

Psalm 60 – God, you have rejected us; our defenses are broken down and you do not go with us to battle

Psalm 61 – crying from the ends of the earth: prolong the life of the king – may he be enthroned forever

Psalm 62 – My soul waits for God in silence (while I am under assault)

Psalm 63 is a song from the wilderness.
The title puts us there.

A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah

David was in the wilderness of Judah when he was running away from Saul (1 Samuel 23-24).
Of course, some have doubts about that context,
since verse 11 says that when the mouths of liars are stopped
“the king shall rejoice in God.”
And so some suggest that the context should be seen as David’s flight from Absalom.

The problem there is that David did not flee into the wilderness of Judah,
he fled to Gilead – the opposite direction from the wilderness of Judah!

There are at least two possible solutions:

1) David is saying that when God saves him, Saul will rejoice
(and in fact, that is what Saul does in 1 Samuel 24:19, after David spared him –
“So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day”).

The mouth of the liar was shut – and the king rejoiced in God!
Never mind that the liar and the king were the same person!

Of course there is a second part to the story:

2) The point of the inscription may not be to tell us about the circumstances of its composition,
but to suggest a context for praying/singing the song.

After all, by the time this song is written down in this book,
David is king.

As the Levites are arranging the Psalms for their usage in the temple,
they see that this Psalm of David fits well
in their collection of songs of the Davidic monarchy.

[We often organize parts of our hymnals according to the main events in the life of Jesus – birth, death, resurrection, Pentecost, etc. – so we shouldn't be surprised to see the Psalter organized by the main events in the life of David. They are not necessarily chronological, but Psalms 51-72 have a strong thematic connection to David – and thus to David's Son.]

Books 1 & 2 of the Psalter take the Davidic monarchy as a given. While there are plenty of laments among the first 72 Psalms, they do not have the catastrophic aspect of the exilic Psalms in book 3. When the Christ – the anointed one – is king, yes, there will be setbacks – there will be trials and tribulation – but there is also confidence that God's anointed king reigns! And that confidence supports us even when we are passing through the wilderness.

But either way, the Psalm demands that we see 1 Samuel 23-24 in the background: David is pursued by Saul. But we sing Psalm 63 from the standpoint of David on the throne.

...or, more precisely, *Jesus*, the son of David, on the throne.

Jesus, after all, is the great singer of Psalm 63: when Jesus went out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil... when Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemane, the Garden became a Wilderness.

So first we need to see what David and Jesus are telling us about:

1. Life in the Desert (v1-2)

a. Seeking, Thirsting and Fainting: I Want You (v1)

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

Notice the verbs:

earnestly seeking [it's all one word in Hebrew]
thirsting
fainting

These verbs emphasize the fact that something is missing.

You only seek diligently for something when you don't have it!

You only thirst when there is nothing to drink.
You only faint when something is amiss – and your body shuts down.

David says that the absence of God is like being in a desert –
a dry and weary land where there is no water.

When Israel left Egypt, they traveled through the wilderness.
Not surprisingly, they had a hard time finding water!
Water has always been a precious commodity in that part of the world.
And so God provided water from the rock.

Now David is in a place that reminds him of that time.
He remembers God's presence with his people –
and that is what he longs for.

Back in the 1980s a great menace threatened the Christian world –
a new genre of songs invaded the airwaves:
songs where you couldn't tell who was being addressed –
“God or girlfriend.”

When you look at a song like Psalm 63, you realize that the problem wasn't the language.
The problem was the ambiguity.

David is every bit as passionate in his longing for God:
“my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you...”
Soul and body – I *want you*.
I want to be *with you*!
I don't want to be alone in the wilderness – I want the fruitfulness of your presence!

But while this is intensely passionate language –
there is no ambiguity whatsoever in the object of David's desire.
“O God, you are my God.”
And there should be no ambiguity whatsoever in our passion for God.

If we are sending mixed signals –
so that people are unclear as to what our central desire is –
then we are *not* loving God with all our heart and soul and strength.

So David is longing for God in the wilderness.
He is thirsting for God in a dry and weary land.
He desires God *bodily* – it's a physical longing, not just emotional or intellectual.

b. The Wilderness and the Sanctuary: Seeing by Faith (v2)

² *So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.*

The conjunction in verse 2 is crucial.

I have told you about the “kiy” in Hebrew –
a conjunction usually translated “for” or “because”
that expresses the reason for the connected statement.
(In fact, we’ll see a *kiy* in the next verse – translated “because.”)

