



Psalm 138 - Thanksgiving and Praise

Of David.

Introduction

This psalm provides a way of offering thanks to God for signs of his constant care. The mention of the holy temple has led some to connect the psalm specifically to a thank-offering, which is reasonable: *<<the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank-offerings to the house of the Lord: 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever!' For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord>>* (Jeremiah 33:11). Psalms 138-145 are the final collection of psalms attributed to David.

Several commentators mention that it was fittingly placed next to Psalm 137, which described the inability of the psalmist to sing before the heathen. Psalm 138 is a declaration that even the kings of the nations will praise Yahweh.

Charles Spurgeon commented, "This Psalm is wisely placed. Whoever edited and arranged these sacred poems, he had an eye to apposition and contrast; for if in Psalm 137 we see the need of silence before revilers, here we see the excellence of a brave confession. There is a time to be silent, lest we cast pearls before swine; and there is a time to speak openly, lest we be found guilty of cowardly non-confession." Derek Kidner added, "There is a fine blend of boldness and humility from the outset: boldness to confess the Lord before the gods, humility to bow down before him."

Psalm 138:1-3 - I Will Give God Thanks for Answering My Prayer.

The opening section explains the theme: "I give you thanks because on the day I called, you answered me."

- ¹ I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
- ² I bow down towards your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your
faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name and your word
above everything.
- ³ On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.

Psalm 138:1-3

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart. David began this song with a bold declaration - that he would hold nothing back in his praise to God. It would be done with all his being, with his whole heart. Spurgeon noted, “We need a broken heart to mourn our own sins, but a whole heart to praise the Lord’s perfections.”

Before the gods I sing your praise. This may well refer to the angels, as the Greek Septuagint took it: <<*You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour*>> (Psalm 8:5 NIV); refer also to the comment made on Psalm 29:1. Others suppose these are human rulers (refer to the comment made on Psalm 82:1); while still others think these are false deities. Since the setting is worship in the temple, the first option is most likely.

It cannot be that David meant he would praise Yahweh in the actual presence of idols and images of other gods. There are three ideas as to what David meant by his singing praise before the gods, Hebrew *elohim*:

- Perhaps it was a declaration of allegiance to Yahweh and he alone, and the gods represent the idols of the heathen.
- Perhaps gods (*elohim*) in this context refers to angelic beings, as in a few other places in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- Perhaps gods refers to human rulers or judges, such as are spoken of later in v.4.

I bow down towards your holy temple. Even if David were not at the temple, he recognised it as God’s appointed place for worship and sacrifice. He would worship according to God’s direction.

Give thanks to your name. To praise the name of the Lord is to honour him in all his character and attributes. The name was understood to represent the very nature of the person. In the psalms, the name of the Lord is often the object of

religious affections, such as praise, love, trust, and hope. The way that Deuteronomy speaks of God's 'name' dwelling in the sanctuary helps here, for example: <<***But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there***>> (Deuteronomy 12:5a), and: <<***They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrated the dwelling-place of your name, bringing it to the ground***>> (Psalm 74:7). The Lord's name there is a way of talking about his personal presence, i.e. the name Yahweh as such, is not the issue, and particularly as he makes himself known through his covenant: <<***The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you!***>> (Psalm 20:1).

For your steadfast love and your faithfulness. David's praise was not empty adoration. It had reasons behind it and a basis for it. He thought of the great loving kindness, Hebrew *hesed*, of God towards him, and God's firmly established truth. Meditation on those gifts from God gave basis for David's spirit of praise.

For you have exalted your name and your word. The particular experience for which the psalm gives thanks shows that God has exalted his name (to which the singer gives thanks) and his word, i.e. his word of promise to care for his servants. Having mentioned God's faithfulness in the previous line, now David considered the main way God's faithfulness is communicated to his people – through his word. God has such a high estimation of his word that he has magnified it above his very name, his character. This is a stunning and remarkable statement, showing the incredible regard God has for his own word. He holds his word in greater esteem than his very character or name.

Spurgeon concluded, “We believe in plenary verbal inspiration, with all its difficulties, for there are not half as many difficulties in that doctrine as there are in any other kind of inspiration that men may imagine. If this Book be not the real solid foundation of our religion, what have we to build upon? If God has spoken a lie, where are we, brethren?”

On the day I called, you answered me. David also had very practical reasons to praise and thank God. The Lord had answered and rescued him many times. When David's strength failed, God made him bold with strength in his soul.

