PSALM 138: WHY SHOULD WE PRAY?

Why should we pray? Well, Jesus taught us to pray. In Luke 18:1 Jesus says that we “ought always to pray and not lose heart.” James 5:13: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.” So for starters we’re clearly told in scripture to pray. But why? Why should we pray? Does God need our prayer to help Him run the universe? Does He need our instruction or our suggestions? Does He require our input? I mean, wouldn’t His will be carried out and accomplished even if you and I didn’t pray about it? We know we’re told to pray, but why? Well, Psalm 138 helps us to answer that question.

Disclaimer: I’m not a language guy (I rely a lot on my Strong’s concordances and Vine’s Dictionary). But when I was at DTS I had the privilege of meeting and learning from some godly men who were biblical Greek and Hebrew scholars. One of my professors was Dr. Ronald Allen from Portland, Oregon. [show picture] Dr. Allen is an interesting man. One thing that is evident about him is that he loves the Psalms. He knows biblical Hebrew quite well and I learned a lot from his unique perspective. In his book “And I Will Praise Him” [show copy] he has a whole chapter devoted to Psalm 138 and so much of what I’ll be sharing with you this morning I’ve borrowed from Dr. Allen’s book. In preparing for this lesson I looked at what various authors had to say from several different resources and all had a different take on this passage. Each one had a little different take on the Hebrew word meanings. So I’m not going to stand in front of you this morning and claim that this is definitively the right interpretation of Psalm 138, but I do think that Dr. Allen really captures David’s heart (he is the one who penned this beautiful psalm).

Psalm 138 is divided into 3 distinct parts, or 3 movements. In v 1-3 David praises God in the first person – “I give You thanks,” “I sing Your praise.” In v 4-6 David looks ahead to the future when there will be the praise of God by the kings of the earth – “They shall sing of the ways of the Lord.” Finally in v 7-8 David reflects on his own walk with the Lord and how he depends upon Him thru daily communication in prayer.

As Psalm 138 begins, David praises God for answering one of his prayers…

READ Psalm 138:1-3

“I give You thanks, O Lord with my whole heart.” Dr. Allen’s interpretation of the original Hebrew here is, “I acknowledge You with all my heart.” For David, the idea of thanking and praising God involves him giving public acknowledgement of what God did. In the Jewish culture of the O.T one would give thanks to God by telling others about God’s character or His wondrous deeds. It was thru this public expression that Yahweh’s name was praised, made known, extolled. Think about it – how will people know what God is doing in your life or my life unless we tell them? And David does this with his whole heart, with his whole being. My favorite psalm is Psalm 103 and it begins, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name!” That’s the idea here.

“Before the gods I sing Your praise.” You need to understand where David is coming from. In David’s time Israel was surrounded by several pagan nations who worshipped many “gods.” These people were polytheistic. Idolatry was rampant and it threatened the religious life of Israel. We know from our O.T. history that Israel over time slipped into idolatry. The people of God forsook the one true God and they began worshipping false gods like Baal (Canaanites), Ashteroth (Sidonians), Chemosh (Moabites), and Milcom (Ammonites). And God judged them severely for it. So here David is asserting a frontal attack on the paganism that he sees all around him. David feels emboldened to declare, to sing, praises to God before his enemies, before people he is surrounded by who do not know his great God.

“I bow down toward Your holy temple and give thanks to Your name for Your steadfast love and Your faithfulness.” The word “temple” is a reference to the place where the people would gather for worship, literally, “a large public building.” So it’s not the temple as we think of it, which Solomon would build some years later. The temple spoken of here would have been the structure built up around the tabernacle which was no longer carried around but was now permanently housed in Jerusalem.

So David not only sings God’s praises and tells of God’s goodness to the godless, pagan peoples around him (v 1), but he also praises God in the house of the Lord as he worships with God’s people. As David shares with others what God is doing in his life, so we should also seize every opportunity to share what God is doing in our life. We should tell others what a great God He is, both here in the church with other believers but also out in the community as well, in the workplace, in the marketplace.

“For you have exalted above all things your name and your word.” Interpreters thru the centuries have struggled with this verse and part of the issue is the structure of the Hebrew text. Some interpretations such as in the Septuagint seem to suggest that God’s word is exalted even above God’s name, His holy character, and that cannot be. As important as the Bible is, as scripture is, we cannot exalt it above God Himself. Dr. Allen suggests, and I think he is correct here, that “Your word” is not a reference to the Scriptures as a whole but refers to God’s specific answer to David’s prayer which comes in verse 3. We’ve all heard the expression, “I got a word from the Lord.” In other words, I had an experience with God in which He personally revealed to me something I needed to do or say, or He showed me something new about Himself. Dr. Allen suggests that God’s answer to David’s prayer quite possibly was unexpected and surprising. It may have even overwhelmed David. The bottom line is that God’s answer to David’s prayer taught David more about God than he knew before.

