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Psalm 62

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GOD CAN BE TRUSTED

Yesterday, my wife Kathy and I returned from a vacation. We spent five days alone together, and we had a wonderful time relaxing, reflecting, playing, and enjoying each other. It doesn't take long to be thrust back into reality, however. Telephone messages, our boys' athletic events and homework demands, and similar urgent tasks quickly brought us back to earth.

One of my favorite *Peanuts* cartoons portrays Lucy sharing her unsolicited observations with Charlie Brown. "Life is a like a deck chair," says Lucy. "Some place it so they can see where they are going. Some place it so they can see where they have been. And some place it so they can see where they are at present." Wistfully, Charlie Brown replies, "I can't even get mine unfolded!"

With all that is going on around us, it is hard at times, even for the Christian, to maintain a clear perspective on life. As the limerick puts it:

The world had a hopeful beginning,
But we ruined our chances through sinning.
We know that the story
Will end to God's glory,
But at present the other side's winning.

It does seem like the other side is winning, doesn't it? I have been back but 24 hours and already I have had two distressing phone calls, one about someone who committed suicide, the other concerning someone who is very seriously ill. Life is hard, especially if we give way to the temptation to interpret reality on the basis of circumstances alone.

In difficult times I have found the Book of Psalms, the prayer book of the king, to be a great help. This morning I want to share with you a psalm that has ministered to me in terms of rearranging the furniture of my life, so to speak, so that I can better evaluate the past, cope with the present, and prepare for the future.

Psalm 62, written by David during his wilderness years, is often referred to as one of the "lament" psalms. The Hebrew word for "lament" comes from the verb "to remember." In these psalms, the king is facing a crisis situation. He cannot cope, and so he cries out to God to remember him. As David's enemies are not identified, we don't know the precise historical circumstances that motivated him to write these words. I think this was done by design so that we can make our own application of them.

In these lament psalms, as is the case with all the psalms, we need to remember that the one crying out to God was the king, the person who represented the righteous rule of God on earth. (Psalm 2, for example, begins with an invitation to the king to pray.) In fact, at his coronation, the king was given the title "son of God," to underline that exalted relationship. Because of our relationship with Jesus Christ, Christians, too, are children of God. And though his kingdom is invisible, it is very much alive. It is a spiritual kingdom, manifested by the rule of God in the hearts of believers. Therefore

while David's enemies, those who rejected the rule of God on earth, were flesh and blood, our enemies are spiritual. They are evil forces that seek to hinder the rule of Jesus Christ in us. As a result, the psalms offer much that we can apply to our own lives.

It is important to remember that David wrote Psalm 62 while he was engaged in the heat of conflict. Thus he could relate very well to the emotions we feel in the midst of our pressures. But David knew a confidence and a peace in his trials that we perhaps have not yet learned, and he expresses that confidence in the words of Psalm 62. Here we will learn not only of that confidence, but the choices we must make in order to experience it too.

The psalm is divided into three paragraphs of four verses each. First, it sets out the foundation of David's expectations, where his hope lies; second, the firmness of that foundation; and third, the futility of all other foundations. Each paragraph teaches that we must make a choice. David made these choices, and we must make them too if we are going to experience confidence in the midst of pressure.

The first choice is revealed in the opening four verses.

I. We Must Recognize that Only God Is Sufficient to Meet Our Needs (62:1-4)

My soul waits in silence for God only;
From Him is my salvation.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
My stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken.
How long will you assail a man,
That you may murder him, all of you,
Like a leaning wall, like a tottering fence?
They have counseled only to thrust him down from his high position;
They delight in falsehood;
They bless with their mouth,
But inwardly they curse. (Ps 62:1-4 NASB)

David begins with a poignant summary statement in which he declares the central truth of the psalm. Here is one of the most significant principles that one can know: Contentment, confidence, security and life is found only in God.

The significant word "only" occurs six times (verses 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 9) in the psalm. In fact, the psalm opens with this word. Verse 1 literally reads, "Only as it looks toward God is my soul in silence." "Silence" here is not referring to the absence of speech, but rather to the absence of turmoil and anger. It is proclaiming that only as it looks toward God is my soul at rest.

David knew that God was his only source of salvation.

This word "only" has been ringing in my ears for quite a while. More often than not it is restlessness, not rest, that characterizes my

soul. You know what I'm talking about, don't you? I am referring to that vague sense of discontent, of wanting something you can't quite articulate. Mark Twain mused, "you don't know what it is you want, but it fairly makes your heart ache, you want it so much." It is that wanting that keeps us on the move, promising that satisfaction and happiness are just ahead. It fills us with a restlessness that nothing—money, sex, marriage, friends, jobs, children, even retirement—seems to satisfy. These things, of course, cannot fulfill us; they were never meant to do so. Our futile searching for satisfaction simply reveals our need for God. Here is how Augustine put this: "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Him. We were made for God and nothing else will do. He is the only end to our search."

Unfortunately, however, as Richard Foster says, God "becomes a reality when he becomes a necessity." The dark valleys of our existence make God more real to us. I know from my own experience, and from the experiences of many who have shared their suffering with me, that oftentimes it is pain that weans us from the idolatries that are robbing us of our joy. Pain is God's way of prying our fingers loose from the things that are futile and not fulfilling. It is pain that enlarges our intimacy with our Heavenly Father, bringing us peace and unimagined joy.

