

Psalm 138  
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Luke 1:57-80

“Thank You! A Song of Gratitude”

December 16, 2018

**Introduction: “Of David” – Why Psalm 138 is an Advent Psalm  
*Of David.***

“Of David.”

If you have heard a few of my sermons on the Psalms, then you know what is coming!

“Of David” *might* mean “by David” –

but at the very least it *must* mean “about David” “for David” –  
when you sing this song you should be thinking about David!!

And one thing that is very consistent throughout the Davidic psalms  
is that when you have a first person singular in a Psalm “of David”  
you should hear the Davidic King – the Son of David –  
singing that part!

Book 5 of the Psalter does not have a whole lot of “David” Psalms.

There’s a small collection at the beginning (Psalms 108-110).

There are a couple in the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 122, 124, 131, and 133).

And then there are a few here at the end of the Book (Psalms 138-145).

(so about 1/3 of Book 5 is “of David”).

But Psalm 138 opens this final group of “David” Psalms

in a way that works beautifully in Advent

because Advent is a time of calling out to God –  
pleading for the *coming* of the Messiah –  
the coming of Christ.

And Psalm 138 is a psalm “of David”

from a time when there *was no Son of David* sitting on the throne!

And in Psalm 138, the singular voice of David – the voice of the Messiah –

calls out with *wholehearted thanks* to the LORD!

Israel sang this for hundreds of years –

waiting for the day when Messiah could sing it for himself!

Why am I thankful to God?

“for you have exalted above all things your name and your word...”

“for though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly...”

“Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life...”

And now we sing this song –  
because Messiah *has sung it first!*

Sing Psalm 138  
Read Luke 1:57-80

As you look at Zechariah's Song here in Luke 1,  
there two sentences.

The first sentence (verses 68-75) is really addressed to Mary and Jesus.  
The second (verses 76-79) then turns to his son, John.

Zechariah has had Mary staying in his house for the last three months.

Quite likely, when he sings this song,  
she is sitting on the opposite side of the room with the women.

This virgin, who is about to marry Joseph, the son of David,  
will give birth to the righteous Branch.

So he looks across the room at her as he sings:

*He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.*

What will this Son of David do?

- 1) he will deliver us from our enemies (verse 71)
- 2) he will lead us in serving God without fear in holiness and righteousness (verse 74-75)  
and all of this because in him  
God will fulfill the oath that he made to Abraham.

What did God promise to Abraham?

Children, do you remember the three things that God promised to Abraham?

Land

Seed

Blessing to the nations

God had promised Abraham that we *might serve him without fear,*  
*in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

This is what Israel was called to do at Mt Sinai.

Israel was called to serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness.

This is what Israel failed to do both in the wilderness, and in the land.

Israel forgot – Israel rebelled – and they turned away from the LORD their God.

And so God had established his covenant with David,

so that the faithful king (the son of David) would lead the people  
into the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

But David and his sons also failed,  
and Israel went into Exile.

That is why Zechariah sees the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham  
coming only through the house of David.

It is only when the Lord God of Israel visits his people,  
raising up a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David,  
that the promises to Abraham can finally be fulfilled.

with the end result that the people of God will serve *him* without fear.

But all of this is still future for Zechariah!

Think about that for a moment?

Jesus has not even been *born* yet! (much less been raised from the dead  
and seated at the right hand of God the Father!).

And yet Zechariah looks across the room at Mary –  
and sees by faith that the child that she carries in her womb  
is the long-awaited Messiah!

When the Word became flesh – even before he was born! –  
in the incarnation – salvation had come –  
as God had joined himself to our humanity!

Psalm 138 is the same sort of song.

Psalm 138 gives thanks to God for his great salvation –  
even though I'm still living in the midst of trouble and enemies and all that!

There are three sections –

Before the Gods (verses 1-3)

Before the Kings of the Earth (verses 4-6)

And before the wrath of my enemies (verses 7-8).

### 1. “Before the Gods”: I Give Thanks Because the LORD Exalts His Word (v1-3)

Verses 1-2 are all one sentence.

There are two statements of thanksgiving –  
culminating in one reason for giving thanks.