We’re not told what David’s prayer in verse 3 is. All we know is that he called out to God (prayed), and then God answered him. “On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased.” And whatever the answer was, it caused David to be strengthened within. It emboldened David. It gave him more courage. Perhaps it had something to do with David winning a battle against one of his enemies, we don’t know for sure because he doesn’t say. The idea here in these verses is that David had an experience in which he called out to God, he had an issue he needed God’s help with. And God answered David’s prayer. And the answer he got provided David with a newfound strength and courage. And this prompted David to then declare to those around him what God had done in his life – both to God’s people and to those who did not know God.

The result of David’s prayer was that God answered him and then David declared what God had done and gave to God the honor and glory that He deserved. So prayer brings us to the praise of God as we see Him at work in our life and learn more about Him experientially.

Dr. Allen says this: “If prayer is the root and praise is the flower, we cannot expect much of a bouquet if the roots are dry and ill-nourished. But when we sink our roots of prayer deeply, we should soon expect brilliant flowers of praise. It is the most natural thing in the world to give God praise when He has overwhelmed us by an answer to our prayer.”

Now David shifts gears and makes a prophecy about the future…

READ Psalm 138:4-6

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David speaks of a future time when all kings will experience what he has just experienced. V 4-5 are more than just David’s wishful thinking or his optimistic hope for the future. Here David prophesies about the future Messianic kingdom, when Jesus comes to rule and to reign on the earth. It’s hard for us to imagine this happening today as we look around at some of our world’s leaders (Kim Jong-un of North Korea, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Ali Khamenei of Iran) that these men would actually sing praises to God! But this will happen. It will happen during the millennial kingdom. When Jesus sits on the throne, all the kings of the earth will join in praise to the glory of God. With Jesus on the throne, all national leaders under Him will be learning of His ways and walking in His paths. And, like David has been doing, will give public acknowledgment to His name.

Then David gives us this wise proverb: “For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar.” Our great and mighty God with limitless glory, all power and authority, regards the lowly, the humble, the poor in spirit. Jesus taught, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” James 4:6 says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Proverbs 3:34 tells us that “to the humble He gives favor.” This is one of the great paradoxes of the Bible – the humble, the contrite, the lowly of spirit are actually closer to God than are the proud, those who exalt themselves.

[life of Paul – prideful, humbled, “Let the one who boasts, boast only in the Lord” (2 Cor 10:17)

World leaders are in an exalted position with great authority, some actually see themselves as god-like figures. But only as they humble themselves under the authority of Jesus will they be able to see God’s might hand at work and in turn praise Him for it.

David closes this psalm with a personal application…

READ Psalm 138:7-8

V 7 offers us a hint about what David’s prayer request was. He recalls how God delivered him from his enemies. Just because God answered one of our prayers and maybe even, as with David, He answered it in an extraordinary way, does not mean that all of our prayer concerns are behind us. Our prayer sheet will constantly change, won’t it? Some prayers will get answered and will turn to praises. Other prayer requests for various sickness, trials, temptations, distress, concerns, etc will take their place. The fact is in this life we will constantly have problems, face various trials. But David can build on his past experience and have confidence that God, just as He did before, will again hear David’s prayer and will answer it. Each time our prayers are answered we’re encouraged to keep on praying.

That first part of v 8 “The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me.” Dr. Allen says that this is the O.T. expression of the N.T. faith, Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” God preserves us, keeps us alive, because He has a purpose for us. And, as David reminds us, He WILL fulfill His purpose for us.

David closes out this psalm with another prayer, a request of the Lord, “Do not forsake the work of your hands.” “Lord, finish what You started in me!” As Paul said in Philippians 1:6: “And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

So why pray? Psalm 138 teaches us that the purpose of prayer is to glorify our great God. We have a real need. So we go to God and lay out that need before Him and ask Him to help us, guide us with it. Then, maybe even in ways we didn’t expect, He answers our prayer. He meets our needs. He provides an answer to our prayer. That produces within us, deep within our very being, a desire to acknowledge, give glory to His name, honor Him and that thru our public declaration, our praise to Him.

Psalm 138 – sing the chorus “Bless the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me…”