

Psalm 138:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I will praise thee with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise unto thee.

Analysis

I will praise thee with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise unto thee. This opening verse of Psalm 138 establishes David's resolute commitment to wholehearted worship of Yahweh. The emphasis on "whole heart" (בְּכָל־לִבִּי/bekhol-libbi) signifies complete, undivided devotion—not partial or halfhearted praise but total engagement of one's entire being in worship.

"I will praise thee" (אֹדֵךְ/odekha) uses the Hebrew root yadah, meaning to give thanks, confess, or acknowledge. This isn't passive appreciation but active, vocal declaration of God's worthiness. The imperfect tense indicates ongoing, habitual action: continuous praise regardless of circumstances.

"Before the gods" (נֶגֶד אֱלֹהִים/neged elohim) is striking and provocative. This could refer to false gods of pagan nations, demonstrating fearless testimony before idolatrous cultures. Alternatively, it may reference angelic beings or earthly rulers. In any case, David declares he will worship Yahweh publicly and boldly, not restricting praise to private devotion or safe environments. This reflects the courage required to maintain exclusive worship of Yahweh in a polytheistic ancient Near East.

"Will I sing praise" (אֶזְמַרְךָ/azammerekka) from zamar means to make music, sing psalms. This adds musical dimension to praise—not just spoken words but melodic worship. Combined with "whole heart," this presents complete worship engaging mind, emotion, voice, and artistic expression.

Historical Context

Psalm 138 is attributed to David, likely written during his kingship when he had experienced God's faithfulness through years of persecution under Saul and establishment as Israel's king. The psalm reflects mature faith tested through adversity and proven through divine deliverance.

The phrase "before the gods" must be understood in context of ancient Near Eastern polytheism. Surrounding nations worshiped pantheons of deities—Canaanite Baal, Mesopotamian Marduk, Egyptian Ra. Israel's radical monotheism—worship of Yahweh alone—set them apart. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 commands: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart." David's declaration embodies this covenant faithfulness.

In a culture where political alliances often required diplomatic acknowledgment of other nations' gods, David's exclusive worship of Yahweh was countercultural and potentially politically costly. Yet he declares he will publicly praise Yahweh "before the gods"—boldly testifying to Yahweh's supremacy regardless of social or political pressure.

The New Testament church faced similar challenges. Early Christians were persecuted for refusing to offer incense to Caesar or acknowledge Roman gods. Their exclusive worship of Christ echoed David's bold testimony. Revelation 5:9-10 describes heavenly worship "before the throne"—the ultimate fulfillment of praising God in the presence of all powers.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. What does it mean practically to praise God with your 'whole heart' rather than with divided devotion or partial commitment?
2. In what modern contexts might believers be called to worship God 'before the gods'—publicly testifying to Christ's supremacy in environments hostile or indifferent to Christian faith?
3. How does the combination of spoken praise and musical worship ('sing praise') engage different dimensions of human personality in worship?
4. What fears or social pressures might tempt believers to restrict worship to private settings rather than bold public testimony?
5. How does David's example of wholehearted, public praise challenge contemporary tendencies toward privatized, compartmentalized faith?

Interlinear Text

אָזֶן	בְּכָל	לְבָבِ	נְצָדָקָה	אֱלֹהִים
I will praise	thee with my whole heart		before the gods	
H3034	H3605	H3820	H5048	H430
אָזֶן:				
will I sing praise				
H2167				

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 111:1 (Resurrection): Praise ye the LORD. I will praise the LORD with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, and in the congregation.

Psalms 95:3 (References God): For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

1 Corinthians 14:15 (Sin): What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.

Psalms 96:4 (Resurrection): For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods.

Psalms 119:46 (Parallel theme): I will speak of thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed.

Psalms 9:1 (Resurrection): I will praise thee, O LORD, with my whole heart; I will shew forth all thy marvellous works.

Psalms 82:1 (References God): God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods.

Psalms 82:6 (References God): I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.

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