

## Psalm 136

Sometimes sections of the bible seem to have a self-apparent interpretation. It can seem like nothing is necessary to comment on. Sometimes we read so much about *God's mercy* that we become numb to how blessed we are. This psalm is all about God's mercy and his goodness. Just like the psalms about praise, mercy is a very common word in scripture. The Bible can be read like a newspaper; with obvious benefits. God is calling us to be more like *gold miners* ... or precious gem collectors...who stop and dig in and take a closer look at every nugget of truth. We need to dwell on the word; and wait for a spiritual download. Scripture is like an onion that has layers that sometimes need to be peeled.

**Read Psalm 136: 1-4:** We are told that God's mercy is multi-dimensional. It is like a diamond. It has different aspects from our different experiences. The first four verses tell us that God's mercy is: good, it's eternal, and it is from the highest god. It is not God, plus nature or God plus my ability. It is just God's goodness. God hides behind day-to-day circumstances. Most people do not see God's hand in their daily lives.

*It is the glory of God to conceal a matter (Proverbs 25:2)*

### Mercy to the Obstinate and Lukewarm

There is more than one word in the bible translated into English as *mercy*. According to Blue Letter Bible, the word for mercy in this psalm is '*hesed*'/H2617. The Rule of First Mention tells us that the best context for a word in scripture is often its first usage. The first use of *hesed* as mercy is found for the first time in Genesis 19:19. Let's step back and peel back a layer and see what that context of mercy really is.

Genesis 19 is all about God evacuating Lot (by angels) from Sodom, just before it was destroyed. Lot is an example of a compromising end-times Christian. He has limited influence on his society. He gets pulled away just before everything gets destroyed. He has gotten too comfortable with the fallen culture. The application for us is the *mercy* God has with us as procrastinating and compromising Christians. He just keeps sending us rain and blessings from heaven though our society marginalizes him. Like Lot, the popular book Pilgrims Promise is all about the end-times believer fleeing the *City of Destruction* just before it is destroyed.

**The Pilgrim's Progress**, is a religious allegory by the English writer John Bunyan, published in two parts in 1678 and 1684. The work is a symbolic vision of the good man's pilgrimage through life. At one time second only to the Bible in popularity, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the most famous Christian allegory still in print. It was first published in the reign of Charles II and was largely written while its Puritan author was imprisoned for offenses against the Conventicle Act of 1593 (which prohibited the conducting of religious services outside the bailiwick of the Church of England).



Part I (1678) is presented as the author's dream of the trials and adventures of Christian (an everyman figure) as he travels from his home, the City of Destruction, to the Celestial City. Christian seeks to rid himself of a terrible burden, the weight of his sins, that he feels after reading a book (ostensibly the Bible).

Lot put himself and his family to the hazard by not getting out of harm's way. He chose the best financial opportunity for himself. He ignored the evil influences connected to his quest. We can also be like that frog that is oblivious to being slowly boiled. We do not detect all of the gradual changes.

God provided an incredible amount of mercy and grace to Lot. Abraham had to rescue Lot and his family with a 318-man army. God sent angels to rescue him yet again. Genesis 19 uses the word *hesed*/mercy for God's intervention to save stubborn Lot. Lot could not bring himself to separate from the worldly influences that were holding him. In the end, his wife chose to stay in the city of destruction. Lot's descendants eventually became enemies of God's people. He literally had no spiritual legacy, other than being saved *by the skin of his teeth*. Lot was indistinguishable from the locals in Sodom. He sat on the city council; and he blended in.

*For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of*

*righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)— then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, (2 Peter 2:4-9).*

The bible is filled with stories of men compromising God's standards. God has been intervening to keep man from destroying himself. Our holiness/separation is for our own protection. We cannot go along to get along. We cannot surround ourselves with the transgender agenda and still be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. We cannot be saturated with the *woke* agenda and see God as clearly.

*...whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Philippians 4:8)*

Scripture is like brain and emotion soap. The demonic influences are trying to incapacitate us with fear and doubt and dread. The nightly news paints a daily picture of doom and a sense that nothing can be salvaged. We have to sanitize our mind and feed it truth and healthy views of life. The psalms are a contrast between the failures on earth and the control in heaven.

This lens is the reference and background for *hesed*/mercy. It is hard to minister to someone who does not think they need any help. That is why Revelation chapter 3 tells us that God would even prefer that we were cold to the gospel, than to be lukewarm, and think our version of self-indulgences and loopholes are acceptable. We are like a CPR patient that needs rescue breaths from God every day. The longer we are out of close contact with God; the weaker we become.

Mercy is not just sparing us from the surrounding judgements. It is to keep us on the narrow path. God has had to re-state the rules for life to keep man from masochistically destroying himself. Many times, God has to stop us and grab us and incapacitate us just to save us. We can be so bent on doing things our own way. God also used the word for *mercy* (*hesed*) literally at the same time he wrote the Ten Commandments, fully knowing that the children of Israel were

simultaneously dancing around naked to the golden calf. In other words, it's being merciful while bedlam is breaking loose around us.

*And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)*

*Hesed* is like rescuing a youth who is addicted to drugs. How do you minister to someone who is harming themselves? How do you get through to someone who does not feel the need to tune in? Sometimes chastisement and hardship are the only way. Sometimes their toys have to be taken away; because they will not walk away from danger. *Hesed* / *mercy* is otherwise defined as the strongest compassion that we can have for another person without falling in love with them.

This psalm begins by reminding us that God is good. This psalm is noting the examples and ways that God has had a sparing eye towards mankind. I know that when I chafe at spiritual things, that I am going the wrong way. We need to make the scriptures personal. They offer a GPS on our spiritual location.

