

Thoughts From Other Minds:

The Existence of Evil.

How can the existence of evil, physical and moral, be reconciled with the benevolence and holiness of a God infinite in his wisdom and power? This question has exercised the reason and tried the faith of men in all ages of the world. ...

The Scriptural Doctrine.

The third method of dealing with this question is to rest satisfied with the simple statements of the Bible. The Scriptures teach, (1.) That the glory of God is the end to which the promotion of holiness, and the production of happiness, and all other ends are subordinate. (2.) That, therefore, the self-manifestation of God, the revelation of his infinite perfection, being the highest conceivable, or possible good, is the ultimate end of all his works in creation, providence, and redemption. (3.) As sentient creatures are necessary for the manifestation of God's benevolence, so there could be no manifestation of his mercy without misery, or of his grace and justice, if there were no sin. As the heavens declare the glory of God, so He has devised the plan of redemption, "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places, might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God." (Eph. 3:10.) The knowledge of God is eternal life. It is for creatures the highest good. And the promotion of that knowledge, the manifestation of the manifold perfections of the infinite God, is the highest end of all his works. This is declared by the Apostle to be the end contemplated, both in the punishment of sinners and in the salvation of believers. ... "What if God, willing to shew his wrath (or justice), and to make his power known, endured with much long suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that He might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had afore prepared unto glory." (Rom. 9:22-23.) Sin, therefore, according the Scriptures, is permitted, that the justice of God may be known in its punishment, and his grace in its forgiveness. And the universe, without the knowledge of these attributes, would be like the earth without the light of the sun. The glory of God being the great end of all things, we are not obliged to assume that this is the best possible world for the production of happiness, or even for securing the greatest degree of holiness among rational creatures. It is wisely adapted for the end for which it was designed, namely, the manifestation of the manifold perfections of God. That God, in revealing Himself, does promote the highest good of his creatures, consistent with the promotion of his own glory, may be admitted. But to reverse this order, to make the good of the creature the highest end, is to pervert and subvert the whole scheme; it is to put the means for the end, to subordinate God to the universe, the infinite to the finite. This putting the creature in the place of the Creator, disturbs our moral and religious sentiments and convictions, as well as our intellectual apprehensions of God, and of his relation to the universe.

Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, pp.429, 435-36.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Pastoral Charge

29 January 2017

Sermon: "The goodness of the Lord and the future # 5" (text: Psalm 136:1-26)

Scripture: Psalm 136:1-26

Sermon Notes

Introduction: During January we have been preparing for an uncertain future by focussing on the goodness of God so as to be rock-solid in the truth that God is good even in the troubles of life.

We have seen how God's goodness overflows to us in 'mercy' - that is, the sort of mercy the Good Samaritan showed the man taken by robbers. This mercy is the overflowing of love in deeds of love, as God's love overflows to us in salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:10).

Psalm 136 is unique among the psalms, in celebrating God's goodness in enduring mercy in every second line, 26 times! It is also a rousing command to us to thank him for his goodness and mercy (vs 1-3).

Knowledge of God's goodness and mercy are to stimulate us to acknowledge him and to praise him with thanks. This is not limited to the psalms or to the Old Testament; in the New Testament it is taken up by Jesus (cf. Lk 17:17) and by his apostles, both as a command and as a warning (Eph 5:18; Rom 1:21-23).

1. Good in creation

There is safety in giving thanks to God; it will keep us from the folly of exchanging his glory for something else; we give thanks to him 'who alone does great wonders' (v. 4). Only God does wonders; or every wonder is done by him (cf. Jn 14:11).

The first 'great wonder' is his creation (vs. 5-9). The universe is a wonder; it's hard to know which is greater, the folly or the wickedness of those who ascribe its wonders to 'Evolution'. May the Lord keep us from such wicked folly; only the Lord, the God of gods, the Lord of lords, does great wonders. He is its Creator!

Do we see in the creation as the overflowing of his love in mercy for us? How could we doubt the goodness of God if we see the heavens and the earth as the great wonders of him whose mercy endures forever?

