

Psalm 138

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Date: 05 December 2010

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[0 : 00] The matter of sung praise has been the topic of the month in the wee world that is the Free Church of Scotland.

I have to say that in the grand scheme of things, I suspect that our little in-house discussions and debates are unlikely to merit even a footnote in the annals of the history of God's wonderful and awesome mission as He irresistibly and graciously gathers together His elect people from every nation, tribe, and people.

Now, that is not to say that the matter is unimportant, but it is to simply encourage us all to retain a measure of perspective.

Life goes on. The King is still seated on the throne, and His will will be done. Now, today I want to consider the matter of sung praise, but my concern, before anybody gets twitchy, is to consider the matter from a more fundamental perspective than the content of our sung praise to the motivation for our sung praise.

The question is, why do we sing? Why do we sing praises to God at all? And we are going to be given direction in the answer to that question as we read in Psalm 138, which is where we will be considering part of this morning.

[1 : 40] So let's read that psalm. Psalm 138, we'll read the whole of the psalm, though as we turn to consider it. We will limit ourselves to the first three verses.

Psalm 138, reading the whole of the psalm. I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart. Before the gods I will sing your praise. I will bow down towards your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness.

For you have exalted above all things your name and your word. When I called, you answered me. You made me bold and stout-hearted. May all the kings of the earth praise you, O Lord, when they hear the words of your mouth.

May they sing of the ways of the Lord, for the glory of the Lord is great. Though the Lord is on high, he looks upon the lowly. But the proud he knows from 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.

[2 : 47] The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me. Your love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not abandon the works of your hands.

The word of God. The psalmist begins this psalm with a joyful and yet also serious and solemn statement of intent.

I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart. He is declaring what his solemn intention is. And before we move on to consider the reasons why he praises God.

Reasons from which we will gain instruction. But before we do that, maybe it is worthwhile to just pause for a moment. And as we begin, ask ourselves in our own hearts, Is that the cry of my heart?

Is that my solemn intent? I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart. Is the praise of God at the very core of who you are?

[4 : 01] Is the praise of God the one matter worthy of employing every sinew of your being, every breath you have been given, every faculty in your armory, your whole heart.

I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart, declares the psalmist. And might we not suggest that that is the crying need of our day in the matter of praise.

That we would praise the Lord with our whole heart, rather than with the beggarly morsels that so often we bring as our sacrifice of praise.

Well, let us learn together from the psalmist. The fundamental question that I want to pose and answer is this one. Why does the psalmist decide and commit to praise the Lord with his whole heart?

What he says there in verse 1 is clearly the product of a process in which he has considered certain truths and he has come to a conclusion.

[5 : 16] He has decided that this is what he will do. And the question that we want to answer is, why does he come to that conclusion? Now, the answer is found very easily, we might say, because it's there before us in verse 2.

In verse 2, he continues to speak a little of the manner of the praise, but then in verse 2, he identifies the reasons. When he states that he will praise the name of God for your faithfulness, or for your love and your faithfulness.

There, right in the middle of verse 2, that he identifies, as it were, the reasons. For this reason, I will praise you in this manner. For your love and your faithfulness.

And though, in a sense, that's the answer to the question, and we could possibly just leave it there, the manner in which we're going to be thinking about the psalm is rather to think of it or look at it, consider it chronologically.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, what I mean by that is that in the psalm, there is an order of events that is described. And what we want to do is follow the order of events that has as its conclusion, as its crescendo, as it were, this decision of the psalmist, this declaration of the psalmist, that he places at the beginning of the psalm, but really is the conclusion of experiences that he has been through that lead him to this conclusion, to this crescendo.

[6 : 52] Perhaps to explain that a little further, I think what we have in the psalm, and this is the manner in which we're going to be considering it, we have, first of all, trouble that the psalmist was in.

In verse 3, there is clearly a reference to a time of trouble he was in. So we're going to think about the trouble he was in. But then we're going to consider the help that he seeks.

He's in trouble. What does he do? To whom does he turn? The help that he seeks. We also find in the psalm the answer that he receives. This man in trouble, seeking help, he cries out for help, and he receives an answer.

And then we come, and with this we will conclude, the praise he offers. So perhaps there it's more clear what I mean by looking at this chronologically, and how this declaration of his intention to praise God is the outcome of an experience that he has gone through.

Let's consider then, in that way, this psalm, or certainly the beginning of this psalm. First of all, the trouble he was in. There we read in verse 3, When I called, you answered me.

[8 : 03] You made me bold and stout-hearted. Now what was the trouble that David was in? And that is an easy question to answer because we simply don't know.

We could speculate, we could imagine, we could contemplate what may have been the trouble he was in, but the bottom line is we don't know. There is possibly a hint as to the nature of the trouble he was in.

