

## Psalm 136 – What is Love?

Friends, Google has existed as an internet search engine for approximately fifteen years, and in those fifteen years my mind has pondered many questions, and I've looked many of them up on Google...

But, in all that time... I've never once wondered "what was the number one question that people were googling in any given year?"

However, Google is able to keep track of such things - and as I was researching and studying in preparation for this morning's message, I discovered that back in 2012 the number one phrase that people were looking up on Google was "What is Love?"

And I don't know why this was such a burning question in 2012 as opposed to any other year – but for some reason in 2012, people all over the world were googling "What is love?" in record setting numbers.

And I must confess that I discovered this little piece of trivia because I too was googling "what is love?" in an attempt to find that dance music hit from the 1998 movie A Night at the Roxbury – "what is love, baby don't hurt me, don't hurt me, no more..."

But instead of finding that song, I found an article from the Guardian called What is Love: Five theories on the greatest emotion of all<sup>1</sup>, which was inspired by those top 2012 search results, and attempted to, in their words "get to the bottom of the question once and for all!"

So the Guardian asked writers from the fields of science, psychotherapy, literature, religion and philosophy to each give a definition of love according to their respective discipline, in hopes of being able to offer a well-rounded examination of the subject.

The scientist defined love from a biological perspective, describing how "true love" is true because it involves a far

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/13/what-is-love-five-theories>

greater amount of chemicals released by the brain compared to “lust,” and from an evolutionary perspective “love” is an important factor which ensures people receive the nurture, care and protection necessary for survival.

The philosopher pointed out the nuanced distinction between love and infatuation, or dedication, and explained how it’s passionate commitment that is necessary to turn infatuation and/or dedication into love, and that love in itself also needs to be nurtured or it can wither and die.

The psychotherapist referred back to all the ancient Greek words which describe different kinds of love (which surprised me a bit because I thought this was something only pastors did) You’ve heard about phileo for brotherly love, agape as a sacrificial love, and eros as sexual love and so on...

And the literary expert observed that its love that drives all great stories, and she actually did a better job of relating love to the human condition than the Psychotherapist did, pointing out that our experience of love is defined by where we are in

relation to it, for e.g. If we are in love – it can seem mundane, if we are without love – it can seem elusive.

And finally, for the religious perspective, they consulted a Benedictine Nun who stated that love is more easily experienced than defined, that it needs to be seen and received through the actions of one person to another, and that it is a paradox because while love is given freely - it binds us to each other and to God.

Now there is certainly a lot of wisdom, good insights and some creational truths in each of these descriptions of love - and one might come away from such a well-rounded examination of love and conclude that indeed it is a multi-faceted wonder – just like a well-cut diamond.

But, for the person who is searching for an answer to the question of “what is love,” these theories would not be terribly helpful because nobody wonders “what is love” for the sake of wondering “what is love” – out of pure abstract speculation on that question.

People want to know “what is love?” for a specific reason; they have another question behind the question of “what is love.”

Someone might want to know what love is because this will help to determine what it means to love and care for someone in their life, or perhaps they need to know what love is because they think it will make them happy and they want to know where they can find it.

So if love is a chemical response in the brain based on the highest levels of personal compatibility between two people – then someone looking for love to make them feel happy will do best to turn E-Harmony to help them find that person.

And if love is passionate commitment, then someone might feel justified in ending a relationship because the other person was neither passionate nor committed to them...

Or, if love is a sacrificial bond that is unconditionally given and binds two people together then perhaps the person was not justified in giving up on the relationship...

So friends, all this is to demonstrate how it’s the definition of ‘love’ which determines the answer to whatever question it was, that prompted us to ask “what is love?” in the first place.

Do you understand what I’m saying here? It’s important that you do because this has huge implications for what people understand when we say “God is love” and “God loves you.”

We might think we’re proclaiming the essence of the gospel message to people – but in fact they are hearing something quite different – because of how they understand and define love.

For example; the average Canadian today believes that love is tolerant, non-judgmental, and does nothing that could be construed as harmful, or would be experienced negatively and

it allows each person to pursue whatever makes them feel happy and fulfilled.

So when we say “God is love” what they hear us saying is “God is tolerant, non-judgmental, and does nothing that I would experience negatively because God wants me to be happy...”

But anyone who is familiar with the story of the scripture and is a follower of Jesus Christ knows this is not what God’s love is about at all!

And perhaps you’ve had a personal experience where other people found out you were a Christian, and initially they thought it was great because they figured being a Christian is all about that message of ‘love.’

