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Psalm 136 & 118



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Introduction

It has been said by church historians that in those periods of Christian history where renewal, revival, and awakening took place and the church was at its strongest...there was a strong focus on the psalms... particularly in the worship of God's people (R. C. Sproul)

The Psalms wrap nouns and verbs around our pain better than any other book

(Joni Eareckson Tada)

If you need a guide for your ongoing relationship with God, read Psalms (Jim George)

This fifth, delicious **Sandwich** paper concerns two psalms - 136 and 118. Why these two psalms together? Firstly, because, they have this in common that both are Hallel psalms. 'Hallel' means 'praise', and is applied to Psalms 113–118, sometimes called the Egyptian Hallel and 'the little hallel', because it mentions the Exodus from Egypt in Psalm 114:1: *When Israel went out from Egypt* ([Jewish Virtual Library](#)).

Psalm 136 itself is called The Great Hallel, the 'national anthem' of Israel. It is a reminiscence of the love of (*Yhwh*), the self-existing One, and His love expressed in His every creative act and in the history of His people. Why is this Psalm great? Because it praises God for His great kindness in lowering Himself to feed every one of His creations ([Posner, Abramowitz](#)).

Secondly, both psalms are framed (sandwiched) by the same text line:

Give thanks to the Lord (Yhwh), for He is good; His love (chesed) endures forever!

While this text line only appears at the start and end of 118, it occurs in every verse in 136.

Hesed

Of the 245 occurrences of the word *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible, 75% of them describe the *hesed* of God. The *hesed* of God encompasses all of the benevolent traits and actions that he demonstrates toward the created world, and in particular to those with whom he is in covenant relationship ([VanGemeren](#)). *Hesed* is "the most significant term used in the Psalms to describe the character of God" (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 1-2). And since God's character never changes, this awesome attribute of His character is, like Him, eternal-as the refrain repeatedly affirms.

The word is used only where there is a recognised tie between the two parties. According to [Snaith](#), The theological importance of *hesed* is that it stands more than any other word for the attitude which both parties to a covenant ought to maintain towards each other.

This is reinforced by [Glueck](#), who categorised five types of *hesed*-relationships in the Hebrew Bible that exists between relatives (Abraham and Sarah Genesis 20:13, Laban and Abraham Genesis 47:29, Ruth and Naomi or Orpah Ruth 1:8, and the Kenites and the sons of Israel 1 Samuel 15:6); between host and guest (Lot and the men who saved his life in Genesis 19:19, Abraham and Abimelech Genesis 21:23, and Rahab and the spies Joshua 2:12); between friends (David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 20:8, David and Mephibosheth 2 Samuel 9:1, and David and Hanun 2 Samuel 10:2); between king and subjects (Jabesh Gilead and Saul 2 Samuel 2:5, Abner and the house of Saul 2 Samuel 3:8, Esther and King Ahasuerus Esther 2:9, 17); and between two parties in some sort of beneficial relationship (Joseph and the cupbearer in Genesis 40:14, the surveyors and the man from Bethel in Judges 1:24, and Israel and the house of Jerubbaal in Judges 8:35). In almost every case, there is an expectation of relational mutual *hesed*.



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Hesed continued

Further, notice how Hesed is specifically identified with the covenant relationship He had with Israel:

*Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love (**hesed**) with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face (Deuteronomy 7:9–10).*

*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love (**hesed**) will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me.*

Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:12–16)

Here, *hesed* expresses a relationship of mutual reciprocity, a mutual relationship of rights and duties or conduct corresponding to a mutually obligatory relationship.

God keeps his covenant and His *hesed*! However, it is not a legal obligation, but a covenantal or moral obligation that originates in the very nature of God. It is not a quid pro quo. God does not keep his *hesed* because people are obedient to the covenant. He keeps the covenant because his *hesed* is unconditional. Obedience, which begins with repentance, is when *hesed* can be appropriated. This is what has given Israel hope throughout both biblical and post-biblical history. In fact, many of the passages that describe *hesed* are promises and prayers when the nation or individuals have broken the covenant. The faithfulness of God to maintain *hesed* even in the face of Israel's failure is an indication of the stability and loyalty of divine *hesed*. This is shown by Exodus 34:6–7 in the forgiveness and restoration of the nation after the sin of the golden calf ([Silverman](#)).

*The Lord, is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (**hesed**) and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation*

English versions of the Bible translate variously as kindness, favor, mercy, compassion and so on. However, *hesed* is binding, wherein the participants are obliged to exercise *hesed* mutually. The *hesed* of Yahweh is, therefore, not to be understood as "grace, "favor," or "kindness," but as the covenantal relationship between him and His people. As [Snaith](#) observes in support of this view, *hesed* includes mercy and forgiveness as a main constituent in God's determined faithfulness to His part of the covenant. That is, to maintain the covenant God must be merciful to an unexampled degree.