In the reasons David gave for his praise, it should be noticed that there is an important pattern. It is important to praise God for who he is even more than for what he has done for his people or humankind in general:

- First he gave God praise for who he is - a God of loving kindness and truth.
- Then he gave God praise for his revelation - the word magnified above his very name.
- Then he gave God praise for what he had done - God's response to David in a time of crisis.

You increased my strength of soul. Alexander Maclaren commented, “The psalmist uses a remarkable expression, in saying that Jehovah had made him bold, or, as the word is literally, proud.” Spurgeon added, “If the burden was not removed, yet strength was given wherewith to bear it, and this is an equally effective method of help.” Paul provides similar encouragement to help strengthen believers in times of testing: *<<No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it>>* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Psalm 138:4-6 - The Lord Is High, and Looks on the Lowly.

The very personal experience of God’s help is now put in perspective: the God to whom the singer had prayed is the universal Lord, to whom all the Gentiles will one day come in worship, i.e. all the kings of the earth shall give you thanks: *<<The nations will fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth your glory>>* (Psalm 102:15), *<<so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate>>* (Isaiah 52:15), and: *<<For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God’>>* (Romans 14:11); and yet he regards the lowly person, such as the one giving thanks in this psalm.

- 4 All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.
- 5 They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,
for great is the glory of the Lord.
- 6 For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he perceives from far away.

Psalm 138:4-6

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord. David was king of Israel and gave praise to the Lord, but he also knew the day would come when all the kings of the earth would praise him. They would praise him in response to hearing the words of his mouth from those who proclaim. Paul made an important related point for the church: *<<But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?>>* (Romans 10:14-15a)

They shall sing of the ways of the Lord. The kings of the earth would not only praise Yahweh with words, but also in song. This was in response to their understanding that great is the glory of the Lord.

For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly. David understood that God is great in glory and on high, yet he holds the lowly, the humble, in high regard. Nevertheless, God keeps his distance from the proud. Adam Clarke commented, “Infinitely great as God is, he regards even the lowest and most inconsiderable part of his creation; but the humble and afflicted man attracts his notice particularly.”

David’s statement that God regards the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar is another way of saying a truth repeated three times: <<*Towards the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favour*>> (Proverbs 3:34), <<*But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’*>> (James 4:6), <<*And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’*>> (1 Peter 5:5b). Jesus confirms this theme: <<*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted*>> (Matthew 23:12).

Psalm 138:7-8 - The Lord Preserves Me through All Troubles.

The psalm closes by telling of God’s constant care for each of his faithful. It is not easy for even the most faithful believer to be mindful of this care at all times, and singing this will help the members of the congregation be more aware of the ways in which God preserves and protects them.

- 7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
 you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
 you stretch out your hand,
 and your right hand delivers me.
- 8 The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me;
 your steadfast love, O Lord, endures for ever.
 Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Psalm 138:7-8

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me. As David considered the greatness of God and his kindness to the humble (vv.4-6), it gave him confidence that God would revive him in his present trouble. Understanding God’s greatness and kindness builds faith.

Your right hand delivers me. When God's help came, it would come with all his skill and strength, i.e. your right hand. God would defend David against the wrath of his enemies. Spurgeon observed, "Adversaries may be many, and malicious, and mighty; but our glorious Defender has only to stretch out his arm and their armies vanish."

The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me. This was David's confident declaration, "As God has begun to care for me, so he will finish the job all my life long." This is a cry heard before from David: <<*I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfils his purpose for me*>> (Psalm 57:2). David knew that God had a plan concerning him, and this God of greatness and goodness would absolutely perfect that plan: <<*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope*>> (Jeremiah 29:11).

This is another way of stating the great promise that Paul wrote about: <<*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ*>> (Philippians 1:6). David could think of the particular promise that God had made concerning him – that his descendants would rule forever, especially fulfilled in the Messiah; refer to 2 Samuel Chapter 7. The principle is true for every believer regarding the promise and course of life God has appointed for them.

Maclaren noted the connection between the phrases <<*The Lord will fulfil his purpose*>> and <<*your steadfast love, O Lord, endures for ever*>>, "Because Jehovah's loving kindness endures forever, every man on whom his shaping Spirit has begun to work, or his grace in any form to bestow its gifts, may be sure that no exhaustion or change of these is possible."

Do not forsake the work of your hands. With confidence in the never ending mercy of Yahweh, David knew that God would never forsake him, who belonged to God by creation and redemption.