There in verse 7, where we read, Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life. You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes. Now it may be that here, David is not speaking about the particular trouble referred to in verse 3.

He is speaking more generally, or he's maybe looking forward to the kind of trouble he might have. We don't know, but maybe, maybe there's a hint there as to the nature of his trouble.

But I suspect there is, in the psalm, a deliberate vagueness. Now that may seem a strange thing to say, that the psalmist would be deliberately vague, that the Holy Spirit of God would so inspire this man to write something that is vague, is vague not poor or bad or inadequate.

[9 : 20] Far from it. The vagueness of the psalm, and indeed this is true of many of the psalms, not all, but many. The vagueness of the psalm, far from limiting the psalm's usefulness to us, 3,000 years down the road, grants to the psalm a timeless quality and a practical usefulness for us in our manifold and varied troubles.

Perhaps if David had specifically identified his trouble, and he had said that some king was trying to topple him, or some foreign army was invading him, we might say, well, what's that got to do with me?

I don't know anything about kings trying to topple me, or foreign armies invading me. This is so alien to me, it's got nothing to do with me. But the vagueness of the psalm, simply the statement that he was in trouble, clearly in big trouble, in deep trouble of some kind, results in it being more helpful for us.

And we who also know much of trouble can identify with and can learn from the psalmist as he responds to the trouble he was in, whatever it may have been.

And so I do ask you this morning, what is your situation? Is life for you a walk in the park? Have you got it all sussed?

[10 : 40] Do you have no worries? Or are you, like the rest of us mere mortals, beset or burdened by troubles of one kind or another?

And if you are, then listen carefully, for here is a psalm for you. First of all then, the psalm identifies trouble that the psalmist was in.

But secondly, the help that he seeks, and there it is in verse 3 also. That we find an answer. When I called, you answered me.

You made me bold and stout-hearted. What does David do in the face of, in the midst of trouble? To whom does he turn? Does he try and sort out his troubles alone?

Does he lean on his own wisdom or his own resources? Perhaps that was his initial instinct. We don't know. It's possible that in the beginning, as he faced his trouble, he did try and solve it by himself.

[11 : 46] We don't know. But what is certainly true is that there came a point. Maybe he was wise enough at the very beginning, or maybe he had to discover that he was incapable of solving or of responding adequately to his trouble, and only then did he do what he describes here.

He called out to the Lord. He turns his cry for help to the Lord. And this was, of course, a very wise move on the part of David.

It was wise for many reasons, and maybe we could just highlight three reasons why it was very wise of David to cry out for help to the Lord. The Lord to whom he cries was his covenant God, his covenant God who was in a committed relationship with his people and with David.

And as a covenant God in a committed relationship with his people, this is a God who was accessible to David. We're thinking of three reasons why it was wise.

Well, this is the first. But as his covenant God, God was accessible at any time, in any place, in any circumstance, he would be ready and willing to hear the cry of his child.

- [13 : 11] Accessible but also interested. He is that covenant God, that loving Father who is always interested in any and every trouble that we have, however trivial or however seemingly trivial.

You know, the measure of a trouble or of a trial is often in the eye of the beholder or in the eye of the sufferer. Maybe others look on and say, oh, well, that's not such a big deal what you're going through, but it's a big deal for you.

But whether it is a huge trial, whether it is huge to you, and maybe others think otherwise, it really doesn't matter. Whatever it is, our God is interested.

He's accessible. We can cry out to him, but he is interested also. And thirdly, and it all comes under the overall heading, as it were, or truth of who he is as our loving covenant God, but he is able to help.

It's not only that he hears us. It's not only that he sympathizes with us and is concerned for and interested in us, but crucially, he is able to help. In contrast to others who may be accessible, who may be interested, who may love us deeply, and yet whose resources are limited, as ours are.

- [14 : 33] The Lord, our covenant God, is one who combines both the will and the power to help. And so, David, whether it was at the very beginning, whether it was following his own efforts to respond to the trial he was in, we don't know.

But whenever it was, he wisely sought the help of the Lord. So the trouble he was in and the help that he seeks.

But then, thirdly, the answer he receives. And again, we don't need to go beyond verse 3 in considering this chapter, as it were, of his experience.

When I call, you answered me. You made me bold and stout-hearted. As we think about this chapter, as it were, this part of the process, the answer that he receives, it's worth just making the point, perhaps seemingly, blindingly obvious, is that there is an answer.

There is an answer to his cry, and it would seem that it was, if not immediate, certainly timely. The language used by the psalmist suggests that it is, when I called, you answered me.

- [15 : 49] And as I say, perhaps the word immediate would be too bold, but certainly it was a timely answer. When he called, in the midst of his trouble, at the point of his need, at that time, there was an answer from the one to whom he turned.

