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Psalm 63

Second Message

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DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS: MY SOUL IS SATISFIED

SERIES: WHEN LIFE IS A WILDERNESS

In Deuteronomy 8, we saw that it was God's intention to give his people Israel a wonderful gift of a new land. This new inheritance was as rich as the Garden of Eden. Yet there was a danger involved in giving them the land too quickly. It would be easy for the people to say in their hearts that their own hands had produced this wealth and to forget God and pursue idols. Thus, in order to humble his people, God put them through a school to prepare them for entering the land.

Between Egypt, where they were redeemed, and the promised land Canaan, lay a vast terrifying wilderness. There, the people discovered that they could not cope and that they were vulnerable. There they were broken of their pride and learned that man does not live by bread alone. Bread alone cannot impart life to man's soul. Rather, man must feed upon God himself. After learning these lessons, when they came into the land and ate of its fruits, they could bless God with tears of appreciation for every good gift.

We want to continue this theme of the wilderness as we look at the experience of the Messianic king, the representative of Israel. This time the wilderness experience is different, for the king finds himself in the wilderness of his own making. What do we do when we are cast off in a wilderness in which we cannot cope when it is the result of our own ungodly choices? This was David's plight. It is one thing to be in circumstances that are beyond our control, such as sickness or even death, but what happens when the wilderness is of our own making?

So many of the wildernesses we face of divorce, rejection of a child or a parent, or unemployment are due to our own choices. When we are in this kind of wilderness, we often think we are unworthy to pursue God. We feel unable to worship, and uncertain about our position in Jesus Christ. If we are in this kind of wilderness, will the God who fed and loved Israel feed and love us? This is where David found himself in Psalm 63.

Most scholars believe the background to this Psalm is Absalom's rebellion in which David faced the rejection of his own son. This came after David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah. In 2 Samuel 12:10-12, the prophet Nathan came to David and announced the judgment of God for his sin:

"Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife." Thus says the LORD, "Behold, I will rise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your companion, and he shall lie with your wives in broad daylight. Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." (2 Sam 12:10-12 NASB)

In the text we find that Absalom had already murdered his brother Amnon for raping his sister Tamar. When he was called back to Jerusalem, he was already on shaky terms with his father. In that con-

dition, he began to turn all the hearts of the people against his father, saying, "I can institute justice better than David." Then Absalom went to Hebron and publicly announced his rebellion and installed himself as king. Second Samuel 15:12 reads: "And the conspiracy was strong, for the people increased continually with Absalom."

Upon receiving news of the rebellion in Jerusalem, David fled for his life. As he left the royal city, Zadok the priest came to him with the ark of the covenant and all the Levites. In this act, he meant to say, "Even though there is a rebellion, you are still the Messianic king. Here is God's throne. God will fight the battle with you." But in 2 Samuel 15:25-28, David replied,

"Return the ark of God to the city. If I find favor with the sight 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...I am going to wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me." (2 Sam 15:25-28)

David was not certain he was still king, and he thought he might lose his office as Saul had. He did not know if he was going to be reinstated. Because of this, he would not accept the word of men encouraging him.

As his procession of retreat made its way up the Mount of Olives, people were weeping, and David covered his head in humiliation and went barefoot. To make matters worse, out came an old man named Shimei, a descendent from the household of Saul, who threw rocks at David and cursed him, saying,

"Get out, get out, you man of bloodshed, and worthless fellow! The LORD has returned upon you all the bloodshed of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. And behold, you are taken in your own evil, for you are a man of bloodshed!" (2 Sam 16:7-8)

One of David's right-hand men said, "Let me kill him! He is cursing the king!" David replied, "Behold, my son who came out from me seeks my life; how much more now this Benjamite: Let him alone and let him curse, for the LORD has told him. Perhaps the LORD will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day" (16:11-12). All the way up the hill, the old man continued to throw stones and curses at the king.

When Absalom finally came into the city, he deliberately wanted to make himself odious in the eyes of his father. Therefore, he pitched a tent on the roof of the king's palace, and he publicly had sex with all of David's concubines. This reminds me of what my generation did during the sexual revolution in the sixties. They made public and intensified all the sins their fathers had been perpetrating in secret. Thus, my generation said, "You have done this privately. We are going to expose it." How would you like your private sins magnified ten times and done in public?

