

# God both high and yet close

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Littlebourne - 24th November 2024 - Psalm 138

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We're taking a break from Zechariah, to look at a Psalm.

Of David

This is one of a series of eight Psalms of David. David is attributed as the author of 73 psalms in total. We're in the Fifth Book of Psalms - if you remember way back when we started the Psalms of Ascent, I talked a little about the Psalms as a whole, and how they are a thousand year project of compilation - this last book of psalms was compiled in the post exile age, around the same time as Zechariah possibly.

**v1**

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

David gives thanks - this is not mere ordinary gratitude, but with sincerity from the whole heart. That's easy enough - standard Bible stuff. But the next phrase is trickier: 'before the gods I sing your praise'.

The 'gods' here is the word 'elohim'. It can mean literally God, or angels, some take it to mean lesser spritual beings of some form - deities subordinate to the Lord.

Another plausible explanation is that this refers to other humans - the word is used to describe the priestly judges in Exodus 21:6, 22:8-9. Exodus describes that people are to be brought before Elohim - before God via His representative judges in the priesthood.

So whilst it's not totally clear, it can mean that David will sing God's praise before other higher authorities - before the priesthood, the judges here on earth, before angels and any other spiritual beings.

He gives praise in public. Calvin puts it like this: "The solemn assembly is, so to speak, a heavenly theater, graced by the presence of attending angels; and one reason why the cherubim overshadowed the Ark of the Covenant was to let God's people know that the angels are present when they come to worship in the sanctuary." David doesn't worship in solitude - indeed none of us does. There is always more going on than ourselves - worship is something outward, whether we intend it or not.

## v2

*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 above all things  
your name and your word.*

David didn't have a temple, the first temple was built by his son, Solomon. Though we get references to the temple in other Psalms of David. For instance Psalm 65:29 says 'Because of your temple at Jerusalem kings shall bear gifts to you.'

We likewise don't have a temple - we don't have a physical focal point. So what was David bowing down toward? Yes, he had the tabernacle, so that might have done, but today, we need to think about what we orient ourselves toward. What we focus on is a key part of our worship - we are to orient ourselves toward God.

Now another difficult phrase, in part because there are translational options available. Either this says something along the lines of 'for you have exalted above all things your name and your word' or it says something like 'you have exalted your word above all your name'. Now the first one makes sense - God is exalted above all things, His word and His name above all. Fine. But the second is perplexing - the NIV interprets it in its rendering of 'you have so exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame'. Now that's interpretation really, not necessarily a bad one.

I think this is saying that God exalts His name, through enacting His decree - His name, His glory is substantiated in what He does, which is an extension of who He is. God's name is glorious, because He is glorious - it's a true description of who He is.

### v3

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

Sometimes we have prayers that seem unanswered, but often our prayers are directly answered. Sometimes also, we are stirred to prayer by the Spirit that we might experience God's faithfulness in answering us. David of course had prayers answered that were literally the difference between life and death. Throughout the Psalms we see his example of prayer for seemingly every situation.

Relatedly, his strength of soul is increased - in answered prayer, he is emboldened. Prayer changes us too.

### v4-5

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

David knows that his own individual contribution to worshipping God is not anywhere near enough - God deserves the praise of all the kings of the world, not just his.

Again we get some interpretation and differences in translation - the NIV says '*May* all the kings of the earth praise You, *when* they hear', but most other translations says something like 'The kings of the earth *shall* praise you, for they *have* heard'.

This makes quite the difference - is this a hypothetical or is David exaggerating? We see the kings of the earth, those with real power globally, either today or in David's day, don't give God praise. But there will be a day when the most powerful bend the knee to God, when the rulers of the earth give God the glory. There will be a day when nobody has not heard the words of the Lord.

### v6

*6 For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly,  
but the haughty he knows from afar.*

This verse follows on from the last - even the kings of the earth are lowly, in light of God's highness. But despite the lowliness of all humanity, God regards us, He answers us, he comes close to us.

God's majesty should not bring us to forget his goodness and mercy and care for us, but equally, his involvement with us should not make us lose our reverence and humility before Him. David joins the two together - His highness and yet His willingness to stoop down to us.

However, the haughty, the proud or arrogant, are distant from God. God knows them - but from afar. Most translations give something like 'but the proud he knows from a distance'. He knows everyone - there's no hiding from God. but not all know God equally, nor does God come close to all alike.

## v7

*7 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.*

David walked through a fair bit of trouble, again life and death situations, but here he is general - we can apply this to any situation of trouble. In any situation, we know that God will preserve us.

We are by nature often people regularly acquainted with fear. We are so averse to suffering of all kinds, we want to avoid all of it. But David says that though he walks in the midst of trouble - that trouble is nearby always - he knows God is there with him. This is part of faith's purpose - to see life in the midst of death, to trust God's mercy and providence. Not as that which will deliver us from all earthly trouble now, but that will deliver us fully and completely in the end.

But God doesn't *just* deliver in the end - David sees His protection in the immediate term too. God stretches out His hand against the wrath of David's enemies, and delivers David from trouble on earth. We see this in the narrative of David's life in scripture - he is miraculously protected from far greater threats than we typically face. How much more should we trust in God with our comparatively small issues.

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

The NIV says 'the Lord will vindicate me', other translations go more on the lines of 'the Lord will accomplish his plans or purposes'. Now this too is quite the difference - who calls the shots? Whose plans or purposes?

David says that the Lord will fulfill His purposes for him - and of course this goes for us too. The trouble seen in the last verse has purpose - God has purposes in mind in all that happens.

God's steadfast love endures forever. God's love doesn't waver, He won't change His mind about us and leave us. David's hope is resting on who God is, His character.

Lastly, 'Do not forsake the works of your hands'. We are the works of God's hands - we are creatures, we're created. God's purposes for us go right back to our very beginnings, as He formed us. His love lasts forever stretching into the future, yes, but also back into the past to before our very first breath.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this Psalm is about God's highness, yet His concern for us. God is above all, yet interested in us.

It's easy often to think only of God's highness and holiness and total otherness - to picture God as someone that is so far above what happens here on earth. He's got better things to do surely than pay any attention to us.

Or the other way around, we can think that God is so involved in human affairs that we forget that He's actually God, actually in control of the big picture, high and holy. God as a listening therapist, but not a God of justice and might.

Many think of God as far and distant - maybe an example of this would be Islam. In Islam, nobody gets to see god, nobody gets to communicate with god, it's a god of highness, and distance.

And many think of god as being so close that god is not really different than anything else - pantheism, it's all god, we're god, god is so close, there's no distinction at all.

But this Psalm tells us that God is both high and holy and someone we're able to communicate with, who comes close to us.

We see in Christ this combination in stark reality - God become man. In order to unite Himself to us, He became one of us, not losing His divinity, but taking on a human nature. His glory and sinlessness and highness brought down to us.

When we're unsure of His purpose, unsure of His regard for us, we need to see that He is so much higher than us - and thus able to do all that is required and we need to see that He comes close to us - in Christ He comes so close as to be alongside us in humanity and takes from us our sin, uniting Himself to us.