beauty. But somewhere, every week, a preacher looks at an infinite subject, glances at the clock, and says, "I think I've got this!" We're strangely encouraged by impossible assignments.

Steadfast love is the Hebrew word *hesed*. It occurs just over 125 times in the book of Psalms. It means God's covenant mercy; His longstanding loyalty with deep affection. It's not human in origin, but divine kindness worked out in creation, meant to be perceived by creatures made in God's image. This is faithful love without respect to human merit. And this love is based on the immutable foundation of God's works, with its highest peak protruding from a Judean hillside stained with the blood of the second person of the Trinity.⁵ This love is expressed from Creator to creation, and from Creator to creature. All benefit from this *steadfast love* but only some taste and see it by faith; only some know its apex expression through a sacrifice for the ages.

And the psalmist, like all who are gripped by *hesed*, must find the words that reflect such a love. He does so, then he puts his findings to music. And we know that in life music with lyrics functions in a particular way. Unlike novels, biographies, booklets, or flyers, songs often possess an indirectness. They wield personifications, puns, paradoxes, parallelisms, and more to convey meaning. But there are times when the songwriter, this one being under divine inspiration, lays aside poetic, artistic obscurity and puts on poetic clarity. And one way this psalmist does that is by utilizing repetition.

In this case, we see four phrases of *give thanks*, and twenty-six *for his steadfast love endures forever*. And we'll revisit the relationship between these two clauses later. But the song develops in such a way as to heighten that relationship. Again, the composer is led to bring the past into the present and to make it personal.⁶ And he does this by taking an inventory of the works and ways of Yahweh the LORD. The first truth-piece inventoried?

a. Creation (4-9)

That the LORD is the Creator, of which verse 4 tells us that He is in a league of His own in that regard, *to him who alone does great wonders*. This exclusive Sovereign is a wonder-worker. All of creation, marvel upon marvel, is His work. You can see how verse 4 might function as a headliner for the rest of the main body of the song.⁷ Whether it is creating a blazing *sun to rule over the day* or ruling the affairs of a favored people by ripping the *Red Sea in two*, wonders are God's alone to perform. And the wonders of the vast universe were unfolded by, verse 5, *understanding*. The whole created order is one clear expression of the wisdom of her Maker. And from the outset of this song, maybe you're catching the same scents as I did this week. In the 4th century, early church father Augustine pointed to the root and consummation of all the wondrous works of God in creation: There is One who moved about in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in

⁵ Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, Vol. 4, 495.

⁶ Dr. Matt Sliger, sermon on Psalm 114. <https://southwoodsbc.org/media/v37gm7x/psalm-114-the-exodus-present-and-personal>

⁷ Ash, 500.

whom are ever hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.⁸ Loaves, fish, coins, storms, diseases, and demons all testify that the world was made through Him.⁹

But notice the way the psalmist expresses things. Back then, in the beginning, God ***made the heavens*** and ***spread out the waters above the earth***. But the verbs here are participles, which bear witness to an ongoing relationship.¹⁰ “I made pancakes,” conveys something different than “I am *making* pancakes.” Not only was it an act of God’s benevolence to make the world in the beginning, but His ceaseless relationship with it to uphold it, provide for it, and to provide for its inhabitants who depend on all of its intricacies—this is an enduring compassion, a gracious commitment that the triune God is keeping at present.

And observe how simplistic and clear are the psalmist’s words. Calvin bluntly states that this is not an astronomy lesson by the Holy Spirit.¹¹ What is observed in the viewing of these ***great lights*** ruling day and night can be understood by the smallest child or the most unschooled of persons. When we clearly see majesty spinning above our heads, there are no excuses for failing to worship the God who made them with ***steadfast love***.¹²

b. Redemption (10-15)

Though the subject shifts from creation to the redeeming acts of God, the style of the song persists in this repetition. Everything made, everything sustained, and all that God has accomplished for His people are supercharged by His lovingkindness.

