

2. PSALM 63

A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.¹

From the very title, we are already plunged headlong into the issues that confront this work. How do we read this title? Is it a literal description of author and situation or completely irrelevant as a later addition? And, whatever view we take of its history, what impact should that have as we attempt to have this psalm speak God's word to us today?

There is a standard discussion of Psalm titles in the scholarly literature. There seems to be a growing recognition that the question of authorship is more complex than the two polar alternatives of personal composition and a centuries later attribution. We simply have no adequate evidence to make definite

Regardless of authorship, we could argue that the title is still significant in determining the setting of the psalm. If it wasn't David's own composition, it could be said, it was written about David, thus, we can still

clichéd reference to I Samuel 24

his enemies (cf. verses 9-

moments of psychological reflection on his part, but we shouldn't then claim we are illuminating David's situation. Unfortunately, the reason for the title may turn on nothing more than the reference to desert in verse

The way I propose viewing this text is to use an approach that will reoccur in this chapter. I try to break out of the bind of choosing between an interpretation that is literal ("the psalm is about David.") or

situation. Whoever wrote this title as comment on the psalm, thought the psalm would fit a person who was removed from the safety represented by the temple and the text echoes the thoughts and prayers of such a

¹ The translation used throughout is

² For background see, Peter Psalms -3 and Kraus, _____, v1, 21-

**1 O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;**

**as in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.**

Fundamentally, the psalm is about the deep longing for God and the first person nature of the language allows us to consider this thirst in personal rather than communal terms. Evidence for this view is developed in the

-11) will, on closer

I develop and defend this proposition about situation in two dimensions. First, by distinguishing the theme of this -- longing for God -from absence. Secondly, I will delve more deeply into the thirst for God.

We must first sharpen our understanding of the thirst for God by contrast with related situations. This

There are psalms about persecution, and psalms about the agony of the absence of God. Neither motif fairly describes this psalm. The situation of persecution (cf. Psalms 3, 7, 12, 54, 59, 69 etc.) is not synonymous

Theologically, it is crucial to assert that persecution and suffering are not the root causes of the human desire to seek God, facing suffering does often propel us to seek God. Failing to distinguish the longing for God from appeals to God during persecution, is to fall victim to the Marxist critique of religion. In the Marxist view, human alienation and suffering cause the person to long for something better. Suffering reconstructed to eliminate alienation, then religion will disappear.

The Biblical view is different: human beings were made by God to seek God. Being made in God's

⁴ Though we have fallen, and

death with equanimity, in part, because of our faith that death will lead to a union that will fill our hunger for God.

There is also a psychological reason for distinguishing a persecution motif from the longing for God: the complex of human emotions and needs are different. A person suffering is in pain, ("I am weary with my crying," 69:3) perhaps confused, angry. The question addressed to God is one of justice, fairness ("Hear a just cause, O Lord," 17:1) and can be a sharp cry for help to find physical safety. Sometimes, by contrast, the mood during persecution is one of quiet confidence. "But You, O Lord, are a shield around me." (Psalm 3:3) In this case persecution enhances the feeling of God's presence.

However, in those times in which we feel strongly the longing for God it comes as a hunger; a hunger to know, to touch, to experience that which is beyond our everyday life. Note for example the difference of tone between Psalm 22:15 and 63:1. Both use images of dryness and thirst but the effect is different.

Of course the two experiences overlap, and during the course of enduring suffering there will be times of strongly felt need for God. Likewise, experiencing a hunger for God may heighten the feeling of pain and suffering from simply being an infinite creature within a finite world and life. However, longing and absence are not always identical or interchangeable. Therefore, in interpreting this psalm, we should not let verses 9 and 10 lead us to see the primary context as persecution.