After all doesn’t the bible say in 1 John 4:8 that *“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”*

However, when you shared the details about sin and confession and salvation and how being a follower of Jesus

Christ determines what you should and shouldn’t do... especially with regards to the expression of love through sexuality in marriage...

Then they recoiled in horror, because they realized that your understanding of love was antithetical to theirs, the very opposite of everything they believe in.

But why is this the case? Why do the followers of Jesus Christ who know the story of scripture, have a different definition and understanding of love than what the world does?

Because friends it is the story of the scripture – as it reveals God’s Covenant work to restore the Covenant of Creation - which truly defines what love is.

And those who are living in accordance with the reality of this story have experienced God’s covenant love, and they thus truly understand what love is – and not as our world defines it.

And this principle was just as true for the nation of Israel in the past, as it is for us today and Psalm 136 was written to help Israel understand that God's covenant actions defined His love, and if they understood and believed this then they would live, and love in accordance with this story.

So let's take a closer look at Psalm 136 so we can see how it does this.

Now I don't know about you – but ever since we took the time to go through all the different covenants in scripture – I keep seeing these covenant themes popping all throughout the bible.

And sometimes I wonder, and maybe you're wondering too, is Covenant is really that predominant of a theme in scripture – and in Psalm 136? And that's a fair question.

So to answer it and to show you that we're not just reading "covenant" things into this Psalm, let me draw your attention to the divine name which the psalmist uses in vs. 1.

He says "give thanks to **Yahweh...**" and this the covenant name for God, furthermore the chorus of this psalm, which gets repeated twenty-six times, is "*hesed olam*"

Now our NIV translates this two word chorus as "*his love endures forever*" but according to biblical scholars "*hesed*" is actually better translated as "covenant loving-kindness."

The NIV just assumes people will understand "love" to be "covenant loving-kindness" but that sends us back to the whole question of "what is love?" again – doesn't it.

So if "*hesed*" refers to God's covenant loving-kindness, and the psalm opens with reference to God's covenant name "Yahweh" – then it's a safe bet that we're not reading the notion of covenant into this psalm the way we can read whatever we want into the definition of love.

And what's more, if we look at the content of Psalm 136 we can see that it summarizes God's deliverance of Israel and establishing them in the Promised Land; under the Covenant

of Law and the Covenant of Kingship; as the most important developments of their time for God's plan to restore the Covenant of Creation.

Let me trace this out for you.

In vs. 1-3 the psalmist establishes that there is no other god greater than Yahweh – if there is a God over all gods, a Lord of lords – it is Yahweh and thus to him alone we should give thanks.

Then in vs 4, the psalmist states that what makes Yahweh the supreme God is that He alone does great wonders – such as creating the world.

He goes on to describe the creation of the world using specific phrases; *“spreading the earth upon the waters”*(vs. 6) *“the sun to govern the day”* (vs. 8) *“the moon and stars to govern the night”* (vs. 9), and with this wording he is recalling the establishment of the Covenant of Creation in Genesis 1 - in all its original goodness before the fall.

And then we remember the subsequent Covenant of Commencement after the fall, and the promise it contained that one day the head of the serpent would be crushed by a descendent of Eve.

And with the knowledge of this covenant promise in the background, the huge leap from the creation of the world in vs. 5-9 all the way Israel's deliverance from Egypt in vs 10, and their establishment in the Promised Land in vs. 21 – through Yahweh striking down Egypt's firstborn and the great Kings Sihon and Og... this huge leap starts to makes sense.

Because in the tenth plague and the destruction of Pharaoh's army, and the defeat of the nations who lived in Promised Land – the psalmist sees a fulfillment of Yahweh's promise in Gen 3:15 to crush head of the serpent and undo the results of the fall in the creation.

In the beginning Yahweh had placed Adam in the Garden of Eden - but Adam had failed in his test of obedience.

So now, Yahweh had liberated Israel and had placed them in the Promised Land as His servant (vs 21), to demonstrate to all the nations how to live in covenant faithfulness with the Creator, in an attempt to restore what Adam had lost.

Now if you're that's thinking "well I'm all for taking a high view of one's ethnic heritage but that's thinking a bit highly of oneself – your nation in the promise land is supposed to be the solution to undo the very essence of what is wrong in the world?!?"

Yes... that's what Psalm 136 is saying and that's why we call them "God's Chosen People."

Now the Psalmist realizes this can all come off as a bit arrogant – so as he concludes the Psalm he confesses that God's choice of Israel to work out His covenant restoration project is an act of undeserved mercy and grace.

He states "*he remembered us in our low estate, and freed us from our enemies.*" (vs. 23-24) In other words this isn't something we merited or accomplished for ourselves.

Furthermore it must be remembered that God's decision to focus on one nation - is really for the benefit of all nations.

