

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 138

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalm 138 is a Davidic psalm of thanksgiving and confidence. The psalm opens with David declaring wholehearted praise before the “gods” (heavenly or earthly powers), worshipping toward the temple, and giving thanks for God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*emet*). The ground of praise is specific: God answered when David called, and God’s answer came in the form of strengthening his soul (v. 3). The psalm then moves outward — the kings of the earth will hear and praise the LORD when they hear His words (vv. 4–5). This is followed by a statement of divine character: the LORD is high yet looks upon the lowly, while the haughty He knows “from afar” (v. 6). The psalm closes with a declaration of trust: though David walks through trouble, the LORD will revive him, stretch out His hand against enemies, and fulfill His purpose for David — because the LORD’s steadfast love endures forever and He will not abandon the works of His hands (vv. 7–8).

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to produce confident, wholehearted praise and trust in the reader — not as a response to comfortable circumstances, but as a response to who God has revealed Himself to be through past faithfulness. The psalm moves from particular deliverance (v. 3) to universal scope (vv. 4–5) to personal future confidence (vv. 7–8), building a case that the same God who answered in the past will complete what He has begun. The intent is not merely to document David’s gratitude but to invite every reader into the same posture: to praise with the whole heart *before* final resolution, to trust that God’s purpose will be fulfilled, and to rest in the permanence of His *hesed* even while walking through trouble.

Subject Sentence: Wholehearted praise and unshakeable confidence grounded in God’s steadfast, completing love.

Primary Claim: Because the LORD’s *hesed* endures forever and He does not abandon the works of His hands, the believer can praise Him with the whole heart and walk through present trouble without losing confidence that He will complete what He has begun.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “gods” in verse 1: The Hebrew *elohim* in “before the gods I sing your praise” (v. 1b) is contested. Three readings compete: (1) pagan deities, before whom David defiantly praises the LORD; (2) earthly rulers or judges (as *elohim* can carry in Ps. 82:1); (3) angelic beings or the heavenly court. The Septuagint reads “before the angels.” The Reformed reading favors either the pagan deities or the heavenly court — both yield the same homiletical force: David’s praise is not private devotion but a public declaration before powers that might claim authority or allegiance. The defiant, public quality of the praise is the key point regardless of which referent is preferred. The preacher should not over-determine this and should let the defiance of wholehearted praise “before the gods” stand as the main emphasis.

“The kings of the earth will praise you” (vv. 4–5): A Wesleyan/optimistic reading sometimes treats this as progressive Christian social transformation — the gradual Christianization of earthly powers through the gospel’s advance. A dispensational reading defers this entirely to the Millennium. The Reformed reading situates this within the Psalter’s consistent eschatological vision: the nations and their kings are destined to acknowledge the LORD (cf. Ps. 2, 22:27–28, 72:11) — a trajectory fulfilled in Christ and consummated at His return. The preacher need not resolve the debate fully, but should not domesticate the scope: the psalm is claiming that David’s particular deliverance is cosmically significant — the God who answered him is the God before whom kings will bow.

“The LORD is high yet regards the lowly” (v. 6): No significant hermeneutical divergence. The contrast between the lowly (whom He regards) and the haughty (whom He knows “from afar” — meaning He does not draw near to them) is consistent across traditions. This verse is a compressed statement of the entire biblical theology of divine condescension and human pride. The Reformed reading notes that this is not merely an ethical observation but a description of how grace operates: God moves toward the humble and withdraws presence from the self-sufficient.

“He will fulfill His purpose for me” (v. 8a): Some Arminian and broadly Wesleyan readers treat this as conditional — God’s purpose contingent on David’s continued faithfulness. The text gives no such condition. The grammar is a confident future declaration (*yigmor YHWH ba’adi*), not a conditional hope. The Reformed reading finds here a direct expression of divine perseverance — God completes what He initiates. The ground stated is not David’s faithfulness but God’s: “your steadfast love endures forever” and “you will not forsake the works of your hands” (v. 8b). The purpose-fulfillment is anchored in God’s character, not David’s performance.

Key Canonical Support

- **Philippians 1:6** — “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” The most direct New Testament parallel to verse 8a — God’s purpose-fulfillment is not contingent on the creature’s ability but on the Creator’s commitment.
- **Psalms 2:1–12** — The eschatological vision of kings and nations submitting to the LORD and His Anointed provides the canonical grounding for Psalm 138:4–5. What David declares in miniature, Psalm 2 declares in full.
- **Isaiah 57:15** — “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.” The direct Old Testament parallel to verse 6 — divine transcendence and condescension held together in one declaration.
- **Luke 1:46–55 (Magnificat)** — Mary’s song echoes Psalm 138:6 precisely: “He has looked on the humble estate of his servant” and “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones.” The incarnation is the supreme enactment of what verse 6 declares.
- **Romans 8:38–39** — Nothing can separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus — the New Testament fullness of the *hesed* that “endures forever” in verse 8b. The permanence of God’s love in Romans 8 is the ground of the same confidence Psalm 138 produces.

