

**HUNGRY FOR GOD:  
STUDIES ON PRAYER**

**9**

**THANKSGIVING**

**Psalm 136**

**By Mary Youtz  
and Beth Crawford**

*“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*  
1 Thessalonians 5:18

*“Prayer is made vigorous by asking, urgent by supplication, and pleasing and acceptable by thanksgiving.”*

Martin Luther

*“Thankfulness is foundational to the Christian life. Thankfulness is a conscious response that comes from looking beyond our blessings to their source. God looks for our thanks. Our worship, prayers, service and daily life ought to be saturated with thanksgiving.”*

Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby

*“Thou hast giv’n so much to me, Give one thing more, a gratefull heart....”*  
George Herbert

## AIM

- To develop specific and practical ways to add the habit of thanksgiving to our prayer and daily thoughts.

## KEY VERSE

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.”

Psalm 136:1

## PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**How to Teach the Bible in Small Group**” and “**Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (\*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are supplying this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to provide resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* and *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for study.

## OPENERS

We know that giving thanks to God is important because it’s mentioned often in the Bible. In the Old Testament, ministers were appointed to offer thanks and praise in the temple. It was part of the duties of the Levite priests (1 Chronicles 16:4,7; 23:30). Thank offerings, a subcategory of the peace offerings, indicated gratitude for God’s delivering or blessing individuals or the nation (Leviticus 7:11–21f, cited in Carpenter, p. 268). David often thanked the Lord (1 Chronicles 16:7–36; Psalms 28:7; 30:12; 35:18; 69:30) as did many other psalmists (Psalms 50:14, 23; 75:1; 100:4; 92:1,2,4; 107; 118). Hannah, Moses, and many other Old Testament people also regularly offered thanks to God. Hezekiah had thanksgiving offered at the temple as part of the reforms during his reign (2 Chronicles 31:2) and the Levites

giving thanks are listed in Nehemiah 11:17 along with the rest of the people who rebuilt Jerusalem after the exile.

In the New Testament, Jesus noted that only one of the ten lepers He healed returned to give thanks for healing (Luke 17:18). He commanded the demoniac that was delivered to return to his town and tell others of the good things God had done for him (Luke 8:39). Thanksgiving is to be part of prayer (Philippians 4:6) and is part of the will of God for us (I Thessalonians 5:18; Colossians 3:15–7).

Having established the importance of thanksgiving in the Bible, how do we integrate thanksgiving into our lives? While some church liturgies include giving thanks to God, not all of us routinely include thanks in our daily or corporate worship. Some people advocate keeping a “thankfulness journal.” Daily they list five things they are thankful for. Some parents try to cultivate thankful attitudes by teaching their children to say “thank you” to others and by asking them to share something they are thankful for each day. These practices help us remember the good things we often take for granted. When we remind ourselves—and others—about how God is blessing us, we can then consciously choose to thank Him. God gives great gifts such as life, health, family, friends, sun, rain, food, shelter, clothing, salvation, His Spirit, fellow believers in the Body of Christ, spiritual gifts, etc., so we have much to be thankful for if only we think about it. “Thankfulness is foundational to the Christian life. Thankfulness is a conscious response that comes from looking beyond our blessings to their source. God looks for our thanks. Our worship, prayers, service and daily life ought to be saturated with thanksgiving” (Blackaby and Blackaby, p. 324). As we talk with the Giver of all good gifts (James 1:17), we can mention specific blessings with thanksgiving. Recognizing and thanking God is the focus of this study.

***Pray that God's Spirit will use this study to enable group members to recognize all the blessings they receive and to stimulate gratitude in their hearts.***

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

[This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.]

