

Psalm 138

Today our Sunday School curriculum has brought us to Psalm 138. The header text above this psalm identifies it as a psalm of David. As we will see when we read through it, this is a psalm of thanksgiving.

David starts this psalm with heartfelt praise to the Lord:

Psalm 138:1: “I will praise thee with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise unto thee.”

Before we get into the meat of this text I'd like to take a moment to discuss the second half of this verse. What did David mean when he said that he would sing “before the gods”? After all, the Bible clearly tells us that there is only one God:

Isaiah 44:8: “Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.”

Now, there are some cults that like to teach that there are many gods. Some say that if you live a good life and join their cult you can become a god yourself. They even teach that Jesus was once a man like us who rose to godhood by making good life choices. But the Bible is extremely clear: there is only *one* God, and *there are no others*. So what is Psalm 138 telling us?

I looked up the word translated “gods” in verse 1. It is Strongs #430. It can actually have a wide variety of meanings. In its plural form (which is what we see here) “it refers to rulers or judges with divine connections... pagan gods... and probably angels”. This means that David is talking about people who have some position of authority. In verse 4 David speaks of kings, so perhaps he is simply saying that he will sing the praises of God in front of everyone, no matter how high or lofty their position might be.

There are a *lot* of psalms of thanksgiving in the Bible. Psalm 75:1 says “Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks”. Psalm 107:1 *and* Psalm 136:1 both tell us to “give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good”. Psalm 67:3 says “Let the people praise thee, O God”. Psalm 30:4 says “Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of his, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holiness”. I could go on (there are so many more!) but you get the point. The psalms are *full* of hymns of praise.

David says that he would praise the Lord with his whole heart. If you stop and think about it, David really had a lot to be thankful for. In his early days he was just a lowly shepherd that no one really cared about. When Samuel went to his father Jesse to anoint one of his children as Israel's next king, Jesse brought together all of his children *except* for David. That was how little his own father valued him:

1 Samuel 16:10: “Again, Jesse made seven of his sons to pass before Samuel. And Samuel said unto Jesse, The Lord hath not chosen these.

11 And Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest, and, behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Send and fetch him: for we will not sit down till he come hither.”

Don't miss the undertones in these verses. Jesse proudly showed all of his children to Samuel *except* for David. When Samuel asked if a son was missing, Jesse couldn't even be bothered to tell the prophet his name; he just said that "the youngest" wasn't there, and made a point of saying that he was a shepherd. Jesse went out of his way to boast about the seven children that he liked, while painting David in the poorest light possible.

David's own brothers didn't like him any more than his father did. One day Jesse sent David to the front line to bring some food to his brother. As soon as David showed up his brother immediately began berating him:

1 Samuel 17:28: "And Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spake unto the men; and Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle.

29 And David said, What have I now done? Is there not a cause?"

From verse 29 we can see that David was apparently used to being attacked when he hadn't done anything wrong. Eliab accused David of pride and wickedness, but the only wickedness on display here was from Eliab. David was the one who actually fought the giant and killed him. Eliab did absolutely nothing – except for falsely accusing an innocent man.

The hits just kept coming against David. After he killed Goliath, Saul took him into his house – and then immediately grew jealous of him and started trying to kill him. David spent years on the run for his life and Saul spent years trying to hunt him down. Whenever David stopped to help people and save their lives from those who were attacking them, the people he saved immediately turned around and betrayed David to his enemies.

But David never lost hope. Whenever he was in trouble he trusted in the Lord:

Psalm 28:7: "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him."

David never looked around at his situation and decided that it was hopeless and all was lost. He didn't sit around and accuse God of being unfair to him. Instead David trusted the Lord. When his enemies were closing in on him and trying to take his life, David looked to God for strength. When David was being attacked he looked to God for a shield. When he was cast down he trusted in the Lord.

In the end God did defeat David's enemies. Saul was killed in battle and David became the king over Israel. All of David's enemies were put to shame. The Lord delivered David in a mighty way, and David responded with hymns of thanksgiving. God had done great things for David and so David praised Him for it. David wanted to tell *everyone* – no matter how high and lofty their position might be – what God had done for him. He wanted everyone to sing God's praises.

The truth is that God has done great things for us as well. What the Lord has done for us is nothing short of astonishing:

Romans 5:6: "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man

some would even dare to die.

8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

As Paul points out, there may be some cases in history where someone would be willing to die for a person who was exceptionally good. A man might be willing to die for his friends – but he would *never* die for his enemies. But that is exactly what Jesus did for us! He didn't die for righteous men, or for good men. He died for the *ungodly*. He died to save wicked sinners who were on the road to Hell. He died to save people who *deserved* the wrath of God. He did not die for the innocent; He died for people who were unquestionably guilty. He died for *sinners*.

