

## Give Thanks!

In the name of the LORD, our God of loving kindness and tender mercy, dearly redeemed thanks-givers:

What most of us know as a table prayer, “Oh, give thanks unto the LORD for He is good, for His mercy endures forever,” is actually the first verse of Psalm 136:1. The ancient Jews first heard this word of God like this: הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה בִּי-טוֹב בִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶד׃. Back in 1995, here at New Life, we read the Psalm with the congregation saying the verses and the pastor repeating the refrain in Hebrew. That was the Holy Spirit’s lifesaver on my second trip abroad. I was told before a worship service that I “should just rest.” But after the other brother finished sharing, the head pastor turned to me and started saying something. Our deaconess translated: “Pastor Cordes, you share. And give them the Hebrew!” In front of hundreds of people the LORD put it on my heart to have them read from their Bibles in their language the verses of Psalm 136, while I repeated the Hebrew refrain. I was giving thanks to the LORD of His gift of grace to me as I then expounded on the first verse and its vital importance for us today.

הוֹדוּ – “*Give thanks...*” – Think how strange this is that we should even have to be told to “*give thanks*”! Do the fans of a championship team have to be told to cheer? Does a nation need to be told to celebrate its heroes after winning a hard fought war? We know that God is our mighty Creator, our merciful Redeemer, our gracious Sanctifier. Why do we have to be told to “*give thanks*” when He fills our lives with blessings every day? Yet this is part of our sinful condition. Our children need to be taught to say these words to their parents and grandparents. We grownups worry instead. **Give Thanks!**

לַיהוָה – “*...to the LORD...*” – He is the only one who deserves our continual thanks and praise. “*The LORD*” is the Savior-God of free and faithful grace. He does nothing out of selfishness or in an arbitrary way. His very essence is love. And though He punishes sin to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him, you can tell He would rather bless. For He gives blessings to a thousand generations of those who love Him and fear His Name.

בִּי-טוֹב – “*...for He is good...*” – Too often our prayers and praises center entirely on what God *does* instead of who God *is*. The fact that God is *good* in His very essence should prompt our heartfelt praise even when our prayers seem to go unanswered, even when it seems God is angry at us. When He allows evil to come into our lives, we need to trust God to work out everything for our eternal good as He promises (Romans 8:28). We have wonderful examples like Job in the depths of near-despair crying out with faith in the *goodness* of his Redeemer and the ancient, eternal hope of the resurrection (Job 19:25-27). Also, we hear Jeremiah in the midst of Jerusalem’s rubble nevertheless praising God for His goodness (Lamentations 3:22-24); in particular the prophet says, “*The Lord is my portion.*” God Himself is the only real inheritance we need because He is *good* and gives *good* to all who hope in Him.

Those who truly know the Lord by faith in Jesus Christ can always give thanks and praise because He truly is *good*. We see it proven again and again in His actions of unfailing mercy:

בִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶד – “*...for His steadfast love endures forever.*” – One of the Holy Spirit’s special words for “love” is חֶסֶד. This kind of “love” no human being has. Every time the word comes up in the Bible for people, their חֶסֶד fails. For instance, Joseph interpreted the dream of the cupbearer in prison, then asked, “*But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness (חֶסֶד); mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison.*” (Genesis 40:14 NIV84) But instead, the cupbearer forgot about Joseph. To His unfaithful people the LORD said, “*Your love (חֶסֶד) is like the morning mist, like the early*

*dew that disappears.”* (Hosea 6:4) All of us who have stood before God’s altar and promised lifelong love and faithfulness know just what He means. In our best efforts to love our spouse and live in harmony, we fail constantly. Our only hope, our greatest hope, our sure and certain salvation is in the *“unfailing love”* of God. He promised a Savior, then delivered us, as promised, from sin, death and hell. God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we can enjoy His love in our relationships too.

God’s love is what we shared with a lonely salesman eating dinner alone in a restaurant on my most recent trip abroad. Sister Ting talked to him a few minutes, then came over to our table laughing. “He wants us to eat with him.” So we moved over with him, then enjoyed the rest of the evening together. He had served eight years in the national army after enlisting to help earthquake victims. He told stories of endless weeks of stale rations, sleeping on the road because there was no room in the rubble. After leaving the army he felt lost. He no longer had any rank or the rigid military schedule. We shared with him the love of God for which he was very grateful. Since I’m about the age of his older brother, he called me, “Uncle Mark.” I gave him the English name Paul, which lit up his eyes as if I’d given him a million dollars. He bought us dinner twice and spent every minute soaking up God’s love.

We have so many reasons to **Give Thanks!** just for our family. For many of us our fellowship at New Life is a closer family than the one in which we grew up. We share each other’s joys and sorrows in relationships that grow closer year by year. We look forward to spending eternity together with God and all our loved ones in heaven. This is why we keep sharing at home and abroad how God adopted us into His family by Baptism. I enjoy showing pictures of my family to the delight of loved ones over there. They can’t believe I come from a family of seven children, that I was blessed with four children of my own, all grown and married, that God has multiplied His blessings with three grandsons.

Over there we find first generation Christians who long for their parents to repent and believe in Jesus while there still is time. They dearly desire close and caring relationships with other Christians. And God answers our prayers in bringing them together as husband and wife with kids in Christian families. As we travel, their familial love for us is so heartwarming. The three young women who serve as our guides and interpreters treat us like their own fathers whom they haven’t seen for ten years. It dawned on me the other day that their personalities match our three daughters. By their English names, Emily has the determined energy of Katie. Danelle shows the quiet competence of our Sarah. And Nina bubbles over with joy like our daughter Charis. We constantly **Give Thanks!** for these blessings from God who help us bring His goodness and unfailing love to many on the far side of the world.

It gives me great joy to share not only God’s blessings on our families here, but the work God gives to spread His love and faithfulness further. They enjoy hearing descriptions of our early days getting started, what it means to go door-to-door looking for lost souls. Many of them are excellent street evangelists who always carry something to give away with God’s blessings to strangers that they meet. They love their children dearly and want them brought to Jesus too. They enjoy seeing our churches which are much different than their places of worship. And they love Loren Steele’s picture of “My Best Friend,” Jesus the Good Shepherd who kindly cares for His sheep and lambs.

We have the joyful privilege not only of knowing the LORD is truly *“good”* and giving Him thanks because *“His mercy endures forever.”* We also enjoy His blessing on our relationships as pictured in our round window above the altar. Here men and women have their heads joined at the cross and their hearts in God’s Holy Book of love. He gives us new life to reach out to the world with the saving message of Christ-crucified and risen. To share His goodness in other cultures is a priceless privilege and blessing for which we give thanks together. And while Christians throughout the world struggle to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience, we continue to enjoy the freedom to do so here. But never forget that even without this religious freedom our brothers and sisters throughout the world still **Give Thanks!** When all else fails, we know that God is good and that His mercy endures forever. In everything we **Give Thanks!** for Jesus’ sake. Amen.