This was, certainly, the experience of the psalmist. Now, we might pose the question, well, that's fine. That was the experience of the psalmist in this particular occasion, but can we, from that, legitimately draw out the conclusion that it is always so?

Can we say, simply because on this occasion, the psalmist received a timely answer from the Lord, is it legitimate to then say, well, that is always what happens? And that is a very serious question of great practical importance, because is it not the case, in our experience, that unanswered prayer is a very painful and confusing reality?

And perhaps there are those here this morning who are listening to what I say, and they're saying, well, that sounds wonderful. That sounds just dandy. This immediate, timely reply, but I've been praying for ages, and I don't hear anything.

I don't seem to have any reply, be it timely or otherwise. And I don't pretend to have any glib or easy answers to that reality.

- [17 : 19] But I do wonder if we can ever conclude that the Lord fails to answer. Is it not rather that the answer sometimes is not heard, or sometimes we are unable to understand the answer that is given, or sometimes the answer, though it is an answer, is silence.

God, for reasons best known to Himself, chooses not to give us a verbal, as it were, answer in the manner that we maybe would like.

Certainly in the psalm, and certainly the experience of the psalmist as it is described for us by himself, is that he called, and the Lord answered. But of greater significance, I think, than the timing of the answer is the nature of the answer received.

Maybe we could approach this aspect with this question. Does the Lord solve David's problem? Does the Lord miraculously and dramatically bring an end to his trouble?

Well, I think the answer to that is very clear. The answer is no, He does not. The Lord does not solve David's problems. He does not relieve him of the trouble he is in. David tells us what the Lord does.

[18 : 38] When I called, you answered me. You made me bold and stout-hearted. David doesn't say, you killed my enemies, or you defeated my foes, or you relieved me of this burden I was under.

No, David says, what you did was make me bold and stout-hearted. You equipped me to be able to respond to my trouble, to face up to my trouble, to overcome my trouble, and perhaps even to live with the trouble I was in.

What the Lord does is equip David. He makes him bold and stout-hearted, and this, we have to recognize, is the Lord's usual way.

He can certainly, and He may on occasion, choose to dramatically intervene in the circumstances of our lives, and resolve a problem that we have.

He can remove a trouble that is facing us. He can, if He so chooses, frustrate our enemies. He can heal a physical illness that we are suffering from.

[19 : 43] He can do all of these things, and there are occasions when He chooses so to do. But I think in the light of the Scriptures, and in the light of the whole counsel of God, as we find it revealed in the Scriptures, we can reasonably conclude that that is not His ordinary way.

Why not? Why is it that God chooses, rather than solve our trouble, equip us to be able to handle or confront or bear the trouble we are in?

Well, I think the answer to that is that God is more interested in you than in your outward circumstances. He is much more interested in you as a person than in the troubles that you are in, and His concern is to change you and to make you more like His dear Son, Jesus.

And that objective will not be progressed by simply removing your trouble, but it will be advanced by making you bold and stout-hearted, by equipping you to confront and deal with and, painful though this is, often bear your trouble.

Also, on a practical level, God dealing with us from the inside rather than dealing with the outward circumstances is much more helpful for us in the long run, because in this life we will always have troubles.

[21 : 14] And if God were to remove one particular trouble, then what will you find? Well, you'll go around the corner, a new week will dawn, and there'll be something else, and there'll be a new trouble and a new trial.

And how will you respond? Will you once again go to God and say, God, you've got to take this trouble away from me because I can't handle it? Or will you, having learned from your previous experience, having enjoyed the equipping of God as He makes you bold and stout-hearted, be better able, certainly with His continuing help, to respond to and to confront and to bear the troubles that will come in your life?

The answer that the psalmist receives. But then finally, the praise he offers. And this is at the beginning of the psalm, but it's really the conclusion of David's experience.

And he concludes with these words that we've already touched on. I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart. And here we come to the heart of the matter, or certainly that which is our principal concern this morning.

Why does David praise the Lord? Maybe just to delay the agony a little in terms of answering that question definitively, we can just note what David says concerning the manner of his praise.

[22 : 38] He speaks of his praise as being wholehearted. I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart. It involved all that he was and all that he had.

There is no other activity to which David dedicates greater focus and energy and attention than the praise of his God. It is wholehearted, but it's also public. I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart.

Before the gods, I will sing your praise. And without entering into the question as to what David specifically refers to here in this difficult expression, what we certainly can say is that he is speaking of praise that is public.

It is speaking of praise that is intentionally public, that is deliberately public. David wants the world to know that his God is a God worthy of his wholehearted praise, that his God has answered his cry for help.

But why does he praise the Lord? Well, we have noted at the very beginning the answer to that question. Now it only is for us to develop it a little.

[23 : 48] I will praise you for your love and your faithfulness. For your love and for your faithfulness. David does not only answer, or rather, David does not only praise God for the answer that he received.

