



Psalm 63 - Comfort and Assurance in God's Presence

A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

Introduction

This psalm opens as if it were a lament, seeking God in a time of trouble; and yet the overall flow of the song is one of confident expectation. Hence it is best to see the psalm as enabling each of God's people to develop confidence during their times of trouble. In particular, the psalm inculcates the confidence that the worshipper will indeed be able to return to the sanctuary to worship God.

Biblically, the highest privilege a mortal can enjoy is to be a welcome member of the worshipping congregation; and the psalm, in instilling such confidence, also enables its singers to treasure this worship as the gift that it is. The several references to 'my soul' point to the intensely personal devotion to God that infuses the whole song.

The title links the psalm to David's days as a refugee, but it is not immediately clear whether the reference is to fleeing from Saul (1 Samuel 23:14-15 and 24:1), or from Absalom (2 Samuel 15:23-28). The latter may seem more likely, since the author calls himself a king (v.11); as confirmed by also 2 Samuel 16:14 for the term 'weary' found in v.1. On the other hand, the land through which David fled is not normally counted as part of the wilderness of Judah, and David could have thought of himself as a king even when he was fleeing Saul, since Samuel had already anointed him.

Most commentators believe it to belong either to David's wilderness years before he came to the throne of Israel, or to his more brief exile from the throne in the rebellion of Absalom. The wilderness years when hunted by King Saul are preferred, but not held with absolute certainty.

Charles Spurgeon added a note of interest: “Chrysostom tells us that among the primitive Christians it was decreed and ordained that no day should pass without the public singing of this psalm.”

Psalm 63:1-2 - Remembering Past Worship

The song opens with passionate expressions of longing for God: earnestly I seek, my soul thirsts, my flesh faints. No doubt the arid conditions of the wilderness of Judah provided the image of a dry and weary land where there is no water. Clearly the singer misses God; but in particular, he misses his experience of God in public worship: the sanctuary is the place of corporate worship, and God’s glory is his special presence with his people, which is given and enjoyed in the sanctuary; refer to the comments made on Psalm 26:4-8. People are said to see or look upon or behold this glory, for example: <<***and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord***>> (Exodus 16:7a), <<***Moses said, ‘Show me your glory, I pray’***>> (Exodus 33:18), <<***Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites***>> (Numbers 14:10b), <<***and you said, ‘Look, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live’***>> (Deuteronomy 5:24).

- 1 O God, you are my God, 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.
- 2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.

Psalm 63:1-2

O God, you are my God. This may seem like senseless repetition, a tautology. It is not; David declared to *Elohim* that he was David’s *El*, David’s God in the most fundamental sense. In a day when pagans thought there were many gods and each nation had their own gods, David sweeps such ideas aside and proclaimed his allegiance to *Elohim*.

I seek you. Appreciating God as God, it is entirely reasonable to seek him, and to seek him as a priority of the day. The thirst of David’s soul demanded to be satisfied early in the day: <<***It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night***>> (Psalm 92:1-2). It is appropriate for all creation to seek God: <<***My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly***>>

seeks you. For when your judgements are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness>> (Isaiah 26:9), <<And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him>> (Hebrews 11:6).

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary. David sought God at the tabernacle as earnestly as a thirsty man looks for water in a dry and thirsty land. The wilderness of Judah is largely desert, so this was a picture of longing that came easily to David's mind.

Beholding your power and glory. David sought God at the tabernacle to connect in some way with God's power and glory. Significantly, David was not at the tabernacle when he sang this song, he was in the wilderness of Judah. Yet he knew that God's sanctuary was not only a place, but also a spiritual concept that could be entered by faith no matter where a person was.

Psalm 63:3-4 - Confidence for Future Worship

The past tense recollection of v.2 becomes a future expectation: 'my lips will praise you', 'I will bless you', 'I will lift up my hands'. This activity of praising, blessing, and lifting up hands takes place in the sanctuary. Lifting up hands is a sign of directing one's prayers and praise toward God, and helps the worshipper to focus his thoughts on God. The ground of this expectation is v.3: *<<because your steadfast love is better than life>>.*

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

⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

Psalm 63:3-4

Because your steadfast love is better than life. This is the reason why David was so motivated to pursue God. The steadfast love, Hebrew *hesed*, of God was better, more meaningful to David, than life itself. This means that David both knew and experienced something of God's steadfast love that many believers today do not know and experience:

- People regard life as natural; David regarded God's great love as natural.
- People enjoy life; David enjoyed God's great love.
- People value life; David valued God's great love.
- People will sacrifice to live; David would sacrifice for God's great love.
- People want to give life to others; David wanted to give God's great love.

- People despair without the sense of life; David despaired without the sense of God's great love.

Life and literature are filled with people who loved someone or something more than their own life, and it could be said of them that they held love better than life. Yet that is not what David sang of here. David meant that the love of God to him was more precious than his own life.

My lips will praise you. In light of David's experience of God's great love, he determined to vocally praise God. David thought that he would be ungrateful and rude if he did not praise and thank the God who loved him so greatly. However, it should not just be the lips that praise God, he requires the whole being to acknowledge him: <<*My words declare the uprightness of my heart, and what my lips know they speak sincerely*>> (Job 33:3). There are those who do not fulfil this requirement: <<*The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote*>> (Isaiah 29:13).