*138 I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;  
before the gods I sing your praise;*

Verse one gives the first statement –

I give thanks to the LORD, singing his praise before the gods.  
Every nation has its gods – the things that it prizes most.

But the singer of Psalm 138 declares the praises of the LORD  
“before the gods.”

Verse 2 then starts with a second statement of thanks:

*<sup>2</sup> I bow down toward your holy temple  
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,*

Notice that the Psalmist orients himself toward the temple –

Bowing down toward the holy temple of the LORD  
orients the Psalmist bodily.

Physical actions can be useful in readjusting our attitude.

Because bodily posture is *part* of our communication!

Have you ever been in an office where the boss’s chair is higher than the other chairs –  
so in every meeting, he is looming above you?!

Communicating his importance!

That’s why the pulpit is elevated –

but my office chair is not!

Because the *word of God* is above us (“he has exalted above all... his word”) –  
but as a man, I am no different from everyone else!

That’s why I wear this robe when I am preaching –

but not when I am doing ordinary things.

In the same way, our posture before God matters!

Verse 2 says that I “bow down” – I prostrate myself – toward your holy temple.

In *every* culture kneeling – or prostrating flat on the ground –  
has been a sign of reverence, humility, submission.

And so the Psalmist says that he bows down toward God’s holy temple  
giving thanks to the name of the LORD for his steadfast love and faithfulness.

God’s name – Yahweh – dwelt in the temple.

“I have chosen Jerusalem that my name may be there” (2 Chron 6:6)  
and Solomon said at the dedication of the temple

“I have built you an exalted house,  
a place for you to dwell in forever.” (2 Chron 6:2)

So Psalm 138 opens by giving wholehearted thanks to the LORD before the gods – and particularly giving thanks “*to your name for your steadfast love and faithfulness*” (*hesed* and *emeth* – a word pair that we often see in the OT).

But why do we give thanks to the LORD?

The end of verse 2 explains:

*for you have exalted above all things  
your name and your word.*<sup>[a]</sup>

Actually, the ESV adds the word “and” –  
“you have exalted your word *and* your name above all” –  
but that’s *not* what the Hebrew text says!!  
The Hebrew says “you have exalted your word above all your name.”

It’s a challenging phrase – but the central point is very clear:  
God has exalted *his word*.

I think the key is found earlier in verse 2:

“I give thanks to *your name* for your steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for you have exalted *your word* above all *your name*.”

All throughout the scriptures, there is *nothing* higher than God’s name!

Why does God act?

Why does God save his people?

Because they’re so wonderful?

NO.

Because they’re so righteous?!

NO Way!!

God saves *sinner*s – for the sake of his holy name!

And yet, Psalm 138 suggests that God does exalt something *more* than his name!  
His Word.

John will tell us in John 1, “In the beginning was the *Word* –  
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

I’m not saying that the Psalmist fully understood this!  
But where did John get the idea that the Word was God?

It's *true* that John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to say this!  
But so was the Psalmist!  
And John would have read passages like Psalm 138,  
where God's *word* is exalted either *with* or *above* God's name!

And John realized that the exaltation of the *word* in Psalm 138  
is not just saying that the Bible is important!

The Bible *is* important – but the Bible is important  
*because* the Word became flesh and dwelt among us!

The written word of God only has power to save –  
power to change lives through the preaching of the Word –  
*because* the Word who was in the beginning with God –  
the Word who *was* God –  
has become flesh and dwelt among us.

This is why *words* are so important!  
Language is *amazing*!  
I make sounds with my vocal cords –  
and somehow when those sounds reach your ears,  
your brain interprets those sounds and makes sense of them.

And the idea in your mind – at least most of the time! –  
somewhat approximates the idea that I had in my mind!!

How do we do this?!!

Because *language – word – communication* –  
is not just a random development in cosmic history.  
It is a fundamental aspect of God himself.  
In the beginning was the Word.  
And God has never been without his Word.  
Communication has happened since before the beginning!  
Because God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit –  
the triune God has been communicating forever!

God has never been lonely.  
He has exalted his word above all his name.

And because of this,  
we can have great confidence in his word – in his promises –  
in the things that he has said that he will do!