We probably know that we have done damage to the lives of others with our spiritual void and mere procrastination. Lot got into heaven, but he probably did not bring many to heaven with him. God showed unbelievable mercy to Lot. He sent angels to take him out of harm's way; though he did not embrace the idea.

We are born with an egocentric mind. The new believer and the worldly person look similar. They are both overly sensitive to their reputation and their plans, and getting *their fair share* in life. They are determined to get their piece of the pie. Like musical chairs; that always ends up leaving someone else out in the cold.

My own faith journey has not been linear at all. God has invested a ton of time and scripture in me, for decades. I still found myself immersed in sin years after knowing the truth. Saving mankind is a hard thing to do. The percentages are very small. It is God's goodness and his character that has kept mankind alive.

*"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)*

**Read Psalm 136:5-9:** What does the creation of the universe have to do with mercy? In Revelation we see that people will be freaking out and losing their composure as the earth and the universe become unstable. The nations will be falling, and there will be earthquakes and warlords and toxic drinking water, etc... Why are we not appreciative that it is currently functioning normally?

God could have easily created us without the solar system and an orbiting universe. He created light on the first day, but he created the sun, moon and stars on the fourth day. In other words, God can use instruments or nothing at all. God chose to dedicate some celestial things *to demonstrate his* glory for the benefit of man. The entire universe is only a demonstration of God's glory and unique love for man. When that harvest of souls is complete, God will dispose of it all.

*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, (2 Peter 3:10-11)*

The careful selection of gravity, temperature, air content, wind influence, seasons, separation of land and sea, water and air, moderating influence of the oceans, inert gas, and many other things are held into a precise and self-correcting balance. Without these markers we would have no appreciation for creation or his protections.

*Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. "While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, Cold and heat, Winter and summer, And day and night Shall not cease." (Genesis 8:21-22)*

*"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? "Or who shut in the sea with doors, When it burst forth and issued from the womb; When I made the clouds its garment, And thick darkness its swaddling band; When I fixed My limit for it, And set bars and doors; When I said, 'This far you may come, but no farther, And here your proud waves must stop!' "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, (Job 38:4-12)*

In other words, God chose to use an extremely complicated labyrinth of mutually affected powers and influences and physical properties that prove his care for us beyond a shadow of a doubt. God gave us science; and then he showed us how he has executed the impossible. In other words, science leads us to understand that God's ways are above our own. This psalm is said to be from *the God of all gods*.

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, (Romans 1:18-20)*

*I am the LORD, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things.' (Isaiah 45:5-7)*

**Read Psalm 136:10-22:** The entire exodus story is supposed to be a memorial for all generations. It is supposed to teach future generations who the real God is...and what he is capable of.

*The LORD your God, who goes before you, He will fight for you, according to all He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a man carries his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place.' Yet, for all that, you did not believe the LORD your God, who went in the way before you to search out a place for you to pitch your tents, to show you the way you should go, in the fire by night and in the cloud by day. (Deuteronomy 1:30-33).*

God allows villains and heroes to populate the landscape. He could have dropped us into a perfectly stable environment. Men do not tend to get saved apart from pending doom or tragedy or significant losses. We do not hear about salvation in the 1,000-year millennium. We do hear a lot about salvation as we step into the 7-year tribulation. God knowingly created Pharaoh, and then ultimately hardened his heart. God allowed his people to end up in a box canyon at the Red Sea, with Pharaoh and his chariots in hot pursuit.

Additionally, God shows us mercy by creating timeless Exodus symbols that we can relate to. Pharaoh is a character who teaches us about Satan. Egypt is a place that teaches us about this selfish and heartless world. Moses teaches us about Jesus. The Red Sea teaches us about baptism. The wilderness experience teaches us about stopping short of the abundant life in Christ; by trying to revert to some of what we left behind. The shekinah glory around the tabernacle teaches us about the Holy Spirit. The Jews still teach the Passover; without the full knowledge of Jesus. Someday soon, God will open their eyes to more of its relevance.

Speaking of that; where is the mercy in creating the Devil? Every character in our life ultimately serves God's purposes. The imagery of a ruthless Assyrian King who takes the children of Israel captive is a perfect villain to create repentance and cleanse the sin taking place in Israel. The deceiver is deceived.

*“Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, And against the people of My wrath I will give him charge, To seize the spoil, to take the prey, And to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Yet he does not mean so, Nor does his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy, And cut off not a few nations. (Isaiah 10:5-7)*

Where is the mercy in 400 years of Egyptian slavery, making bricks for pyramids? For starters, God needed to evacuate them from Canaan, while the Canaanites devolved to the point of necessary destruction. God's people would have been ruined with them.

*“Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” (Genesis 15:13-16)*

God uses the fire behind us and the glory in front of us to propel us forward. If life without Christ was that good enough, we might never get saved. If life as a lazy or unwilling saint was tolerable; we would lose out on all kinds of eternal and present blessings. Like a mother eagle, God pulls the comforts out of our nests to get us moving out.

**Psalm 136:23-26:** The bible is full of God's rescues of mankind. The Book of Judges is a seemingly endless circuit of: judgement, repentance, deliverance and new freedoms, followed by yet another fall into sin.

The story of God and man is a story about redemption. God came down to the public sewer system to find us. He got his hands dirty, and it cost him dearly. He cleaned us up and took us in. We are a form of measurement of God's mercy. Alternatively, the holy angels are more of an example of God's glory and power. We do not hear too much about God forgiving them. They do not need a performance handicapping system like we do. He is the King of Kings and the LORD of Lords. Like Elijah, we see a glimmer of that greatness; but really only through the lens of our own cave entrances.