

In the sequence of deliverance psalms from Psalm 51-64, Psalms 61-63 form a triptych, a three part picture of devotion that shifts attention away from the causes of danger and the need for deliverance and focuses on the worshiper. The enemy, whether it be the sinful self or a conspiratorial coup, remains an ever present threat, but in these three psalms the worshiper's passion for God dominates. In the first picture, the psalmist articulates a deep desire for God. He cries out to God out of the depth of his being. His vowed commitment is grandly inclusive of all he is and ever will be (Ps 61). In the second picture, he declares his quiet confidence in God alone. God is his rock, his salvation, his fortress, his hope, and his refuge. He confidently declares that he will never be shaken. In the third picture, David expresses his longing for God. He seeks after God with every fiber of his being. Every physical, emotional, and spiritual longing finds its true fulfillment in God alone. Taken together these three psalms guide us in the worship and praise of the triune God. In the Spirit, they exemplify a passion for Christ, to the glory of the Father, in the fullness of grace and truth.

The superscription attributes Psalm 63 to King David when he was in the desert of Judah presumably having fled Jerusalem because of the Absalom conspiracy (2 Sam 15-19). In Book I we identified Psalms 3-7 with Absalom's rebellion. This collection of psalms at the beginning of the psalter focuses our attention on the humiliation and vulnerability of David. They comprise his passion narrative and demonstrate David's desperate need for Yahweh's deliverance. Psalm 63 may very well fit that historical occasion, but its placement in Book II of the psalter is intended to reveal the heart and longing of the true worshiper.

Yearning for God

*You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.
I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.
On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.
Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.*

*I cling to you;
your right hand upholds me.*
Psalm 63:1-8

The maxim of our age is emphatic: “I *think* therefore I am.” “I *desire*, therefore I am.” “I *feel*, therefore I am.” “I *dream*, therefore I am.” Our age believes that “we the people” define who wish to be. Identity, meaning, worth, and purpose are self-selected. The existential self has become an imperial self, independently conquering and colonizing, setting up self-rule and declaring, “Long live me!” Western Enlightenment Cartesian thought has had a profound impact on the way people think about themselves and how they act. The Puritan who said when you ungod God you unman man was surely right. We have forgotten who we are because we have forgotten God.

We are what we desire, but strictly speaking it is not desire alone that defines us but what and for whom we desire. The psalmist boldly declares his absolute devotion, affection, and obedience for God. “Oh God, You are my God! Earnestly I seek you.” His self-worth is not a human achievement but a divine endowment. He embraces the truth that he is made in the image of God. He knows in the depth of his soul that he was made for communion and community, for rational reflection and righteous obedience, for worship and work. He is called into a personal, face-to-face relationship with God and his longing answers that call.

The essence of who we are comes from God and is received by us as a gift. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). We have a soul because God created us with a soul. This means that we are not our own. That which is most dearly “me” is not mine. The genesis of soul-making lies not in ourselves but in our Creator and Redeemer. Jesus made this clear: the value of our soul is beyond our means: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

Who we are and to whom we belong is a critical issue. We were never meant to be me-centered.¹ David leaves no doubt that he is radically God-centered. He even goes so far as to say that God’s love is better than life itself. That passionate conviction, delivered long before there was a firm understanding of the promise of everlasting life, cuts across the centuries of salvation history and relates directly to Jesus’ call to discipleship: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25).

Psalm 63 is packed with desire and all these desires are gathered into one.² For David worship is a verb. It is action. Worship is seeking, thirsting, longing, beholding, and glorifying. And the singular object of his worship is God. Worship sees God through the eyes of faith and beholds his power and glory. His voice and hands are lifted up in praise. His mind dwells on God, through the night he remembers him. Worshipers cling to God. They cleave to God. They stick to

¹ Webster, Soulcraft, 43.

² Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, vol. 2. 67.

God. They hold on tightly to the right hand of God.

David's passionate whole person search for God was driven by his wilderness experience. We do not know whether he was in a literal desert or in an emotional place that felt as dry as a desert. What we do know is that the essential wilderness is clearly marked on the map of spiritual formation. This "dry and weary land" is found in many places. As it was with Jesus in the Judean wilderness so it is with us. God leads us into difficult places. Jesus in the wilderness fits a pattern seen throughout the Bible: Job on the ash heap, Abraham on mount Moriah, Joseph in Egypt, David at En-Gedi, Jeremiah in the pit, and Daniel in the royal court. The list of wilderness experiences is long. We end up in places where we feel abandoned by God, but it is there in the wilderness that our desire for God grows and deepens. The wilderness can be a university campus or a busy office. Sitting in a cancer clinic with a chemo-therapy IV line in your veins counts as a dry and weary land. Jesus endured forty days in the wilderness, confronting the seduction of the devil at the point of his utter weakness and vulnerability, but it left him resolute in his determination to seek the Father's will. Like our Lord, we are led by the Spirit where we don't want to go to end up where we ought to be. We go thirsty and hungry for the sake of the Gospel.

