

The next eight psalms are attributed to David (Ps 138-145). They deepen our insight into God's promises to the house of David (2 Samuel 7:1-29) and help us understand the meaning of the incarnation of God. We pray these psalms today in the light of David and Jesus, the Son of David. They point forward not only to Jesus' self-understanding but to our own in Christ. They offer valuable insight into what it means to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. They reflect on the pressures, vulnerabilities, and challenges facing all those who have entrusted themselves to the ever-living Son of David. These eight psalms are followed by five praise psalms. Each of the final five psalms begins and ends with Hallelujah, "Praise the Lord." The Psalms conclude with lament-free joyous psalms – total praise from beginning to end.

Psalm 138 takes in the large view of salvation history. The "gods" and the "kings of the earth" are called by David to join him in praising the Lord. David is one of the earliest proponents of the global gospel. He instructs the nations on how to respond to the Lord's unfailing love and faithfulness. He bows down low before the Lord and rises up to proclaim the gospel to the kings of the earth. He does so boldly and without condemnation. He is welcoming to the nations. He invites them to praise the Lord. When they hear what the Lord has decreed they will all want to praise the Lord, because "the glory of the Lord is great" (Ps 138:5). David even gives a glimpse of how the gospel works. The Lord transcends his transcendence and "looks kindly on the lowly" (Ps 138:6). The first hint of resistance to this global gospel comes in David's need for protection. He walks in the midst of trouble and is subject to the anger of his foes. But the Lord preserves his life and stretches out his hand to save him.

The messianic significance of Psalm 138 is striking. We see David in the psalmist's description, but not only David, we see Jesus, the Son of David, who proved his faithfulness beyond what could be imagined and lowered himself unbelievably so that we might believe. We see Jesus, but not only Jesus, we see ourselves and all those who follow him. This messianic self-understanding, prefigured in David, informs the life of today's disciples. The way to know Christ is to become like Jesus precisely in the way the psalm describes, bowing adoration, emboldened proclamation, and humble identification. What Jesus did in person, through his incarnation, death, and resurrection was foreshadowed in principle and promise long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. David reveled in the anticipation of these truths. Their meaning goes beyond David's expectation and finds fulfillment in the Son who is the radiance of God's glory, the one who learned obedience by the things that suffered (Heb 1:3; 5:8). Like the prophets, David spoke of things that would be best understood in the light of the gospel. Truths that even the angels long to look into (1 Pet 1:12).

Beyond All Expectation

*I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart;
before the "gods" I will sing your praise.
I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name*

*for your unfailing love and your faithfulness,
for you have so exalted your solemn decree
that it surpasses your fame.
When I called, you answered me;
you greatly emboldened me.*

Psalm 138:1-3

David's praise and thanksgiving knows no bounds. He's all in, "I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart." Or, as one translation says it, "Thank you! Everything in me says, 'Thank you!'" (Ps 138:1, The Message). He acknowledges Yahweh exuberantly and joyfully before every ungod who claims to be god, every angel or authority, every king or prince, every idol or ideology. David stands before the world to sing the praises of the Lord God. He is not intimidated by worldly powers. His open confession before the gods is undaunted. His confession is public for all to hear. His thankfulness unites his public and private self. He cannot be one way in the world and another way in worship. "Before the 'gods' I will sing your praise." David stands before the world unbowed, bowing before the Lord. It is this combination of courage and humility that is the sign of spiritual maturity and wisdom.

The reference to "your holy temple" may refer specifically to the Jerusalem temple or it may generally refer to the presence of God. "Temple" conveys a range of meanings from the Tabernacle to the Temple. David's worship is filled with gratitude. He praises the Name of the Lord for his unfailing love and faithfulness. He then adds an intriguing third attribute: "for you have so exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame." Ross suggests that "the Lord's fulfillment of his promise to the psalmist surpasses all other manifestations of God's works."¹ What David may be saying is that the Lord fulfills his revealed promises in ways that even exceed our expectations. He's not implying that God's promises are at odds with his name, but that the fulfilled promises are beyond our imagination. The apostle Paul said something similar when he writes, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. . ." (Eph 3:20).

This line takes on deep significance when we compare God's promises to David (2 Sam 7:1-29) with the reality of the incarnate Son of David. Who would have thought that the promise to raise up offspring to succeed David, to build the temple, and to establish his kingdom would be fulfilled through a virgin conceiving and bearing a son? And that this child would be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God (Luke 1:32-35). Surely David did not envision the fulfillment of God's promises in this way (that's the point!), but he did anticipate fulfillment in ways that he could never have imagined. The Lord's exalted greatness was such that he expected to be surprised! What he experienced of God's unfailing love and faithfulness only served "to greatly emboldened" him. We imagine Jesus praying Psalm 138 and identifying with David's confidence. His whole public ministry of teaching and healing expressed this bold confidence. Jesus said, "I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:19-20).

¹Ross, Psalms, 805.

David and the Son of David

*May all the kings of the earth praise you, Lord,
when they hear what you have decreed.
May they sing of the ways of the Lord,
for the glory of the Lord is great.
Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly;
though lofty, he sees them afar.
Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life.
You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.
The Lord will vindicate me;
your love, Lord, endures forever –
do not abandon the works of your hands.*

Psalm 138:4-8

The early church undoubtedly prayed this psalm with the testimony of Jesus in mind. Jesus was the fuller realization of everything David said; everything he prefigured. If we put the apostle Paul's Christ hymn (Phil 2:6-13) alongside Psalm 138 we see key parallels. The call for the kings of the earth to praise the Lord finds its resolution in the exaltation of Christ when "every knee" will bow and "every tongue" confess "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father." The description of the exalted Lord looking kindly on the lowly parallels the humility of the Incarnate One, "Who, being in nature God. . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."

David's description of walking in the midst of trouble and depending on the Lord to save him and vindicate him finds a far deeper, rich meaning in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. David's testimony sets us up for the testimony of the Son of David, who we imagine praying this psalm in preparation for the life-threatening troubles and the anger of his foes. Surely, David's passion for thanksgiving and praise and his experience of being "greatly emboldened," ministered to Jesus self-understanding and spiritual fortitude. David's total disavowal of self-reliance and his absolute dependence on the Lord to save him bore testimony to the messianic strategy.

What was true of David and most true of the Son of David becomes true for all who follow Jesus today. The parallels run deep throughout salvation history and encompass all those who are in Christ. David bore elegant testimony to the truth when he said, "The Lord will vindicate me; your love, Lord, endures forever," but as we know his vindication depended upon the sacrificial love of the triune God. Jesus, the Son of David, fights for us in the Name of the Father, to rescue us from sin and death and to give us new life, everlasting life, in the Spirit. So when David prays, "do not abandon the works of your hands," we hear the apostle Paul's confident reassurance, "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).