To sharpen our appreciation of the text, it is also worth separating the longing for God from the situation of the absence of God. Logically, the two ideas seem equivalent: how can you thirst for God without having God be absent? If the psalmist is in the dry wilderness, far from the sanctuary, isn't this an absence from God? Again, the key distinction is one of human emotion, rather than theology. Those psalms dealing with God's absence (e.g. 10, 13, 22, 88) strike a different tone. They tend to be angry, desperate, works, revealing a person in extremes. ("How long, O Lord. . .," 13:1)

Of course, in this psalm, as in any human situation, we cannot clearly separate the three motifs. We temporarily pull these ideas apart so that we can clear the ground to explore more deeply this thirst for God. Do we, reading the text today, hunger for God? In other words, can we pray, sing, recite this psalm without hypocrisy?

On the surface of life we may not long for God very much. The layer of activities that cover our feelings and fill our thoughts seldom have much to do with God; our true longing for God is covered by our sins. In this case, if we read this psalm we may feel guilty or depressed and the psalm functions as law. Judgement can have its traditional use of spurring us to self-examination. But even if we do not feel a thirst for God we can still use the psalm in a positive way as a means of calling us back to God. Pray verse 1 as petition to God. In this act of saying, you begin the process of thirsting for God.

On the other hand, other actions and feelings may really reflect a deep longing for God. Someone has written of our "ache for transcendence," by which I would include all of our longing for the existence of magic or the supernatural. We want so much for there to be more to life than dull ordinariness. A case can be made that much of our life is mislabeled longing for transcendence. Perhaps our thirst for God is why the fear that God does not exist is so deep and terrible. Sometimes we may hunger for God so deeply that, at an unconscious level, we fear what would happen if we were to bring that hunger to light and act on it.

If you are in the situation of longing for God, there can be something inexpressible and frustrating about the experience: there is a desire to give voice to the feeling, and you have no words or images to do so. Then the psalm can fulfill its most obvious function, as we take the words of this psalm for our own and use them. We could meditate on the image of thirst which has an immediacy and primacy to it. When thirsty, we seldom contemplate the nature of thirst, we act to slake it. The image of the verse situates a thirsty person in a land without water, as we, thirsty for God, can find ourselves in a culture, a group, a situation that provides no sustenance for this primary human need.

Note on Method

We pull back from our interpretation of the psalm to discuss briefly the method of the analysis up to now. The "modern" approach to the psalms is to start with setting and form. We have done this, but fundamentally shifted the categories. Rather than the historical setting, we are analyzing the literary setting: the mood evoked by the psalm, what human setting is called up when we read it. Our use of the psalm in a different time and culture than its composition is possible because we argued that the human situation of thirst

for God is archetypal. So, while we cannot run roughshod over historical setting (e.g. in the cult or private, pre or post exile) it is not immediately determinative of how we would use the psalm today.

Certainly, there are assumptions in such an analysis. Among them are that the psalm makes sense as a literary unit, and that we understand psalms to be prayers from believers to God, and that the collection of them in the Bible is normative for believers, in some way. More importantly, it is also assumed that it can make sense to look for an individual human setting for the psalm. Here, I simply took the first person language of the psalm at face value. A more thorough analysis would need to examine more carefully the meaning of first person language in a cultic situation in Hebrew culture. I would argue that while the psalm may have had a primary setting in the cult, it is defensible to read it now also in individual terms.

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

The image of the sanctuary occurs frequently in the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 28:2, 60:6) and there are a range of overlapping concepts: sanctuary, the temple, the mount, Zion and even Jerusalem, all referring in various ways to a place of God's special presence.⁵ Since we do not share the same religious orientation as ancient Judaism with regard to having one central liturgical focus for all Christians, it is worth considering how we might appropriate this image without either trivializing it or being condescending to the Jewish perspective of the psalmist.

On the one hand, we must avoid any formulation of the problem that would reduce itself to something like: "Jews believed God was in one place, but we know God is everywhere." This both misstates ancient Jewish belief and would make the Biblical notion of sanctuary meaningless for us. While it seems clear⁶ that the location and access to God is an issue of some tension (See Psalm 11:4) in ancient Israel (as in many other times and places!), a clear strand of texts inform us that, whatever the temple meant, God is not contained inside (I Kings 8:27, Psalm 115:3, 139:7-10, Jeremiah 7:4, and the story of Jonah).

