

The beauty and brevity of Psalm 61 reassures the worshiper that God will provide a secure place and permanent protection for those who turn to him. In this sequence of “save me” psalms, Psalm 61 expresses poetically the experience of salvation. The psalmist shows us what deliverance looks like by providing a series of concrete images that paint a picture of lasting protection. Five metaphors illustrate the place of security: the unassailable high ground of the rock, the impenetrable fortress refuge, the unscalable strong tower, the unprecedented hospitality of the tent, and the undisturbed intimacy of a mother hen’s wings. Coupled with these five spacial references are five specific references to time. The psalmist longs to tabernacle with God *forever*. He prays that the king’s life will be extended for *many generations* and that he will be enthroned in the presence of God *forever*. He seeks to praise the name of God *forever*, without interruption, *day after day*. These ten references to time and place offer a comprehensive and personal description of deliverance.

Hear My Cry!

*Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.
From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
For you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the foe.
I long to dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.
For you, God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.*

Psalm 61:1-4

There is no indication that the psalmist turns to God as a last resort having tried in vain to receive comfort from others first. Winston Churchill reportedly quipped that you can always count on Americans to do the right thing after they have exhausted all other possibilities. A sign of spiritual maturity is when the Lord is our first recourse rather than our last resort. This is why personal and communal worship is vitally necessary for the people of God. The rhythms of grace built into our weekly routine remind us of our need for God’s deliverance.

The lament is as brief as it is intense. Desperation is in tension with devotion. The extremity of need is more than matched by a thorough, comprehensive and focused request for help. The theological depth that lies behind this cry is truly impressive, especially when prayed in the context of the body of Christ. The proportion of concern to confidence minimizes the worshipers predicament and maximizes the psalm’s focus on God.

The psalmist’s acute sense of need is established with a loud cry, from a distant place, at the point of utter exhaustion. The words are few, but the depth of meaning behind each phrase

speaks volumes. Some commentators take “from the ends of the earth” literally, implying that King David has been exiled from Jerusalem and the ark of the covenant. They suggest that the Absalom conspiracy lies behind David’s cry.¹ But this need not be the case, as the feeling of being at “ends of the earth” is common to those who suffer. We need not travel far to feel alone and estranged from the love and comfort of God. Even when we are surrounded by a loving family or close friends we can feel alone. When I first went to Mongolia to train pastors I felt like I had literally reached the ends of the earth, but I sensed that Mongolian believers figuratively felt like they were exiled in their own country. Because of their new found faith in Christ they became homeless in their homeland overnight. Because of Christ they were perceived as outsiders, foreigners and strangers in their home culture. In his letter to the “elect exiles” the apostle Peter explores the tension between *distance* from our familiar selves and our home culture and our *nearness* to God in the household of faith. It is helpful to see Psalm 61 as wrestling with and focused on *placement*. Emotional dissonance – that “ends of the earth” feeling – is resolved by a powerful sense of the presence of God. In the providence of God devotion overcomes the distance, not by retracing our steps back home but by being led to the rock.

The psalmist transposes his geographical metaphor (“from the ends of the earth”) into highly personal terms: “I call as my heart grows faint.” It is “not merely a statement of how one feels inside,” but “the phrase suggests a person’s whole being running out of energy.”² From the landscape to the inscape, the psalmist paints a bleak picture of his existential crisis. He is desperate. He cannot lead himself; he must be led. He cries out, “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” Embedded in this simple plea is an essential truth of leadership. Leadership is what God makes of us and not what we make of ourselves. To lead is to be led. King David knew what Christ’s followers must embrace. We are no good to ourselves and others unless we are mastered by the Master. Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There is no other path to leadership than to be led “to the rock that is higher than I.” Any form of leadership that is independent of the leading of the Lord fails from the start. Leadership in the name of Jesus means that we follow Jesus in everything we do.

All five metaphors, rock, refuge, tower, tent, and wings, speak of the presence of God. These concrete images speak of the solidarity of the people of God. David “piles up the images” to reinforce the all sufficiency of the saving presence of God.³ God is our rock and our tent recalls the words of Psalm 27, “For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock” (Ps 27:5). It is especially significant that Jesus applied these metaphors to himself. He is the rock upon whom the wise build their house (Matthew 7:24).⁴ He is the Word made flesh, who “tabernacled” among us and

¹ Calvin, Psalms, 410. Calvin writes, “I agree with those who refer it to the time of the conspiracy of Absalom; for, had he not been an exile, he could not speak. . . of crying from the ends of the earth. . . .By some, indeed, the words have been understood figuratively, as meaning, that he prayed from the lowest deeps of distress; but I can see no foundation for this.”

² Goldingay, Psalms, 237.

³ Keller, The Songs of Jesus, 130.

⁴ Payne, Philip B. “Jesus’ Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables,” Trinity Journal 2 (Spring 1981): 3, 9. Payne writes, “Here in the parables, the most assuredly authentic of all the traditions about Jesus, is a clear, implicit affirmation of Jesus’ self-understanding as deity. His sense of identification with God was so deep that to depict himself he consistently gravitated to imagery and symbols which the Old Testament typically depict God.”

revealed the Father's glory full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He is the mother hen who longed to gather her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37). He is the temple, who, when asked for a sign of his authority, answered, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19).