That's why verse 3 says:

<sup>3</sup> *On the day I called, you answered me;  
my strength of soul you increased.*

As we'll see at the end of the song,  
the story isn't over yet –  
I'm still in the midst of trouble and enemies and sorrows.  
But on the day I called, you answered –  
you increased the strength of my soul.

Okay.  
Who says that??!  
“my strength of soul you increased”!!

It's a fine translation – that's what the Hebrew text says!  
But if you want to get the picture,  
“you got me fired up!”  
“You gave me that drive – that energy – that li'l extra  
that got me over the top!”

The only problem with those images is that they all portray a coach,  
or a drill sergeant –  
the *real* energy came from within!

A coach can get you fired up –  
but he just drew that fire out of you –  
it was already there.

But the Psalmist is saying that the LORD has *increased* my strength of soul.  
The grace of the gospel is not just outward encouragement!  
The grace of the gospel is *inward strength* –  
whereby God, by his Holy Spirit, gives *strength* to the weak!

You see this most clearly at the baptism of Jesus,  
where our Lord – the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us –  
received the gift of the Holy Spirit.  
*Even he* was strengthened in his humanity by the gift of the Holy Spirit,  
so that he might accomplish what we could not do for ourselves!

And remember, Psalm 138 is in the *voice* of David –  
the voice of the messiah –

so the inward strengthening of our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit  
is *exactly* what this song is pointing to!

And, when you see Jesus as the singer of Psalm 138,  
you also can rightly understand the central part in verses 4-6.

**2. “All the Kings of the Earth”: The Gospel Proclaimed among the Nations (v4-6)**

<sup>4</sup> *All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD,  
for they have heard the words of your mouth,*  
<sup>5</sup> *and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD,  
for great is the glory of the LORD.*

At first blush, verse 4 seems very odd.

After all, here we have an obscure poem from a tiny middle eastern country.  
Why should the ‘kings of the earth’ have any idea about the glory of Yahweh,  
and his steadfast love and faithfulness in the life of an obscure poet in Judah!

Unless, of course, the Psalmist is *not* talking about himself!

Why must ancient Hebrew poets be obsessed with themselves?

Why couldn’t they write poems about someone else?

And especially, if they believed God’s promises to David –  
then why couldn’t they write poems about *him*?

If they believed God’s promises about the coming Son of David –  
then we should expect to find songs sort of like the Song of Zechariah  
(which we heard about in our NT lesson!).

The kings of the earth do not celebrate God’s faithfulness to unknown Hebrew poets.  
But the kings of the earth do celebrate God’s faithfulness to *David*!

If *all nations* will be blessed through Abraham’s Seed –  
and if David’s Son is the one *through whom* God’s blessings come to his people –  
then any thoughtful OT believer could see that God’s faithfulness to *David*  
will result in the kings of the earth giving thanks to God!

Or to put it another way – God’s faithfulness to *Jesus*!

The poet doesn’t expect *anyone* to remember him!

That’s why he titled it, “Of David” – “about David” “for David!”

It would be like someone writing a hymn about Jesus!

And, if you think about it, he *was* writing a hymn about Jesus –  
because Jesus is the Son of David who fulfilled this song!!



Each of the two statements of praise and thanks has a brief reason for giving thanks – followed in verse 6 with a overarching reason for the praise:

<sup>4</sup> *All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD,  
for they have heard the words of your mouth,*

Notice that we are still speaking of God's *word*.  
The kings give thanks to you, O LORD,  
because they have heard God's word!  
In the Psalmist's day, there were *very few kings*  
that had heard the Word of the LORD.

But once the Word came in the flesh –  
the word began to spread!  
Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses before kings and rulers –  
and over the last 2,000 years we can confidently say that thousands of kings  
have heard the word of the LORD –  
and the gospel has spread to the ends of the earth –  
even the wilds of northern Indiana!

<sup>5</sup> *and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD,  
for great is the glory of the LORD.*

God's glory is revealed in how the kings – and the nations –  
sing the ways of the LORD!

But lest you get too focused on bringing the gospel to the wealthy and powerful...  
the Psalmist reminds us that God's ways are not our ways!

