

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

*“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever; ... Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.”* (Psalm 136:1-3, 26).

That is why we come to church in part: to offer up our thanks to God *“for his steadfast love.”* Of course, we’re here *today* because our country has set aside the fourth Thursday in November for thanksgiving, but we Christians, who have eyes to see and ears to hear, are encouraged in our thanksgiving constantly. Jesus did — *“Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”*; Paul did — *“in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”*; and especially in the Psalms we are called to *“Give thanks to the LORD, ... for his steadfast love endures forever,”* and we recognize Him as the giver of every good gift and every perfect gift (James 1:17).

In fact, that’s the main reason we come to church, the preeminent, the prevenient reason we come to church. We come to get the gifts — we call them God’s grace! We call it the Gospel. We come to receive the forgiveness of sins Christ won for us by His cross, a forgiveness bestowed by performative words spoken by your pastor. We come to be assured of eternal life, once closed off to mankind because of sin, but opened back up by Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. We come to partake of the healing medicine of our salvation, given us not just by the spoken word but by words attached to bread and wine whereby the miracle of Christ’s body and blood are united with these common elements. We eat and drink them in faith, and we are given “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation” (Small Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar, “What is the benefit of this eating and drinking?”). Then, having received of this grace, we respond with thanksgiving.

This is the way the sainted Dr. Norman Nagel said it in the Introduction to *Lutheran Worship*: “Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. Music is drawn into this thankfulness and praise, enlarging and elevating the adoration of our gracious giver God. ¶ Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. ... ¶ The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them” (p. 6).

We give thanks because of God’s gifts. Surely, it’s the courteous thing to do. Every mother and father have had to teach their children to say “thank you.” But amazingly, God doesn’t withhold His grace if we are ungrateful. All ten lepers were cleansed, even though only one returned to give thanks. That’s because God’s

gifts don't depend on any action on our part. They come from His being, "*for he is good.*" We don't have to do anything to merit His favor. If it were otherwise, it wouldn't be grace (Rom. 11:6). In Dr. Nagel's ordering, God's goodness and His eternal "*steadfast love*" come first. We recognize it and then respond with thanksgiving.

Moses, as you heard in our Old Testament reading, called upon the Israelites to remember the Lord's goodness, how He favored them in their wilderness wanderings, feeding them with manna, preventing their clothing from wearing out and their feet from swelling, and eventually leading them to a good and plentiful land. God was good to Israel, though they doubted that God would be able to bring them into the promised land ... you remember that's why they were consigned to 40 years in the wilderness (Num. 14:34). He was good to them and fed them though they grumbled at a lack of food, a lack of meat, a lack of water (Ex. 16:11-12; 17:2-6). The Lord was good to Israel and saved them, lifting up a serpent in the wilderness, even though they complained still more (Num. 21:8-9).

Similarly, the psalmist recalled God's grace and mercy, though he began with the creation, lauding the wonder of it all in short phrases: the Lord "*made the heavens, ... spread out the earth above the waters, ... made the great lights, ... the sun to rule over the day, ... [and] the moon and stars to rule over the night,*" and he punctuated each phrase with the refrain: "*for his steadfast love endures forever.*"

The psalmist then remembered the Lord's deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt: "*to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, ... and brought Israel out from among them, ... with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, ... to him who divided the Red Sea in two, ... and made Israel pass through the midst of it, ... but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, ... to him who led his people through the wilderness.*" And again each phrase was punctuated with "*for his steadfast love endures forever.*"

Finally, he remembered the Lord's defeat of the kings Sihon and Og and their armies that barred Israel's entry into the promised land (Deut. 1-3), but ultimately the gift of the promised land as a heritage, yes, "*for his steadfast love endures forever.*" The Lord's steadfast love, God's חֶסֶד (chésed) — His mercy or lovingkindness or faithful love or loving devotion as the word is variously translated ... the New Testament word we're used to is grace.

God's steadfast love is His grace, His favor. David sings "*his favor is for a lifetime*" (Ps. 30:5), but really, as we heard today over and over, His favor is eternal, it "*endures forever.*" Indeed, it is not just for the past and for Israel; it is for us, and it is now. He remembers us; He rescues us; He supplies our every need "*for*

Thanking the Good God for His Steadfast Love — Psalm 136

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Thanksgiving Day

Pastor Douglas Punke

*he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*” When we are “*brought low*” or when we “*abound*,” God is still God; “*he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*” When we experience “*plenty [or] hunger, abundance [or] need*,” God is still God; “*he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*”

And surely, you know that this steadfast love was manifest most tenderly in the sending of His own Son as our Savior, who by His steadfast love has rescued us from our bondage to sin, and has delivered to us life everlasting, for what created good but was corrupted in the fall has been restored in Christ Jesus, and we who have been baptized into Christ have been made new creations. And the exodus of old was but a foretaste of our greater deliverance accomplished by Christ our Passover Lamb, and by our passing through the Red Sea waters of our baptism.

And all this is by God’s grace alone, apart from any works of ours. So how shall we respond? Like the unthankful nine or the grateful one? May we be like the one: “*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. ... Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.*” (Psalm 136:1, 26). Yes, let us give thanks to the Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.