On the other hand, we must also avoid formulations of the sort that would glibly equate the temple in Jerusalem to our average church building. The understandable use of Biblical texts about "going into the house

⁵ See Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 73ff for a comprehensive discussion.

⁶ See Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 34ff.

of the Lord" as entrance liturgies may tend to blur the distinction. God was available, manifest, in some special way in this one place, the temple (I Kings 8:10-13, Psalm 27:4, 84:1). So, in analyzing the motif of sanctuary, we must be clear to include the connotation not only of "refuge" but also of "presence."

To sum up, verse 2 recalls for us how the sanctuary is a special place of experiencing God. But is the psalmist in the temple now, or reflecting on previous visits? A number of significant versions⁷ translate "I have looked" (past tense) whereas Kraus translates "Thus I look. . ." (present tense). The title puts the psalmist out of the sanctuary, but verse 7b tends to imply--and Kraus so analyzes--that the psalmist is presently in the sanctuary.⁸ I will take the principle meaning as being a reflection on previous visits.

Therefore, our appropriation of the text begins with meditation on the profound religious experience of sanctuary. The psalmist has entered into a sanctified area and experienced, in some way, the power and glory of God in ways not universally available.

We can repeat this process. Saying, praying this verse should invite us to reflect on our past experiences of God. We remember when we have had special experiences. This may be in a congregation's sanctuary, in nature, in other places. As we mentally (or actually) return to that space we feel that it has been sanctified, it is special. In mulling over previous experiences, we have our memory of them strengthened, we recover them, long buried under the secular minutia of our lives, we haul them to the surface, and restore them.

What if a person has no memory of such experiences? This is an important case to consider, because we cannot make experience a criterion for salvation. If a person has no previous experiences, then the act of reading this text can be taken as the first experience, (as we argued with verse 1) and the person can simply claim the sanctuary of God now. Further, a person could begin to identify those things they need sanctuary from.

Our use of sanctuary can be taken to a more profound level. Implicit in the image of the Jerusalem sanctuary is also movement: considering the sanctuary involves imagining going toward it and leaving it again.⁹ A person approached in prayer and expectation and then received benefits and words of wisdom (e.g.

⁷ NRSV, RSV, NJB, NIV, Weiser.

⁸ To this should be added the customary wariness at attempting to translate Hebrew aspects into English tenses. See Craigie, Psalms, 110-3 for discussion.

⁹ Kraus, Theology, 76ff.

Psalm 60:6, par. 108:7, or Psalm 65 generally). Therefore we might reflect on what we look for by intentionally setting out to enter into a sanctuary. From a time of prayer in a holy place, a person may seek to receive centering or peace. A group may look for unity or direction. It is not stretching the point to see this in a metaphorical or societal way either. In the late 1970s, Salvadoreans looked to the sanctuary of the archdiocese for sustenance and received it via the radio broadcast of Romero's sermons. This is an often remarked feature of the time.

Before the sanctuary had become static in one temple it had moved in the form of the ark of the covenant. Its presence on the battlefield was sustaining for Israelites (e.g. I Samuel 4:5). Even this aspect of sanctuary has contemporary referents. What else is meant when priests in vestments hear confession and celebrate mass in the shipyards of striking Solidarity workers in the early 80's or when congregations march in city streets to "take back the night"? The symbols of the sanctuary of our faith go forth to where the people do battle. Of course, some Americans are, for ample reason, suspicious of having that symbol be the priest. We can locate that symbol in the processional cross or the elements or the actual gathered people themselves. But, in countries where priests are targets for murder and threats, having the person of the priest among the people is a potent symbol of God's presence.