David relates his yearning for God to four physical locations: the wilderness, the sanctuary, the banquet, and the bedroom. He compares his whole person experience of God to these places in order to better understanding and round out his description of his desire for God. The wilderness provokes his thirst for God and stands in marked contrast to his experience of God in the sanctuary. The house of God inspires his lips and limbs to praise God with his whole being. The sanctuary is filled with the power of God's glory and satisfies his appetite for God the way a sumptuous dinner satisfies. On his bed at night he remembers all that God has done for him. He meditates on God through the night. He is as safe and secure as a little chick under the mother hen's wings chirping his praise.

Two final relational images sum up the psalmist's whole person search for God. David clings to God the way a husband and wife "cleave" together (Gen 2:24) and the way Ruth clung to Naomi (Ruth 1:14). But David understands that even the power to cling, to cleave, to stick to God comes from God. "My soul followeth hard after thee" (Ps 63:8 KJV) is made possible by God's right hand upholding him. The only reason we can work out our salvation with fear and trembling is because God works in us to will and to act according to his good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13). Our passion for God is always upheld by God's passion for us.

David's devotion to God is best expressed in the line, "Your love is better than life." True intensity meets true ultimacy in a declaration of desire that transcends the many tempting intensities that demand our devotion. But these idols, pursuits, and passions, are devoid of ultimacy and when placed alongside God they rob us of knowing and loving God. For those who cannot identify with David's passion for God, Psalm 63 provokes a crisis of faith. The experience of seeking, thirsting, longing, and clinging to God belongs first to the Lord Jesus who prayed the psalms and then to all who take up their cross and follow Jesus.

Jesus was in the habit of driving his truth home in radical ways. One of the boldest lines he ever spoke contrasted devotion to him to devotion to family. He said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Let’s be clear. The love of family is an integral part of costly discipleship. What Jesus meant by his radical comparison was that family must never become an excuse that distances us from following him. Loving our family provides the opportunity for loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, strength and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves.

Modify the comparison and you get the Tuscaloosa, Alabama pastor saying on Sunday morning, “If you are truly serious about following Lord Jesus Christ you will hate Alabama football.” Is the love of sports an integral part of cross-bearing discipleship? Yes, indeed, it can be. What Jesus rejects is the temptation to make too much of sports, to turn sports into a god placed alongside Christ. When sports or family or money or music or whatever the intensity may be becomes a competitor against the Lord for our devotion and worship, we need to hear Jesus’ radical word and repent. Nothing was ever meant to be the excuse that distances us from following Christ.³

The better-than-life-love celebrated in Psalm 63 demands more of God than David imagined when he crafted this psalm. The author of Hebrews stresses that God’s covenant love is based on the better covenant and the better priesthood of Jesus Christ, who gave the better sacrifice in the better tabernacle and who offers the better hope and the better promises. As Jesus said to the woman at the well, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). This is the better-than-life-love of Jesus Christ.

Anticipating Deliverance

*Those who want to kill me will be destroyed;
they will go down to the depths of the earth.
They will be given over to the sword
and become food for jackals.
But the king will rejoice in God;
all who swear by God will glorify in him,
while the mouths of liars will be silenced.*

Psalm 63:9-11

The tone of the psalm abruptly changes as the pending threat and the need for deliverance re-emerges from the shadows. The psalmist boldly states as a self-evident fact that those who seek his life will be destroyed. They are marked for destruction and doomed to the pit. “Destroyers shall be destroyed. Those who hunt souls shall be themselves the victims.”⁴ They will be slaughtered by the sword so that their blood runs into the ground like water.⁵ Their unburied

³ Webster, “Intensity without Ultimacy,” The Other Journal, March 21, 2016.
<https://theotherjournal.com/2016/03/21/intensity-without-ultimacy-christian-perspective-sports/>

⁴ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, 68

⁵ Goldingay, Psalms, 262.

bodies will be eaten by jackals. This great reversal is a matter of fact is laid down without gloating. He has no intention of taking matters into his own hands. Vindication, not vengeance is the theme of his conclusion. Ross writes, “These enemies would have seen David die in the wilderness and his carcass finished off by packs of jackals, but what they had hoped for him will actually be their end.”⁶ Christians read this and know that God is patient “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). The world may show contempt for the riches of God’s “kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead [all of us] to repentance,” but they are only “storing up wrath” against themselves “for the day of God’s wrath” (Rom 2:4-5). As repulsive as David’s picture of judgment may be, it is the truth confirmed throughout the Bible. As Calvin says of those who are adamant in their refusal to turn to God and receive his mercy, “. . .This is only preparatory to their everlasting destruction.”⁷

In sharp contrast to the horrific destruction of destroyers is the simple uplifting declaration of joy: “But the king will rejoice in God.” Deliverance, not destruction, is the king’s future along with all those who join him in swearing allegiance to God. Together, they will glory in God’s truth and power. Meanwhile “the mouths of liars will be silenced.” They will be “stopped up.”⁸ Their falsehood exposed; their lies will cease. They form a stark contrast to the heart-felt cry of Psalm 61, the quiet confidence of Psalm 62, and the soulful yearning of Psalm 63. King and people together will say, “Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.”

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 388.

⁷ Calvin, Psalms, 442.

⁸ Goldingay, Psalms, 262.