

The Steadfast Love of the LORD

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[0 : 00] I think this is a long reading, but it's very appropriate, right? Because what did we just hear? A thanksgiving service, a call to worship. Come on, let's give thanks to the Lord.

And then all these different groups thanking God for what he has done for them, right? How he has been good to them, how he has rescued them from their distress. All these desperate situations. It's so wonderful to hear. I don't know if you can relate to all of them. I mean, people in the desert wandering. It was a bit different life back then, of course. Maybe the people in prison. I don't know how it was like in lockdown, but people in prison desperate to get out.

Maybe that's how it feels. That is what, yeah, people are celebrating here. They gather together. People share and they give thanks for what God has done.

But, of course, there's a lesson to us there. And so I thought if we look at this psalm, actually, what should we learn from all these testimonies, all these things that we've just been hearing? So why don't I pray again that God would speak to us?

[1 : 02] Our Father, thank you so much for your word for this psalm and for you. We pray that you would speak to us and show us your glory and help us to trust you this coming year. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Now, there's one common thread through all these stories. I mean, the way the reading brought it out, right? It's always God rescuing his people. But why?

What is this psalm about? Well, as you've heard, it's very repetitive, but let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, right? What should we see from God?

There's lots of things you can see, of course. His power. His mercy. Actually, as we hear these stories, as we hear the testimonies just now, well, this is about God's steadfast love.

Verse 1, let him thank, you know, give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His steadfast love endures forever. And in every story, let him thank the Lord for his steadfast love. And in the last verse, whoever is wise, let him attend to these things.

[2 : 00] Let him consider the steadfast love of the Lord. God is a God of steadfast love. And that's what I wanted to spend time thinking of today. That as we've looked back, now it's time to look up.

Look up at God's steadfast love. Now, what is steadfast love? It's one of those real Bible words, right? The Hebrew word *gesed*. What is steadfast love? It's unconditional, committed, covenant love.

It's when you're, you know, you've committed to someone and you stay with that commitment. I think the easiest illustration is marriage, right? Marriage is a covenant and ideally a proper marriage.

Well, you are committed to that marriage. You show steadfast love, love that doesn't change. I think the problem with the world is, of course, that often that's not how most marriages work these days, right?

Usually you fall in love and here's someone who's really beautiful and you want to spend more time the rest of your life with them. And that's why you marry them. And the only thing is, what happens when that changes?

[3 : 03] What happens when the person is no longer attractive? Well, then they are no longer in love. And, well, the marriage has lost its foundation. And often the marriage is then over, right?

But that is not real marriage. Real marriage is I do. It's about my commitment, right? For better, for worse. In sickness and in health. For richer, for poorer. That is steadfast love.

That is God's unchanging commitment. And that is what we should see here. You know, God's commitment to his people to always bring them out of trouble for us.

That's, you know, we've had quite a year, but God has remained committed to us. Now, of course, when we talk about God's unchanging love for us, some people misunderstand that. Some people think it means I must have a very easy life, right? If God always loves me. I mean, clearly in this psalm and clearly in some of our testimonies, it doesn't mean that we have an easy life.

[4 : 01] These people were lost in the desert or stuck in prison or sick. And we've heard people who had the toughest year of their life. It also doesn't mean that how we live doesn't matter.

For some people, they think if God always loves me, I can live whatever way I want. These people couldn't live in every way they wanted. Because when they sinned, actually, that's when a lot of the trouble came, right?

Why were people in prison? Well, verse 11. Why were people sick?

Well, some were fools through their sinful ways. You know, it doesn't mean that if you had a tough year, that's because of your sin. It's not such a linear relationship.

That was much more in the Old Testament. But certainly, God cared about them. He loved them. And so, he didn't want them to remain in their sin. It's the same for marriage, by the way.

[4 : 57] You know, marriage, being committed to someone doesn't mean that they can just live whatever way you want, whatever way they want, and don't have to change. Of course, we love each other. You know, if someone sins, you want to help them change.

But the thing is, in marriage and in our relationship with God, commitment is there. God is always committed to us. And no matter how much you struggle, no matter how much you fail, no matter how much you sin, no matter the mess in your lives, God keeps loving you.

And his love is unchanging. That's why he is always there for you, because of his unchanging covenant love. And that is what we want, right?

I mean, again, with marriage, what is it like the other way? If you are the person who is loved, surely you want someone who keeps on loving you, right? Again, if someone loves me because I'm so funny, then there's a pressure on me to stay funny the rest of my life, which is very difficult.

If someone loves you because you're beautiful, then you have a lot of pressure to stay beautiful. Imagine if God is like that, right? That God loves us because we've got our lives sorted out.

[6 : 11] And then we have a very tough year, and it gets messed up with COVID and the fifth wave. And suddenly God stops loving us. Or he loves us because we were pretty good, but actually this year we've fallen into some really sinful habits that we're still trying to make free from.

