



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 138

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Introduction

- This Psalm is titled *A Psalm of David*
- The Hebrew and all the versions attribute this Psalm to David
- It is believed that he wrote it when God delivered him from all his enemies, and was firmly seated on the throne of Israel
- However, the Septuagint version adds the names of Haggai and Zechariah to the title
- It is probable that it was used by the Jews as a form of thanksgiving for their deliverance from all their enemies, and their ultimate settlement in their own land



Introduction

- Several commentators mention that it was fittingly placed after 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 the Lord
- Psalm 137 expresses the need of silence before mockers, Psalm 138 expresses the greatness of a brave confession
- There is a time to be silent, *“Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.”* (Matthew 7:6)



Introduction

- And there is a time to speak openly, lest it would be denying Christ, *“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”* (Mark 8:38)
- *“do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.”* (2 Timothy 1:8)
- It seems that this Psalm was composed between his being king over Judah and over all Israel
- It is a prophecy of the Messiah's kingdom, and of the calling of the Gentiles in the latter day, as appears from Psalm 138:4
- Psalm 138 is classified as an Individual Hymn of Thanksgiving



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3
- Declaration of Confidence for the Future 138:4-6
- David's Firm Confidence 138:7-8

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- David was known by always giving thanks to God; not just when God listens to his prayer, but even in the time of affliction
- He always mixed his prayer with praise; and always felt he was under the protection of his Savior
- So, he speaks directly to the Lord in verse 1, promising to praise, thank, confess out loud
- The Hebrew word has the sense of making it public, not keeping it a secret, making known how great the Lord is
- But *with my whole heart* suggests from deep inner self
- As if he is saying “My public praise comes from the bottom of my heart, from the depths of my being”

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- Praising God, then, must be born in the inner depths of the heart, but it must not be kept secret
- David says he will praise Him with sincerity and zeal: *with my whole heart*, with that which is within him, with faithfulness and fervent heart
- Inward impressions are in accord with outward expressions
- The psalmist's thanksgiving proceeds from the core of his being—the center of his life
- It represents his whole being
- The whole heart leaves no room for varied motives or intentions

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- According to St. Augustine the word praise means confession,
- He says, “I remind you, that the term confession in Scripture, when we speak of confession to God, is used in two senses, of sin, and of praise.”
- *Before the gods*, It is hard to imagine that David meant he would praise God in the actual presence of idols and images of other *gods*
- There are three ideas about what David meant by his singing praise *before the gods*

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- Some believe it was a declaration of loyalty and commitment to God and Him alone, and *the gods* represent the idols of the heathen
- In Psalm 136:2-3, the psalmist says, “*Oh, give thanks to the God of gods... Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords!*”
- Such phrases are common in the Old Testament, expressing God’s sovereignty over any false gods
- And some say *gods* refer to kings of the earth or judges
- And many church fathers say it refers to the angels
- According to the Septuagint and the Coptic version, it came as *Before the angels*

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- St. John Chrysostom says, “If, then, he is referring to the angels in heaven, what he means is something like this; I shall do all in my power to sing in the company of the angels, and shall strive to compete with them and join the powers on high in choir. Even if there is a difference in nature, after all, yet I shall endeavor to stand in their company.”
- St. Jerome says, “After such a confession and repentance, this repentant is qualified to praise together with angels. He who praises, will no longer feel remorse, but will give thanks and bless.”

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- But St. John Chrysostom believe also that angel may refer to the priests
- He says, “It is customary for Scripture, you see, to call a priest angel and god, saying in one case, ‘You shall not revile gods, or speak evil of the leader of your people.’ and another, ‘lips of priests will persevere judgment, and from his mouth they will look for righteousness, because he is angel of the almighty Lord.’ if, then, it is permissible to take this interpretation, it must be understood this way: In the company of the priests who are present, following their cue and leadership in due respect, I shall follow and sing to You.”