The *Psalms* is a prayer book and hymnal of the Jews. The word *psalm* comes from the Greek *biblos psalmon* transliteration of the Hebrew for “book of praises” (Williams, *Psalms 1–72*, pp. 18–19). Sometimes it is referred to as “The Psalter,” a term taken from the third century Greek translation of the Old Testament used by the early church (Soderlund, p. 400). The title is from *psalterion* for “stringed instrument” or “collection of songs” (Williams, *Psalms 1–72*, pp. 18–19). Jesus would have grown up hearing and learning the psalms as part of His regular worship. He and the New Testament authors quoted *Psalms* frequently, and showed how many verses of these inspired words applied to His life and ministry.

Because *Psalms* is made up of “inspired Hebrew prayers and hymns,” it is well loved by many people (Fee & Stuart, p. 169). The psalms are poetry, but Hebrew poetry, which does not need to rhyme or follow a strict meter [beats]. The authors do use recognizable poetic forms, including parallel lines that state a thought similarly or sometimes expand on it. Like other poetry, the psalms are full of images or symbols, picture words meant to stir the emotions as well as the mind. Some psalms were meant to be sung. Because they are poetic literature, we need to read and interpret them in context, as hymns and prayers. The beliefs and feelings expressed also need to be seen in light of the entire body of Scripture. Just as any other portion of Scripture, no one verse should be lifted out of context and given a meaning that does not harmonize with the setting (Fee & Stuart, pp. 169–185). Therefore, when a psalmist expresses a sense of abandonment, we should not conclude that God does abandon His people, something that would contradict other Scriptures (Deuteronomy 31:6; Matthew 28:20). Instead, we can understand from the psalmist’s honesty that it is not sin to come to God and pour out our hearts to Him (Christensen).

Psalm 136 repeats the phrase “His steadfast love endures forever” in each verse. In Hebrew, this refrain requires only 6 syllables, making it easier and more pleasing to the ear to repeat. Perhaps it would sound like, “for his love has no end” (Gelineau’s suggestion for Psalm 118, cited by Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, p. 457). The various sections of the psalm focus on thanking God for who He is (vv. 1–3, 26), the world He created (vv. 4–9), His involvement in Israel’s history—especially deliverance from slavery and giving of the Promised Land (vv. 10–22)—and His faithfulness to His children (vv. 23–25).

### **STUDY THE PASSAGE: Psalm 136**

**Let’s read Psalm 136 as worshippers have done for centuries. We’ll divide into two groups, and one will read the first line while the rest will read the repeated words, “His love endures forever.”**

**1. In verses 1–3, the psalmist thanks God for who He is using different names for God. What do these names refer to, and why is this important at the beginning of a prayer?**

In Exodus 3:14, God revealed the special name His people were to use when worshipping Him: “I AM,” (i.e., Yahweh or YHWH). “I AM” implies He exists from eternity past to eternity future; He is not dependent on anything or anyone for His existence; and He is unchanging. The Jews considered the word for “I AM” so sacred that they wouldn’t pronounce it. Instead, they wrote only the consonants as a type of shorthand or code. Scholars have tried to fill in the missing vowel sounds, and frequently the name for God appears as “Yahweh,” translated here as “the LORD” (Wyatt, p. 507). “God of gods” means He alone, and no other gods, has first place. “Lord of lords” points to His authority being superior to all powers on earth (Williams, *Psalms 73–150*, p.

466). Thus the God they worship is the only God, the supreme power, and someone they personally know because He has revealed Himself to them.

Help the group see that prayer, especially prayer focused on thanksgiving, should start with thinking about God and praising Him and His attributes. This is modeled in both the Old and New Testaments. Refer to the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9), and to the prayers of Ezra, (Ezra 7:27–28), Daniel (Daniel 2:20–23) and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 9:6–15). Focusing on God helps us by reminding us of His power, wisdom, and provision, which are all sufficient. This can help prevent prayer from becoming centered on our complaints and limited ideas.