But in verses 2 and 4 we have another conjunction usually translated “so” or “thus.”

If David had used “kiy” (for/because) in verse 2,
he would have said that he longs for God
because he had previously looked upon God in the sanctuary,
and so *now* he is longing for what he once had.

But that’s not what David is saying.

David is saying the exact opposite.
Because I long for God in a dry, weary land where there is no water,
therefore I have looked upon God in the sanctuary, beholding his power and glory.

Everyone has times when they feel distant and barren.

We all spend time in the desert –
a dry, weary land where there is no water.

What do you do when you are in the desert?

You draw near to God.
You come to the sanctuary and worship.
And when he comes to the sanctuary,
he beholds God’s power and glory.

Whether it was David as he came to Nob,
where Ahimelech ministered before the LORD (until Doeg slew them all),
or whether it was the Levites in the temple,
when you come to the sanctuary, you are beholding God’s power and glory.

I want you to think for a moment about what David would have seen with his eyes.

He would have seen a tent.
Perhaps one of the nicer tents in Israel,
but it was still a tent.
The gods of the nations had splendid temples that declared their glory.
David’s God dwelt in a tent.

Is it any wonder that Israel tended to wander away from the LORD?
The nations around them had power and glory!
Yahweh?
had a tent.

Even when Solomon's temple was built,
there was something remarkably different about it.
Solomon's temple displayed power and glory –
but there was something missing:
there was no image in Solomon's temple!
All other nations had temples with images.
But the temple in Jerusalem had no image.
There is a footstool for a throne (the ark of the covenant) –
but no one sitting on the throne.

Rather, next door to Solomon's temple was Solomon's palace –
built out of similar materials, and with a similar threefold pattern.
And in Solomon's palace, the throne room (which parallels the Holy of Holies)
does have an image:

it has the Son of David sitting on the throne.

When you think about Psalm 63 this way,
you start to realize how Psalm 63 becomes the song of the people of Israel –
it becomes *our song* as well.

When we are thirsting in a dry and weary land,
we need to look upon the LORD in his sanctuary,
and behold his power and glory.

And it's not as though *this room* is the sanctuary –
but rather, the *church* is the sanctuary –
we are the temple – the holy place where Christ dwells by his Spirit.
And together, as a church, we enter the heavenly sanctuary
where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

This is what Jesus said in John 7 on the last day of the Feast of Booths.
This was the day when the priests would re-enact the story of the “water from the rock”
as they celebrated God's provision in the wilderness.
The people would abstain from water all day,
in order to remember the thirst of their fathers in the desert,
and then the priests would break open a fountain
as they retold the story of Moses and the rock.

But on the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out,
“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.
Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said,
‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” (7:37-38).

Living water now flows from the heart of Jesus to his people.
So when you are thirsty – when you are parched and weary –
come to Jesus!
Come to the sanctuary where you will behold the power and glory of God!

You see this frequently in the Psalms.
Psalm 73 speaks of coming into the sanctuary
as the turning point for remembering the fate of the wicked.
Psalm 84 speaks of longing and fainting to be in the house of the LORD.

It’s the same thing that Hebrews 2 says of Jesus:
We do not yet see all things under his feet –
“but we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels,
namely Jesus,
crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (2:9)

Seeing the power and glory of God has always required faith.

After all, it is when we come into the sanctuary that we see:

2. What Really Satisfies? (v3-8)

a. Your *Hesed* Is Better than *Hayyim*, so I Will Bless You as Long as I Live (v3-4)

³ *Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.*

Your steadfast love is better than life?!
That’s a strong statement!
You may be familiar with the Jewish blessing,
“L’chaim” – to life!

Hesed is Hebrew for “steadfast love”;
hayyim is Hebrew for “life.”

Life is good –
except when life stinks.
And there are times, as Job would remind us,

when life really stinks.

There are times when life gets so bad that you cannot think of anything worth living for.
And so there are times when “L’chaim” – “to life” – starts to sound hollow.

That’s why David says that *hesed* is better than *hayyim*.

And not just *any hesed*!

Your hesed.

God’s steadfast love is better than life.

Even as he experiences the desert – the barrenness of not having God’s presence –
he comes into the sanctuary and beholds God’s power and glory,
and thus sees that “because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.”

The same parched lips that are longing for water
will praise the Living Water that is only tasted by faith.

And so (because of your steadfast love is better than life),

⁴ *So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.*

Because *hesed* is better than *hayyim*,
therefore my *hay* will be characterized by blessing your name.