He certainly did receive an answer. And this is, as it were, the spur to praise. But his praise is not only because he received an answer. But rather, his praise is a result of what that answer revealed concerning the very nature of God.

Yes, God answered his cry, but in answering his cry, God revealed something of who he is. He revealed to David, he reminded David, he made it clear to David that he is a loving and a faithful God.

Precisely, those attributes, those truths concerning God that David highlights. I will praise you. Why? Because you answered my prayer? Well, no, not fundamentally for that reason.

But I will praise you for your love and your faithfulness that finds expression in answered prayer. The praise of David is grounded in and flows from the very character of God.

[25 : 07] The words David uses to describe God here in the Hebrew are very fundamental words to describe our covenant God, hesed, variously translated as love or grace or mercy, and emet, translated truth or faithfulness.

And these words touch on the very essence of God as He has revealed Himself to us as our covenant God. He is loving, He is merciful, He is gracious, He is faithful, He is loyal, He is true.

Indeed, the manner in which David uses the words allows us to think of them not only as distinct characteristics, you know, love and faithfulness, but it allows us to see how these truths marry beautifully where faithfulness serves to describe the nature of God's love.

This love that David speaks of is a faithful love. It is a dependable love. It is a love that never lets go. It's that kind of love. So David doesn't just say, well, you're a loving God and you're a faithful God, but there is a marriage of these truths and he says, your love, it is that kind of love, a faithful love, dependable love, a love that never grows cold, another, a love that never lets down.

And how precious to David must that love have been. Time does not allow us to develop why this feature, this characteristic of the love of God would have been so precious to David, but maybe if I can just suggest and hint at some reasons and you can carry these and develop these yourselves as you wish.

[26 : 48] Think of David's experience of love in his human relationships. He married his sweetheart, Michal. Michal who is said to have loved David.

No doubt her love for David was deep and genuine and sincere. He was this great military hero. He was the one that she loved above all others.

And yet we find that with the passage of time when she witnesses and very ironically if you wish, very soberingly, when she witnessed the wholehearted praise of her husband leaping and dancing before the Lord, we're told she despised him in her heart.

What happened? Well, her love grew cold. Passionate perhaps, but not faithful. And how different the love of the Lord and how precious to David as he suffered in human love.

And no doubt he contributed to that. How precious for David to be able to turn to his God and say, ah, but your love is different. Your love is faithful. Others may let me down.

[27 : 58] I may let others down, but to you I can turn. And in you I find faithful love. His own son. His own son, Absalom, who as a wee boy I am sure, this I don't think is unworthy or illegitimate speculation, surely that wee boy as a wee boy idolized his father.

My daddy, he's the one I love more than anyone. I'll always love my daddy. And yet, that love grew cold.

That love became perversely and cruelly became hatred. And this son who had loved him then hated him and wanted to depose him and to kill him and to get rid of him.

Driven by selfishness and jealousy and evil in his heart and what pain for a father the wounds of his own dear son. But, but, for David in such circumstances to turn to his Lord and say, ah, but your love, your love is different, your love is faithful, your love is dependable.

I will never be the victim of such pain as a result of you letting me down. And so, David, why does he sing praise to God? What is the motivation for his sung praise?

[29 : 19] I will praise you for your love and your faithfulness. And as we draw things to a close, dear Christian friend, I would say to you, behold your God, admire and celebrate and wrap yourself in his faithful, loyal, stubborn love.

But as we do close, I do ask this question, where can we best discover and admire and experience this love, this faithful love in all its fullness?

And for this, we must turn to David's greater son. We have read in John's Gospel and we have been given there a telling description of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

And we read there in verse 14, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father. And then what does it say?

Full of grace and truth. Full of grace and truth. The very words used by John in Greek, charis and aletheia are the Greek equivalents of the Hebrew words used by the psalmist in Psalm 138.

[30 : 31] Jesus Christ, full of hesed and eme. Jesus Christ, full of charis and aletheia. Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth.

And the most eloquent and dramatic demonstration of the fullness of grace and truth in the person of Jesus Christ, where is it to be found? Surely it is to be found at Calvary, where driven by gracious love for his people and faithfulness to his Father, Jesus died in the place of sinners.

So, dear friend, Christian or otherwise, behold the face of God in the person of Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth. And as you behold, respond in the only way that is fitting, bow down and praise, cry out with the psalmist, I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart.

I will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness. Let us pray. my friend, bow down, to my Mary, I will praise you, in the Holy Spirit, thank you, for your love.

If you think of all, of course, you may want to honour a sacrifice of your father, but of course, let me... into your love and you finish that you're so alone into your body in the house, I will always you end in my life with full diss Nicole.

[31 : 56] You're going firm of our friends as with me in the Sentinel, and I will pound you up and you won't but I will