## **2. What is the significance of repeating, “His love endures forever”?**

Parents and educators use repetition to teach basic skills. Saying or singing something out loud helps humans store information in their long-term memory. For example, many of us remember songs from childhood such as “A, B, C, D...” and “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” The words or lyrics some of us heard weekly in church services as we grew up may still be familiar to us as adults. As Israel repeated the theme of God's love never ending, God's people of all ages are reminded of to whom they belong, of what God is like based on what He has done for them, and of what they can expect from Him in the future.

The Hebrew word translated “love” (NIV), “lovingkindness” (NASB), “steadfast love,” (RSV), or “mercy” (KJV) is *hesed* meaning, “covenant love” (Williams, *Psalms 73–150*, p. 465). A covenant is a sacred contract or treaty. However, the covenants God made with individuals, families, or people groups are not to be thought of as agreements between equals. God initiated a covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth (Genesis 9:8–17). God chose Abraham and his family to be in special relationship with Him to demonstrate His love and faithfulness to the rest of the world (Genesis 12:1–7; 15:1–21 and Genesis 17). The covenant God made with the people of Israel through Moses' mediation continued and broadened the unique relationship established with Abraham (Exodus 19–24). In each covenant, God chose the other party and determined the benefits and responsibilities. If the people selected to belong to God fulfilled their obligations to love, obey, serve, and worship God, then He would bless them greatly. If they disobeyed and disregarded God's demands, He promised curses and hard times. Nevertheless, God always fulfilled His responsibilities even if the other party was unfaithful, He preserved a “remnant” of His people to restore and to whom He could again demonstrate His goodness (Thompson, pp. 790–793).

**3. List the parts of creation that are in verses 4–9. How can thinking about or experiencing nature lead to thanking God?**

The psalmist reminds us that God made the heavens, the earth, the waters (e.g., oceans, seas, rivers, streams, lakes), the sun, moon, and stars. While he does not mention every living thing on earth, these verses bring to mind all of creation found in the opening chapters of the Bible. Refer to Genesis 1 for background on God’s creation of the world. Also Psalm 19:1–4 and Romans 1:20 tell us that nature proclaims the work of God.

Possible answers to the second part of this question may include gratitude for the beauty, the order, the complexity, the variety, etc., of nature. Others may express thanks for the power and wisdom of God displayed in both the vastness and the intricate details of creation. Also, some may appreciate the faithfulness of God as they reflect on the relative stability and rhythms of the universe, such as day and night, the seasons of nature, the water cycle, and physical laws of motion. God’s genius and kindness are seen in the ways the universe is delicately balanced to support human life. See Hugh Ross’ “Fine-Tuning for Life in the Universe” for 47 characteristics that indicate a delicate balance of physical factors in the universe in order for life to exist ([www.reasons.org](http://www.reasons.org)).

**4. Next, the psalmist lists examples from Israel’s history to thank God for and to substantiate that His love endures forever. How did God’s involvement in Israel’s history show His unchanging love?**

If the group is unfamiliar with the Old Testament, explain the events and people described in these verses. The psalmist refers to the last of the ten plagues, the death of the firstborn, to persuade Pharaoh to free the Hebrew slaves in verse 10 (Exodus 10 and 12:29–32). In verses 11–12, he reminds us that God spared the firstborn of Israel in the Passover and delivered the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 12). Verses 13–15 describe how, when Pharaoh’s army pursued them, God parted the “Red Sea” (or *Yam Suph*, “Sea of Reeds”) and led the nation through on the dry seabed. As the night was ending, God threw the army into confusion, caused the wheels of the chariots to come off, and then allowed the waters to flow back in place, drowning Pharaoh’s soldiers (Exodus 14).

Verses 16–22 recall the Lord’s faithfulness in leading His people through the desert despite their complaints and unbelief (Exodus 15–17; Numbers 10–17, 20–20). The psalmist also reminds the worshippers of God’s help in conquering the kings of lands and cities east of the Salt Sea and Jordan River (Numbers 21) and then beyond the Jordan to the west, the remainder of the Promised Land (Numbers 34–36; Joshua).