Accordingly, the loving-kindness of God towards Israel is wholly undeserved. If Israel received the proper treatment for her stubborn refusal to walk in God's way, there would be no prospect for her of anything but destruction, since God's demand for right action never wavers. Strict, however, as the demands for righteousness are, God's yearnings for the people of His choice are stronger still. Moreover, *hesed* is generally performed by only the stronger partner within the mutual relationship. We can see this especially when the term is used together with the word 'covenant', whether between God and humanity or between people ([Bareket](#)).



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Hesed continued

However, the weaker party seeks the protection and blessing of the patron and protector, but he may not lay absolute claim to it. The stronger party remains committed to his promise, but retains his freedom, especially with regard to the manner in which he will implement those promises. *Hesed* implies personal involvement beyond the rule of law. Marital love is often related to *hesed*. Marriage is certainly a legal matter.... Yet the relationship, if sound, far transcends mere legalities.... Hence, 'devotion' is sometimes the single English word best capable of capturing the nuance of the *hesed* ([Bible Commentary](#)).

In sum, then, what we can say about *hesed* is that it expresses the reciprocal conduct of people toward God and to each other in a mutually obligatory relationship. It is not an arbitrary or one sided demonstration of grace, kindness, favor or love. As reciprocal conduct, *hesed* is synonymous with loyalty, justice, righteousness, honesty, the "knowledge of God" and the "fear of God. It is the proper conduct within the context of a covenant relationship ([Glueck](#), [Snaith](#), [VanGemeren](#)).

Psalm 136 - The Great Praise

Turning to these psalms separately, I discuss 136 before 118 because 136 covers Israel's history from the exodus from Egypt, while the setting of 118 seems to be the exodus from Exile.

Give thanks to the Lord (Yhwh), for He is good; His love (chesed) endures forever!

This powerful refrain is repeated in every line of the psalm for a total of 26 times. Why? Maybe because 26 is the numerical value of the divine name 'Yahweh' ([Bible Commentary](#)), the self-existing, eternal One. Also, maybe the 26 verses correspond to the 26 generations from the creation of the world until the time the Torah was given. Moreover, the closing idea that God provides food for all of His creations, is why this Psalm is known as "The Great Praise" ([Abramowitz](#)).

The structure of the psalm is summarised in this table.

Verse	Subject	Who, what, where
1-3	'God of gods' and 'Lord of lords' appear nowhere else in the Psalms.	Who God is
4-9	Creation - heavens, earth, great lights, sun, moon & stars.	What God does
10-22	Egypt to Canaan -struck firstborn, cut Red Sea, destroyed Pharaoh & his army, killed kings Sihon & Og, gave their land to Israel as an inheritance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Creates</i>• <i>Judges</i>• <i>Rewards</i>
23-25	Remembered Israel when humiliated, & snatched them from their enemies.	
26	The expression 'God of heaven' appears nowhere else in the Psalms.	Who & where

Who God is

We have already noticed that *hesed* expresses the reciprocal conduct of people toward God and to each other in a mutually obligatory relationship. It is not an arbitrary or one sided demonstration of loyalty, love, justice, righteousness, honesty, the "knowledge of God" and the "fear of God, but the proper conduct within the context of a covenant relationship. While verses 1-3 are predominately about God, the 'Give thanks to the Lord' implies a second party.

Surely, the exhortation is for God's people to hold out their open hands in giving thanks to the Lord (*Yhwh*), the self-existing One, who is independent and needs nothing, but is good and His *hesed* endures. *Hesed* is an essential part of His character.



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Who God is continued

Here are the first three verses of the Psalm that are exclusively about God. Particularly, they are about who God is, for they say nothing about what God does, or where He lives.

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His loyal love endures.

2 Give thanks to the God of gods, for His loyal love endures.

3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for His loyal love endures (Psalm 136:1-3).

There are two expressions here that are unique in the book of psalms. Firstly, ‘God of gods’. In this text, ‘gods’ is *elohim*, which probably means something like powers, the powers that be; the many powered ([Abarim Publications](#)). He is The Power of all powers. The following texts aver:

“See now that I, indeed I, am he!” says the Lord, “and there is no other god besides me....and none can resist my power (Deuteronomy 32:39).

Indeed, God is exalted in his power (Job 36:22).

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62).

So, ‘God of gods’ means the most powerful God of all, exalted and magnified above every god.

