

Psalm 136

Introduction

1. Prayer of thanksgiving and praise
2. We don't know who the author is
3. Theme: the everlasting covenant loyalty of God

A. Structure and Poetic Elements

1. Structure:
 - a. Opening charge to give thanks to the LORD for His goodness(1-3)
 - 1) His goodness revealed by His creative works (4-9)
 - 2) His goodness revealed by delivering Israel from Egypt (10-15)
 - 3) His goodness revealed by leading Israel to the Promise Land (16-22)
 - b. Summary and closing charge to give thanks to God (23-26)
2. Poetic Elements:
 - a. Antiphonal refrain (pronounced an-tif'-fo-nall)—an antiphony is a responsive alternation between two groups of people, especially singers:
 - 1) The phrase **“For His loving kindness is everlasting”** is repeated after every stanza for a total of 26 times
 - 2) This is the only psalm like this in the Bible
 - 3) It was likely intended that the priest would read the first half of the stanza and the audience would respond with the refrain
 - b. Repetition:
 - 1) **“Give thanks...”**: 3x in the intro; 1x at the end (serve as bookends)
 - 2) **“To Him”**: 8x
 - c. Unique structure of the parallelism: stiches separated by the refrain throughout the psalm, but an easy example to see is vs. 7-9
 - d. Varying designations for God:
 - 1) Yahweh (1)
 - 2) God of gods (2)
 - 3) Lord of lords (3)
 - 4) God of Heaven (26)
 - e. Merism: where a single thing is represented by some of its parts, often two contrasting objects that represent the whole (vs. 5-9; heavens/earth, sun/moon/stars representing all of Creation)

B. Teaching

1. The opening charge to give thanks to the LORD for his goodness (READ 1-3 interactively):

- a. The first thing that stands out in this opening is the three-fold repetition of the imperative **“give thanks”**:
 - 1) The basic meaning of the Hebrew word is to acknowledge something and it’s used in three different ways in the OT:
 - a) To acknowledge or confess sin
 - b) To acknowledge some truth about man or praise man
 - c) To make a public acknowledgement or declaration of God’s attributes or works—the author is certainly using it in this way in this psalm: to publicly declare the attributes and works of God
 - 2) Most English Bibles translate the word as **“thanks”** but according to TWOT that really doesn’t convey the full sense of the word:
 - a) Again, at its root it means to acknowledge or declare something
 - b) It is often paired with words like praise, exalt, glorify, and declare
 - c) In other words, it a form of praise expressed through thanksgiving

- b. The second thing that stands out stands out in the opening are the different ways in which the author refers to God:
 - 1) He refers to Him as **“Yahweh”**, the **“God of gods”** and the **“Lord of lords”**
 - 2) This is obviously a poetic way to refer to God multiple times, but there is likely more to it than that
 - 3) Believe it or not, these are not common terms for God:
 - a) **“God of gods”** is only used three other times in the Bible
 - b) **“Lord of lords”** is only used one other time in the OT and three times of Jesus in the NT
 - 4) However, what’s interesting is that both phrases occur in Deuteronomy 10:17: **“For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe.”**
 - a) Chapter 10 of Deuteronomy shares some similarities with this psalm
 - b) It refers to Creation (heavens and earth), Egypt, the Promise Land, God’s compassion on His people, and even providing food—all of which are referenced in this psalm
 - c) It even declares in 10:11 that the LORD is to be their praise
 - d) So, this psalm is actually a carrying out of what the LORD said should be the response by Moses and the Israelites in Deuteronomy 10:21-22 (READ)

- c. The third thing we need to note in the opening is the reason the psalmist gives for thanking God--His goodness:
 - 1) The word the psalmist uses here is a pretty general word for good
 - 2) But, he has something more specific in mind and that’s what we find in the refrain: **“For His lovingkindness is everlasting”**—in other words, one of the things that makes God good is this thing the NAU translates as **“lovingkindness”**
 - a) The Hebrew word is hesed and it is rendered as lovingkindness, loyal love, steadfast love, faithful love, and even mercy by different English translations because the exact meaning is hard to pin down
 - b) The root of the word refers to goodness or kindness, but its usage in the OT indicates that it’s a goodness or kindness that is born out of loyalty or commitment

- c) When I see this word in the Hebrew, I translate it as God’s “**covenant loyalty**” because that is ultimately what it reflects
 - d) And here, the psalmist writes that God is good because His loyalty to his covenant “**is everlasting**” (so much so that he repeats it 26 times)
 - e) This is something repeated throughout the OT (Psa 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; and even books like 1 and 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Ezra)
- d. The last thing I will point out before we move on to the body of the psalm is that this same imperative—“**give thanks**”—appear in the last line of the psalm so the phrase serves as a set of book ends

**The psalmist now moves on to three historical themes that reflect the LORD’s (notice the 8x the phrase “to him” is used)

2. God’s goodness revealed by His creative works (READ 4-9 interactively):
 - a. The psalmist begins this section by highlighting the fact that the LORD does great wonders (lit. wonderful acts)
 - b. Here the psalmist has in mind Genesis 1 and the Creation of all things (he uses merism by using heavens/earth, sun/moon/stars, day/night to represent all of Creation)
3. God’s goodness revealed by delivering Israel from Egypt (READ 10-15 interactively):
 - a. He struck down the Egyptians
 - b. He delivered Israel from their oppressors
 - c. He parted the Red Sea and protected Israel as they crossed over to the other side
 - d. He destroyed the Pharaoh’s army
4. God’s goodness revealed by leading Israel to the Promise Land (READ 16-22 interactively):
 - a. He led His people through the wilderness (40 years of protection and provision; 16)
 - b. He struck down great and mighty kings like Sihon of the Amorites and Og of Bashan (17-20)
 - c. He gave Israel the land of Canaan as their heritage (21-22)
5. Summary and concluding charge to thank God (READ 23-26 interactively):
 - a. The psalmist wraps up his psalm with both a summary and another charge to thank the LORD for His goodness
 - b. The LORD “**remembered**” the Israelites at their lowest point—remembered here should be understood not as mere recollection but rather action on behalf of as is described in the second stich of the parallelism here: “**and has rescued us from our adversaries**” (24)
 - c. God’s goodness extends to all life as He “**gives food to all flesh**” (25)

Conclusion
