

## In the Shadow of Your Wings

### Psalm 63

We come now to the last message in our series on the shape of David's voice in the Psalms. The first text we looked at was David's voice in exile in Psalm 142. Today we look at its counterpart in Psalm 63, where once again we find David in exile, but ironically it is the exile of his own making. It is one thing to find yourself in a spiritual "desert" because of circumstances beyond your control, quite another when you are in a "desert" due to the consequences of your sin. And I can think of nothing more painful than to be disowned by the children whom you bore. But the good news of the gospel is that even in that wilderness we can find complete restoration with God, if we will but turn to him and completely trust him.

Last week we charted the course of David's journey from the palace to the desert and the many ups and downs of his soul along the way. During that journey he experienced five life-changing encounters. Two of which, Hushai and Shimei, we looked at as providing depth to several of the metaphors in Psalm 3. This week we will examine two more, that of Ittai and Zadok as providing the backdrop to Psalm 63.

The king's walk to exile covered about twenty miles, and a descent of some four thousand feet. In the last scene we find David, weary after the long journey, together with all the people at the fords of the Jordan. He has finally reached his destination, the wilderness of Judah, and there he refreshes himself. Even though he is forced to live as a fugitive on the run, he takes time out to return to his calling as a poet and writes Psalms 3 and 63. He cannot let the significance of his journey to exile fade away into the desert dust. He is driven by a deep passion to memorialize this spiritual journey into Israel's sacred memory, so that taste of eternity that intersected his painful path for a moment in time can be relived again and again.

Why poetry? you ask. Walter Brueggemann writes:

The task of articulation for the preacher is to trace and voice the delicate, tortured, dramatic way in which God moves for and with us from one world to the other, a move wrought in love and faithfulness, but also wrought in grief and humiliation . . . The artful drama of hurt healed requires an artful voice that stands shrewdly against the voices that either make guilt our fate, or that offer healing too soon and too cheaply . . . When the text comes to speak about this alternative life wrought by God, the text must use poetry. There is no other way to speak.<sup>1</sup>

The superscription of the text is: “A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.” The vocabulary of the psalm,<sup>2</sup> and the fact that David is fondly recalling his experience of worshipping God in Jerusalem as king (vs. 2. 11), point to his estrangement from Absalom as the appropriate context, rather than the period when he was persecuted by Saul. The psalm is a devotional masterpiece, a “rare jewel of Christian contentment,” that gives the reader a privileged look inside David’s soul at this holy hour. Derek Kidner says of this text: “There may be other psalms that equal this outpouring of devotion; few if any that surpass it.”<sup>3</sup>

The metaphors David uses in the Psalm are best understood when we lay them alongside two significant encounters he experienced just after his exit from Jerusalem, the first was with Ittai the Gittite, and the second was with Zadok the priest.

**17 And the king went out and all the people with him,  
and they stopped at the furthest house.**

**18 Now all his servants passed on beside him,  
all the Cherethites, all the Pelethites, and all the Gittites,  
six hundred men who had come with him from Gath,  
passed on before the king (NASB).**

As we saw last week the escape route David chooses is not the quickest route out of Jerusalem, but the one most conducive to reflection. David had to endure the dual punishments of descending the full length of the city under the humiliating stares of the population and of gazing upon the whole of his beloved capital from which he would soon be exiled. And by choosing to make his crossing at the furthest house in the Kidron the king exits the city with the refuse. In this way David is publicly embracing his own humiliation. As he embraces his humiliation, he in turn is embraced with an incredible loyalty, and to his surprise it is from a foreigner, Ittai the Gittite.

**Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, “Why will you also go with us? Return and remain with the king, for you are a foreigner and also an exile; return to your own place. You came *only* yesterday, and shall I today make you wander with us, while I go where I will? Return and take back your brothers; mercy and truth be with you” (2 Sam 15:19-20).**

Standing by the Kidron, emptied of all dignity, David cannot believe what he sees, a recent convert from Gath attempting to cross over with him. In a conversation

that is reminiscent of Naomi's words to that sweet clinging Ruth, also a foreigner, David bids Ittai the Gittite to return home with his family. This foreigner pledged his vows only yesterday, and David cannot bear the thought of taking this man, once a foreigner wandering in exile, back into that desolate uncertain world. It is a horrible condition that both David and Ittai know all too well, and too great a price to pay. So David bids Ittai to stay in Jerusalem, to throw his lot in with the new king, where the situation stands much more certain. So he bids good-bye with "mercy and truth be with you," a courageous word to allow a man the freedom to annul holy vows with no guilt. But Ittai will not take "no" for an answer.

**"As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives,  
surely whatever *place* my lord the king may be,  
whether for *death* or for *life*,  
there also your servant will be."**

Ittai picks up on the word "*place*" and redefines it in terms that transcend time and space. Now "*place*" is stretched to the extreme limits of "*in death or in life.*" The general from Gath has skillfully lifted a line right out of David's own poetry, a line that described the loyalty of Jonathan (2 Sam 1:23 "*in life and death not parted*"). Just as David is at the nadir of his exodus, exiting Jerusalem with the refuse, God gives him the gift of loyal-love, a mirror from his past, Jonathan, risen from the dead from the redeemed ranks of those whose arrows impaled his friend on Gilboa. So these two men, once strangers, now in the crucible of dangerous flight, are forged forever friends.

**22 Therefore David said to Ittai, "Go and pass over."  
So Ittai the Gittite passed over with all his men  
and all the little ones who were with him.**

Now we discover that not only is Ittai going off to exile with David, but so are his men (some 600!) and families with all their toddlers. The sight of this miniature nation migrating with David must have moved him beyond words.

As David continued his ascent up the Mount of Olives the entire populace embraced his sorrow.

**23 While all the country was weeping with a loud voice,  
all the people *passed over*.  
The king also *passed over* the brook Kidron,**

**and all the people *passed over*  
toward the way of the wilderness.**

The whole nation is bent over in tears and draped in sorrow. Their voices fill the valley of the Kidron in a chorus of anguish, as if the fate of the king affects the nation and the entire land as well. At that point David lifts his head out of his sorrow and sees Zadok and all the priests coming to meet him. Israel's priesthood gives the fugitive king their full weight of trust and most valuable gift, the ark of the covenant.

**25 And the king said to Zadok,  
"Return the ark of God to the city.  
If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD  
then He will cause me to return,  
and cause me to see both it and His habitation.**

**26 "But if he should say thus, 'I have no delight in you,'  
behold, here I am, let him do to me as seems good in His eyes."**

In a bold act faith David sends the ark back to Jerusalem. If restoration occurs, David sees it as a gift that must be on God's terms and God's timing. Restoration is not assumed, presumed, nor demanded. David leaves God an incredible amount of freedom to act in grace. This is faith at its best. With these life-changing encounters with Ittai and Zadok in mind, we can better comprehend the depths of David's poetry in Psalm 63. In the poem David recounts three gifts the wilderness imparted to his soul. The first is David's appetites that are intensified for God.

**O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you ;  
My soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you,  
In a dry and weary land where there is no water. (63:1)**

David's renewed hunger for God is apparent in the alliteration of the opening words of the poem. The first four words begin with the opening letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*. This fourfold alliteration stresses that David is returning to the basics, the ABC's that hold everything together, the very bedrock of his faith: "O God you are my God, earnestly I seek you."

The verb "earnestly seek" is derived from the Hebrew root "dawn," suggesting an intense desire that rises with the first rays of daybreak. This rooted passion for God is also seen in the pronouns that give shape to the poem. Almost every image of the

psalm is crafted in the simple terms of the *I/You* relationship. In the wilderness, everything is reduced to “you and me”; there are no intermediaries. David found that his journey, painful as it was, had a way of stripping away all that was not essential to his life.

