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Psalm 138: A Psalm of David

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Psalm 138

A Psalm of David

Introduction to Psalm 138

Traditionally this is a Psalm of David, but the reference to the Temple in verse 2 calls that into some question, because the Temple was built after the death of David under Solomon, the son of David. It is also possible that the phrase "toward your holy temple" refers to the Holy of Holies. We will not go far wrong, however, if we think of this Psalm as coming from the lips of David or one of the royal descendants, one of the sons, of David. In this Psalm you will notice that, while the worship of the LORD must take place in the presence of the false gods (verse 1), there is a note of confidence, even triumph in this Psalm that is absent from Psalm 43. There the Psalmist is isolated from the LORD and taunted by the idol-worshipping enemies; here the Psalmist is not isolated and sings the triumphs of the LORD over the other gods.

V. 1

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

The "gods" here may reflect a picture from very early in Israel's history. The First Commandment stipulates that we are to have no other gods other than the God who gives the covenant on Sinai. That seems to imply that other gods are available for worship, albeit now unlawfully. Early in her history, at the time of the giving of the Law around 1240 B.C., Israel may have thought that Yahweh was the supreme God among many really existing gods in the other nations; but that, because He was supreme and their Rescuer, He alone was worthy of worship. Later on in the Old Testament they were taught by God that He is really the Only God there actually is (Here you might want to read a much later passage, e.g., Isaiah 45:22-23, from about 540 B.C.). So when we today read and pray this Psalm with its reference to "the gods," we may think of these as contemporary false gods, perhaps those worshiped in the surrounding pagan nations, before whom and despite whom, we worship the One and Only True God.

False gods have no real objective existence. False gods are powers and forces (e.g., an "ism" such as "Consumerism") whose only power is the power people willingly confer upon them. These forces thus often play the role of "god" in people's lives. But even though such "gods" are unreal gods without objective existence, they nevertheless exercise real power in competition with the power of God. In the presence of those powerful alternatives to the worship of the true God, the Psalmist praises the LORD with his whole heart.

V. 2

**I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and
your faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.**

Again, worship is concretely worship in, or toward, the Temple where God is pleased to dwell among Israel, where He shows His face of steadfast love and faithfulness to His Covenant promises. The Name and the Truth of this God is, and is to be, exalted above every other conceivable rival.

Yahweh's "steadfast love and faithfulness" is a frequently found combination in the Psalms and in the Old Testament generally. It is virtually equivalent to what Christians call the Gospel. It recalls that God made (saving) promises and that He is to be confessed and worshipped as a God who can be relied upon, no matter what, to keep those promises.

Recall the "Name" of Yahweh from Psalm 105:1. The "Word" of God here stands in apposition to "Name," and they are probably intended as parallel ideas. However the Hebrew text here is uncertain, as you can discover from the notes in the RSV. It could also be translated: "Your Word exceeds even your Name." Thus it might mean something like this: "Your word, that is, what you have already done by your creative speaking, and by that same creative speaking will yet do, exceeds even your name, that is, what you have promised by revelation and what we have on that basis been able to expect from you." It is God's way of saying to us, "you ain't seen nothin' yet!" Then it would mean much the same thing that the New Testament means when it praises God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in Ephesians 3:20, as the God who can (and will!) accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

V. 3

- a. **On the day I called, you answered me;**
- b. **you increased my strength of soul.**

or:

- b. **you made me arrogant (bold!) in my soul with strength.**

The faithfulness of God may be measured by how he answers my prayer. What the Psalmist specifically asked we may infer from verse 7 below; he wanted deliverance from the wrath of his enemies. What the Psalmist actually received, however, may not have been exactly what he had asked for; but what he received was something even greater, namely strength in his soul. I think that is what was being hinted in the alternative translation of verse 2 above that I suggested. That strength may well have taken the form of the courage and boldness to envision what is described in verses 4-5, namely God's intention for all people.

V. 4

**All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD,
for they have heard the words of your mouth;**

The word of God is never simply idle sound or theoretical idea; what God says, that in fact happens. "Let there be light!" And there was light! The kings of the earth may not yet have praised the God of Israel, but it is only a matter of time before they do so, because the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. This verse should be viewed as prophetic, referring to the conversion of the Gentiles. The Psalmist is anticipating what will be the case one day.

V. 5

**They shall sing of the ways (the deeds) of the LORD,
for great is the glory (reputation from accomplishments) of the LORD.**

The Psalmist here in verses 4-5 speaks in a vision of the future which anticipates the day when all the kings of the earth shall not only forsake their idols and acknowledge the Reign of the LORD as the Only God, but they shall also together with the People of this God sing His praises. This theme is taken up again, for example, in Revelation 11:15: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever."