There was nothing compelling God to save any of us. After all, we truly were guilty. God would have been just in condemning all of us to Hell. When the angels sinned God did not launch a plan of salvation for them. God is not required to have mercy on those who have rebelled against Him. Yet God chose to love us. He is the one who made the first move:

1 John 4:19: “We love him, because he first loved us.”

If God had not chosen to love us when we were unlovable – if He had not chosen to die for wicked sinners who deserved His wrath – then all would have been lost. But that is exactly what He did. He died for the unworthy.

We definitely did not deserve it. After all, God is of infinite value and we were condemned sinners worthy of death. All of our lives put together aren't worth even a tenth of the value of God. We were not worthy of the sacrifice that He made, and yet He made it all the same. He gave His life for people who were worth infinitely less than Him, and He did it with great love and compassion. He chose to love us and die for our sins. He chose to take upon Himself the punishment that we deserved. All those who repent of their sins and believe on Jesus will have everlasting life. They will not face the wrath of God but will inherit everlasting joy and peace.

David had a lot to be thankful for – and so do we. David praised the Lord with his “whole heart”, and we should do the same. After all, do you remember what the greatest commandment is? It is to love the Lord *with all our heart*:

Mark 12:29: “And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

30 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.”

We are not just to love the Lord casually, or occasionally, or from time to time. No, God wants us to love Him with *all* of our heart. The thing about love is this: when you truly love something with all of your heart, you want to tell other people how great it is. You *want* to sing its praises. When you find something that excites you it's only natural to want to share it with others. When you see something great and awesome you want to run up to the nearest person and say “Did you see that amazing thing?” It's perfectly natural to want to boast about the object of your love and sing its praises.

If we truly love the Lord with all of our heart then we will *want* to sing His praises. We will want to make sure that all the people of the world know who God is and what He has done. We will want to share this great love that we have for God. In fact, it will be impossible to keep it to ourselves!

Our love will result in more than just praise. It will also result in worship:

Psalm 138:2: “I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.”

I'd like to pause here and point out something that's extremely significant. We know that the Lord has given Jesus a name that is above every name – that at the name of Jesus, every knee would bow and every tongue would confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. There is no name that is greater than the name that Jesus has – and yet this verse tells us that God has magnified His Word *above* His name.

Do you realize how significant that is? That tells us just how much God values His Word! It indicates how much the Scriptures are worth – and how much we should treasure them. His Word is not a light thing that we can casually toss aside. It is of indescribable value! We should read it, study it, take it seriously, and obey it. It is absolute folly to magnify our own desires and thoughts above that of the Word. Our name is *not* greater than God's, nor are our thoughts greater than His. We should have tremendous respect for the Scriptures, and we must *obey* them. If we reject them and do as we please then we are actually magnifying ourselves *above* His Word – which means we are making ourselves to be greater than God. That is a serious sin.

You see, there are two different responses that men can have to the Word of God. There are some who humble themselves when they hear it. King Josiah was a great example of this. When the Scriptures were rediscovered in the temple and the king heard what they had to say, he trembled:

2 Kings 22:10: “And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

12 And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,

13 Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.”

Josiah realized immediately that the Israelites had not been keeping the Law. They had abandoned God and gone their own way, and he knew that God would not allow their sin and wickedness to continue. The Word brought great fear and trembling upon him. He immediately wanted to keep the Word and walk in its light. He knew that God would not be mocked, and he did not want the wrath of the Lord to come upon his nation.

God saw his humility and repentance, and the Lord told him that he would be spared:

2 Kings 22:18: “But to the king of Judah which sent you to enquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard;

19 Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard thee, saith the Lord.

20 Behold therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again.”

Because Josiah humbled himself and repented – because he feared the Lord – he was told that God would spare him. He would not face the wrath of God; instead he would die in peace. The wrath would not come during his lifetime.

The same is still true today. If we humble ourselves and repent, and if we fear the Lord and tremble at His Word, then we will not face the wrath of God. We will instead receive mercy and salvation. But those who harden themselves and reject God's Word will face a very different fate.

We can find an example of this in the life of King Jehoiakim. During his reign the tribe of Judah was engaged in all sorts of idolatry and evil. They were about to be invaded by King Nebuchadnezzar and destroyed. God sent Jeremiah to warn the king to repent; if they repented then they would be saved. But look what the king did to the Word of God:

Jeremiah 36:21: “So the king sent Jehudi to fetch the roll: and he took it out of Elishama the scribe's chamber. And Jehudi read it in the ears of the king, and in the ears of all the princes which stood beside the king.

22 Now the king sat in the winterhouse in the ninth month: and there was a fire on the hearth burning before him.

23 And it came to pass, that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth.

24 Yet they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king, nor any of his servants that heard all these words.

25 Nevertheless Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah had made intercession to the king that he would not burn the roll: but he would not hear them.”