Verse 2 is a logical progression from verse 1. The psalm starts by expressing our longing to be in the presence of God, and verse 2 begins the process by recovering our past experiences of God.

Note on Method

We may call attention to the way historical data have been used, not as a constraint on the present, or as ends in themselves, but to give substance to the image in the psalm and as a way to reinforce the power of the poem.

- 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.**

a pious cliché

human situation, so we may pray this, again, as reinforcement to our own faith.

But how does this happen? The rest of verse 3 and 4 provide the first level of answer: four tasks are worship activities. They come not as sacrifices, or as commands; note the exact motivation: "Because steadfast love. . . ." The tasks are not a response to an exchange of gifts between God and humanity, and not a demand for obedience. Rather they are our spontaneous response as we consider God and how God is to us - it *hesed* that is producing this reaction. The meaning is hard to pin down,¹⁰ but it involves a relationship, and the excess beyond the expected in a relationship, which we call grace, or amazing goodness. As with verse 1, we are speaking of that particular emotion that overcomes us when someone has done something unexpectedly good for us and we are dumbfounded.

Therefore, to develop the meaning of these verses for us, we can meditate on exactly how we have felt at moments of unexpected blessing. We can further our meditations of verse 2, by adding this dimension: we can specifically reflect on past blessings by God.

As before, these reflections on the past are not for a mechanical or guilt inducing purpose. The reason for remembering the past is to help us unblock the present. Meditation about the past should change how we are in the present.

Secondly, and regardless of our mental state, we can respond in the ways indicated. Because verbal praying is better understood, I will limit my comments to the "lifting up of hands." It is used in several places: Psalm 28:2, 134:2, 141:2, Lam. 2:19, 3:41, Neh. 8:6, and I Timothy 2:8, and, in a reversal of sorts, in Isaiah 1:15. It is a gesture accompanying prayer, adoration or supplication.

My primary point here, is simply to note how a physical action is an appropriate response to God. Christians rise to pray, fold hands, bow heads, make the sign of the cross, raise arms above heads, or even clap, and there are other motions. Since we sometimes have no words to say (cf. Rom 8:26) perhaps at moments of

¹⁰ On the meaning of *hesed*, see Kraus, Theology, 44.

overwhelming feeling we can remember that we can pray just by raising our hands, or make the sign of the cross, or another gesture.

Note on Method

This is an appropriate place to lament the apparent lack of an accessible concordance of images in Hebrew poetry.¹¹ It would greatly advance analysis, if we could readily turn to a source for the image "lifting up of hands," or "sanctuary" and read a comprehensive discussion. Of course, people have written on these subjects, but the material is scattered and requires significant effort to collect and use.

Summary of verses 1-4

Verses 1-4 form a distinct section of the psalm. As such we have seen a movement from the longing for God to a number of specific actions to develop our understanding of that longing and to help break us from an immobility of simply being stuck in our longing.

Despite the first person language, the passage is a natural entrance liturgy, but simply reading it as written hardly exhausts its possibilities. As we have identified the separate modes (expressing our longing, recalling previous times of God's presence, expressing a blessing), each of these could be developed, either by using other Biblical texts, or as an inspiration for creativity. Each image could be developed or drawn out to form a liturgical progression.

5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

Kraus makes the verse a condition: "As with fat and marrow, may my soul be satisfied." Unfortunately, he does not discuss the reason for this translation. It makes a difference. In the NRSV the verse is a statement, in Kraus, a wish or hope, or perhaps even an invocation of blessing on one's self. It may be possible to understand the NRSV in this way also: the verse becomes a statement made in hope that saying it will help it come true. Words have this curious power, if we repeat "I am happy," when depressed, it may encourage us. I can attest that even repeating "I am warm," when cold can make me feel warmer.

¹¹ Luis Alonso Schokel, A Manual of Hebrew Poetics, p.120-1

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

Again, while Kraus makes verse 6 a new sentence, the NRSV makes this verse the situation in which the response of verse 5 occurs. Absent any discussion, we cannot pick between the two.

