

Praise for a Purpose

Psalm 138

SCRIPTURE

¹ I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;

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.

³ On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.

⁴ All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth.

⁵ They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD.

⁶ For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.

⁷ Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.

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

UNEXPECTED GOODNESS

You may have heard me tell this story before, but it bears repeating. It's a kind of miracle story, one that led people to see God at work in the world. Traveling overseas can be unsettling – especially if it's your first time. My first time was when I went to Finland a couple of years ago. When I arrived in Helsinki, with just one more flight to go, I got stuck in the wrong customs line and ended up missing my connection. That experience is nothing compared to this one: a woman and her husband were traveling in Portugal when their rental car was stolen ... the one with the woman's bag in the trunk ... the one with their passports and plane tickets, and they planned to fly back to the U.S. the next day. They went to the airport early, perhaps they thought they could work something out with the airline, but they had little hope.

But that's not the end of the story.

What they didn't know was that another woman had found the missing bag. The money was gone, but the passports and plane tickets were right there. She noticed the date of departure and went into overdrive ... literally. She drove for over an hour before she found a man who worked as a security guard in the airport the couple would be flying from. Because it was 2:00 a.m., she had to bang on the door for a while before he woke up and came to the door. After he got the gist of what was going on, he immediately jumped in his car and drove to the airport with the bag, even though his shift wouldn't begin for another 7 hours or so. When the couple arrived at the airport, they went to the ticket counter to explain their situation. Before they finished their story, the airline official started beaming and he handed them the missing bag.

The couple was able to fly home because of the actions of people they would never meet. In their time of trouble, God answered their call. God worked this miracle through people answering God's call to provide unexpected goodness.

THANKS WITH MY WHOLE HEART

The person who wrote Psalm 138 was going through his own time of trouble, yet because he knew who God was, he was able to sense God's presence and know without a doubt that God was working for his good.

The very first verse tells us the psalmist gave thanks to God with his whole heart. The Hebrew word translated as "giving thanks" in my version of the Bible can be best understood as "teaching" or "making known" – the psalmist isn't thanking God privately, the psalmist is "thanking" God by making God and God's steadfast love and faithfulness known, by teaching, witnessing, and confessing who God is and what God has done. The psalmist uses the God's name as revealed to Moses from the burning: Yahweh, which means I am who I am, or I will be who I will be, and then proceeds to give witness to who God is. He gives this witness with his whole heart; he holds nothing back, singing praises to God in a way that all can bear witness to the evidence of God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

THE REASONS FOR PRAISE

The psalmist sings praises for three reasons: to thank God for who God is, to thank God for helping him personally – this is also the evidence he gives for God being who God is, and to thank God for the final word, what I call the end of the story.

In verse 2 of Psalm 138, the singer gives thanks to God's name – that is, for God being who God is, steadfastly loving and eternally faithful. He praises God for exalting the name of the LORD and God's word above everything – this means God's faithfulness and love

trumps all things. No matter what happens or what seems more important at the time, God's priority is caring for God's children: the psalmist, all people through time, and us living in a future the psalmist couldn't have possibly imagined.

In the first part of verse 6, the psalmist declares that even though God is higher than all things, God specifically regards the lowly – the humble, the struggling, the lonely, and the lost. To speak of God's regard in this way is to speak of the attention God pays to the least and lowest of society. The ones who need the most help and can reach for it in hope and humility get first dibs on God's power. In the second half of verse 6, the psalmist says God perceives the haughty from far away. This isn't an indication that God pulls away from any person, but the ones who believe they have the power to save themselves put themselves on a different mountain than the one God invites them to climb. God perceives them from far away because the ones who praise themselves have stepped away from God.

The psalmist sings praises for the specific things God did for him and continued to do throughout his life. In verse 3, the author thanks God for answering his prayers. God answers prayer. Let's think about that for a moment. God, the creator of the universe and the source of all power and life, not only hears our prayers, but answers them as well. God doesn't just do that once or only some of the time, God hears and answers every prayer – this is clear evidence of God's steadfast love and eternal faithfulness. The way the psalmist experienced God's answer to his call was with a renewed strength of soul. And we can expect this as well. God gives us the strength to persevere through all things, the strength to be all of what God has created us to be and to deal with whatever happens.

In verse 7, the psalmist admits that his life is troubled but does even that by thanking God for God's presence with him during those times and for God's deliverance from them. His words are a reflection of the 23rd Psalm, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." The rod and staff of a shepherd are tools of protection. When we experience trouble, God is with us and protects us.

In verse 8, the author of Psalm 138 thanks God for fulfilling God's purpose in him. That might be the most important reason to thank God, for what better purpose to serve than God's? The central verses of Psalm 138, with its bookends of God's nature and the help God has given to the psalmist, tells us the purpose of the singer's praise and thanksgiving. The psalmist's teaching and confessing and witnessing make known to all the powers of the world the steadfast love and eternal faithfulness of the LORD. Verse 4 of this psalm tells us that the result of praise is that "all the kings of the earth" shall praise the LORD. They will be the ones singing of the ways of the LORD, and great is God's glory. And then comes the verse about God perceiving the haughty from far away. Could the psalmist be referring to what the kings of the world were like before witnessing the glory of God through his thanksgiving. Who would be more focused on his own glory and confident in his own power than a king? And what happens when one recognizes God as the most high and worthy of praise? They bow, they kneel, they become close to the earth in their humility. In short, they become lowly and fall under God's loving regard.

I can't think of a more effective witness than from one who had dismissed or rejected God in the past; if that witness also happens to be powerful by the world's standards, then how much more effective would he or she be? The psalmist's thanksgiving and praise have led the most influential people of the world to sing of the ways of the LORD: God answers our prayers and strengthens our souls, God is present with and cares for the lowly, God walks with us through times of trouble, and God delivers us from our enemies.

OUR PURPOSE

How will the powers of the world hear the word, know the way, see the glory of God, and give praise? This is where we come in. We know that God will fulfill God's purposes in each of us, and God's purpose is to save the world. You may not feel like your witness can make much of a difference or that your congregation is too small to matter in the larger scope of things, but that is where God comes in. God works through our offerings of thanksgiving and praise – no matter how insignificant you think they are – to give the final word of redemption. When we make known how God has worked for our good through even the worst of times, the ones who hear us will learn the ways of the LORD, and all the powers of the world will sing of God's glory.