What could David say? He had no platform to speak to his son without appearing hypocritical. There David sat in his brokenness, dejected. How would you have felt in his place—unworthy to pursue God, unable to worship, uncertain about your position? That is where David was.

Will God meet us when the wilderness is the result of our own ungodly choices? The answer is yes! Look at what David says in the first four verses of Psalm 63.

I. God, My Desire (63:1-4)

**O God, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee early;
My soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.
Thus I have beheld Thee in the sanctuary,
To see Thy power and Thy glory.
Because Thy loyal-love is better than life,
My lips will praise Thee.
So I will bless Thee as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands in Thy name.**

In this text David puts himself in a wilderness. There he discovers that instead of being abandoned by God he finds his life being renewed spiritually. First he renews his commitment to God, saying, “O God, you are my God!” God is all he has! When he left the city, he shed all of his defenses. He abandoned the royal city and the palace. He had even separated himself from the sanctuary, the priesthood, and the ark of the covenant. In the midst of his humiliation, he is not even sure he is a king anymore, but he says, “God you are all I have.”

Sometimes what keeps us from being renewed in the wilderness is that we do not leave everything behind. We take with us our motor-home and all our props that we had in the city. But we do not get renewed. We do not find God plus nothing. David shed all of his props. If you are going to be reinstated, God must do it.

Second, David finds a renewed appetite for God. His appetite for God is sharpened and deepened by his experience. He says, “I seek you early. My soul thirsts for You. My flesh yearns for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” The first thing in the morning when he gets up, David wants God.

Israel is an interesting country. Due west from the top of the Mount of Olives, the land drops sharply into a deep ravine into the Garden of Gethsemane and rises again to the plateau of the beautiful city Jerusalem, the pearl of the world. To the east, the land drops off immediately into a barren wasteland. In other words, Jerusalem is one step away from the wilderness. When David was cast out into that wilderness, all he saw was a land that was desolate, sunburnt, and arid. As he gazed into it the land reflected back and magnified the condition of his own soul. He is parched. He is weary. He is languishing. He does not want water, he wants the fountain of living waters. It intrigues me that when God puts us in a wilderness he uses physical circumstances to intensify our pain, not to numb it, in order to sharpen our appetite for God himself.

The God that David seeks he remembers from the past: “Thus, I 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.” Even though David is now away from the sanctuary, I am sure he remembers travelling throughout the promised land with the ark of the covenant and seeing God come through that throne to defeat Goliath, to subdue the Philistines, to show his power for salvation,

to establish his rule in Jerusalem, and to manifest his glory in the sacrifices. The Shekinah glory was in the tabernacle that travelled with the king’s armies.

Now David is separated from all of that. All he has with him to worship God is his memory. He has nothing else to aid him. But he says, “Because your loyal-love is better than life itself, because you are a God who makes commitments especially to the king, I know that you are not just committed to that sanctuary. You are committed to the lowly king even when he sins. You will leave the sanctuary to come and travel with me in the wilderness and make yourself known to me.” That is the kind of God we serve. David declares, “When you show me your loyal-love, it tastes better than life itself.”

Because he knows this about God, he renews his commitment to worship even in the wilderness through his memories. He says, “I will use my lips to praise and bless you. Then I will lift up my hands in your name.” The last image is a picture of absolute dependence. He is saying, “If God does not grace me, there will be no life.” David had no inhibitions in the wilderness.

Finding himself cast out, he renews his commitment to God, his appetite for God, and his desire to worship him.

The reason we do not enter into this experience is that we take our motor-homes into the wilderness with us. We need to go naked and vulnerable so we can say, “God, you are my God. If I am to be saved, you must do it.” Here is David being renewed personally. Now that he is renewed, will God feed him? Will he prepare him a feast in his wilderness even though he created it himself? Look at what he says in verses 5-8.

II. God, My Feast (63:5-8)

**My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness.
And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips;
When I remember Thee on my bed.
I meditate on Thee in the night watches.
For Thou has been my help,
And in the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings after Thee;
Thy right hand upholds me.**

One of the lessons I have learned about daughters is that when they get to be adolescents it is difficult to teach them good eating habits. It seems adolescents are always eating the wrong foods at the wrong times. Therefore, when dinner is ready, no matter how balanced it is, they are not hungry, and they only spend about 38 seconds at the dinner table before they are off again. Spiritually, the same is true of all of us. Before God can give us a feast, we must prepare ourselves. If we have been feeding on idolatrous diversions, we will not be hungry and we will miss the feast.