Two related images (bed and night) are mentioned here, both deserve being fleshed out.

Thinking of God on a bed is also mentioned in Psalm 4:4,¹² and references to thinking of God at night are found in Psalm 16:7, 17:3, and 119:55. Kraus assumes, without discussion, that this thinking is done in the physical temple, functioning as an actual refuge.¹³ Without becoming trapped in a historical debate, for which there seems to be little evidence in either direction, we may use this suggestion to amplify our understanding of the power of this passage.

First, the verse suggests the whole process of considering God at times outside normal, public life. One's bedroom is, in many cultures, the most private dwelling place of a person. Night is the time when, in many cultures, the mysterious and the spiritual are most accessible. But a private place and night do not point in precisely the same emotional direction. The bedroom is, for us, a place of refuge, the ultimate safe place. Outsiders seldom penetrate there: the salesperson will be firmly kept in the front room, friends enter as far as the kitchen, but the only ones entertained in the bedroom are lovers. By contrast, the night has always been a time of exposure and danger, the powers about at night are not uniformly friendly. What then is the significance of being up at night, in one's safe place, after all around are asleep, considering God? The themes of safety, privacy with a dimension of danger and risk would seem to be consistent with the thirst announced in verse 1: the longing for God. The power and mystery of that deep longing can spring forward there.

But what about the actual sanctuary? Spending the night in a church is not a common experience, it might be interesting to explore the idea. Even the plainest church sanctuary is wrapped in mystery after dark, and the most securely locked building would still induce a degree of apprehension in most. Also, some churches do now function as actual sanctuaries: offering refuge for soldiers from the war, or refugees from the

¹² And plotting on your bed (Psalm 36:4) is perhaps then especially bad.

¹³ Kraus, Psalms, vol. 1, 20-21.

U.S. government. The meaning of this verse may be increased for us, by consideration of both personal and congregational uses.

Note on Method

Again, we have tried to avoid becoming entangled in a discussion about the historical situation of sanctuaries. This is not because it is unimportant, but because a certain amount of interpretation and appropriation can be done in an authentic way without a precise determination of original setting. The psalm has value that transcends its circumstances of origin. This point will be developed in the commentary on the next verse.

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

With this verse, we can again remark on the tension between the literal and poetical meanings of text. Kraus¹⁴ sees the roots of the image "under the shadow of your wings" (cf. Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 57:1) in the physical wings of statues of cherubim on the ark of the covenant in the temple (Psalm 80:1, 99:1). If this is taken as the "real" meaning of the verse, we risk a reductionism that would, for example, flatten the extended image of birds and hunting elaborated so beautifully in Psalm 91:3-5 into a physical hiding underneath the ark in the Holy of Holies.

Again, we strive to avoid two dead ends, on the one hand, a purely historical debate about refuge practices, and, on the other, an equally profitless dichotomizing of "literal" vs. (what?) "spiritual," meanings. In this latter case, we would then be trapped into trying to dismiss ancient practices compared to our "wider" understanding of refuge, or we would be destroying the ability of the text to speak to us by saying that it "really" means an actual retreat to a space that no longer exists.

Suppose that the text "originally" meant a physical journey to reside by the ark to save oneself from actual enemies, who, by cult taboo, could not attack the person. Would not such a journey immediately be subject by that same person and the society to a "metaphorical," or "poetical" understanding? Would not that

¹⁴ Kraus, Psalms, vol. 1, 20.

actual person, or inspired observers of the proceeding be moved to comment on how God's wings provide a refuge? The argument between a historical and poetical interpretation obscures a deeper unity.

For us, God provides an actual, not metaphorical refuge, from our sins, from various troubles and, yes, from death. We respond by praise, and by "singing for joy."

We should also note that verse 7b is an instance of darkness ("shadow") as a positive rather than negative image.

