

November 17, 2024

A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING TO OUR FAITHFUL GOD

Psalm 138

(4 of 9 in a series of selected Psalms)

We've noted before that the Psalter (the book of Psalms) gives clear evidence that it was arranged quite intentionally. Psalm 1 placed at the beginning of the book to remind us that there are two paths down which we can go, but only the one of following God's Word leads to life and blessing. Psalm 2 shows us that obeying God's Word requires us to bow the knee to his King, Jesus. Then, if you go to the very end of the book, Psalms 146-150 were obviously placed there in a strategic way. Each of those psalms begins and ends with a call to praise the Lord, and (being at the end of the Psalter) serve to remind us that all of history is leading to a day of our Lord receiving ceaseless praise. That's where we're heading. But it's not just those two psalms at the beginning and five at the end that show very intentional arrangement of the psalter. The Psalter is divided into five books (which you can see with headings before Psalms 1, 42, 73, 90, and 107), with each of those books ending with a very similar refrain along the lines of "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen." Moreover, you'll notice that most of the lament psalms occur in books 1-3 of the Psalter (that is Psalms 3-89), while psalms of praise outnumber psalms of lament in books 4-5 (that is, Psalms 90-150), no doubt suggesting that though this world is filled with pain and suffering, we are moving toward that day of ceaseless praise (again, shown in Psalms 146-150).

But it's right here that the particular psalm we're looking at this morning comes into play. Most of the psalms that are ascribed to David come earlier in the psalter, but there's one obvious exception. Right before those last five psalms of praise (146-150) are a group of eight psalms all written by David. They are Psalms 138-145. Right before the end of the psalter, here comes David again. Perhaps the fact that these Davidic psalms are here is a reminder that the Davidic King will indeed come, and his arrival is what will lead to our ceaseless and eternal praise. But it's also interesting that many of these eight psalms of David right before the end of the Psalter are psalms of lament. That is, psalms that still recognize the pain and sorrow of this world that force us to ask, "How long, O Lord" until you send your Son and make everything right? It seems to be a reminder to us that there'll be plenty of reason for lament, right up until the coming of Christ. And yet, what's interesting, is that these eight psalms of David, placed right before the conclusion of unbridled praise which are mainly psalms of lament are bracketed by psalms of thanksgiving. In other words, though most of these eight Davidic psalms right near the end are psalms of lament, the first and last of this group are psalms of thanksgiving. And it's hard not to think that this is intentional when we recognize how intentionally everything else in this book of psalms is arranged.

So what is the message of a psalm like Psalm 138, which begins this last collection of David's psalms and is filled with thanksgiving right before a number of psalms of lament? It seems that the message here is that though reasons for lament will be plentiful, right up until the time Christ returns and ushers in an eternity of ceaseless praise of our great God, there is also reason within

these days of sorrow to give thanks to our faithful God. And if you look at Psalm 138 closely, I think you can see that this is clearly what the psalm is saying. Our text this morning reminds us of why we should give thanks to God even in the midst of our disappointments, pain, and sorrow. Specifically, I think we can see three reasons for which we should thank God that correspond with each of the three sections of the psalm.

You can see the three sections of the psalm are divided with a change in pronouns. In verses 1-3, you can see that David speaks of himself. He writes, "I give thanks . . . I sing your praise . . . I bow down," and so on. Then, in verses 4-6, he speaks of the kings of the earth giving thanks and notes that "they shall sing" of God's ways. And, finally, in verses 7-8, David returns to first person, which we can see when he uses "I, my, and me." So, what do each of these sections show us that we should thank God for? First, we see in verses 1-3 that we should give thanks for God because he is faithful to answer our prayers.

We should give thanks to God because he is faithful to answer our prayers

As David opens the psalm, he notes that he will give thanks to God and praise him. He writes, "I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name" (vv. 1-2a). When David mentions that he will give thanks "before the gods," there are two main thoughts here as to what he could be referring to. It could be a reference to angels, or it could be a reference to the false gods that others serve. I think it's the latter. I think David is saying that he will praise God in the face of these false gods, declaring before them that there is only one God worthy of worship.

This is a picture of a man overflowing with thankfulness and an eagerness to worship the Lord. He's giving thanks, singing, and humbling himself before God as he bows down. But why specifically? What is moving him in this moment to thank and praise God? David says at the end of verse 2, "For your steadfast love and faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word."

The key characteristic for which David is thankful and moved to praise the Lord for is the Lord's faithful, steadfast love. When David speaks exalting his name, he's referring to God demonstrating who he is. In other words, he's saying that this is who God is, the one who is faithful and shows steadfast love to his people. When he speaks of God exalting his word, he means in terms of God demonstrating his faithfulness and steadfast love in terms of being true to all of his promises. Everything God has declared by his word that he will do and who he will be toward his people, he is faithful to do and to be. David is moved to thanksgiving and praise because his God is faithful to his promises and steadfast in his love toward his own.