Even more surprising is the fact that Jesus linked these metaphors to his followers. In Christ his followers become the rock, the refuge, the tower, the tent, and the wings. Jesus said to Peter, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). Peter and all those who follow in his God-inspired confession of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, are the rock upon whom the church is built. "As you come to him," Peter wrote, "the living Stone . . . you also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house. . ." (1 Peter 2:4-5). Christ's followers (living stones) are being built by God into a spiritual household, a house of the Spirit, to be a holy priesthood. Like the psalmist, the apostle Paul stacked up the metaphors. Christ's followers are fellow citizens in God's kingdom, members of God's household, and joined together to become a holy temple in the Lord, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph 2:19-22). The relational and spiritual character of this "house," built by God *of people*, is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete, than if it had been built with stone and steel.⁵

The psalmist follows up his loud cry for help with a solemn vow of commitment. In the midst of worship, he is confident that his prayers have been heard. He is reminded of his heritage and his home among the covenant people of God. He is not alone. He is in solidarity with those who fear "your name." Many years ago, Psalm 61 was a source of comfort for me. I was a young pastor in a conflicted church and this psalm gave voice to my anguish. I felt overwhelmed and exhausted. I prayed and sang the psalm for weeks as a plea, "Lord, lead me to the rock that is higher than I." And in time, like the psalmist, my confidence was renewed.

Prayer for the King

*Increase the days of the king's life,
his years for many generations.
May he be enthroned in God's presence forever;
appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him.
Then I will ever sing in praise to your name
and fulfill my vows day after day.*

Psalm 61:6-8

The prayer of thanksgiving that follows in the second stanza is brimming with confidence. The king's cry has been heard and his hope is renewed. He is safe and secure on top of the rock. The strong tower is his protection. The Lord's tent is home and the wings of the Lord are his shelter. The psalmist's attention shifts sharply from place to time and to the enduring promise of the Lord's blessing. The psalmist's perspective from the rock, that is to say from Christ (1 Cor 10:4), offers a vision that goes beyond David and his royal succession. To be led to the "rock that is higher than I" is to be led to the fulfillment of God's promise to David (2 Samuel 7:16). The

⁵ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 58.

king's prayer "was to be fulfilled to overflowing in the person of the king, the Messiah."⁶

When we pray the Lord's prayer, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10) we are praying in line with Psalm 61. The Christological fulfillment of the psalm comes to a climax in verse seven. The psalmist prays that the king will be enthroned in God's presence forever – "to live in the sphere of God's love, blessing, and protection."⁷ It is not a stretch to identify this prophetic petition with Jesus, the incarnate one, and to hear in Jesus' glory prayer in John 17 echoes of David's psalm. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he prayed, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him" (John 17:1-2). Along with the psalmist and the covenant people of God we are the beneficiaries of Christ's rule and reign. "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6).

The imagery of the rock, refuge, tower, tent, and wings finds its essential meaning in David's final prayer request: "appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him." The true strength of God's kingdom is not found in "brick-mortar" fortresses or in anything else the world associates with power. It is found in God's love and faithfulness. To pray for God to "assign" or "prepare" these attributes is to "suggest a commissioning of servants (personification)."⁸ These attributes must be embodied in a person, and there is no person who embodied them more fully than Jesus Christ. David's petition recalls Psalm 43:3, "Send me your light and your faithful care [truthfulness], let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell." These two petitions in Psalm 61 and 43 earnestly seek "someone who explicitly embodies God's own qualities. . . . The emissary thus brings God in person."⁹ Jesus embodied the message of God. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

With this, the psalmist breaks into song. We know from the Samuel narrative how much music meant to David. Others may have been designated Israel's chief musician, but David was their worship pastor and he knew it was impossible to separate mind and heart. Worship is a matter of thinking and feeling. It is both intellectual and emotional, because it engages the mind and expresses the heart. As Henry Mitchell, an African-American pastor, liked to say, "If truth goes into your heart on the arm of emotion it will stay. But if it enters your heart unaccompanied, it will only visit for a short while and then leave." Praying and singing belong together. When the church teaches with wisdom and sings with gratitude, our minds and hearts are informed and inspired by the word of God.¹⁰

We cannot pray Psalm 61 without thinking of Jesus from beginning to end. The psalmist concludes with a vowed commitment to sing the praises "of your name" forever. The apostles

⁶ Kidner, Psalms, 220.

⁷ Goldingay, Psalms, 241.

⁸ Ross, Psalms, 358.

⁹ Goldingay, Psalms, 32.

¹⁰ Webster, The Living Word, 105.

found in the name of Jesus a direct link with the reality of God, represented by the name of Yahweh. Jesus not only embodied the message of God but also revealed the character of God. His name was synonymous with God himself. For he was given the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow (Phil 2:9-10). "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).