Also, ‘Lord of lords’ is unique in the psalms to 136. As we noted, (*Yhwh*) is the self-existing One, who is independent, completely self-reliant, and needs nothing. Compared with the Lord, all human beings are dependent, and we cannot meet our needs entirely on our own. For example, the Earth we live on, the air we breathe, the plants we grow, the sun and rain needed for our lives and every living thing the Lord gave us. If we work for a boss, our income depends on him. If we own a business, it depends on customers to survive. Every product or service we enjoy was made by someone else to provide for our every need. As for *Yhwh*’s self-sufficiency, it reminds me of Psalm 50:1, 12: *The Mighty One, God (elohim) the Lord (Yhwh) says, “Even if I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all it contains belong to me”.*

In brief, the first three verses are about God the Lord whose loyal love (*hesed*) is part of His eternal being. From verse 4 to verse 25, there is a significant change.

What God does

Verse 4 is introductory telling us that it is the ‘Lord of lords’, the self-existing One, who is independent, completely self-reliant, Who performs magnificent, amazing deeds alone, without help from any.

His first magnificent, amazing work is creation. Using His wisdom, intelligence and skill, He made the heavens (v5), spread out the earth over the water (v6), and made the great lights, the sun to rule by day (v8), and the moon and stars to rule by night (v9). Because of these things, the people are to *give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His loyal love endures*.

His second magnificent, amazing work is judgment. He executed justice upon the sinful, and delivered justice to His people. He struck down the firstborn of Egypt (v10), walked Israel out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm (v11-12), cut the Red Sea into pieces and crossed Israel through it (v13-14), tossed Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea (v15), walked Israel through the wilderness (v16), struck down great and powerful kings, Sihon king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan (v17-20), and gave their land to Israel His servant as an inheritance (v21-22). Because of these things, the people are to *give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His loyal love endures*.



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What God does continued

His third magnificent, amazing work is reward. He remembered His people when they were humbled by their enemies, and hungry for He snatched Israel away from her enemies, and gave them food (v23-25). Because of these things, the people are to *give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His loyal love endures*.

Who God is & where

The final verse says, *Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his loyal love endures* (v26).

Heaven is called God's holy dwelling place (Deuteronomy 26:15), His high and holy place (Isaiah 57:15), Who sits down in heaven (Psalm 123:1).

This title, “the God of heaven,” was first used by Abraham in conjunction with the expression ‘the God of the earth’ (Genesis 24:3). This connection to earth is apparent in all of the 23 biblical references to *the God of heaven*. That is, the God of heaven is the supreme deity who governs both the celestial and terrestrial realms. Psalm 113:6 sums it up beautifully: *Who is like the Lord our God, Who is seated on high, who looks down on the heavens and the earth?*

Conclusion on 136

In sum, the refrain ‘give thanks’ is the human response to all that God is and does, which originate out of His sublime character trait of *hesed*, His loyal and enduring love.

Psalm 118

This psalm has a sandwich structure, starting and ending with the same text:

1 *Give thanks to the Lord (Yhwh), for He is good; His love (cheqed) endures forever!*

29 *Give thanks to the Lord (Yhwh), for He is good; His love (cheqed) endures forever!*

Collective

Verses 2-4 are collective. Israel (v2), the priests of Aaron’s line (v3), and the people who fear the Lord proclaim (v4) *His love (cheqed) endures forever*.

Individual

Verses 5-14 are individual. “I” six times, “my” five times, and “me” ten times. The unidentified psalmist is in dire straits (v5) because of the people who hate him (vs6-7), who are described as ‘the nations’ that surround him on every side like bees (vs10-14), which may suggest that he was Israel’s military leader. Eleven times in these verses ‘the Lord’ helped him by answering his prayers (v5), relieves his anxiety (v6), gave him triumph and protection (vs7-9), pushed his enemies away (vs 10-13), and delivered him (v14).

Individual & collective

Verses 15-28 have “I” six times, “me” four times, and “my” three times. Fifteen times in these verses ‘the Lord’ is mentioned, and twice as ‘God’. as the psalmist praises the Lord for his deliverance, and his return to the house of the Lord.

Collectively, the people of God are called ‘the righteous’, and the psalmist, along with his community enter through the gates of the Lord to say ‘we bless you’, what the Lord has done ‘is marvellous in **our** eyes’, and, *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light.*

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Conclusion

Some have suggested that the references to *the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone* (v22), *the house of the Lord* (v26), and the hostility of the surrounding nations and the Lord's victory over them (vs10-24), and *bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar* (v27), demonstrate that this is a victory song celebrating the return from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple, and entering it, and dedicating the house of God (Ezra 6:17).

Well might the psalm ends as it began:

29 Give thanks to the Lord (Yhwh), for He is good; His love (cheqed) endures forever!

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