



# IN THE SHADOW OF YOUR WINGS

SERIES: GIVE ME AN AUTHENTIC VOICE

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Psalm 63

Eighth Message

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This is the final message in our series on the shape of David's voice in the Psalms. In the first text we studied, Psalm 142, we heard David's voice when he was in exile. Today we look at its counterpart, Psalm 63. Once again we find David in exile, but this time an exile of his own making. It is one thing to find yourself in a spiritual desert because of circumstances beyond your control, but it is quite another when you are in a desert due to the consequences of your own sin. There is nothing more painful than being 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 as he experienced five life-changing encounters along the way. His meetings with Hushai and Shimei provided depth to several of the metaphors in Psalm 3. Today we will examine his encounters with Ittai and Zadok, which provide 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 (2 Sam 16:14), weary after the long journey, David is 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 (vv 2, 11), point to his estrangement from Absalom as the

appropriate context, rather than the period when he was being 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 with Ittai the Gittite, the second with Zadok the priest.

**And the king went out and all the people with him, and they stopped at the last house. 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 (2 Sam 15:17-18, NASB).**

We have already seen that the escape route which David chose was not the quickest way to exit Jerusalem, but the one most conducive to reflection. He had to endure the dual punishments of descending the full length of the city under the humiliating stares of the population, gazing upon the whole of his beloved capital from which he would soon be exiled. By choosing to make his crossing at the furthest house in the Kidron, the king exits the city with the refuse, publicly embracing his own humiliation. As he does so, he in turn is embraced with an incredible loyalty. To his surprise it comes 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 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 a day earlier. 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. It is too great a price to pay, so David bids Ittai to stay in Jerusalem and throw his lot in with the new king, where the situation stands much more certain. So he bids good-bye with the salutation, "mercy and truth be with you"—a courageous word to al-

low a man the freedom to annul holy vows, without guilt. But Ittai will not take “No” for an answer.

**“As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely wherever (whatever place) my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be” (2 Sam 15:21).**

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, one 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 but now locked in the crucible of dangerous flight, are forged forever as friends.

**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 (2 Sam 15:22).**

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

As David continues his ascent up the Mount of Olives the entire populace embraces his sorrow.

**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 (2 Sam 15:23).**

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 this point David lifts his head out of his sorrow to behold 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.

**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 bring me back again and show me both it and His habitation. But if He should say thus, ‘I have no delight in you,’ behold, here I am, let Him do to me as seems good to Him” (2 Sam 15:25-26).**

In a bold act of faith, David sends the ark back to Jerusalem. If restoration occurs, he sees it as a gift that must be on God’s terms and timing. Restoration is not assumed, presumed, or 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 that the wilderness imparted to his soul. The first is that his appetites are intensified for God.

## I. David’s Hunger for God Is Intensified

**O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly;  
My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You,  
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.  
Thus I have seen You in the sanctuary,  
To see Your power and Your glory.  
Because Your lovingkindness 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. (Psalm 63:1-4)**

### A. The expression of David’s hunger

David’s renewed hunger for God is expressed in the alliteration of the opening words of the poem. The opening four words begin with the first 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.

### B. Things that heightened his hunger

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. It is 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 delivering us from 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. Now that he has been forcibly torn from his city, exiled from home, and bereft of the sanctuary, memory is all that remains to help him experience God. 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 are 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, sharpened by the ache of separation and sorrow, all the more acute: "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 You as long as I live." The memory of those faces: Ittai, who embraced him in his shame, and 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 no longer counts his life 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 now as if one with God's *hesed* love. And so there 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 is a meal from heaven itself.

## II. David's Soul Is Satisfied

**My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness,  
And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips.  
When I remember You on my bed,  
I meditate on You in the night watches,  
For You have been my help,  
And in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy.  
My soul clings to You;  
Your right hand upholds me. (Psalm 63:5-8)**

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 a 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 had lacked in the wilderness, now descends from heaven with more power and pleasure than he had 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 in a powerful grasp, awakening 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 to 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, his vision is clarified.

## III. David's Vision Is Clarified

**But those who seek my life, to destroy it,  
Will go into the depths of the earth.  
They will be delivered over to the power of the sword;  
They will be a prey for foxes.  
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. (Psalm 63:9-11)**

The third gift which 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 for David, and he sees the end of his distress. Justice will win in the end. 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...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>

David not only gets a clear vision of his enemies' end,

he sees his own 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 had fully done its work: it intensified his hunger for God; it fed him with the very life of the living God; and it gave him a clear vision of God's coming justice, a matter that that was God's responsibility, not his.

David's poem, a classic statement of true spirituality, shaped the ministry of Jesus. When the Lord began his ministry, he was led into the wilderness and, like David, became intensely hungry. But he refused to feed himself. He knew that man lives not by bread alone, but by the word of God; therefore he trusted God to feed him. Once he was fed, he offered a banquet to hungry people in the wilderness, feeding five thousand and then four thousand. Finally, at the climax of his ministry, David's vision of justice fortified 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.*

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 14-15, 41.
2. 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).
3. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (London: IVP, 1973), 224.
4. C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Psalms, Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 215.
5. Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 127.
6. Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 66, 103.

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