God's covenant promise to Abraham specifically stated "*through your offspring **all** nations will be blessed.*" (Gen 22:18) and this inclusive covenant blessing to all people, and to the creation itself is reflected in vs 25 when the psalmist says "*Yahweh gives food to **all** living things*" both humans and animals...

So Yahweh, the Covenant God of Israel is in fact God of all the nations.

Now, given that fact you might expect that the Psalmist would conclude this psalm by once again referring to God by His covenant name as he did in vs. 1.

But Psalm 136 concludes by stating “*give thanks to the God of Heaven...*”

Now, this is not a concession to the surrounding nations that their vague notion of the Almighty in Heaven is sufficient enough to say that they truly know God.

Instead it is a subversive invitation to them, to confess that the one whom they call the God of Heaven is in fact Yahweh, the Covenant God of Israel, and to join Israel in thanking Him for what He has done in this world through choosing them.

So now we can see how Psalm 136 was a complete summary of God’s covenant plans to restore the Covenant of Creation through Israel in the Old Testament.

And as the Psalm covers the details of this summary, after each covenant act of God is described – the response is “*hesed olam!*”

Over and over it is emphasizing that in every instance, in every circumstance what God has done, how God has acted is an expression of His “hesed” – his covenant loving-kindness.

So, Psalm 136 establishes beyond a doubt, that God’s covenant and His love are connected and they define each other.

The psalmist sees God’s covenant as His love and His love as His covenant - they are inseparable in their relationship to each other, and you can’t define one without referring to the other...

Which means that if you do not know about God’s covenant – then you do not truly understand God’s love, and we are right back to where we started - wondering “what is love?” and reading whatever we think love to be into verses like 1 John 4:8 when it says “God is love...”

But the good news friends comes from 1 John 4:9 – and this is why it’s so important that we don’t take bible verses out of



context – because 1 John 4: 9 explains what love is... by stating  
*“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one  
and only Son into the world that we might live through him.”*

In this statement there are specific details revealed that  
define God’s love in connection to His covenant work in Jesus  
Christ.

And through proclamations like this we are introduced to  
God’s covenant and thus introduced to His love, and the more  
we learn and understand about God’s covenant the more we  
learn and understand God’s love.

So - we just learned a great deal about God’s covenant work  
from the summary of Psalm 136, let us learn more as we see  
how it leads us to Jesus Christ – in whom it is ultimately true  
that Yahweh’s covenant loving-kindness endures forever!

Now a brief outline of the covenant work in Psalm 136 is  
creation, deliverance through the striking down of the first

born, and the receiving of inheritance through the striking  
down of great kings – for the benefit off all nations, right?

So friends, this Psalm leads us to Christ through its summary  
of the pattern by which Jesus would bring the Covenant of  
Creation to its fulfillment.

Jesus is the Word by which all things were **created** (John 1:3);  
and as 1 John 4:9 says “He the one and only Son of God” – the  
**firstborn** and God struck him down on the cross, in order that  
we might have **deliverance** from the sin that enslaves us (2  
Cor 5:21) and when Christ was struck down on the cross – He  
died as **King** of the Jews (John 19:19).

And through His death and resurrection he was raised up in  
his ascension to become King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Phil  
2:9) and He gives God’s people, not just the Promised Land –  
but the a renewed earth and heavens as their **inheritance!** (1  
Peter 3:13)

And it is for the blessing of **all nations** - God's redeemed people will include those from every tribe and tongue and nation (Rev 5:9)

So you see the pattern of covenant work in Psalm 136 is what leads us to Christ – creation, deliverance through striking down, inheritance through striking down kings, for the benefit of all nations... and through this we learn more about God's covenant work, and thus we know more about God's love.

And in moving to Christ we can see even more clearly how God's love is His Covenant and His Covenant is His love, and how they can never be separated - because they have been fully joined together and defined in the person of Jesus Christ.

And since Jesus Christ fulfills God's Covenant love and restores the Covenant of Creation the good news is that He also addresses whatever reason we are searching to discover what love is in the first place.

However we have experienced love; as affected by the brokenness of this world and the curse on creation; can be healed through knowing God's love in Jesus Christ.

So friends, let me close off this message in the same manner as the psalmist ends Psalm 136.

After all this explanation of how love is defined by God's covenant work which culminates in Jesus Christ – you might expect me to close with some sort of power statement about God's love in Jesus Christ.

But instead let me just state, subversively of course, after all that's been said on the subject this morning, to the bottom of the subject – once and for all, for everyone to hear...

God... is **love!** And friends God **loves** you!

If you don't know – now you know.

Amen.