Two things in the wilderness heightened his hunger for God. The first was the appearance of the landscape. Jerusalem rests at about twenty-six hundred feet above sea level, but from the top of the Mount of Olives, the ridge is so steep on its eastern slope that one seems just a single step away from that forbidding wilderness.

Standing on the mount and facing east, one can feel the intense heat like a slap in the face. And that is how it hits David. As he gazes into the face of that scorched desert, it stares back at him, like a mirror magnifying the condition of his own soul that is weary and parched for God. “In a region where he is surrounded by sun-burnt aridity and a nature that bears only one uniform ash-colored tint, which casts its unrefreshing image into his inward part, which is itself in much the same parched condition, his soul thirsts, his flesh languishes, wearied and in want of water, for God, the living One and the Fountain of life.”<sup>4</sup> Isn’t it ironic that when we have an internal ache, rather than escaping the ache, God often places us in situations that magnify it, so that we are forced to embrace it.

The second thing that sharpens David’s appetite for God is his memory.

**Thus I have beheld you in the sanctuary,  
To see your power and your glory.  
Because your loyal-love is better than life,  
My lips will praise you.  
So I will bless you as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands in your name. (63:2-4)**

Now that after David has been forcibly torn from his city, exiled from home, and bereft of the sanctuary, all that remains to help him experience God is memory. There are no earthly gateways to open his five senses to heaven; no sacred steps to climb; no smell of fragrant incense; no sound of the shophar; no taste of hot shew bread; no holy sight of the ark glistening underneath the wings of the cherubim, and no music. Its harmonic strings that once resonated among thousands of worshippers, muted now in the quaking silence of the desert. All that remains is a fragment of past imaginings. But

ironically, this serves to make David's memory all the more acute, sharpened by the ache of separation and sorrow: *"thus I have seen you (i.e. with this longing) in the sanctuary."* So through metaphor and memory David recreates those wondrous moments when he beheld God in glory and power within the sanctuary.

As the king relives those memories again and again he is strangely moved to a deeper commitment to God than he ever experienced in Jerusalem. *"Your loyal-love is better than life . . . So I will bless Thee as long as I live."* The memory of those faces: Ittai, who embraced him in his shame, Zadok and Hushai, who risked their lives for him, now become mirrors of Jonathan's face; Jonathan, who loved David unto death. David has experienced this kind of loyal love before, but receiving it now, as a desperate exile, when he doesn't deserve it, transforms him. That passion now begins to shape his life. It is a passion that is deeper than life, for David counts his life no longer dear to himself. The old man, an exiled king, is finally transformed into a Jonathan. That wondrous love seizes him, and slips beneath him, his bones, his flesh, enmeshed as if now one with God's *hesed* love. And so in the desert, with no choir, no worship leader, no instruments and no sacrifices, David worships God with fullest expression of body and soul. *"The lifted up hands refer to a posture of prayer, probably denoting that the empty hands wait in trust to be filled with the blessing of God."*<sup>5</sup> It is a worship service of two: I, and that Holy You.

So the ache of the wilderness gives David an increased appetite and a renewed commitment for God. The second gift bestowed upon this hungry exile was a meal from heaven itself.

- 5 My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness,  
And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips.**
- 6 When I remember you on my bed,  
I meditate on you in the night watches,**
- 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.**

Verse 5 marks a radical change of mood in the poem. Surprisingly, it comes when the light of day gives way to the terror of night, when David has to take his turn

at one of the four-hour night watches. Four hours with nothing to do but watch. There under that starlit canopy of desert sky, time seems to grind to halt. Most of us would be haunted by fear, wearied by the monotony, or restless for the sensuous stimulations of the day, but for David, alone on his bed, the ache of memory drives his gaze upward in concentrated meditation. Acting like radar, it “locks on” to God.