<sup>6</sup> *For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,  
but the haughty he knows from afar.*

In the ancient world, the king was supposed to be the defender of the poor and needy.  
Of course, just like today, reality was often quite different!

But here the kings of the earth are warned that the LORD actually does  
what kings are *supposed* to do.  
He regards the lowly –  
he cares for the meek and the humble.  
But the haughty he knows from afar –  
if you think that you are something –  
beware – because God can spot that from a mile away!

We have had two sections so far  
each with two statements of praise and thanks –  
followed by the reason for that praise and thanks.

Now, in the final section,  
the Psalmist returns to present circumstances.

**3. “Against the Wrath of My Enemies”: The LORD Fulfills His Purposes for Me (v7-8)**

<sup>7</sup> *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.*

<sup>8</sup> *The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;  
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.  
Do not forsake the work of your hands.*

Again you can see how this is spoken in the voice of David –  
of David’s Son, our Lord Jesus –  
and thus by all those who are united to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Just as all Israel could sing this with David,  
so also we can sing this with Jesus.

But because Jesus has sung this song all the way to the end,  
therefore we can have confidence that the LORD will fulfill his purpose for us.

He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion  
in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Advent must always connect to the *second Advent* – the second coming of Christ!  
Because we still walk in the midst of trouble.

Perhaps you have heard of the increasing persecution of Chinese Christians  
in western China.

Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu has been imprisoned,  
along with more than 100 of the members of his church.

He recently wrote an essay entitled “20 ways that persecution is God’s way to shepherd us.”  
One of his points was,

“When you are threatened with death for the gospel,  
you find out for whom you really live.

When faced with the risk of job loss, you know for whom you really work.

When you may lose fortune and position for the sake of the gospel,

you find out whether are crazy for money or crazy for the gospel.”

But Pastor Wang Yi points out that there are more subtle ways this works:

“The church-state conflict is also a test  
to see if we are cowardly and bullying at heart,  
obeying the powerful but despising the humble.”

Are we silent – fearful – when the powerful people are around?  
But then we take it out on the little people who cannot defend themselves?  
In so doing we do not reflect the grace of our God,  
the one who regards the lowly –  
but puts down the haughty!

Children, be careful of this!  
You know better than to disobey your parents –  
but it can be tempting to take out your anger on your siblings –  
because they have less power!

But that is cowardly and bullying!  
And that is *not* the way of the cross –  
our Lord Jesus endured affliction and suffering for us –  
that is why he came!

Let us then bear the cross in the way that he has taught us!

Pastor Wang Yi’s final point was this:

“**The cross is the border between the world and the church.**  
To walk from the world to the church you must pass by the cross;  
in the same way, that is how you return from the other side.”

<http://www.chinapartnership.org/blog/2018/12/the-church-state-conflict-20-way-persecution-is-gods-way-to-shepherd-us>

But what this means is that to refuse the cross is to join the world.

You cannot say that Jesus is Lord of my heart –  
but he is not the Lord of my actions!  
Yes, we must render to Caesar the things that are Caesars –  
we must pay our taxes and obey the law of the land –  
until and unless those laws violate the command of Jesus!

But if we render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s,  
then we must certainly render to God the things that are God’s!!

And that means that we must bear witness to the faithfulness of God in Jesus Christ!  
We walk in the midst of trouble – but the LORD preserves us!  
Just as his right hand delivered Jesus from the grave  
and raised him from the dead –  
so also we *know* that God will bring us *through* suffering and death  
to eternal glory through raising *us* from the dead!

The LORD will fulfill his purposes for me.  
And his purpose is that you might walk in the way of the cross!  
As Paul says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection,  
and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,  
that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”  
(Phil 3:10-11)

Or as John Calvin once said:  
“And it is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self  
that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity;  
to feel your own incapacity that you may learn to distrust yourself;  
to distrust yourself that you may transfer your trust to God;  
to rest with a trustful heart in God that, relying upon his help,  
you may persevere unconquered to the end;  
to take your stand in his grace that you may comprehend the truth of his promises;  
to have unquestioned certainty of his promises  
that your hope may thereby be strengthened.” (Inst.)

“The LORD will fulfill his purposes for me;  
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.  
Do not forsake the work of your hands.”