In his creation he has lavished his love upon us; he has confined the water to the seas to give us dry land as our home; by giving us the great lights, and the stars, for light and warmth, for signs and seasons and for days and years; God is love, and the heavens do tell it; they are there because his love overflows to us in mercy.

2. Good in redemption

Creation is a great wonder, but a new creation is an even greater wonder. The psalmist calls us to thank God for his goodness and mercy in the creation of a re-

deemed people; [Oh give thanks] 'To Him who struck Egypt in their firstborn, for His mercy endures forever' (v. 10) (cf. Exodus 12:29-30).

Some say, "What kind of mercy is that?" When our first parents rebelled against the love of God to them in creation he showed mercy; he promised a Saviour (Gen 3:15); their descendants filled the earth with violence until his judgment was necessary—but in mercy he saved Noah and all with him in the ark.

After the Flood, after mankind again rebelled against him, the Lord showed mercy by entering into a covenant with Abraham, to bless him and to make him a blessing to all the nations; the Saviour would come from his descendants.

By Moses' time Abraham's descendants who had found refuge from famine in Egypt were now a great nation; this Pharaoh was a wicked man who let his people in rebellion against the Lord and the attempted genocide of his people. The Egyptians enslaved them and made them throw their infants boys in the Nile.

The Lord, who is sovereign in mercy (Ex 33:19) did not have mercy; he did justice—but even his justice was slow to strike; it was only when all else failed that he 'struck Egypt in their firstborn' and even then only to show the mercy he had promised to Abraham and to all our fallen race.

The psalmist leads us in savouring each step of the way as a mercy itself (vs. 11-15). Give thanks because he drowned the Egyptians? Surely not! Yes, for even that was an act of mercy: 'Mercy continued to protect its children, and therefore called in the aid of justice to fulfil the capital sentence on their foes.' (C H Spurgeon).

The mercy continued through the wilderness; their conduct tested it, but it bore the strain, even to the destruction of great kings, Sihon and Og (vs. 17:20). Pharaoh had tried to stop them leaving Egypt; Sihon and Og tried to stop them reaching Canaan—but in mercy the Lord slew them and gave their land to Israel (Num 21).

This history is our history; as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ we are to give thanks to the Lord who has remembered us in our lowly state and rescued us from all our enemies (v. 23); this mercy is continuous with that mercy; if the Lord had not in mercy given them victory there would have been no Saviour, no mercy for us.

This history is also a picture of our salvation; the Lord's victories over their enemies then are guarantees of his victory over his and our enemies now; Christ has delivered us from bondage to Satan; Christ our Passover saves us from the wrath of God in judgment; his unfailing mercies will bring us safe home at last.

3. Good to all

The psalmist thanks God as 'God of heaven', the universal God, for his goodness is not limited to his elect; he gives food to all flesh (vs. 25-26). If we are tempted to doubt that God is good, if the difficulties of life ever begin to get us down, then let us remember not only his goodness to us in creation and in redemption but also his goodness to all (Ps 145:8-9); surely he will certainly take care of us who love him?

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My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does Psalm 136 teach us about how God thinks about our response to his goodness? Reflect on Eph 5:18-20; how much are we to thank God for? What other passages of scripture confirm this?
2. According to Romans 1:21-23 what danger is there in not giving God thanks? How might this work out in practice, firstly in the ancient world, and secondly in the modern world?
3. Reflect on the meaning of the word 'mercy' as used of the Good Samaritan's actions in helping the man who had fallen among robbers. With this in mind, how what is the connection between God's wonders in creation and his mercy (cf. Ps 136:5-9)?
4. Should we be giving thanks to the Lord for striking dead the first born of Egypt, and drowning Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea? If not, why not? If so, why? How is Christ our Passover (1 Cor 5:7)?
5. Why does the psalmist end the psalm 'he gives food to all flesh'? How does this affirm his goodness? What danger does it warn us against?