V. 6

- a. **For though the LORD is high, he regards (sees) the lowly;**
- b. **but the haughty he perceives from afar.**

Line a. says very simply that, however high the LORD is, He is never too high to be aware of the needs of those who are lowly and to provide for them. Line b. can be read in two ways:

1. In most translations "haughty" (proud) stands as a *contrast* to the lowly, as in the NRSV. Then it is saying that the lowly are the object of the LORD's favor, whereas the proud will never be able to put any distance between themselves and the all-discerning eye of God, who will eventually bring them down.

2. "Haughty" can be translated as "lofty" and stand as a *parallel* to "high." Then it would mean that, although the LORD is high, He regards the lowly; and although He is lofty, He knows us in a caring way even at a great distance.

V. 7

- a. **Though I walk in the midst of trouble,**
- b. **you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;**
- c. **you stretch out thy hand,**
- d. **and your right hand delivers me.**

This is as specific as the Psalm gets in identifying the circumstance under which the Psalmist prays this Psalm. The "trouble" of 7a is paralleled in 7b with "the wrath of my enemies." Who are these enemies? For the Psalmist, presumably David or a royal son of David, they were probably political or military foes. But how shall we Christians pray the Psalm? That is a perennial difficulty with the Christian use of the Psalms. My own solution to the problem is two-fold: (1) I think first of all of Jesus Christ, THE Anointed Son of David, surrounded in an "alien and exiled" situation, and attracting the enmity of foes in his single-minded devotion to his heavenly Father. (2) Then in the second place, I am drawn by Psalm 43 (and others) to think of those as (perhaps unwitting) enemies who either unconsciously or by design, either covertly or openly, make it difficult for me to retain my single-minded devotion to the one God of the Bible, Yahweh who reveals Himself as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. From such, especially when they do it with malignity (in their wrath), I need that deliverance which comes alone from the God of the strong right hand.

V. 8

- a. **The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;**
- b. **your steadfast love, O LORD, endures for ever.**
- c. **Do not forsake the work of your hands.**

God's purpose for us has not yet come to its fulfillment: we are a work of the LORD still in progress. Verse 8a is a beautifully personalized appropriation of the steadfast love of Yahweh, spoken in confident faith. My faith is always the desired response to the declared faithfulness of the promising God. Verse 8b provides the basis for the declaration of faith in 8a. This is a repeated refrain in Psalm 136. Verse 8c is a final prayer based on 8b. What shall we think of as "the work of Yahweh's hand?" There is the possibility that it refers to the work of the creation itself. But it seems to me that, in addition, we need to think of that further and special work of the Creator God when He reveals Himself as Yahweh in the creation of Israel as His People. Israel holds a two-fold significance in the Bible.

1. Israel is first of all the down-payment on God's work of redemption. In the fall of Adam *all* people fell, sinned, and died. But in the creation of Israel God graciously chose them as His own Possession among all the peoples, as His Kingdom of Priests, as His Holy Nation (Exodus 19:5-6; this is the passage St. Peter appropriates to the Christian community in 1 Peter 2:9-10). To this people He declared, "I am Yahweh, your God. You shall have no other gods beside Me" (Exodus 20:2). And to them in Exodus 34:6-7 Yahweh proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." This Israel God intends to be His redeemed People.

2. But Israel is intended also to be the instrument and the agent of God for the redemption of all the rest of fallen mankind, the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. *How* that intention of God plays out in the concrete history of Israel is the basic story of the Bible, Old and New Testament, the story of God's grand plan of salvation.

For this reason I believe that, although the superscription "A Psalm of David" may be an historical anachronism, it does preserve an important theological thought. The Psalmist, if he is not David himself, is thought to be one of the sons of David (recall here the study of Psalm 2), who by virtue of his being king of Israel is also a mediating figure in Israel, one who is simultaneously both the embodiment of the People of Israel before God and a representative of God to the People. In short, he is a messianic figure. The "me" of verse 8a, therefore, is not merely every "me" who prays this Psalm, but more fundamentally the "me" who embodies the People of God and the one who represents God to His People. Thus, the LORD will fulfill His purpose for that particular messianic "me", and He will also, *through him*, fulfill the work of His hand. In this way there is, for the New Testament Christian, a distinct foreshadowing of Jesus the Messiah in this Psalm, just as there was in Psalm 43 in the figure of The Abandoned One. Thus, through THE Son of David, Israel, the People of God, the work of God's hands, now becomes also the body of Christ and the Temple of His Holy Spirit.

The LBW prayer to accompany Psalm 138:

Lord God, you keep the proud at a distance and look upon the lowly with favor. Stretch out your hand to us in our suffering, perfect in us the work of your love, and bring us to life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As you can see, this prayer adopts the usual interpretation of verse 6. The "wrath of my enemies" becomes simply "our suffering" devoid of any necessary reference to a human agent. And God's work "in us" is at best a personalized appropriation of "the work of Thy hand," without mention of God's grand plan of salvation through the Mediator.

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