As you might notice, with the intended interruption of God’s mercy, a linear, compressed story is being told which adds texture to this *hesed*. Creation first. Then comes God acting to redeem. He begins by speaking of God’s deliverance in verse 10 by the mention of striking ***down the firstborn of Egypt***. He doesn’t start with the first plague, or the fifth, but with the last one. Why? Because this was the final-straw plague which broke Pharaoh’s back of resistance. God had proven Himself to Egypt’s king once and for all, and in doing so, Pharaoh was driven to drive Israel out of Egypt in haste. Through this judgment, we can see the two-sidedness of the coin of God’s salvation, can’t we? In the same wondrous works, God is exercising both His justice and His mercy.

Sometimes we can only see one or the other, or we have a bone to pick with that kind of justice or that display of mercy. That’s because we have a habit of calculating justice and mercy independent from God, don’t we? We flare up when the prodigal son receives the mercies of ring, robes, rockports, and ribeye. We protest when our own understanding of justice doesn’t align with God’s. But *are we* the best measurers of what justice is, or where and how it should be applied? History gives us a resounding answer to that question. You see, the heinousness of human rebellion that refuses to acknowledge God’s work with the reverence reflected in the psalm, whether it be from

⁸ Colossians 2:3

⁹ John 1:3, Hebrews 1:2

¹⁰ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 393.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. VI: Psalms 93-150*, 184.

¹² Romans 1:18–20, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse.”

me or an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, justifies His righteous judgment.¹³ God owes no one mercy. All humans, save one, have only and ever deserved divine justice.

And what we notice as the psalm-writer brings forward Israel's history is that God's mercy indeed does run parallel with His justice. God saved Israel through the marvel of commanding a sea to make way for His sons and daughters (mercy) and by closing those same waters over **Pharaoh and his army host** (justice). Further, God, **with a strong hand and an outstretched arm**, saved His people through substitution. Judgment passed over all who believed that the lamb's blood smeared over their doorposts was sufficient for the saving of their own firstborn sons from death.

When the apostle Paul writes in Romans 3 that we are "*justified by God's grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*," we understand that Psalm 136 was more than a signpost but not less than one. You see, this history of redemption is ours to inspect, to rejoice over, and to call our own! The truth of creation and Exodus are passed down to us in scripture to assure us that in the best and worst of times, this God and His long-love soaring highest in Christ are the most steady realities in our lives. But the composer-musician isn't finished taking stock. We note in verses 16-22, His sweeping...

c. *Dominion (16-22)*

Here we see a series of intense events showing how *steadfast love* unfolded for Israel. The LORD didn't deliver His people into the wilderness without a plan or devoid of the strength to carry it out. But as we see, the psalmist is curiously selective in what he highlights. He's not aiming for comprehensive reflection, but bringing to bear historical inflection points meant to spur on confident faith and fervent praise.

Of course, the songwriter could have just as easily penned Israel's many instances of rebellion or the details of giving the Law at Sinai. Yet, he chooses to emphasize God taking on **great kings** and defeating them. He is covering some details to show that what He promised to Abraham came to fruition. For indeed, verse 21, he granted them the land which these great kings once ruled **as a heritage**.

The stories of **Sihon** and **Og** are found in Numbers 21. On both occasions, these kings were the aggressors, believing that they could defeat Israel in battle. In fact, in the situation with Sihon, Israel sent good-will messengers to ask permission to pass through their land in peace. But the king of Sihon refused; then he attacked. Israel swung the swords in defense, but it was God who exerted dominion over **mighty kings** and their armies.

It's quite clear that the biblical authors of the New Testament were familiar with these acts of God's dominion. Paul was acquainted with this "inventory" that is now so incredibly useful for our understanding and encouragement inside of life under Christ. "[God] has delivered us," Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, "*from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*"¹⁴ More pointed perhaps is the author of Hebrews, who, speaking in terms of living by faith, expressed, "*What more shall I say?*"

¹³ James Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 95.