David prepared himself for the feast to come. In verse 6, he says, “I remembered you on my bed. I meditate on you in the night watches, for you have been my help.” In the wilderness, David is in fear for his very life. He cannot go to sleep. He must stay awake for the night watch.

During the night, there is a slow progression of hours when things do not change. David uses that time to focus on the Lord. The wilderness has given him a new lens to magnify his ability to focus on who God is. It always amazes me to be with people in the midst of their grief and suffering. I was with a couple this week whose newborn son was in the hospital fighting for his life. For them, every

Scripture verse was magnified for it had a new focus in this wilderness. The same is true during the night watches.

With that new lens David remembers God. This is no passing remembrance. The word means “entering in” to everything God has done for him. I am sure David remembered when God by grace defeated Goliath, the Philistines and the Jebusites. As he rehearsed these events in his mind, he entered into them again with God.

Then he says, “After I remember you being my help, I meditate.” This is a piece of vocabulary that does not exist in Silicon Valley! I find it very difficult to meditate here. To meditate means to take a text that has been memorized in our heart and rehearse it audibly over and over again to milk it of its meaning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “In solitude the soul develops senses we seldom know about in every day life.” It is difficult for me to sit still for any length of time. During the last weeks of my wife’s father’s life, she spent hours waiting at the hospital. When I visited, I could only sit still for five minutes before I became restless and wanted to move. David is not that way. On his night watches, he rehearses who God is and meditates on his beauty and majesty.

When we were in Eastern Europe last year we saw this characteristic in all the Christians because of their intense suffering. My friend Bill Kiefer described their prayers in his journal:

At each meal and before and after each teaching, one of the group would be asked to pray. As each one prayed there first issued a profusion of words followed by a more and more intense prayer sometimes accompanied by weeping. (They wept because they understood the depth of their sin and the greatness of God’s grace.) One day out in the woods we observed them during a prayer time praying privately. We could see lonely figures standing like sentinels against the sky speaking with God. Each one was totally focused, not moving from that position for an hour or more, even as the winds and rain began to spring forth. How humbled I felt in their presence.

That is David. He made preparation for God’s banquet. After he had done this, God fed him with divine delicacies. He says, “My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fat, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips...In the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy. My soul clings after Thee; Thy right hand upholds me.” Here is David hidden, clinging, eating, and singing to God.

If you look closely at this text, you will discover something interesting. David is under the wings of God. In other words, he has left the earthly temple where as king he led Israel in their corporate worship, and he has entered into the heavenly reality. As king, he never entered the inner sanctuaries of the tabernacle. He was only allowed in the outer court where he stood by the altar. Only the priests could go inside to see the candelabra that would illuminate the eye and the incense to be smelled by the nose and the shew bread to be experienced by the mouth. And only once a year would the high priest enter into the Holy of Holies to see the ark and the wings of the cherubim touching. This was the throne of God where the priest could see the blood on the mercy seat and commune with God himself.

But through his brokenness and through his memory, David enters not an earthly tabernacle, but the heavenly one. In his wilderness, he is transported not into the outer court or the holy place. He is in the Holy of Holies underneath the throne of God! Do you see that? He is under the wings of God.

In the cool of this protection, he writes this song. Here he finds the love relationship so intense, he can only use the terms that are used in Genesis to speak of the relationship between a man and his wife. He says, “My soul clings after you.” That is the term “cleave” from Genesis 2. After chasing God, he turns around and says, “Your right hand is upholding me.” He realizes that God is giving him the very strength he needs to pursue him. What a relationship! This is intimacy! Then he says, “All I can do in response to this satisfying feast of life is to give a shout and cry out in song.” Thus, underneath the wings of the Holy of Holies, he composed Psalm 63, and we still sing it 3,000 years later. Singing is such an important aspect of entering into the presence of God.

Can God prepare a feast in the wilderness? Yes! Does our sin disqualify us from entering into that feast? No! No sin will keep us from having intimacy with him if we repent. But we can miss out if in our night watches we numb our pain with diversions instead of focusing in on the Lord and remembering him. Though the diversions may numb the pain and take away the depth of the tragedy, they shut the windows of heaven so that we cannot enter into the Holy of Holies.

