



HEAVEN IN THE SAND

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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Psalm 63

26th Message

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We have carefully 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. The king's walk to exile has covered twenty miles, and a descent of four thousand feet. In the last scene we left David, weary after the long journey, together with all the people at the fords of the Jordan. He had finally reached his destination, the wilderness of Judah, and there he refreshed himself. Much has happened in just a few kilometers. For David, a lifetime of emotion has been compressed into hours: sorrow coupled with surprise; humiliation yoked with love; delight dancing on the heels of betrayal; illumination birthed out of abuse, and human initiative quickened by divine sovereignty.

The clearest evidence that David is being restored is the fact that spiritual integration is returning to his soul. Everything that had once been fragmented and torn now appears to be reconnecting into a unified whole. Spiritual insight returns; honesty is welcomed; tensions are acknowledged. A wholeness that breeds integrity settles deep into David's soul. Miraculously, the real David is coming back—and he knows it. 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 Psalm 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 the taste of eternity which 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.¹

In this psalm, David crafts vibrant verses designed to transport the poet to heaven, indeed to the highest heavens, within reach of God's very throne, by interspersing his speech with vivid images of the mud, muck and mire of earth below.

The superscription of the text is: *"A psalm of David,*

when he was in the wilderness of Judah." The vocabulary of the psalm, and the fact that David as king (v 11), is fondly recalling his experience of worshiping God in Jerusalem (v 2), points 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," which gives the reader a privileged look inside David's soul at perhaps its finest hour. Derek Kidner says of this text: "There may be other psalms that equal this outpouring of devotion; few if any that surpass it."²

Psalm 63 means much to me personally. This was one of the texts that I stumbled upon at a time when I was drowning in sorrow, and in it I found a shelter for my soul. Like David, I was about to exit from Jerusalem when I got a telephone call from home, from my wife Emily. It was tragic news. Emily's sister, who had earlier been diagnosed as HIV positive, now had full blown AIDS and was close to death. I was stunned. I wanted to go home, but I couldn't. I had to get back on a bus that was leaving Jerusalem. Soon we were headed south, through the Negev, into the wilderness to Egypt. As I took my seat, my mind was dazed. It was as though I was awakening from a dream. My eyes were glazed in tears. Though I was among friends, I felt very much alone.

The bus transported me to a place I did not want to go, through that dreaded highway of the wilderness. I felt like I was taking a backwards journey into grief's vertigo. Driven by pain, I reached for my Hebrew book of psalms and by chance opened to Psalm 63. When I read the words, *"A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah,"* a strange comfort emerged in the ache. The poem carved an entrance into my soul and began to do its work in me. The world outside became surreal, as if it was passing in slow motion. My soul seemed to leave the company of my companions and to fly away to a far off place, a place that was safe, at home. Ever since, this psalm has been a sacred memory for me, a reminder of a feast that is provided in the wilderness.

While the narrative of 2 Samuel 15-16 unfolds David's physical journey to exile, this poem unfolds the journey that was taking place inside his soul. In its verses the poet recounts three gifts which the wilderness provided for his broken heart. The first gift is an increased hunger for God.

I. Appetites Are Intensified (63:1-4)

**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 beheld You in the sanctuary,
To see Your power and Your glory.
Because Your lovingkindness (loyal-love) is better
than life,
My lips will praise (glorify) You.
So I will bless You as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands in Your name. (NASB)**

David's renewed hunger for God is apparent in the alliteration of the opening words of the poem. The first words begin with the opening letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*aleph*). This is an artistic use of alliteration to stress 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/Thou* 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 2600 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 but 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."³ Isn't it ironic that when we have an internal ache, God often places us in situations that, rather than dulling the ache, act like mirrors to magnify 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, all that remains to help him experience God is memory—sheer memory. There are no earthly gateways to open his five senses to heaven; no sacred steps to climb; no smell of fragrant incense; no piercing 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. Oh the 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 only serves to make David's memory all the more acute, sharpened as it is 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 You 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 "to 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, unaware; 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. A worship service of two: "I," and that "Holy You."

So the ache of the wilderness gives David an increased appetite for God and a renewed commitment to him.

The second gift bestowed upon this hungry exile is a meal from heaven itself.

