

*A Walk Through the Psalms: God Saves*  
*Psalm 138; John 3:17-21*  
*Salem United Methodist Church; June 3, 2018*  
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The Psalms are a collection of ancient worship songs to God that speak to the human soul today. John Wesley referred to the Psalms as a “rich treasury of devotion.” The Psalms have nurtured, guided, and given voice to suffering for generations upon generations through its laments and praises. Through the Psalms we can be honest with and revere God at the same time. Also, through the Psalms we come to know who God is and who we are in relationship to God.

As we read through Psalm 138, what images came to mind? How did it speak to your heart? The Psalm begins with words of praise to God. “I give thanks to you with all my heart, Lord. I sing your praise before all other gods. I bow toward your holy temple and thank your name for your loyal love and faithfulness because you have made your name and word greater than everything else.” There is a definite sense of deep gratitude from this individual. He uses words such as, “I give thanks to you...I sing your praise...I bow toward you...I thank your name.” Do we know why this individual is so thankful?

Yes, at some point in time this person was in distress. We don’t know what the distress was. Some think that this Psalm may be referring to the trouble Israel was in during the exile in Babylon. The Psalmist doesn’t tell us if the “I” is referring to one person or a group of people. But the Psalmist does tell us that God helped, God saved, in the time of distress. How did God help? How did God save in the time of distress? God answered. God encouraged. God provided inner strength. There is a phrase that I want to debunk. And that phrase is, “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” First, this phrase is not in the Bible as some like to say. Second, God does not create situations for us to handle. Life happens. Sometimes the situations that we find ourselves in are created by our own choices. Sometimes we find ourselves in situations created by others. And sometimes situations happen that are out of our control. Nevertheless, we are in these situations. They are real to us. We hurt. We are overwhelmed. We feel helpless and hopeless. How we deal with the situation is what counts. We can cave in and allow the situation to overcome us or we can persevere and endure. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that endurance produces character which produces hope. The Psalmist gives us a glimpse into how character is built during difficult situations. The Psalmist cried out to God. We don’t know what the psalmist cried, but we know the writer was brutally honest with what was happening. In another Psalm we hear how brutally honest we can be before God. The writer of Psalm 142 wrote, “I cry out loud for help from the Lord. I beg out loud for mercy from the Lord. I pour out my concerns before God. I announce my distress to him.” The Psalmist is not holding back from God with this drama. Back to Psalm 138: after the writer cries out to God, there develops an awareness of how God is giving inner strength. In Romans Paul calls this hope and that the hope is there because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been gives to us. God gives encouragement, inner strength, and hope. These are three powerful words. We will look at each of them.

First, encouragement. How does it make you feel when someone encourages you? Football teams have encouragers. We call them cheerleaders. They stand on the sidelines with pom-poms jumping around shouting out cheers to get the crowds to cheer on the team. Does it work? Of course! The Psalmist is stating that God is a cheerleader who cheers us on and gives us strength to persevere, to

keep on keeping on. The Psalmist writes: “Whenever I am in deep trouble, you make me live again. You send your power against my enemies’ wrath. You save me with your strong hand.” These are resurrection words, “You make me live again.” The Psalmist was wasn’t living, not quite dead, but not living either. And through God’s encouragement, the writer is now alive again. We don’t know if the situation is better, but at least the Psalmist can face it. The Psalmist now realizes this power and inner strength is given by God.

Inner strength is the second powerful word. The psalmist writes that God sees the lowly. One can’t get much lower than being in a concentration camp where death, brutality, and starvation are common occurrences. The women who were imprisoned in Ravensbruck concentration camp drew inner strength from remembering recipes from better times: times when they held carefree tea parties and times when the family gathered for holiday meals. Where having or not having a scrap of food was a matter of life or death, these women wrote their recipes down from paper stolen from the commandants’ office. They found comfort in remembering and sharing these recipes with each other. It helped to preserve a way of life, a culture that was being obliterated. As they remembered the recipes, stories of the meals served at their tables would emerge. They remembered life’s events such as birthdays, anniversaries, Passovers, Bar Mitzvahs, and Shabbats. Remembering not only gave them comfort but strength to carry on. And the sharing of these recipes also gave them something else—hope. As the older women taught these recipes to the younger women, they had hope for the survival of the next generation. Hope is the third powerful word.

In the middle of an extremely difficult time God gave these women the inner strength by remembering recipes and saved them. Remembering their recipes also gave them power against their enemies’ wrath. Nothing could get them down when they remembered the sweet smell fresh baked challah bread prepared for Shabbat or the taste of orange cake offered with tea. In the midst of their suffering, their lament was transformed to giving thanks. Their recipes are published in a cookbook called: *The Holocaust Survivors Cookbook: Recipes Your Family Will Enjoy, Stories You Will Never Forget*.

Psalm 138 is about the transformation of our laments, our cries for help, our messed up situations to giving thanks and praise. Lament and praise go hand in hand. They are like dance partners. Both are needed. We witness this every time we share in Holy Communion. We lament that we are not the people God expects us to be. We call this confession, but it is also a lament. Then God saves us from ourselves and we are forgiven. We acknowledge this forgiveness with each other in the sharing of the peace. Then we turn right around and give thanks to God with our offering and a prayer called, “The Great Thanksgiving.” In this prayer we give thanks to God for all of God’s mighty acts, especially the one through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In the midst of a world that is full of hate, wrath, violent behavior, and division, the ancient words of Psalm 138 still offers us encouragement, inner strength, and hope that God still saves. We can give thanks and at the same time pray, “Your faithful love lasts forever, Lord! Don’t let go of what your hands have made.”

**Reflection Questions:** Have you ever prayed a prayer similar to Psalm 138? If you have prayed it, what was happening in your life when you prayed it? And how did God save you? How can our laments be transformed into acts of praise and thanksgiving?

**Resources:** The Living Pulpit, Volume 11, No. 4, “Lament and Praise.”