

“STEADFAST LOVE”

Psalm 86:1–17

Key Verse: 86:5

“For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.”

Have you ever found the love of someone in your life to be on again, off again? Like it could change at any moment? Human love is like that—intense at one time, dead as a doornail at another. In our study of the Psalms, we’ve been thinking about God our Shepherd. We’ve seen that he’s God who made us in his image to be shepherds like him (Psalm 8). He’s God who equips us for spiritual battle (Psalm 18), who hears us when no one else does (Psalm 22), who shepherds us in every way (Psalm 23), who gives us light and salvation (Psalm 27), God who’s our refuge, strength, and very present help in trouble (Psalm 46), who invites us to cast our burdens on him (Psalm 55). Today, we’ll be learning about God whose love is “steadfast.” What does this mean? Why is he known for his steadfast love? How can we experience God’s steadfast love today? And what happens when we do? May God speak to us through his word.

It says this is a prayer of David. If we memorize it, we can learn how to better pray to God. This Psalm has an opening (1–7), middle (8–13), and an end (14–17). As we begin to pray, we come to God not formally or habitually but personally, with earnest cries and pleas. Then, we stop and spend time thinking about who God is and ask him to make us spiritually whole. Finally, we tell God honestly what we’re struggling with. In David’s case, it was the ungodly people around him. He asks God not to rebuke or fix them, but simply to show a sign of his favor for himself. Though David is really struggling, it’s a gracious prayer.

So, when we pray we first need to know who we’re talking to. Let’s read verses 1–7. Five times David says, “O Lord” (1,3,4,5,6). People often sigh, “O Lord!” It’s said so much, it seems meaningless. Is it? If we look carefully at these verses, we notice there are two ways “Lord” is written. Three times it’s the normal capital L with lower case letters “o,” “r,” and “d.” But twice it’s all caps, “LORD.” At

first it seems no big deal, right? But in Hebrew, the all caps word is “YAHWEH,” and the lower case word is totally different: “Adonai.” These two words for God each say something different about him. YAHWEH means he’s the covenant God, the God of steadfast love. Adonai means the Sovereign God, ruling over all things, including me. To call God “O, YAHWEH!” means to know his loving nature, his faithfulness to his promises. It’s like saying, “O God, I know you love me and you will keep all your promises to me!” But to call God “O, Adonai” means to express our faith in his sovereign rule over all things. It’s like saying, “O God, I know you own me and you rule my life! I’m ready to submit fully to you!” David says “Adonai” here most. He’s emphasizing his faith in God’s rule over all.

Next, notice how he refers to himself. In verse 2 he says I am “your servant, who trusts in you—you are my God.” In verse 4 he again calls himself “your servant.” Literally, “servant” here means “slave.” It reminds us of how Apostle Paul referred to himself in his letters as a “slave” of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹ Many people have the mindset, “*I am the lord; you are my servants.*” But David, though he was a king, had the mindset, “*You are my Lord; I am your slave.*” God is not *our* slave; we are *his* slaves. But is that really our attitude in prayer? Do we come to God ready to serve him as our Lord, ready to do *whatever he wants*? To pray like this, our way of thinking needs to change. From our hearts let’s repeat it: “You are my Lord; I am your slave!” (5X)

But David also shares his personal situation. In verse 1 he says, “I am poor and needy.” In verse 3 he says, “...to you do I cry all the day.” Sounds like a hard life! In verse 4 his soul is not glad. And in verse 7 he says, “In the day of my trouble...” In hard times David doesn’t turn to unhealthy ways to cope; he comes to God his Lord and cries all the day. He says he “lifts up” his “soul” to God. It means, “Here I am, Lord; only you can heal, restore, and renew me.”

And notice the verbs he uses: “*Incline* your ear...*answer* me...*Preserve* my life...*save* your servant...Be *gracious* to me...*Gladden* my soul...*Give ear* to my prayer...*listen* to my plea...” He’s urgent, pleading, repeatedly asking God to turn to him, hear him or listen to him. When we pray, we need to be this earnest and persistent. And we need faith that God is listening and will answer. We may be sick. We may have sinned. But by faith we can come to God and know that he hears us (1 John 5:14–15). The Bible calls this “the prayer of faith” (James 5:15).

¹ See Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1, where *doulos* (Greek) means not just “servant” but “slave.”

Basically David pleads with God for grace (6). The phrase “pleas for mercy” appears much more often in the Bible (13 times in the ESV). But in verse 6 this phrase “plea for grace” is used only once. It’s because the Hebrew word for “grace” here is different from “mercy.” It’s a word that would be used by a person who has no right or claim to demand anything from anyone. Such a person receiving help would be completely undeserved and unmerited. David was a man of faith, devoted to God. But his attitude is so humble. He knows he doesn’t deserve anything from God. Only by faith in God’s grace is he asking God to preserve, save, and gladden him. When we’re struggling, we need to come to God humbly and plead with him only because of his totally undeserved grace.

Read verse 5. For the first time in this Psalm David takes a break from his requests and confesses what he knows about God’s nature (cf. 8–10,15). It’s a simple and powerful statement: “For you, O Lord, are good.” The Psalms directly tell us 16 times that God is good.² But how can we be sure of this, when we experience so much bad? Psalm 34:8a urges us, “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!” We can know God is good if we experience it in our own lives. David adds that God is “forgiving” and “abounding in steadfast love” (also verse 15). It reminds us of Exodus 34:6. God revealed himself to Moses, saying, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...” This phrase became a famous confession of faith throughout the Old Testament.³ “Steadfast love” is especially important. In Hebrew it’s one word: “khesed.” In the Old Testament it’s repeated around 250 times, and it’s rich in meaning. But it’s a hard word to translate into English. It means loyalty, faithfulness, commitment, kindness, mercy and compassion, all in one. It’s relational, active, and enduring. Basically it means God’s covenant love, which is so deep, firm and reliable. Verse 5 says God is “abounding” in such steadfast love. This reality about God inspires David to pray.