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

Summary of verses 5-8

Verse 8 brings the second section to a close. Verses 5 to 8 form a chiasmic structure: verses 5 and 8 focus on soul, verses 6 and 7 use the image of darkness in two different ways.

At first, this section does not seem to develop or relate to the initial idea of our thirst for God. This section has largely been affirmations, not the kind of development of the image of thirst or longing we might expect.

Apparently, verses 5-8 suggest that one response to recognition of a thirst for God is to continue to reflect on the nature of previous significant events in our relationship with God. While such a thirst for God could trigger an extended lament, this psalm goes in a different direction, to a positive response. So we can now refine our estimate of the human situation of the psalm: the speaker is thirsting for God, but able to respond in constructive ways. Meditation on this section, then, is especially fruitful for us. We have a model of response, a handbook of how to deal with our feelings of longing.

As we now understand the particulars of the situation of the psalm, we should be more careful in its use. This psalm should probably not be prescribed for a person deeply longing for God, lest the responses here seem to be trivializing their longing, moving too quickly to advice giving. Either stay at verse 1, or use another text (Psalms 43:1-3?).

**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.**

Now we have a significant turn, as the motif of persecution is introduced. Despite our careful attempts above to distinguish persecution from longing for God, the temptation of the reader is to say, "aha, now we've gotten down to the real issue."

No. In the structure of the psalm, the focus is on God first, not on enemies. The development of the psalm is on the relationship with God. Further, note the tone of these two verses. While they speak of a gory end to the enemies, it is spoken on a note of quiet confidence, not bitter or gleeful about their impending death. Contrast the development and tone of Psalm 3 or 69 for example.

This section also raises an issue of some significance in the psalms, how we should understand the harsh language towards enemies. This subject should be taken up at length in a commentary on a psalm where that is a dominant motif.

For here, where the enemies are not vilified, and what we have is a simple statement of their future destruction, we will only make a brief comment.

It seems apparent that this text envisions specific people who are engaged in some physical opposition to the psalmist. It may be appropriate for us to "spiritualize" this to the extent of praying in confidence that the sins that drive our enemies will be overthrown.

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

Verse 11 has, apparently, always been problematic.¹⁵ Sometimes verse 11b is eliminated as secondary and the order of phrases rearranged. The problem isn't that similar ideas about the King are not expressed in the Psalter, the question is the connection of verse 11 to what has preceded it. On first reading, our psalm, which would seem to have been building to some profound closing affirmation, seems to have skidded to a bumpy end.

In developing a meaning for us, we must first cast aside North American assumptions of the separation of church and state. The king in ancient Israel had significant cultic functions and was felt to be in

¹⁵ Kraus, *Psalms*, vol. 2, 18, 21.

a special relationship with God.¹⁶ "The King is lord of the temple and chosen representative of the lordship of God."¹⁷ So, verse 11 carries on the concern of the psalm for the sanctuary. As the place was saluted in verse 2, now its lord and protector is prayed for.

A fuller assessment of this verse would need to draw on a comprehensive analysis of the motif of King in the psalms, which is beyond our scope. For this psalm, we may suggest (following Kraus and Weiser) that here the speaker widens his own outlook beyond his person to the cult, finding room to pray for others who have, because of their role, a special relationship with God.

Again, while this sudden concern for others strikes a strange note from our individualistic viewpoint, it is consistent with a more profound theology: to counter any excessively personal preoccupations by a concern for others.

Summary

We have traveled quite some distance from verse 1. The brief psalm has, hopefully, been revealed as a rich mine of meditation for us as we ponder our deep connections with the one who made us.

If the analysis has been successful, we have kept our devotional or homiletical material congruent with the historical background and literary setting of the psalm. The contribution of the devotional perspective has been to focus our attention on different questions. Of course, as author I cannot assert that the work as succeeded in becoming Word of God for the reader.

¹⁶ Kraus, Theology, 114-5.

¹⁷ Kraus, Psalms, vol. 2, 21.