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<sup>1</sup> I will praise You, LORD, with all my heart; before the 'gods' I will sing Your praise.

<sup>2</sup> I will bow down towards Your holy temple and will praise Your name.

Psalm 138:1-2

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How are you coping with COVID? Here I am not asking whether you have had COVID, and how you are responding to the physical side of it (but if you do have COVID, our thoughts and prayers are with you, as are all the people of God). But with a 24-hour news cycle that consumes us, I wonder if many are suffering from a sort of COVID-fatigue. Many are tired and exhausted from following various 'rules'. And we wonder when we may return to something like the 'normal' of pre-COVID times. How have these COVID times actually affected you in your 'soul'? Flowing from this, how would you say these past few years have affected your worship of God?

At a very simple level, COVID has affected some people's ability to attend a Worship Service in a Church Building. Genuine health concerns about gathering with other people have precluded some from being able to gather in a building. Others may feel the government mandates about mask-wearing is all too much (although, as Christians, we obey those in authority where it does not impact on the preaching of the word). One of the positive outcomes in response to dealing with COVID is that many church groups have moved into on-line platforms and digital delivery of 'worship opportunities'.

When we think of 'worship', we often think of it in relation to attendance in a Church Building, gathering together with other Christians. In one sense this is correct and appropriate. The Bible says of the early Christians (Acts 2:42), "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." The Bible says, (Hebrews 10:25), "Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." This takes up the theme in our Psalm for today (Psalm 138:2): "I will bow down towards Your holy temple and will praise Your name."

But we know that Christian 'worship' is much deeper than this, don't we... The Bible also says (Romans 12:1-2), "In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." In other words, 'worship' is also about what we do in the totality of our lives.

What is Christian worship really all about? If there is one thing that ought to bring us all together, it is the worship of God. And yet we could also say that the one thing that is meant to bring us together is also one thing that 'divides us' as Christians. Have you ever heard someone say, "I don't like the worship at such-and-such a place..."? Have you ever heard someone say, "I don't

worship at such-and-such a place because it doesn't meet me where I am at...”?

For some people, especially those outside of the church, God's preoccupation with us worshipping him might seem kind of strange. And perhaps you've asked yourself the same question at some point. Why do we gather, every Sunday, for hours at a time, to corporately worship God? Why does he want us to do that? What is the point of that? Couldn't we be doing something better with our time? Why worship God? Well Psalm 138:2 actually gives us an answer to this question. And David breaks it down into three parts.

Psalm 138 consists of three sections, moved by three closely connected thoughts: The first section of the psalm (verses 1 to 3) opens with a declaration 'to give thanks'. The thanksgiving is for the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness. The second section (verses 4 to 6) speaks of the kings of the earth who will also 'give thanks' (translated in the NRSV as 'praise'). The third section of the psalm (verses 7 to 8) speaks of another group whom one might expect to have power over the psalmist, the enemies or those who bring trouble. In words this time reminiscent of Psalm 23, the psalmist speaks of a sense of security in terrifying circumstances. The reason for this confidence is the eternal nature of that for which the psalmist gives thanks in v. 2, the Lord's 'steadfast love'.

The Psalmist says, "I will praise You, O Lord, with all my heart." There is only one right way to praise and thank God. And that is with your whole heart. True worship is whole-hearted. Half-hearted praise is really not praise at all. It's like the difference between a child who gets a present from his grandparents, and is forced by his parents to say thank you. As opposed to a child who gets a present, and immediately upon opening it, drops the gift, and runs into the arms of his joyful grandparents to give them the biggest hug they've ever received. That's the kind of worship, praise, and thankfulness that God deserves.

The Psalmist says, "I will praise Your name for Your love and Your faithfulness." For us, as Christians, we recognise this that God has saved us at the innumerable cost of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross. And we praise Him because He paid the debt we could never afford. We praise Him because in Him we have our total being and existence.

The Psalmist says, "I will bow down towards Your holy temple." Again, for us as Christians, the reference to 'The Temple' now points us to Jesus. If we go through the Bible we will find Daniel opening his windows toward the temple, where he prayed three times a day. We also will find Jonah saying, "Yet will I look again toward Your holy temple." So, looking to Jesus, He is our temple. There is no acceptable worship except through Him. Christ is our Temple, and towards Him we must look with an eye of faith.

This psalm is typically labelled as a psalm of thanksgiving, as the opening line suggests. Yet, the verb "to give thanks," yadah, can also mean "to praise," or better still, "to confess" in the sense of giving testimony. To thank God is

always to confess something about this God; gratitude apart from testimony always falls short. The psalmist announces, “On the day I called, You answered me” (verse 3).