So I will bless you. David did not mean this in the sense that a greater bestows a blessing on a lesser. David meant this in the sense that it blessed and honoured God when his creatures praised him and thanked him appropriately.

As long as I live. Common sense told David he could only praise God during his earthly lifetime: <<*For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?>> (Psalm 6:5), as did the prophet: <<*For Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness*>> (Isaiah 38:18). After death it is too late to praise God or to seek salvation. However, there will come a time when praise can again be offered to God by those that are called to be with him in a life yet to come: <<*Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!'*>> (Revelation 5:11-12).*

I will lift up my hands and call on your name. The lifting of the hands was not only the common posture of prayer among the ancient Hebrews, it was especially appropriate for praise. It displayed the anticipation of gratefully receiving from God, and the sense of surrender to him: <<*Hear the voice of my supplication, as I cry to you for help, as I lift up my hands towards your most holy sanctuary*>> (Psalm 28:2), and: <<*I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument*>> (1 Timothy 2:8).

Psalm 63:5-8 - My Soul Clings to You

The delight in God is not limited to the sanctuary, of course; the memory of God's presence and promises mediated in public worship, and of God's help in times past, produces joy and praise; even in the watches of the night, a time normally devoted to sleep, people deal with sleeplessness by meditating on God.

- ⁵ My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
- ⁶ when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
- ⁷ for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
- ⁸ My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Psalm 63:5-8

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast. David spoke of a satisfaction that too few people know, even among believers. He spoke of the deep satisfaction that comes in a surrendered seeking of God, of receiving his great love, of praising God without reservation.

When I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night. David thought that there were not enough hours in the day to think upon God's greatness and goodness. Therefore he also used the night-time watches to meditate upon God. Jesus, too, spent the night in the presence of his Father: *<<Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God>>* (Luke 6:12).

For you have been my help. Many of David's psalms are simple cries for help. Since this psalm was composed from the wilderness of Judah, there was certainly help David could ask for. Yet, Psalm 63 has no cry for help but gives thanks and praise for God's faithfulness in many times when God had been my help for David.

In the shadow of your wings. The idea of the shelter of shadow of God's wings is repeated many times in the psalms. Sometimes it has the idea of protection, as a mother bird shelters her young chicks. Other times it has the idea of presence, as in the wings of the cherubim that surround the throne of God. Here, the idea of presence seems to best fit the context.

My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. This speaks of the partnership and connection the believer experiences with God. David's soul was close to God, following him as one followed a master or teacher. God responded with care and strength for David, upholding him with his mighty right hand, the hand of skill and strength. The connection expressed by **my soul clings to you** is truly close. It conveys the sense of joining or gluing together, as in Genesis 2:24. It is the Hebrew word *dabaq* and can also mean 'holds fast' or 'united'. It is used in: <<***while those of you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today***>> (Deuteronomy 4:4), and: <<***Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall be one flesh.'*** But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him>> (1 Corinthians 6:16-17).

Psalm 63:9-11 - Those Who Seek My Life Will Fail, but I Will Rejoice

Now the song explains where the troubles came from: 'those who seek to destroy my life'. In David's experience, as the title suggests, these were Israelites who rebelled against God's choice of David as king. In order to apply this psalm, the ordinary believer should observe the analogy: these are people hostile to God's purposes, especially hostile to the house of David and Christians follow David's heir, Jesus. The confidence is that these people will fail in their goal of destroying God's faithful.

If the setting is Absalom's revolt, then the power of the sword was fulfilled literally (2 Samuel 18:6-8); again, ordinary believers should use analogy to apply this. The king, i.e. David, and those who adhere to him, will not fall prey to these enemies but shall rejoice in God, because when the mouths of liars are stopped, God's love and faithfulness are clearly on display.

- 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 prey for jackals.

Psalm 63:9-10

But those who seek to destroy my life. David's deep communion with God did not take away his problems. There were still those who wanted to kill him. According to its title, Psalm 63 was written from the wilderness of Judah and David was in the wilderness hiding from a conspiracy to kill him.

They shall be given over to the power of the sword. David trusted God to deal with his enemies, especially with King Saul. In God's time and in God's way, David's enemies did fall by the sword, which has the sense of being killed in battle: <<***Therefore give their children over to famine; hurl them out to the***>>

power of the sword, let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be slain by the sword in battle>> (Jeremiah 18:21).

They shall be prey for jackals. Because jackals often scavenge, this image is a grim description of dead bodies, lying unburied after a battle: <<*Because of this our hearts are sick, because of these things our eyes have grown dim: because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it>> (Lamentations 5:17-18).*

¹¹ But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

Psalm 63:11

But the king shall rejoice in God. If the psalm was written during the time he was persecuted by Saul then David was not yet on Israel's throne and that promise still waited many years for fulfilment. Yet it was a promise of God, first expressed in 1 Samuel Chapter 16, so by faith David could dare to think of himself as the king, and in that daring faith rejoice in God: <<*And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed>> (Luke 1:46-48).*

All who swear by him. This could be 'swear by the king,' or it could be 'swear by God.' The second is more likely, as confirmed by: <<*The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear>> (Deuteronomy 6:13), and: <<You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear>> (Deuteronomy 10:20), where swearing by the Lord's name displays loyalty to God. Thus the psalmist invites all the covenantally pious to join him in his confidence.*