But is there a particular thing that God has done to move David to give thanks and praise because of God's faithful, steadfast love? It appears the answer is yes. David writes in verse 3, "On the day that I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased." It seems that David is moved in his heart to praise and thank God for his faithfulness and steadfast love because David

cried out to the Lord in prayer, probably in a time when he needed deliverance or the like, and the Lord answered him and in doing so demonstrated his faithful love.

And if you think about all the events in David's life in which he needed God to demonstrate his steadfast love and faithfulness, there are many from which to choose. After all, Saul tried to kill him. His rebellious son, Absalom, tried to kill him. He was often at war with the Philistines. I mean, it can almost feel like most of David's life put him in a place where he needed to cry out to God for deliverance. And he often does. Turn forward two psalms, and we'll read David writing in Psalm 140, "Deliver me, O LORD, from evil men" (v. 1). In Psalm 141:9, he prays, "Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me and from the snares of evildoers!" In Psalm 142:6 he prays, "Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me!" And we could keep going like this, but I think you get the point. David prays this way, and on one such occasion as the Lord answered him, he wrote this psalm, thanking and praising God that on the day that David called, God answered him.

But there is one note in this psalm that we might not expect. Notice *how* David says the Lord answered him. He says, "On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased" (v. 3). This may well be a continuation of the note that we've seen in the last couple of psalms we've looked at. It may be that David cried out for deliverance from some difficulty and instead of the Lord pulling him out of it so that he didn't have to walk through this difficult season, he instead simply increased his strength to endure it.

I choose which Psalms I'll preach somewhat at random, and the fact that this point has been made three weeks in a row suggests to me that it may well be that the Lord wants many of us to hear this. Perhaps we've been praying that the Lord would keep us from having to walk down a treacherous path (like the "Valley of Baca" we saw last week), and his answer has been not to deliver us. And, yes, that's not his only answer. Maybe as with David, the Lord is saying, "Watch, and I'll increase the strength of your soul in a way you couldn't imagine, and you'll endure with my strength."

If the Lord does indeed free you from the struggle or give you strength to endure it, either is a reason to give thanks to God and praise him. Even the Son himself prayed in the garden for the cup to pass from him while adding, "Your will be done." And his Father did not let the cup pass. Jesus went to the cross. And yet his Father strengthened him to endure the cross and bear the shame. Your Father may answer you similarly, and, if so, it's not a sign he doesn't love you. It's a sign that he loves you, knows what's best for you, and will not let you be alone in it. He gives his children an increase of strength in their souls when he leads them through the valley of the shadow of death. He shows in those moments that he is our faithful God whose steadfast love knows no end. And so we should thank and praise God for his faithfulness and steadfast love, especially in how he so faithfully hears and answers our prayers. Second, we should give thanks to God because he personally cares for us.

We should give thanks to God because he personally cares for us

As David continues, he moves from the fact that he gives thanks and praise to the Lord that all the kings of the earth will recognize this as well. He writes, "All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth, and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD" (vv. 4-5a).

As David writes, he knows that it is too small of a thing that he alone praise the Lord and give thanks to him. In fact, all nations and all rulers owe God thanks and praise, and one day that's coming. In Philippians 2:10-11 we're reminded that everyone, without exception, will one day bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Isaiah 52:15 notes of the crucified and risen Lord that "Kings shall shut their mouths because of him." And, of course, the kings specifically are referenced by Isaiah and here by David with the understanding that if even the kings acknowledge the Lord's greatness, then obviously lesser individuals will as well. It's an inclusive argument, suggesting that all nations will praise him. All of history will lead to the exaltation of Jesus Christ when all stand before the Lord in judgment.

But even in this age, David envisions the Lord receiving thanks and praise from those outside of Israel, and this is something that we ourselves are a partial fulfillment of. Though we were once in darkness, "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12), as Paul reminds us, we've been given life, our eyes have been opened, and as we give thanks and praise to the Lord today, we are a partial fulfillment of the global praise that David envisions here. And we continue to take the gospel to all nations so that peoples from all the earth will give thanks and praise to the Lord as they hear his words.

But, again, recognize that David highlights a specific characteristic of the Lord that will draw the praise of the nations. He writes, "For great is the glory of the LORD" and then adds, "For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar" (vv. 5b-6).

Notice that there are two things that we don't usually ascribe to someone together. On the one hand, the Lord will be praised by all nations and their kings because "great is the glory of the Lord." That is, he is great, awesome, majestic, and mighty. This is the kind of thing Isaiah felt when he saw the Lord high and lifted up and was overcome at his own sinfulness in the presence of the holy God. It's the kind of thing we feel when we look at the stars or an awesome sunset and are overwhelmed with the idea that our God created these things that make us seem so small. God should be praised because "great is the glory of the Lord."