Our first exhortation is to go into the wilderness in our nakedness and vulnerability. Then we are to prepare ourselves for a feast. We are to focus and to meditate on God. Then God will feed us and be our desire. Now David sees that God is his defense. Look at verses 9-11 in which he receives a vision of justice.

III. God, My Defense: Vision of Justice (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.**

Whenever men and women are hurting and are in a wilderness in Scripture, they cannot immediately deal with their problems from which they are running. God in his grace always first increases their physical appetite. Then he feeds them a meal. After being fed, then they can see life. This was true of Elijah. The same was true of Jonah. Jesus even fed Peter a meal before they talked.

This is what happens here. The vision comes after David’s worship. He says, “Now that I am in the Holy of Holies, I can see!” David is transported to the end of the age, for in the heavenly temple time is no longer an issue. He is transported into the age to come and directly to the place of verdict where God announces his judgment. David says, “It is all clear now. I see the end of the enemies of the king. They will be like the sons of Korah who rebelled against Moses. The earth opened up and swallowed them. They will go to the lowest places on the earth.”

Then he adds, “God will use their own devices against them to do it.” Absalom took up the sword; he will die by the sword. In his justice, God will use the means of the enemies against them, and their inheritance will be the place of jackals. In the Ancient Near East, there was no greater curse than for a dead person to be left exposed to the jackals, the final scavengers of life. The jackals always got the leftovers after the big animals had had their fill; they would finish you off. David is saying the people who oppose the Lord’s anointed will be treated like the dung of the earth.

David goes on to say, “I not only see their end, I see my own.” Remember he was not sure if he was going to be a king anymore. Many of us get ourselves into that position. When we make ungodly choices, we wonder if we will ever be a husband again or a father, wife, son or worker. The answer is yes. God is going to reinstate this king by grace. When it happens, the king will rejoice in God and all will be made to follow that king.

I think David saw an even greater vision at this moment. He says, “All who swear on Him will glory. The mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.” He saw into the future to a greater King who would come from him—the ultimate Messiah, Jesus, the Anointed One. All who swear by that one and by the God of that one will glory, but those who speak lies will be stopped. The lie is denying that God’s rule comes through his anointed Messiah. This is the greatest denial of reality in life. On that day of judgment, that mouth will be closed because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. What a vision!

Notice the Psalm did not begin with this vision. David had to go through the entire process to get to this point. Then what does David do? Nothing! He does not have to reinstate himself. He does not have to quell the rebellion. He does nothing.

What does God do in the wilderness of our own making? First, he wants us to be renewed spiritually. He does this by enlarging our appetite for him and him alone. The exhortation is to go out into the wilderness without our props. We are to be vulnerable. Second, he wants to feed us a feast we never knew in the city. The exhortation is to not defile our appetite with the diversions of idols. We are to focus on God alone, and we are to use the night watches to meditate upon him. If we will do that, then we will see with our eyes. The vision of justice of the age to come will be so clear that we can return to the city and do absolutely nothing in our own cause.

Many of us have experienced what David has been through. There is nothing more painful than rejection, especially by someone you love. At times, I am sure you have shared Christ with people and have been rejected. At other times you have been vulnerable and shared yourself only to have someone walk out on you. I wrote this poem in the midst of one of those experiences, and I want to share it with you as a prayer. I have entitled it *That Strange Gate*:

Why is it now, my soul is moved
To taste of Thy gracious love,
When all before it seemed cold and dead,
Though my eye could see so much,
Of Thy glorious grace.

Yes, now my soul drinks deeply,
The river is lively and flowing.
It tastes sweet.

But the gateway is the ache,
of rejection,
of appearing foolish,
of knowing one can’t convince.

My lips wax not eloquent, but slippery,
My heart knows little of boldness,
It caves in to timidity,
My lips are silent,
But my eyes see You, Your hand by mine.

O that You would keep me in such sweet place,
Under your wings—
To know my broken ways,
This is true joy.

Don’t let me go,
Pursue me deeper still.

Then I shall tell of your gracious love to the saints,
Especially those who hold you dear,
Those simple ones, whom I love.

O to be swallowed up in Thee!

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