C.S. Lewis once wondered why God commands us to praise him.

Doesn’t that seem rather “vain” of God?

But if our “chief end” is to glorify God and enjoy him forever,
then praise is the natural result!

As Lewis puts it,

“all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise....

The world rings with praise –

lovers praising their mistresses,

readers their favorite poet,

walkers praising the countryside,

players praising their favorite game –

praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, horses, colleges, countries,

historical personages, children, flowers, mountains,

rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians and scholars....

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy

because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment;

it is its appointed consummation.

It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are,
the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.” (quoted in Piper, 248-249)

Praise is the expression of our delight and joy in God –
our longing and desire to be with him.

Notice this: God’s steadfast love – his covenant faithfulness – is at the heart of our praise.
Our praise is our response to God’s *hesed*.

When people go to a football game they praise their team
(and probably curse the other team, or at least the officials).

When people go to a religious conference or a political rally they praise their cause
(and denounce their opponents).

But why do we praise?
And what is it that nourishes praise?

b. Memory, Meditation, and Praise Provide My Food and My Rest (v5-6)

⁵ *My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,*

⁶ *when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;*

Verses 5-6 answer this question.

Memory and meditation are the key.

My soul will be satisfied.

How satisfied?

Satisfied as with fat and rich food.

What is it that nourishes praise – that feeds my soul – and produces delight?

“when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night.”

Yes, participation in public worship – in the sanctuary – is crucial.

But if the rest of your week is characterized by work and movies and school and games –
if your “default mode” is to remember and meditate upon other things –
then you will praise other things easily! –
and you will praise God only perfunctorily!

“I remember you.”

We keep seeing this word!

Remembering and forgetting are all about worship.

When I remember the LORD, I worship him and serve him only.

When I forget the LORD, I turn to other gods and serve them.

Therefore David keeps remembering God.

Remember who God is.

Remember what he has done.

Memory nourishes praise.

Think of Ahasuerus in the book of Esther.

Mordecai had saved his life –

but Ahasuerus had *forgotten* to praise him.

One night as the king lies sleepless in his bed,

(in the watches of the night!)

he listens to the reading of the annals of his reign,

and he *remembers* Mordecai.

The result is praise for Mordecai

(and destruction for Hamaan, Mordecai's enemy).

When I remember God – when I remember his steadfast love and faithfulness,

“my mouth will praise you with joyful lips.”

Likewise, “I meditate on you.”

Remembering and meditating are related ideas.

But meditation assumes memory.

Meditation takes the thing remembered,

and ponders or contemplates it.

We are not talking about “transcendental meditation” where the goal is to empty your mind!

Rather, biblical meditation is where you fill your mind with God and his mighty deeds,

so that the glory and power that you have beheld in the sanctuary

remain firmly fixed in your mind throughout the day.

And that's why David says that when he goes to bed at night he remembers God.

What are you thinking of when you go to bed?

David says that he meditates on God in the watches of the night.

What are you thinking of when you wake up in the middle of the night?

“The watches of the night” refers to the widespread premodern custom
of waking up in the middle of the night.

In most latitudes, if you go to bed shortly after sundown, and get up shortly before dawn,
you have somewhere between 9-15 hours for sleep

(depending on where you are and what time of year it is).

In winter, the “watches of the night” can be much longer than in summer!

I used to think that the monks were truly amazing

for waking up in the middle of the night to pray.

I now realize that what was amazing was *not* that they woke up in the middle of the night

(almost everyone did!) –

and for that matter, they weren't even that amazing for praying.

They were just doing what *every* Christian should do!
And, not being very good at self-discipline,
they realized that they needed others to help them do it!

How can we help each other?

Well, family worship is one way.

I didn't do very well at this last week –
but when we end our day together with our Triune God,
when we sing his praise and meditate on his word,
that can move us toward remembering and meditating –
which then prompts us to praise...

Why?

c. In the Shadow of Your Wings My Mouth Will Praise You (v7-8)

⁷ *for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.*

⁸ *My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.*

David now remembers God's steadfast love –
he meditates on how God has demonstrated his faithfulness.

“You have been my help” –
once again, we see that the idea of a helper is not that of an “assistant,”
but someone who does for us what we could not do for ourselves!

“and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy” –
I fear nothing because my God hovers over me.
I sing for joy, even with my parched lips,
because by faith I see Jesus sitting at God's right hand.