Aim: To call the reader to wholehearted, defiant praise grounded not in resolved circumstances but in God’s *hesed* — His steadfast commitment to complete what He has begun in His people.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1a	“I give you thanks with my whole heart”	The opening declaration establishes the quality of the praise: <i>undivided</i> . Wholehearted praise is the psalm’s governing posture.
1b	“before the gods I sing your praise”	Public, defiant praise. God’s praiseworthiness is not a private sentiment — it is a declaration before competing powers.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
2a	"I bow down toward your holy temple"	Worship oriented toward God's dwelling — the place where He has made His name to dwell. Even in prayer, there is directional reverence.
2b	"and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness"	<i>Hesed</i> and <i>emet</i> (steadfast love and faithfulness/truth) — the covenantal pair that appears throughout the Psalter (cf. Ps. 25:10, 89:14). The praise is not generic; it is <i>covenantally specific</i> .
2c	"for you have exalted above all things your name and your word"	God's name and word have supreme authority — more than any competing claim. The basis of confidence is not David's intuition but God's declared word.
3	"On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased"	The specific, past deliverance that grounds the entire psalm. The answer came not as changed circumstances but as <i>strengthened soul</i> — inner fortitude, not necessarily outer relief.
4	"All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD, when they hear the words of your mouth"	The scope expands from the individual (v. 3) to the universal (v. 4). The same God who answered David will be acknowledged by every earthly power.
5	"and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD"	The content of the kings' eventual praise: the LORD's ways — His characteristic manner of acting. The glory is not just power but revealed character.
6	"For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,	A hinge verse explaining <i>why</i> God is praiseworthy: His

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	but the haughty he knows from afar”	transcendence does not produce distance from the humble but nearness. Pride, not lowliness, produces God’s distance.
7a	“Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life”	Future confidence in the face of acknowledged present danger. David does not deny the trouble; he locates himself in it while claiming God’s preserving presence within it.
7b	“you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me”	God’s action is both defensive (against enemies) and positive (deliverance). The image is of a God who is actively engaged, not passively watching.
8a	“The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me”	The psalm’s climactic claim. God’s sovereign purpose-fulfillment is the anchor of present confidence. This is not wish but declaration.
8b	“your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever”	The ground of verse 8a: His purpose will be fulfilled <i>because His hesed</i> is permanent. Purpose-fulfillment is grounded in covenantal love, not human merit.
8c	“Do not forsake the work of your hands”	A closing petition that is also a declaration of identity: David is <i>the work of God’s hands</i> . The request appeals to God’s own character and creative investment.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
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Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	Wholehearted Praise for a Specific Deliverance
2	4–5	The Universal Scope of God’s Praiseworthiness
3	6	The Character that Grounds Both Praise and Confidence
4	7–8	Confident Trust in Present Trouble and Future Completion

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Wholehearted praise and unshakeable confidence grounded in God’s steadfast, completing love.

Primary Claim: Because the LORD’s *hesed* endures forever and He does not abandon the works of His hands, the believer can praise Him with the whole heart and walk through present trouble without losing confidence that He will complete what He has begun.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe what “answered prayer” looks like. David’s testimony in verse 3 is that God answered him — but the answer was not the removal of the trouble (the trouble reappears in v. 7). The answer was “my strength of soul you increased.” Many believers quietly conclude that God did not answer because circumstances did not change. This passage demands a richer theology of divine response: God’s primary answer to your cry is often inner fortitude rather than outer relief. The strengthened soul *in* the trouble is a greater miracle than the removed trouble. Stop measuring God’s faithfulness by the changed circumstance and start measuring it by the soul’s capacity to keep walking.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Bring your praise before the competing “gods” — don’t privatize it. David’s praise is not bedroom devotion — it is declared “before the gods,” before powers that claim authority and allegiance. The natural tendency under pressure is to keep faith quiet and private, to praise God in safe spaces while the “gods” of career, reputation, security, and approval go uncontested. This passage calls the believer to a defiant, public, wholehearted declaration: the LORD is God and these are not. Wholehearted praise is not a volume category — it is a loyalty category. Let your praise name what it is displacing.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Orient your prayer toward God’s *hesed*, not your performance. The closing petition — “Do not forsake the work of your hands” — is a prayer that appeals entirely to God’s character and investment, not David’s record. It is the prayer of someone who knows he has no leverage except who God is and what God has begun. The application is concrete: the next time you pray for God’s continued faithfulness, notice whether you are offering reasons drawn from your performance (“I’ve been faithful, Lord”) or reasons drawn from His character (“You began this; your love endures”). Restructure

your petitions around the latter. This is not passive — it is the most theologically precise form of bold prayer.

4. [Mind/Belief] — Receive verse 6 as both comfort and warning. “The LORD is high, yet he regards the lowly; but the haughty he knows from afar.” This verse does not describe two types of people in the world — it describes two postures available to every believer at any moment. The haughty are not the overtly arrogant; they are the self-sufficient — those who have arranged their lives so they do not need to call out (v. 3). God’s nearness is not distributed randomly; it moves toward lowliness and withdraws from self-sufficiency. The question is not “am I a good person?” but “am I a person who has learned to need God?” Cultivate dependence as a spiritual discipline, not as a failure.