Note that the deliverance from Egypt and settling the Promised Land covered a time period of at least two generations. (A generation is 40 years in the Bible.) God demonstrated His steadfast love by leading, providing, protecting, and forgiving Israel despite the people's disobedience. Also, God's plan to give Israel the Promised Land remained the same even though they turned away in doubt and idolatry.

**\*How have you seen God's plans to deliver us from slavery to sin and to give us a new life with Him remain the same despite our unfaithfulness?**

You can point out that aspects of God's general plan for redeeming mankind (Colossians 1:13–14), for transforming us into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29), and for announcing through us His message of reconciliation to others (2 Corinthians 5:18–20) have not changed for more than 2000 years. This clearly indicates His great love for people and His faithfulness to carry out what He plans.

**5. Verse 12 refers to both God's "mighty hand" and "outstretched arm" in the deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians. Why is it important to thank God for these things?**

The mighty hand (or arm) of the Lord refers to God's power and strength (Ryken, et al, p. 361). The outstretched arm of God refers to His power—whether in Creation, in redemption or salvation of His people, or in judgment (Ryken, et al, p. 43). These are probably poetic parallel images. However, Wilkerson sees the act of reaching out indicating God's willingness to help ("Definition"). God's power, strength, and faithfulness to help His covenant people are attributes that can strengthen our faith when we face difficult situations. God is all-powerful, omniscient, and able to find and execute a solution to our current trials. He also desires to aid His children when they call on Him. We can thank Him for these characteristics whenever we pray.

**6. Lastly, the psalmist thanks God for benevolent actions in the lives of His children. What actions are mentioned in verses 23–25?**

These verses sum up the loving steps God has taken on behalf of His people. The people of Israel using this psalm as a means to worship God have already reviewed His rescue from slavery to Egypt (vv. 23–24), His defeating enemies in and around the Promised Land (v. 24), and His provision for them in the wilderness when they wandered as nomads (v. 25). Christians today also can thank God for having pity on us, for freeing us from sin and death, and for giving us everything we need for life and relationship with Him. The fact that He has continued to act with the same Fatherly concern that He showed Israel centuries before sending His Son should make it easy for us to give thanks for the enduring nature of His love. Mercy, rescue, help, and provision are things

people often need and pray for even today. Therefore, we should also express gratitude to God for them.

## 7. How does the psalmist end this psalm (v. 26)?

It's interesting to note that the author names "the God of heaven" at the end of this psalm. What does that name convey? The psalmist probably is thinking of the holy, eternal, exalted ruler of the universe. Remember the names he used for God in the opening verses: "the LORD," which is the special covenant name Israel employed; "the God of gods," the only true deity; and "the Lord of lords," the highest authority in the universe (Williams, *Psalms 73–150*, p. 470). This is the One the people are to thank for all the ways He has shown His covenant love through the generations.

However, since Jesus came and revealed God as "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9) and opened the way to enter His presence boldly (Hebrews 10:19–22), prayer is now speaking to someone who is both the exalted God of the universe and our loving Parent. Dallas Willard points out that the correct translation of Matthew 6:9 should be, "our Father, the one in the heavens" (Willard, p. 257). He argues that the plural use of heavens indicates that God is both far removed as the ruler over all the cosmos and also present in the nearest heaven, the atmosphere all around us. Thus, God is ready to speak to us "face to face" as He did with Moses (Exodus 33:11). Willard believes that Jesus was teaching His disciples the possibility of close communication when He addressed God in words that conveyed the meaning, "Our Father always near us" (Willard, p. 257). We are much more likely to converse with and give thanks to God when we picture Him present with us rather than distantly peering down on His creation from heaven above.

## APPLICATION

**\*Close your eyes and imagine your favorite outdoor scenery. What about it speaks to you of God's greatness as Creator? What would you thank God for if you wrote Him a thank-You note?**

You could encourage your members to take time in the coming week to try writing God a thank-You note. Some may want to write a letter to God, a psalm or poem to be sung or prayed, while others may simply list the things for which they are grateful.

