



Psalm 61 - Assurance of God's Protection

To the leader: with stringed instruments. Of David.

Introduction

This is an individual lament of sorts: it serves as a general request for God's help in times of trouble for particular members of God's people. At the same time it is certainly not individualistic: in praying for the Davidic king, vv.6-7 tie royal well-being to the well-being of the whole people; and v.8 looks forward to acts of public worship as the proper result of the help for which the psalm prays.

David was often in trouble; the life circumstances which prompted this psalm are not revealed. It does seem to come after he came to the throne. Because of a reference to the end of the earth some have thought it comes from the time of Absalom's rebellion or on his military campaign near the Euphrates (2 Samuel 8:3-4). Those are possible, but by no means certain settings for this psalm.

Psalm 61:1-3 - Hear My Prayer, for You Have Been My Refuge

As the congregation sings this, they imagine themselves in all manner of places, i.e. the end of the earth, and circumstances in which they feel needy and exposed; in such cases they should lift their cry to God, who is a reliable refuge and strong tower. The rock that is higher than David is an image of safety.

- 1 Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.
- 2 From the end of the earth I call to you,
when my heart is faint.
Lead me to the rock

that is higher than I;
3 for you are my refuge,
a strong tower against the enemy.

Psalm 61:1-3

Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. This was wise praying from David. He understood that although God hears all prayer in one sense, in the sense of answering and responding favourably, God does not hear or listen to all prayer. Opening his prayer this way, David did not presume.

From the end of the earth I call to you. From what is known, David did not travel far outside the Promised Land. Yet figuratively he was at the end of human understanding and strength and resources; there was a real and powerful sense in which this prayer was offered from the end of the earth. David did not say, “from the end of the earth I will give up hope,” or “from the end of the earth I will deny that you love me.” At the limit of his wisdom, endurance, and ability David said I call to you.

When my heart is faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. David knew there would be times when his heart was overwhelmed. In those moments he needed at least three things:

- He needed the rock, a place of stability and security; something strong enough to stand against crashing waves or quaking earth.
- He needed a rock that is higher than I, a place above himself, above his wisdom, above his abilities.
- He needed God to lead him to that rock. David was unable to get to the firm-footed place above his crisis on his own.

It is not revealed why David was overwhelmed, and it is better that it remains unknown. If his specific circumstances were known there would be a strong temptation to limit God’s rescue only to those in the same situation. God wanted this prayer to be prayed by his people no matter the reason why their heart is overwhelmed.

Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. Assuming David wrote this as king, humanly speaking he had reached the top of the ladder. He still realised that was not enough, and needed something higher than himself: <<*Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all*>> (1 Chronicles 29:11), <<*Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, ‘Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing*

and praise'>> (Nehemiah 9:5), and: <<The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all>> (John 3:31).

For you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. David remembered that God had answered such prayers in the past. In the past God himself has been a shelter and strong tower for David: <<*The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold*>> (Psalm 18:2).

Psalm 61:4-5 - Let Me Dwell in Your Tent, for You Have Heard My Vows

To dwell in God's tent is to be a welcome guest in God's presence in worship. In this context the vows are promises of special peace offerings, which the worshipper will celebrate in due course.

- ⁴ Let me abide in your tent for ever,
find refuge under the shelter of your wings. Selah
- ⁵ For you, O God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.

Psalm 61:4-5

Let me abide in your tent for ever. The tent of God is a refuge for the weary traveller, the place where protection and hospitality are given to the honoured guest. The tent of God is the tabernacle of meeting, the centre of Israel's sacrifice and worship.

Find refuge under the shelter of your wings. This refers to a place of safety. It is another powerful figure of speech. The idea is of how a mother bird shields her young chicks from predators, from the elements, and from dangers by gathering them under her wings. This figure of speech is also used in four other psalms: <<*Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings*>> (Psalm 17:8), <<*How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings*>> (Psalm 36:7), <<*Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by*>> (Psalm 57:1), and: <<*for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy*>> (Psalm 63:7). Jesus used this same word picture to show his love and desired care for Jerusalem and its people: <<*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*>> (Matthew 23:37).

With image after image, David built upon the idea of <<*the rock that is higher than I*>> first stated in v.2. No one image could fully express the greatness of God's help to David.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

For you, O God, have heard my vows. David probably referred to past vows of grateful allegiance to God, which he continued to honour. God heard these vows and responded to them, giving David rule over God's people, i.e. the heritage of those who fear your name.

Psalm 61:6-7 - Prolong the Life of the King

If God will prolong the life of the king, and appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him, then the community of God's people may rest secure in God's blessing. Such a king would be faithful to God and committed to the well-being of the people; contrast the unjust rulers of Psalm 58.

- ⁶ Prolong the life of the king;
may his years endure to all generations!
- ⁷ May he be enthroned for ever before God;
appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!

Psalm 61:6-7

Prolong the life of the king. David confidently expected God's blessing upon his reign: <<*Loyalty and faithfulness preserve the king, and his throne is upheld by righteousness*>> (Proverbs 20:28). It was not because he thought so highly of himself, it was because he thought so highly of the God who keeps his promises.

May his years endure to all generations! David knew that he would not live forever and indeed he died of natural causes in his old age. He was speaking prophetically of a greater king who would follow him and reign for all time. Peter explains this on the Day of Pentecost: <<*Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, "He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption"*>> (Acts 2:29-31).

May he be enthroned for ever before God. David could only say this in reference to himself in a very limited way. He could say it with limitation of the Messiah that was promised to come from his lineage: <<*Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever*>> (2 Samuel 7:11b-16).

Appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him! David himself needed this mercy and truth, but he also knew that his greater Son, the promised Messiah, would also rely upon God's mercy and truth.

Psalm 61:8 - I Will Always Sing Praises to You

In the biblical worldview, one finds the fullness of God's presence in public worship, and the right response to God's goodness is to sing praises and perform one's vows in the company of God's people.

⁸ So I will always sing praises to your name,
as I pay my vows day after day.

Psalm 61:8

So I will always sing praises to your name. David began the psalm desperately crying out to God with a heart that was fainting and overwhelmed. The song ends with praise, honouring the character of God as expressed in his name, and doing so forever: <<*I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness, and sing praise to the name of the Lord, the Most High*>> (Psalm 7:17).

As I pay my vows day after day. David knew he had an unending obligation to thank and honour God: <<*When a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth*>> (Numbers 30:2), and: <<*If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not postpone fulfilling it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt*>> (Deuteronomy 23:21). It could and should be done daily and that forever.