How terrible, then, if God would stop loving us, right? The pressure to keep it up. When I was at London Underground, I had a colleague of mine. He did not want to get married.

He had a girlfriend, but if he got married, then he had to stay with her. And now he wanted to be able to get out whenever he could. That poor girl. So much pressure on her. She had heart problems, so she had to go in and out of hospital.

And she was constantly afraid that it was too much work for her boyfriend and he would leave her. You know, if God was like that, and he could dump us at any time, how could we go into the next year?

But that is not what God is like. God won't dump us. He will stay committed to us. I mean, that is, in a way, the background to this psalm. The psalms, this is near the end of the book.

[7 : 19] The psalms were compiled in light of the exile. We've heard about the exile maybe a few times the past few weeks. You know, the people of Israel, they had some very tough times in their history.

After a hundred years in the land with all their sin and idolatry, at some point God kicked them out. And the Babylonians came and they burned the city and they burned the temple.

And all the people were taken away as slaves to Babylon. And they lost everything. And they lost their homes. They lost their community. They lost their freedom. They lost their possessions.

They lost their God. They lost everything, right? And they were there in Babylon and wondering, does God still love us? Is there any hope for us? And, well, they read the psalms and they compiled the psalms into the book it is now.

Actually, there is hope. What is that hope? God's steadfast love. God is committed to us. And his love never changes. He loves us. And so we can rely on him.

[8 : 20] And what does that mean? Well, ultimately that means not just that he loves us now. Ultimately, that also means we will go home. That's the other thing in this psalm.

We've been looking up. We've been looking back. We've been looking up at God's steadfast love. But what does that mean? Well, we look forward and one day we will go home. And this psalm has a big layer of going home.

I mean, going home is what you want, right? If you're in exile, if you are in Babylon, where do you want to go? You want to go home. And all these stories. You're wandering in the desert. Where do you want to go?

You want to go home. You're locked up in prison. Where do you want to go? You want to go home. Because what is home? Home is your community. Home is your family. Home is where you belong. Home is with God, right?

That is where you want to be. And so at the end of this psalm, actually, we stopped the Thanksgiving stories. And we got these verses about God and his control of the land.

[9 : 20] Because the land, that is for Israel back then what they wanted. And it's those beautiful verses that come from like Isaiah about what God, yeah, about living in the land.

So verses 35 to 38. He turns a prayer. He turns a desert into pools of water. A parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry dwell. And they establish a city to live in.

They sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield. By his blessing, they multiply greatly. And he does not let their livestock diminish. For them, that was the good life.

This is their dream. Being back home. A fruitful land. Being together. God is back with them. And everything is wonderful. Going home.

And isn't that what we also want, right? We want, in a way, we are still in exile. The exile of Genesis 3. The fall, the broken world we live in. Don't we want to go and be with God?

[10 : 22] Don't we want to have all the troubles being over? Well, it will happen. One day. One day. Well, we're not going home. Jesus will bring our home to us when he comes back.

And that is our hope. I mean, in a way, today is, you know, New Year's Day. And we think 2023. And I really hope we'll have a wonderful year. I hope we'll have a great year.

The only thing is, the year has changed. But nothing else has changed, right? The world is still broken. That hasn't changed. I haven't changed. It's not like when the clock struck midnight.

My sinful nature disappeared. It didn't. Right? And so, we are still sinners in a broken world. It will still be, yeah, good chance that 2023 will be like 2022.

But it won't last forever. One day, Jesus will come in his steadfast love. We know that because he's committed to us. He's done everything for us.

[11 : 19] And he will bring us home. And so, that is our hope for this year, right? We've been thinking about God's faithfulness, God's love. As we look at this year, actually, let's look beyond that.

Let's look that we are going to go home one day. God is a God of steadfast love. Well, why don't we spend some time reflecting on that?

In a moment, we'll celebrate communion. I mean, how are we, you know, where do we see God's commitment to us most clearly? Well, it's that his son died for us on the cross, right? How much more committed can you be to someone than giving up your life for them?

But before we do that, why don't we just take a minute and just pray. Pray on your own. Remember God's steadfast love. Remember this year. And pray that you would keep trusting his steadfast love in this coming year.

And then I'll call us and I'll pray and then we'll have communion together. Amen.

[13 : 08] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for your steadfast love. Thank you that your commitment to us is unchanging. We know our sin. We know our mess in our lives. And we know we don't deserve anything.

And yet you gave your son. He died for us. And so your love for us is guaranteed. We pray that we would trust it. We've seen it in history. We've seen it in our lives.

We've seen it in 2022. And we know you will keep loving us this coming year and forevermore. We thank you that you are this unchanging God. In Jesus' name.

[14 : 16] Amen. Amen. Hang on.