However, David also adds, "For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar" (v. 6). Though our God is great, high, and exalted, he knows those who are lowly and humble. You may think that you're insignificant and the Lord overlooks you, but that's not who he is. He cares for you personally.

Now, go back to verse 1 for a second. David praises and thanks the Lord "before the gods." I don't have to tell you that all the gods that man has conjured up and created over the years, they're not like our God. Yes, perhaps man thinks of them as great or majestic in their minds. But, if so, they don't regard the lowly. Our God, on the other hand, is in control of the whole

universe, calling out the stars by name, and he tells us that we can cast our cares upon him because he cares for us. He cares that you feel lonely or sad. He cares that you're hurt by the disappointments of life. He cares that you are hurting. The majestic and awesome God cares for what you're going through and will deal lovingly and mercifully with you. That's our God.

Now for those who exalt themselves and think they're great, he distances himself. He knows them from afar. But for those who humble themselves before God, he knows us in our every detail and draws close to us. The theological words you might hear stressing this reality of God is transcendence and immanence. Transcendence means that God is exalted, lofty, far above anything that we've known. It's what churches historically attempted to reflect when they built grand cathedrals that tower over you. They make you feel small. That was to reflect God's transcendence. And that should draw us to worship. But he's also near. He's close to us. That's what is meant when we reference God's immanence. He's close to us, loves us, sings over us, and cares for us.

And we should not let go or ignore either of those because God's immanence, for example, is so much more overwhelmingly glorious to consider when we acknowledge that this is the transcendent God who reigns over all and is above all that draws close to us and cares for us. And if David is stressing that the nations will one day praise the Lord and give thanks to him because we hear of his glory and goodness to us, we are a fulfillment of verses 4-6. So let us rejoice before our God and praise and thank the great and good God. And, finally, we see that we should give thanks to God because he will certainly fulfill his purposes for us.

We should give thanks to God because he will certainly fulfill his purposes for us

As David closes the psalm, he declares the ways that God has shown his faithfulness toward him. He writes in verse 7, "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me." We've already noted a number of the ways that David's very life has been threatened throughout his reign, and the Lord's grace and mercy toward David in these situations hasn't been lost on him. David acknowledges that God has been the one to preserve his life. God has been the one to deliver him from the attacks of his enemies—even if it was through strengthening David's own hands to win battles. When you go to war and come out victorious, it would be shameful not to praise the Lord for delivering you and preserving your life, even as David does here.

But it's not just that David is looking backwards as to how God has preserved and defended him. He also looks forward and considers God's faithful commitment to him. He writes in verse 8, "The LORD will fulfill his purposes for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands."

How wonderful it would be to be David! He knows that God has made promises to him that he would reign and his sons after him until one comes to the throne to reign forever. Therefore, David knows that he's not going to be cast off by the Lord. He knows that the Lord will carry out every plan and purpose he has for him. David gets to live his whole life knowing that nothing in

all creation can thwart God from fulfilling the purposes and plans that he has for him. Again, how wonderful it must be to be David!

But before we give into that too much—and you knew this was coming—are we any different? Consider the fact that if you're a child of God through faith in the crucified and risen Lord, it's because before the foundation of the world, the Lord set his affection on you. He chose you to be the object of his love. Paul says in Ephesians 1:4-5, "In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purposes of his will."

But that's not all. Paul also reminds us in Ephesians 2:10 that we are God's workmanship, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." So it's not just that God ordained you to be his adopted child. He also created you specifically to carry out certain good works that he prepared for you before the world was ever created so that you would walk in them. And, harkening back to verse 5, remember "great is the glory of the Lord." In other words, no one and nothing can stop him from fulfilling his purposes and plans. Moreover, we need not fear God will suddenly abandon us and his plans for us. Repeatedly in Scripture we're reminded that he will not leave us nor forsake us (e.g., Heb 13:5).

Putting all of this together, you know what you can say? You can say, "The LORD will fulfill his purposes for me." You can pray, "Do not forsake the work of your hands," with utmost confidence that you're praying precisely in line with God's will, and he will answer that prayer. Everything David proclaims in verse 8, every Christian alive today can proclaim as well. And would we ever doubt this when our Father sent his own Son in order to live, die, and be raised so that we might become his forgiven children? We have every reason to trust that our God will fulfill his purposes for us.

David writes Psalm 138 to remind us in this world that we have plenty of reasons to praise and thank our God, even in the midst of pain and sorrow. Three of those are that God is faithful to answer our prayers, shows personal care for us (though he is great and awesome), and will certainly fulfill his purposes in our lives. If we actually believe those things, that's enough for us to thank and praise the Lord the whole of our lives. So let's do that now as we come to the table. Amen.