5. [Affections/Worship] — Let the permanence of God’s *hesed* produce rest, not presumption. “Your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever” is not a theological slogan — it is the explicit anchor of David’s confidence that God will complete His purpose (v. 8a-b). The connection is load-bearing: *because* His love is permanent, His purpose will be finished. Many believers carry chronic anxiety about whether they will make it — whether God will give up, whether they have exhausted His patience, whether the work He began will stall. This psalm answers that anxiety not with a call to try harder but with a call to rest in what is permanent. His love does not fluctuate with your faithfulness. Let that permanence replace the anxiety with something steadier.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 138 reveals God as the covenant LORD whose *hesed* — steadfast, loyal, committed love — is both the source of past deliverance and the guarantee of future completion. His transcendence (“the LORD is high”) does not produce remoteness but a particular kind of nearness — one that moves toward the lowly and humble rather than the powerful and self-sufficient. God is not a passive responder to human need but an active agent who stretches out His hand, defeats enemies, fulfills purposes, and refuses to abandon what He has made. The psalm’s theology is covenantal at its core: the grounds of confidence are never human merit or performance but the permanent character of God — His name, His word, His *hesed*, and His creative investment in His people as “the work of His hands.”

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 138 anticipates with remarkable precision the Reformed doctrine of perseverance — not the perseverance of the saints in the sense of human tenacity, but the perseverance of God in His commitment to complete what grace has begun. Verse 8 (“The LORD will fulfill His purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever; do not forsake the works of your hands”) grounds eternal security not in

the believer's grip on God but in God's grip on His own purpose, His own love, and His own creative work. This is the Psalter's version of Philippians 1:6 — and like that passage, it removes all boasting while simultaneously producing maximum confidence. The psalm also displays the Reformed insistence that genuine praise is not a response to favorable circumstances but a response to revealed character — David praises “with his whole heart” in the midst of trouble (v. 7), not after it has passed. Grace-driven praise neither requires nor waits for resolved conditions.

Main Takeaway

The LORD who answered you in the past is the same LORD whose *hesed* never ends and who does not abandon the works of His hands. You are His work. He will finish it. Stop living as though His commitment to you depends on your consistency — walk through the trouble with a whole heart, because His love is more permanent than your circumstances.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating verse 3 as a promise of circumstantial relief.** The most natural misreading is to hear “on the day I called, you answered me” as a promise that God will resolve your trouble when you cry out. But the answer in verse 3 is soul-strengthening, not circumstance-changing — and the trouble persists into verse 7. A sermon that promises answered prayer in terms of changed outcomes will leave those whose circumstances did not change feeling unheard or unfaithful. The power of this psalm is precisely that David praises a God who answered him *by sustaining him in the trouble*, not by removing it. Preach that distinction carefully.
- **Moralizing verse 6 as an ethical call to be humble.** “God regards the lowly” can quickly become “so be humble, and God will bless you” — a works-based application that misses the verse's theological force. The passage is not primarily issuing a command; it is describing how God's grace operates. The application is not “try harder to be humble” but “recognize which posture opens you to God's nearness” — and then, in light of the gospel, ask what produces genuine lowliness (a reckoning with one's actual need before God, not performed modesty).
- **Detaching “He will fulfill His purpose for me” (v. 8a) from its ground.** Verse 8a is frequently cited as a standalone confidence statement — and it is powerful. But the preacher who stops there has cut the root. The ground of the claim is in verse 8b: *because* His steadfast love endures forever and *because* He does not forsake His works. Purpose-fulfillment is not a generic divine promise — it is an inference from the permanence of *hesed*. Preach the logic: His love is permanent, therefore His purpose holds, therefore you can have confidence.

- **Ignoring the eschatological scope of verses 4–5.** The kings of the earth who will praise the LORD when they hear His words are easy to skip over in a rush to the more personally applicable sections. But this movement from David’s particular deliverance to universal royal acknowledgment is doing crucial work: it tells the reader that the God who answered David is not a private deity but the sovereign Lord before whom all earthly power will ultimately bow. Collapsing this to an encouragement that “God is famous” misses the Christological and eschatological freight these verses carry in their canonical context.
- **Preaching this as a formula for answered prayer rather than a theology of God.** Psalm 138 is sometimes taught as a pattern: praise wholeheartedly + worship toward the temple + give thanks = God answers. This prayer-method reading domesticates the psalm entirely. The psalm is not about David’s technique; it is about God’s character — His *hesed*, His condescension to the lowly, His purposeful completion of what He begins. The applications flow from what is true about God, not from what David did to get results.
- **Underplaying the defiance of “before the gods.”** It is tempting to softpedal verse 1b as a literary flourish. But “before the gods” is a pointed declaration: David is not praising God in a neutral space but in the presence of competing powers. This has direct application to the contemporary believer who worships in a culture of competing allegiances — praise is not just vertical devotion but a public declaration of where ultimate loyalty lies. The wholehearted praise of verse 1 is defiant because it displaces something. Don’t let it become merely sentimental.