The next part of the Psalm is both God-centered and personal. Look at verses 8–13. David begins by describing the unique greatness of God. Read verses 8–10. Other religions attribute compassion or mercy to their gods. But no other religion has a God like this, the God who is steadfast in his covenant love for unfaithful, sinful people who in no way deserve his grace. This God is not just

² 25:7–8; 27:13; 31:19; 34:8; 68:10; 73:1; 86:5; 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1,29; 119:68; 135:3; 145:9.

³ Num.14:18; Neh.9:17; Psalm 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2.

a God of some people, but the God who made all the nations. Someday, all the nations will come, bow down and worship before him. And this will be fulfilled not through force or violence, but through his Son Jesus, who humbled himself, suffered so much, and gave his own life for sinners. Philippians 2:9–11 says, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

God’s “great” and “wondrous works” are best seen in his holy Son Jesus. He came and dwelt among people just like us, revealing his glory, grace and truth (John 1:14). When he died on the cross he became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). When he rose from the dead he became the resurrection and the life for all who believe in him (John 11:25–26). He reveals God’s great works by baptizing us with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33), who changes us to live for the glory of God. Jesus is truly “wondrous.” For all peoples of all nations, he’s the only one worthy of worship. Through him the Eternal God revealed himself as the One God in three Persons: Father, Son and Spirit.

In light of the awesome greatness of this God, David reflects on his own need to change and grow. He writes, “Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name” (11). It’s a famous verse, and what a prayer! David realizes he has much to learn from God’s ways. He’s not seeking mere head-knowledge; he wants to “walk” in God’s ways and God’s truth. And he asks God to unite his heart. Why? Sin leaves anyone with a divided heart. We want to love God, but we love sin, the world, and ourselves. It seems smart, but it never works, and it makes us powerless. Here David is praying not to change his situation, or just his attitude, but to be changed himself, at his core.

A united heart is a heart with undivided devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor.7:35b). It’s a graceful, beautiful, constant heart, filled with genuine love for God. A united heart is a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Tim.1:5). In our sin, our hearts are deceitful and desperately sick (Jer.17:9). But the Bible says our hearts and consciences can be purified by faith in the blood of Jesus (Heb.9:14; 10:22). Each person needs to experience this. This is the heart David is seeking. Elsewhere he prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and

renew a right/steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). It’s what God can do in us by his Spirit, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, if we would just cry out to him and ask him in faith. This prayer is crucial to our spiritual life: to unite our hearts, to cleanse and purify our hearts, by the blood of Jesus, so that we can live in real reverence for God.

With faith that God will do it, David goes on to say, “I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever” (12). It shows what a united heart does: it thanks and glorifies God’s name forever. Why is that? Read verse 13. David is so thankful, so eager to glorify God, because he’s tasted his great, steadfast love to deliver him from the depths of hell. It was purely God’s grace to him. The grace of Jesus gives us this same heart’s desire, to thank and glorify God.

David comes back to why he began to pray in the first place. Let’s read the last part, verses 14–17. He’s praying because of some insolent, ruthless people around him who “do not set [God] before them”—meaning they are inwardly godless. Instead of being discouraged by them, David turns his attention to God. Read verse 15 again. This is the third time David mentions that God’s love is “steadfast.” Because of this love, David can pray. Why don’t we pray? We may think it’s because we’re not disciplined or spiritual enough. But the real reason is simple: we’re not thinking enough about the steadfast love of God in Jesus. If we really meditate on his steadfast love for us, we gain the confidence and inspiration to come to him and ask, “Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant...” (16)

God’s steadfast love for his people was fulfilled in Jesus. His coming to this world in person is the embodiment of God’s steadfast love for all the people of the world. God’s steadfast love is no longer an abstract concept, but a person: Jesus. God’s steadfast love is especially seen in his cross. He was the sinless One, but he was crucified to take all the punishment our sins deserve. He knew all our sickness, all our darkness, all the sins we’ve been hiding, all the ugliness within us. Still, he went to the cross, poured out his blood, and died to cleanse us. His love was that steadfast, that faithful. In our sin we deserve the wrath of God. “...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom.5:8). No matter who we are, he loves us to the end with such amazing, steadfast love, if we would just turn to him and accept it.

If we truly receive his steadfast love, we don't abuse it; it changes our hearts. In verse 2 David says "for I am godly." In Hebrew, "godly" (khasid) has the same root as the word "steadfast love" (khesed). Literally it means being committed, loyal, steadfast in one's love for God. So, when God's steadfast love unites our sinsick hearts, it changes us into committed, loyal people, growing in steadfast love for God and for others. We just need to keep calling to God in prayer. We learn his steadfast love for others not because we're so great or so good, but because of his steadfast love for us in Jesus. When we cry out to our Lord Jesus in prayer, we grow in his image as shepherds with steadfast love for his weak, broken, failing sheep.

There are many people I want to love and serve. But in my own strength I can't do it. I don't have it in me. I get discouraged and disappointed. Sometimes I feel numb. But this Psalm encourages me to keep coming to my Lord Jesus in personal prayer, crying out to him, asking him to cleanse my heart with his blood, unite my heart, and help me experience more of his steadfast love for me, so I can show his steadfast love to others. Lord, grant me this prayer of faith.

Read verse 5 again. This verse is the hope of God for all weak and broken sinners, no matter who we are. May God help us all learn how to really pray to our Lord Jesus by faith in his grace, holding on to his steadfast love for us.