II. The Soul is Satisfied (63:5-8)

**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.**

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, its slow, dream-like cadence marking the endless seconds of the night. 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 sharp focused 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 seizing grasp that awakens a deep love which reaches back for God with strenuous surges: *“My soul followeth hard after thee”* (KJV).

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 ourselves with idols instead of allowing God to feed us.

The last time I found myself in this “gateway” I was on a plane, flying home from Romania. I had returned there after four years of anticipation and longing to see my friends. After waiting so long, one begins to wonder if reality can possibly meet expectations. Yet, to my amazement, all that I had been waiting for, yearning for, longing for came to me. Every face I wanted to hold, every heart I wanted to embrace, every angelic song I wanted to hear, everything was granted me. It was so splendid, so real, so intimate; not one wish was withheld from my soul. But then, in a moment of time, it was over. At midnight at the railway station in Cluj, as the train whistle blew, its shrill blast tore at my soul in the painful emotion of parting. Was it real, or was it just a dream? On the plane flying home, the ache transported me to heaven, and I wrote these words:

That Strange Gate,
Again⁴

That same ache,
of the strange gate,
has opened up and let
me in.

On a plane again,
strange, oh how strange,
to feel that river lively flowing,
to be alone with You.

But that ache the same,
strange now, not of rejection,

but of acceptance,
from that other elusive world.

Acceptance that I bathed in,
freely given soaked my soul,
now gone,
has left me in the gate, alone.

And now lost in darkness,
caught between two worlds,
I sit to contemplate the ache,
as it drives me just to You.

Where was I?
Did I not see to touch and feel?
Was it only a dream now gone,
or is this gateway real?

How strange You,
gaping, aching, ache
that binds me only
just to You.

Love rejected given,
or love accepted taken,
the ache the same,
like Isaac bound to You.

Oh the irony of such sweetness, framed in the window of the ache!

The wilderness intensified David’s appetites, then it satisfied his soul.

Finally, after his soul is fed and fully sated, David’s vision is clarified.

III. Vision Is Clarified (63:9-11)

**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.**

The third gift which the wilderness imparts to David is a clarity of vision. This idea poetically fits the etymology of the word *wilderness*, which comes from the Hebrew word *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 who were seeking his life will descend into the deepest parts of the earth. David also comprehends that in the justice of God, the ways of the wicked will be used against them: they will be devoured by the sword (a metaphor for no uncertain death). Even their final memory will be dese-

crated, 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, ravens, and other scavengers. The dead were thus deprived of the last vestiges of their existence.⁵

Not only does David get a clear vision of their end, he sees his own end: *"The king will rejoice in God"* is a clear statement that David sees his own restoration to public office. And 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 him with the very life of the living God;
and it gave him a clear vision of God's Justice,
something that was God's responsibility, not his.

Will it work for you, though? Will God meet you in your wilderness? When I picked up the telephone in Jerusalem and heard the dread news of my sister-in-law's impending death, I was forced to make my exit into the wilderness. I spent a week encased like a mummy in the sultry heat of Egypt. At times I felt as if I was almost suffocating in the dense air of tombs, and strangled by shrouds of ancient artifacts. In the tunnels of one of the pyramids I was almost overrun by a swarm of French tourists and overcome with claustrophobia. Driving through the city of the dead, my personal sorrow was so magnified it practically choked me in despair.

Finally, when we exited the city, I had to endure fourteen more hours of cloistered plane travel, sitting in the middle seat of a row of five seats, in the deepest part of the smoking section! I couldn't wait to touch American soil. When we finally landed in Chicago, I immediately called home to check on Melanie's condition. She was dying, but in the midst of her collapsing world, two of my closest friends (my Ittai and Zadok) went to visit her with the gift of the gospel. She listened to the good news, and then cast away all her props of support and put her trust in Christ. It was about 1 a.m. Chicago time when I re-boarded the plane to fly home. The entire plane was like a morgue, with everyone lost in sleep, but heaven entered my seat and I sang all the way home.

It was as the poet said:

Your loyal-love is better than life.

In the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 14, 15, 41.

2. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 224.

3. C. F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Psalms, Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 5:215.

4. *"The Strange Gate"* was the first poem I wrote referring to the intense, divine love felt in the soul through the "strange gate" of rejected love. It too was written on a plane.

5. 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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