The audible rehearsal of his acute memory transports him beyond the horizon to within view of the celestial city. And there he is welcomed, invited in and sat down to a feast that transcends all earthly pleasures. Everything he had left behind in Jerusalem, everything he lacked in the wilderness now descends from heaven with more power and pleasure than he ever experienced on earth. His soul, once parched with thirst, now not only drinks, it eats—and not mere food, but the richest of delicacies, marrow and fatness, until his soul is sated. Here is the reality of what the metaphors “streams in the desert” and “honey from the rock” are all about. The silence of the desert that engulfed David now gives way to full throated singing as shouts of ecstatic joy burst forth from the deepest parts of his soul.

The ark, which David had abandoned and sent back to Jerusalem, now descends from heaven itself. The wings of the cherubim rest right above his head. It is a sight too amazing to comprehend. Under the shadow of those wings, a canopy of protection, David’s soul sings. Above the wings of the cherubim, the God who earlier had exiled David now grabs him with a powerful grasp that awakens a burning love that reaches back for God with strenuous surges. David is renewed with a support reserved for kings and warriors (“*your right hand,*” Isa 42:6; 45:1).

Isn’t it ironic that the “ache” of the wilderness actually becomes the “gate” to heaven? Yet so often we miss it, because we try and drown out the pain by feeding our appetites with idols instead of allowing God to feed us. But David trusted in God to feed him, and he experienced a heavenly feast. Finally, after his soul is fed and fully sated, David’s vision is clarified.

- 9 But those who seek my life, to destroy it,  
Will go into the depths of the earth.**
- 10 They will be delivered over to the power of the sword;  
They will be a prey for jackals.**
- 11 But the king will rejoice in God;**

**Everyone who swears by Him will glory,  
For the mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.**

The third gift that the wilderness imparted to David was clarity of vision. This idea poetically fits the etymology of the word *wilderness (midbar)*, which is derived from the Hebrew term *dabar* (“word,” so perhaps *midbar* = “place of revelation”). Having been fed by God, everything now comes into focus and David sees the end of his distress. In the end, justice will win. The wicked that were seeking his life (Absalom and his troops, Ahithophel and Shimei) will descend into the deepest parts of the earth. David also sees the “methods” of God’s justice in that God will use their own ways against them: they will be devoured by the sword (a metaphor for no uncertain death). Even their final memory will be desecrated, for they will be left as prey for the jackals. Othmar Keel writes:

In death nothing was worse than to lie exposed on the field – a prey to animals or in a strange land. So long as the bones are intact, even a dead man retains a minimal existence...In war, the bodies of those fallen, slaughtered and executed were often left to lie as food for jackals, raven, and other scavengers. The dead were thus deprived of the last vestiges of their existence.<sup>6</sup>

Not only does David get a clear vision of his enemies’ end, he sees his end. “The king will rejoice in God” is a clear statement that David is confident of his restoration to public office. And that that restoration will bring resounding, “wide-mouthed” praise to all who had put their trust in God and did not join the conspiracy of lies. What does David do in the meantime? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The wilderness has fully done its work: It intensified his hunger for God; it fed with the very life of the living God; and it gave him a clear vision of God’s coming justice, something that was God’s responsibility not his. David’s vision shaped our Lord’s hope that he would survive the grave and the lies that put him there, and his restoration would indeed be a resurrection that would elicit praise and glory from all peoples of the earth.

May David’s experience be ours in the fullest measure and may all of us speak from a heart overflowing with gratitude:

*Your loyal-love is better than life!*

*In the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.*

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term “weary” in verse 2 is the same term as in 2 Sam 16:14 “The king and all the people who were with him arrived *weary* and he refreshed himself there (see also 16:2).

<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (London: IVP, 1973), 224.

<sup>4</sup> C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Psalms, Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 5*; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 215.

<sup>5</sup> Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 127.

<sup>6</sup> Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World, Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 103.