God commanded the king to repent, because judgment was coming – and in response the king literally *burned the Word of God in the fire*. He wasn't afraid of God. He didn't repent. He cared nothing for what God had to say. He just tossed the Scriptures into the flames to be burned. It made no impression on him at all.

But God would not be mocked. Since Jehoiakim would not repent, God said He would send judgment:

Jeremiah 36:30: “Therefore thus saith the Lord of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost.

31 And I will punish him and his seed and his servants for their iniquity; and I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah, all the evil that I have pronounced against them; but they hearkened not.”

God told the king that since he refused to repent, he would be killed and his dead body wouldn't even be buried. None of his descendents would ever sit on the throne of David. All of the terrible judgments that God threatened to send against the land of Judah would come – and that is exactly what happened.

Josiah repented when he heard the Word, and he was spared. He humbled himself and God saved him. Jehoiakim, though, rejected the Word. He burned it in the fire and mocked it. As a result, God cursed him and poured out His wrath upon him and his nation. Those who repent and believe will be saved; those who do not repent will not be saved and will face the endless wrath of God. That is still true today. We may not take our Bibles and throw them into the flames the way that Jehoiakim did, but if we reject it and go our own way then the results are the same. Only those who humble themselves and fear God will be spared His everlasting wrath. Those who cry out to God will be saved:

Psalm 138:3: “In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul.”

If you read through the psalms you will quickly see that this is what David *always* did whenever he was in trouble. David had entire armies at his disposal, but whenever he was threatened or in danger he always went to God for salvation. David never trusted in himself for salvation. It would have been easy for his power and victories to go to his head – after all, he had killed the giant Goliath. But David always believed that salvation only comes from the Lord. He always looked to God for help in his time of need, because he knew that only God could save him.

The same is still true today. The Lord is near all those who call upon Him. He is the one who watches over us. It is foolish for us to worry about what might happen. Instead of being afraid we should cry out to the Lord and trust in Him for deliverance:

Psalm 127:1: “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.
2 It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.”

It is a foolish and vain thing to spend sleepless nights worrying about what may or may not happen. God is watching over us; He knows what is going on in our lives and He knows what we face. In fact, He knew the troubles we would encounter long before we were ever born. It is far better to trust in the Lord. We will not be saved by our sleeplessness or our worrying; it is God who will deliver us.

David always looked to God for deliverance. When the Lord delivered him, he was not content to keep it to himself. Instead he wanted to tell everyone what God had done for him. In other words, David wanted to testify:

Psalm 138:4: “All the kings of the earth shall praise thee, O Lord, when they hear the words of thy mouth.
5 Yea, they shall sing in the ways of the Lord: for great is the glory of the Lord.”

David wanted to tell everyone what God had done *so that everyone would praise the Lord*. David did not keep God's greatness and His wonders to himself. He wanted everyone to praise God – even the kings of the earth.

One of the things about kings is that they typically aren't interested in the “little people”. Kings tend to spend their time with other kings, or with the great men of the world. Rich people usually spend their days hanging around other rich people. That is the way the world works. Why would a rich man care about the poor? Yet we find that God is *not* like that at all. Even though God has all power and all authority, and even though He is infinitely greater than we can even imagine, God still cares about

those who humble themselves before Him:

Psalm 138:6: “Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off.”

The Lord is *tremendously* high. It is amazing that God would give us any of His time and attention; we are less than ants in comparison to Him. Yet God *does* care about us. He loves us and watches over us and deliver us – as long as we are humble, like King Josiah was. But if we choose the route of pride and haughtiness (like King Jehoiakim) then we have a very different situation. The psalm says that God knows the proud “afar off”. In other words, God doesn't want to get anywhere near them! Those who humble themselves will find mercy and salvation; those who reject God and exalt themselves above Him will face rejection and wrath.

When David was in trouble he chose to trust in the Lord:

Psalm 138:7: “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me: thou shalt stretch forth thine hand against the wrath of mine enemies, and thy right hand shall save me.”

8 The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me: thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever: forsake not the works of thine own hands.”

It is a wonderful blessing that the mercy of the Lord endures forever. It is fantastic that His love never changes, and that He is faithful even when we are not. Where would we be if we could not cry out to the Lord in times of trouble? Where would we be if we had to depend upon our own might in order to save ourselves? Imagine for a moment if our future – if our eternity – really *did* depend upon ourselves. Can you protect yourself from the evils of the world? Can you raise yourself from the dead? Can you grant yourself everlasting life? I think not.

The Lord is indeed worthy of all praise and honor and glory, for He has had pity upon us. He has chosen to love us and save us. He has given us mercy and grace and forgiveness – gifts we never could have earned. The Lord has done great things for us. We should tell the whole world what He has done, so that all the peoples and nations will sing His praises!