“My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.”
Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cling to his wife (Gn 2:24)

Again, there is nothing wrong with using this strong, passionate language!
After all, marriage is *supposed* to be a picture of God's love for us –
of Christ's love for his bride.

Therefore, it is fitting that David sings of the overshadowing wings of God –
like Ruth (his foremother) spoke of Boaz.
We cling to Jesus, because we have no other help – no other fortress.
He is the one whose right hand upholds us.

Verse 9 may seem somewhat abrupt.

3. The End of the Destroyers and the King's Joy (v9-11)

a. When They Go Down into the Depths of the Earth... (v9-10)

⁹ *But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;*
¹⁰ *they shall be given over to the power of the sword;
they shall be a portion for jackals.*

Whoa!

I thought we had a happy song for once!
All this “praise” and “blessing” – “remembering” and “joyful lips”!
And then David has to spoil it by talking about the death of his enemies!

Why is it that we feel uncomfortable about these parts of the Psalms?

It is because we do not take sin seriously enough.
If we love God – if we find our enjoyment in him,
and if we long for him, body and soul,
then we must *passionately* hate
anything that gets in the way of our delight in God!

Why am I in this wilderness?

Why am I not near God?

Those who hate God and are seeking to destroy his people
are my foes forever.

Think of another Saul – Saul of Tarsus.

Saul had supported the stoning of Stephen, and then persecuted the church.

When Saul went to Damascus, Ananias was afraid of him.

When the Lord Jesus told Ananias to go to Saul,

Ananias questioned the Lord:

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man,

how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.” (9:13)

Notice that Jesus does not rebuke Ananias for his response.

Likewise, even the apostles were afraid to meet Saul when he returned to Jerusalem.

It was only when Barnabas interceded and told them the story,
that they were willing to meet him (9:26-27).

I have no doubt that the saints in Jerusalem and the surrounding area
were praying Psalm 63:9-11 about Saul –

just as we should pray these Psalms about all who hate the Lord Jesus!

And the reason is because we want the king and his people to rejoice.

b. The King and His People Shall Rejoice... (v11a)

¹¹ *But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,*

If we pray, “thy kingdom come,”
then we are praying that the kingdom of Christ would advance,
and the kingdom of Satan would be destroyed.

After all, if we love God with all our heart,
then we must hate everything that opposes the one we love.

There’s a reason why sports fans “boo” the other team
(and the officials when they make a bad call)!

If you delight in your team, then you rejoice in their success and you praise their victory.
Therefore, you must *root against* the other team –
and even as you “bless” your team for their “mighty deeds,”
you will “curse” the other team
whenever they cast doubt on the mightiness of your team!

Now, when it comes to sports, I highly approve of what is today called “sportsmanship.”
After all, the more you “bless” and “curse” sports teams,
the closer you get to putting them in the place of God!
And so yes, it would be *highly* inappropriate
for someone to sing Psalm 63 about the Yankees or the White Sox.
You would never say,
“those who seek to defeat the Cubs shall go down into the depths of the earth.”

It is only appropriate to sing Psalm 63 about something that is truly life or death.
And it is only when King Jesus returns in glory that *finally*:

c. And the Mouths of Liars Will Be Stopped (v11b)

for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

Why does the king rejoice?
Why do those who swear by God exult?
Because the mouths of liars will be stopped.

When you love with all your heart,
then you cannot stand it when God’s great name is dishonored.

What do you do about it?

After all, *you* do not have the power to “stop the mouths of liars” –

at least, not all the time!

Sometimes, you may be the agent of the King.

Ken Smith, the pastor of an RP church in New York

was the agent of the king in stopping the mouth of a lesbian English professor.

She was studying the religious right and its politics of hate.

She found plenty of material to convince her

that conservative Christians were hateful towards gays.

“But one letter I received defied my filing system.

It was from the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church.

It was a kind and inquiring letter.

Ken Smith encouraged me to explore the kind of questions I admire:

How did you arrive at your interpretations?

How do you know you are right?

Do you believe in God?

Ken didn't argue with my article;

rather, he asked me to defend the presuppositions that undergirded it.”

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/my-train-wreck-conversion.html>

Today she is the wife of an RP pastor.

There may be times when you say something:

answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes –

but there may be times when you are say nothing:

do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

What kind of fool are you dealing with?

But whether you speak or not –

let not your heart be silent!

When you are in a dry and barren wasteland,

sing Psalm 63!

“O God, you are my God alone, I seek your face with eagerness.

My soul and body thirst for you in this dry, weary, wilderness.”