¹⁴ Colossians 1:13

For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—[33] who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, [34] quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.” The point is not that we take up literal arms in His cause. The point is that evildoers, persecutors, Satan, and even these monstrous hearts of ours don’t stand a chance against the outstretched arm of this wonder-working Creator and Redeemer! To linger over God’s dominion is an exercise in present-day building up our most holy faith.¹⁵ And, as they are recollected and plumbed by faith, these victories are but foretastes and down payments of the complete, evil-vanquishing victories yet to come.¹⁶

II. A summary report of steadfast love (23-25)

Here he is, trying to make sense of it all, sizing up the inventory, and seeking to sum it all up with a few words. And he’s shifted things by making the song personal, yet corporate, by the first-person usage of *us*. So much is bound up in those words, ***he who remembered us in our low estate***. We were nothing if not in our sin. We wore pride like a peacock. We exuded self-sufficiency. We thought we knew it all. Spiritually we were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.¹⁷ But God, while we were yet sinners, sent His Son, who condescended to become one of us, and to then, astoundingly, allowed Himself to be lowered into a tomb in death as the full payment for our sin.

There’s no better way God could have remembered our weakness and ***rescued us from our foes***. This word ***rescued*** in verse 24 is the idea of an animal snatching up prey.¹⁸ And prey headed for destruction—I’m certain many in Israel, seeing the chariots rumbling across the dry seabed, believed they were about to become prey. And in our crookedness and sinful filth, condemnation loomed large until He snatched us from the jaws of death and hell. His ***steadfast love*** is better than life itself!¹⁹

The psalmist concludes this summary by bringing the inventory into an ever-present, common experience. Verse 25, ***he who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever***. Worth noting is that the daily gift of food is placed on the same plane as the great acts of creation, redemption, and dominion.²⁰ Let’s not underestimate our lunch today, that dinner tonight, that breakfast tomorrow morning. They are from this LORD, *seasoned* heavily with steadfast love.

III. Hearts moved by steadfast love (1-3, 26)

So what’s to be done in light of such rich inventory? The bookends reveal the ultimate thrust. Verses 1-3, ***Give thanks to the LORD...Give thanks to the God of gods...Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever***. And verse 26, ***Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever***. Thanksgiving is the “regular heartbeat” of a people who make it their habit to take inventory.²¹

¹⁵ Jude 20

¹⁶ Ash, 505.

¹⁷ Revelation 3:17

¹⁸ Ibid. (Motyer mentions Genesis 27:40, Psalm 7:3, Lamentations 5:8)

¹⁹ Psalm 63:3

²⁰ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, *NICOT: The Book of Psalms*, 951.

²¹ Walford, 951.

In fact, knowing what we know because of the gospel, we have even more stimuli for thanksgiving! On the heels of considering Jesus' suffering in our place to provide a lasting city to come, the author of Hebrews said it clear, "*Through [Jesus] then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.*"²²

Are you a person marked through and through with this gratitude? Have you taken a proper look at the mercy of God, considering your lack and His clear willingness to be merciful? It's why He sent His one and only Son into the world—to put away *our* sin by a price we couldn't pay. Hesed, steadfast love. Faithful, tender, longsuffering love.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, out of need and because there are a thousand sacred sweets to be consumed with joy inconceivable, let us continue to plunder eagerly and faithfully the warehouse of scripture! Luther wrote that he would not live in paradise without the Word, but with the Word he could live in hell itself.²³ What an ever-yielding gift it is! The psalmist has mined the gold of creation, redemption, and dominion. He has brought them forward and applied them to the people of God in his time, and I trust our exercise of worship this morning has found us doing the same.

We don't lack inventory. We never will. This refrain of steadfast love functions to show the relevance of every act of God to every believer in every age.²⁴ Let us, like the cleansed leper in Luke 17, keep coming back to thank Him for cleansing us from sin's penalty and power. Let us continue to thank Him for His glory in creating, His grace in redeeming, and His power in overwhelming all opposed to His purposes and His people.

²² Hebrews 13:15

²³ Quoted by Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth*, 17.

²⁴ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 495.