In Psalm 138, the Psalmist had experienced “a day of trouble” (see also Psalms 20:1, 27:5; 41:1), a “day of disaster” (see Psalm 18:19), or a “day of distress” (see 59:17) — in other words, some really tough times. The term “day of trouble” is intentionally vague. It can refer to times of physical illness, spiritual struggle, financial peril, military threat, and the like. The psalms also call these times of crisis a “day when I call”, because times of crisis are also times of prayer — moments when a suffering person or people “cry out” to the Lord in despair.

Philip Melancthon once described worship (note, as part of a larger statement), “True worship... is the exercise of faith wrestling with despair.” This is one way of seeing our ‘worship’. The Scriptures are full of examples. It was faith wrestling against despair that led Mary to ignore the chores of the day so she could sit at her Lord’s feet to be comforted with His preaching (Luke 10:38-42). It was faith wrestling against despair that pushed Jairus to rush from his dying daughter’s side to beg Jesus to restore her life (Mark 5:21-43). It was faith wrestling with despair that caused the criminal crucified next to Jesus to ask that he be remembered when his Lord entered into His kingdom (Luke 23:39-43). This is Christian worship – it is about faith in Jesus. It rests in Jesus and His Word, it will never be put to shame.

Psalm 138 is a thanksgiving psalm. Psalm 138 is wedged between two psalms of greater reputation, Psalms 137 (‘By the rivers of Babylon ...’) and Psalm 139 (‘O Lord, You have searched me and known me...’). The proclamation of thanksgiving in Psalm 138 suggests that the Lord has answered the psalmist’s desperate plea expressed in Psalm 137. As a way of exploring the ‘work of (the Lord’s) hands’ (Ps 138:8) and showing how the Lord regards the lowly, the psalmist will turn in Psalm 139 to a personal account of a faithful relationship with the Lord. In that psalm it will be seen that it is not possible for the psalmist to escape the Lord who is all present and all knowing, and this ultimately leads to wonder and praise (Ps 139:14).

In Hebrew, the name for the book of Psalms is *Tehillim*, or “praises,” because from beginning to end, the God we confess is the subject of our praise. And in this we must be clear, this unbridled praise is always grounded in gritty reality. There is no room for escapism or denial in these texts; the Psalms do not afford us this kind of luxury. What the psalms do provide, however, is a lens through which to see this world, and even more, a language that can lead us to full confession in the midst of it.

Christian worship is a complex thing. While worship leads to great boldness in proclaiming Christ’s praises to even the most powerful worldly gods, true worship also leads to great humility. Boldness and humility both mark true worship. In Psalm 138 verse 1 there is boldness, and in Psalm 138 verse 2 there is humility.

Do you have a life-long friend? How has this friend stood by you through the good and the bad times? Good friends are hard to find. This truism reaffirms itself over and over. A good friend is a treasure, for he or she will stand by you through the tough times, even from a long distance. God is this kind of friend. Our Creator not only made us and sustains us, He actively works in our lives for our ultimate good. He is present through times of blessing and tragedy. He deserves our thanks and praise for His constant care.

C.S. Lewis when he said that for all of us, our prayer life should be our autobiography. Sometimes it is hard to give thanks in the middle of a hard situation. Frustration can often take over and we find ourselves feeling too grim to express any feelings of thanks towards God. Our human emotions are a powerful tool and when met with anything that is outside of God's word, that is when our minds start to wander down a path that leads us away from God. But praising God means truly loving and thanking Him for His faithfulness despite what is going on around us.

It is when we face trying times that our faith is tested and we are faced with either choosing to rely on His promises or give into our anxiety. One practical way that we can keep ourselves from giving into worry is by reminding ourselves of all the time God has worked to prove His faithfulness and that your current situation is no different. 'Worship' is ultimately trusting in God's presence in our lives.

David was often faced with enemies and dangerous situations (verse 7). Yet, He trusted in God's hand of deliverance because He knew that God was the only one who could bring Him ultimate peace and rest during those hard times. Verse 8 is followed with a promise that still applies to us today. God will fulfill His promises to remain faithful and His love for us never changes. No matter what you are facing today, look to the one who has proven He is powerful, loving and faithful and trust that He is able to work all things out for your good.

When and where you have the ability to go to a 'church building' to experience 'worship', what is your motivation for going to church? Is it something you feel you "have to" do or "supposed" to do? Do you go just to see friends that you only get to see on Sunday? Or do you go anticipating the opportunity to worship God, to sing praises to Him, to magnify Him? Do you look forward to being amongst the body of believers and fellowshiping with them? Do you eagerly yearn for the message God speaks through His word and those who have been ordained to reflect upon it? Do you listen with ears and a heart ready to for God to speak something personal just to you? The more we recognise the depth God's loving-kindness towards us, the more our heart will yearn to spend time with Him, every day of the week and not just on Sundays. Amen.