**\*What would life be like if God had made every person, every plant, and every sea creature exactly alike? How could contemplating the variety of colors, shapes, textures, sounds, smells, flavors, and personalities remind you to thank God?**

**\*Think over the work of God in your life and in the lives of those you know. What specific incidents and examples could you give thanks for in your prayers? What one thing would you like to share with the group?**

This question is designed to help people recall how God has worked in the past so they can give thanks in prayer and to increase their faith in His current provision for them. Be flexible as you listen to the group; there are many possible answers. The Scriptures tell us that we should build up or strengthen each other, especially by our speech (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 11:25; Ephesians 4:29). Hearing how God has worked in another person's life can encourage others to trust God in difficult circumstances, to pray with more faith, or to worship God more wholeheartedly.

One way to foster thankfulness would be to designate time each month to have a few people share a brief testimony of what God has done. This could take place during your usual meeting or at a potluck meal or informal gathering. A Bible study I attended set aside the regular teaching one evening. It had been two weeks since we had last met and almost everyone had experienced an answer to prayer, a divine appointment to share his or her faith, or something new in their Bible reading. This evening stands out among the many that I attended [author's note].

**\*Name some Bible promises for which you are grateful. How often do you stop and thank God for them?**

You could ask the group members to work on this as a "homework" assignment. Depending on the maturity of the individuals' relationship with God, let them work on their own or search the Bible together. You might inform them of publications or Websites that highlight God's promises so that this is not an exercise in frustration. Some may be able to use a search engine and look up "promises of God" to begin.

**\*How could we, as a group, regularly include more thanks in our worship and prayer times?**

Your group could begin the habit of sharing one thing each person is grateful for at the beginning of your meetings. If you have an overly talkative group, or some people who tend to dominate, ask the members to limit their thanks to one sentence.

You could suggest keeping a journal of prayer requests and answers for the group. Plan to review the journal periodically and spend time in worship in response to what you have seen God do.

Also, you might encourage members to write down significant spiritual times in a personal journal or diary. Included may be helpful teachings/Bible verses, answers to prayer or times that God work/or strongly manifested His

presence. Throughout the Bible, God encouraged his people to remember His interventions. In Joshua 4, the Lord told Joshua to have the Israelites set up stones of remembrance for God’s miraculous help in crossing the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. The stones of memorial were to be set up not simply to commemorate the crossing of the Jordan, but as a testimony to the people of God concerning His awe-inspiring power. The stones taken from the middle of the Jordan riverbed would help them recall what God had done in the past, so that in future difficulties Israel would turn to the God who had formerly delivered them.

Likewise, the Passover Feast was a celebration to remind the Jews each year of God’s mercy when the angel of death “passed over” the firstborn of their people and animals (Exodus 12). Jesus transformed this feast into a remembrance of His sacrificial death that made possible the New Covenant. We continue to remember what He did for us whenever we participate in the sacrament of communion (Luke 22:14–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). Today, we believers should erect stones of remembrance of our own experiences, which will help strengthen our faith when facing great difficulties. Then we will be able to say as Samuel did after erecting a memorial to the Lord for routing their enemies, “Thus far has the Lord helped us” (1 Samuel 7:12, cited in Lindsell, *Harper Study Bible*, footnote to Joshua 4:7, p. 313).

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

Let’s review the major areas that the psalmist thanks God for and how this shows His continuing love. We are reminded of:

- Who God is
- His Creation
- His saving acts on behalf of His people
- His continual protection and provision
- His enduring love

We can use these topics as beginning points for adding thanksgiving to our regular times of prayer. Remember that thanksgiving starts by looking beyond our blessings to their source—God (Blackaby & Blackaby, p. 324), so that our hearts are full of gratitude; gratitude that’s not for what we get but for the One who has continually given us everything we need—and more.

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