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- Therefore, if the psalmist is pledging to sing God's praises in the presence of foreign gods, he is promising to witness to an unbelieving or wrongly believing world—honoring God before those who worship other gods
- And if he is pledging to sing God's praises before the heavenly creatures, he is joining the heavenly chorus
- Some believe that, by the *temple* in verse 2, he means the holy tabernacle of meeting, as the temple was not yet built
- There he sings before God, who is in heaven with His court of angels but is also listening to the prayers in the earthly temple

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- The psalmist gives two reasons to praise the Lord; who God is and what God has done
- David praises His name *For Your lovingkindness and Your truth; For You have magnified Your word above all Your name*
- *Lovingkindness* and *truth* are huge covenant words in the Old Testament
- They are associated with the name of God; *“And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.’”* (Exodus 34:6,7)

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- St. John Chrysostom comments on *I will worship toward Your holy temple and* says, “This too is no little virtue, to be able to ascend to the Temple, and in ascending to bow down with clear conscience. What is required, after all, is not bending the knee and going in, but doing so with ardent spirit and heightened attitude, not being present in body only but also in mind – just as it is no slight honor to adore the God of all as He should be adored.”
- David directs us to praise God for His long history of loving and faithful involvement with His covenant people

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- That historical involvement has exalted the name of God, because He has kept His words of promise through all the generations
- *praise Your name For Your lovingkindness and Your truth* may primarily regard the goodness and grace of God in promising David the kingdom, and His faithfulness in fulfilling the promise, and so, David was under obligation to praise the Name of the Lord
- *Your name*, Names reflected the natures and characters of the person who bore them and were conceptually equal to the essence of ones being

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- *Your word above all Your name*, He means, Your divine promises
- God has made Himself known to us in many ways in creation and providence, but most clearly by His word
- Many church fathers understand *Your word* of Christ
- God had mercy on the human race, and thus magnified Christ, who is His Word, and He gave Him a name that is above every name
- David then turns his thought to the past, to the day of affliction
- The reason of David's heart filled with praise and thanksgiving to God is his own daily experience, whenever he is in any affliction, he hastens to call and to cry out to God

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- The Lord had *answered* and rescued him many times
- When in distress through Saul's persecution, he cried to the Lord, and he immediately answered him, and delivered him out of his troubles; and such immediate answers of prayer are to be remembered with thankfulness
- It is important to praise God for who He is, even more than for what He has done for us
- David first gave God praise for who He is – a God of *lovingkindness and truth*
- Then he gave God praise for His revelation – the *word*, magnified above His very name

Declaration of Praise for the Past 138:1-3



- Then he gave God praise for *what He had done* – God’s response to David in a time of crisis
- When David’s strength failed, God made him *bold with strength* in his *soul*
- God strengthened his heart so that he did not go under the weight of affliction and trouble, but was filled with courage to withstand his enemies, and with strength to do the will and work of God
- This is to be understood of inward spiritual strength; *“He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man”* (Ephesians 3:16)

Declaration of Confidence for the Future 138:4-6



- Verses 4-6 points to what is found in Revelation 5 and 7, where all nations gather around the throne of Jesus Christ and praise God, *“And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, And have made us kings”* (Revelation 5:9-10)
- David knew by the spirit of prophecy that the day would come when *all the kings of the earth* would praise Him
- So, after this personal declaration, he broadens his contemplation to the world and imagines that his testimony takes in the whole horizon

Declaration of Confidence for the Future 138:4-6



- They would praise Him in response to hearing *the words of His mouth* from those who proclaim
- *All the kings of the earth* in a sort of universalist obedience, join with David praying in a common song of praise to honor the greatness and sovereign power of the Lord
- The effect of praise is to be that of the revelation of God to others, who if they come to know Him, will also praise Him
- One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ, God's anointed King, is Lord of all

Declaration of Confidence for the Future 138:4-6



- *“at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Philippians 2:10-11)
- The kings of the earth would not only praise God with words, but also in song
- *the kings of the earth* shall sing, no longer in their own misguided heathen ways, but in the ways of the Lord which are all mercy and truth
- According to St. John Chrysostom *the ways of the Lord* are His laws, and His commandments

Declaration of Confidence for the Future 138:4-6



- Their singing was in response to their understanding that *great is the glory of the Lord*
- Great is His character; great His dignity; great His honor; and all this will be seen to be so when those of most exalted rank thus worship and revere Him
- The most noble on earth shall acknowledge that there is One who is more exalted than they are
- So, the reason that kings ought to join David in giving thanks and singing to God is three-fold
- First: The kings have heard the words (verses 2 & 4)
- Second: The glory of the Lord is great (verse 5)

Declaration of Confidence for the Future 138:4-6



- Third: The Lord is exalted, seeing and knowing the states of the lowly and the haughty alike (verse 6)
- David understood that God is great in glory and *on high*, yet He holds *the lowly*, the humble, in high regard
- On the other hand, God keeps His distance from *the proud*
- David's statement that God *regards the lowly, but the proud He knows from afar* is another way of saying a truth from Proverbs 3:34 that is repeated twice in the New Testament: *God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble* (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5)
- From His exaltation God looks down alike on the lowly and on the proud

Declaration of Confidence for the Future 138:4-6



- But it is to show a gracious interest in the *lowly*, while *the proud* are merely marked as persons to be kept at a distance
- The proud Pharisee pressed as near God as he could; the poor publican, not daring to do so, stood afar off; yet God was far from the Pharisee, near to the publican
- St. Augustine says, “Notice how the psalmist wishes to see the kings of the earth sing along their ways, humbly bearing the ways of the Lord, and not exalting themselves against the Lord; Lest, if they exalt themselves, they will realize that, ‘Though the Lord is on high, yet He (honors) the lowly’. If the kings wish to be honored, they have to become lowly!”

Declaration of Confidence for the Future 138:4-6



- Everything that we are or have was given to us from God—our physical strength and appearance—our intellects—our spiritual discernment—our financial resources—our abilities/gifts
- Nothing we have done can be compared to what God has done
- It is God, not ourselves, who deserves honor and glory
- The lowly (humble, poor) are more likely to acknowledge their need for God
- The proud (gifted, wealthy) are more likely to give themselves credit for their status—and are therefore less likely to honor God

David's Firm Confidence 138:7-8



- As God, who is on high, regards the low with the greatest kindness, David, fully aware of his own low position, confidently promises himself God's assistance in every trouble
- *Though I walk in the midst of trouble*, he knows that he will not be overlooked or forgotten
- David *walked in the midst of trouble* during the greater part of his life
- When the persecution of Saul was over, he had trouble from foreign enemies (2 Samuel 5-12)
- When these were subdued, his domestic troubles began (2 Samuel 13-19; 1 Kings 5:53)

David's Firm Confidence 138:7-8



- God, however, from time to time gave him a reviving
- Whenever he should be in trouble God would remember him, and give him life and strength
- What God had so often done for him, David is confident that he will do again
- *You will stretch out Your hand*, God has stretched out His hand by becoming flesh in Christ
- His nail pierced hands are the guarantee that nothing can separate us from His mercy and love
- When God's help came, it would come with all His skill and strength *Your right hand*

David's Firm Confidence 138:7-8



- God would defend David *against the wrath* of his *enemies*
- He will break the power of his enemies, and deliver him from their conspiracies
- St. John Chrysostom says, “ He did not say, You will get rid of the tribulation, but You will give me life while remaining in the very midst of troubles, You will succeed in rescuing me after falling into the dangers themselves – something really remarkable and unexpected, when harm is pressing and circumventing, to establish the one affected by it in a state of security.”

David's Firm Confidence 138:7-8



- And he comments on *And Your right hand will save me* and says, “that is, Your power, Your strength: God is well equipped with ways and means, and capable of leading to salvation from a desperate situation.”
- *The Lord will perfect that which concerns me*, This was David’s confident declaration
- He knew that God had a plan concerning him, and this God of greatness and goodness would absolutely *perfect* that plan
- He will complete what he has begun, indeed, “*being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*” (Philippians 1:6)

David's Firm Confidence 138:7-8



- With confidence in the never-ending *mercy* of God, David knew that God would never forsake him, who belonged to God by creation and redemption
- Long before the day of Christ, David was sure of that, because of the certainty of the covenant
- God will fulfill His purposes for me; *Your mercy, O Lord, endures forever*
- *Do not forsake the works of Your hands*, The psalmist has experienced God's upholding hands over and over in the past and petitions God to continue to uphold and protect

David's Firm Confidence 138:7-8



- *the works of Your hands*, not of our hands, because whatever good we have we have it from God's bounty, without whom we are not only unable to do anything, but even "*we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God*" (2 Corinthians 3:5)
- David reminds the faithful that their God is a God who remembers and cares; that their God is a God worthy of thanks and worship; and that their God is a God above all gods
- He has been expressing his faith in God, but now closes with a prayer that God will continue His faithfulness to *the works of His hands*

David's Firm Confidence 138:7-8



- And we too must live in this trust, in this certainty of God's goodness
- We must be sure that however difficulty and intense the trials that await us may be, we will never be left on our own, we will never fall out of the Lord's hands, those hands that created us and now sustain us on our journey through life



Discussion

- What is this Psalm about?
- What motivated David to write this Psalm to God?
- What does it mean to give thanks with your “whole heart?”
- What does the phrase mean, “before the gods I will sing your praise?”



Discussion

- What was David thankful for?
- What reason did David give others to worship the Lord?
- What can we learn about praise from this Psalm?
- How does Psalm 138 encourage us to respond to God's love and faithfulness?