This was true of David. In the wilderness he learned to trust God. Through the rejection of his own father he discovered the love of his Heavenly Father. (His family would have ruined him had he not fled to God for refuge.) David was hammered and hurt throughout his entire life, but through the darkness, suffering and pain, he gave voice to all of his passions in this one phrase: "My soul finds rest in God alone."

David describes himself as a leaning wall, a tottering fence. What a word picture! There is something about a tottering wall that makes people want to tip it over. We are taunted by its weakness. As a child, I remember competing with other children as to who would be the one to finally push over a leaning fence. David had already taken severe punishment, and it is clear from this psalm that certain individuals intended to exploit his vulnerable position to the fullest. His very life was at stake.

But it was through this kind of adversity that David came to know God. That is why he cries, "He is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold." He repeats this again in verse 7. There he calls God, "The rock of my strength, my refuge." The word "refuge" comes from the verb, "to be lifted up; made safe, secure." In the Ancient Near East, safety was synonymous with reaching and remaining upon a fortified height which was inaccessible to all enemies. Because David had reached such a place, he concludes, "I shall not be greatly shaken." He does not mean that he would never face difficult circumstances. Obviously, he knew this was not true. But he also knew he would never be shaken to the point of being uprooted.

Are there tottering fences in your life, circumstances that make you vulnerable, weak, discouraged and frightened? For some of you, the tottering fence is your marriage. Many marriages among us are barely surviving. For others, it is a terminal illness. You are facing an uncertain future. Others of you feel grieved this morning? Is there an inexplicable ache in your heart? Then go to him who made your heart! Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:18-20).

Knowing that this is what God is like, and knowing him, is true rest. There is no more profound lesson to be learned in life: "Only as it look towards God can my soul be at rest."

The second choice we must make is found in verses 5-8.

II. We Must Continually Choose to Allow God to Meet Our Needs in His Time (62:5-8)

**My soul, wait in silence for God only,
For my hope is from Him.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
My stronghold; I shall not be shaken.
On God my salvation and my glory rest;
The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God.
Trust in Him at all times, O people;
Pour out your heart before Him;
God is a refuge for us. (62:5-8)**

These verses are almost identical to verses 1 and 2, but notice one major change. In verse 1, David simply states a fact: "My soul waits in silence for God only." In verse 5, however, it becomes an exhortation: "My soul, wait in silence for God only." David knew that it takes more than simply recognizing that only God could meet his needs. He knew he had to make a choice to look to God to do so. Thus, David exhorts himself to "wait on God."

The lesson is clear: Our expectations and hopes should be placed in God and him alone. But waiting is hard, isn't it? Someone has said that the American's prayer is, "Lord, give me patience. And I want it right now!" It is difficult to preach patience to a society that retrieves information from its computers and meals from its microwaves in seconds. A television commercial for a pain medication advised, "When you haven't got time for the pain." My friends, you had better have time for the pain! If you think you don't, the pain will be there for a long time.

What does it mean to "wait" on God? Two crucial elements are given in verse 8. The first involves confident trust; the second, prayer. David says, "Trust in Him at all times, O people." All of life is consummated in loving and trusting God. That is what we were made for; that is where ultimate satisfaction lies. We are to trust him with all our hearts and refuse to rely on our own understanding. Certainly we are to plan and prepare, but we must hold our schemes and our dreams loosely. We must allow God the right to revise them or replace them without our approval or knowledge. Trusting him to lead us means that we will often be in over our heads and things will seem out of control. But we have to live with that uncertainty. We must give up the security of our own plans and live in a world where God's goodness and love are the only sure things.

Henri Nouwen wrote: "The movement from illusion [the illusion that we are in control] to dependence is hard to make since it leads us from false certainties to true uncertainties, from an easy support system to a risky surrender, and from many 'safe' Gods to the God whose love has no limits." How true that is! Trusting God takes a special kind of humility that admits we cannot control the circumstances of our lives; that we do not have the answers to the hard questions of our existence; and that we are powerless to effect any eternal results. The valleys of life are designed to lead us to these realizations.

Second, waiting involves prayer. David says, "Pour out your heart before Him." As God's beloved children we have privileged access

and intimacy with him, and opportunity to receive all that he has stored up for us. And prayer is the means by which everything is accomplished. Prayer is our response to the revelation of God's heart. And if you do not know what to pray for, then pray David's psalms. Prayer was the essence, the genius of his life. It should be our, too. So let us unburden our hearts in response to David's words.

Prayer is the highest expression of our dependence on God. When we pray, we can ask for anything, even the most difficult thing. Anything large enough to occupy our minds is large enough to hang a prayer on. We don't need to insist or clamor. We can't make deals with God or make demands of him. Remember, we are coming to a friend, and friends don't make demands. We must ask, and then wait, patiently and submissively, until God gives us what we request—or something better.

David learned this. He wrote in Psalm 131: "I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me." David learned not to worry over God's delays and his mysterious ways. No longer restless and craving, David waited for God to answer in his own time and in his own way. God is able to do far more than anything we ask or imagine. But he must do it in his time and in his way. We may ask in our time and in our way, but God answers in his.

The third and final choice is set out in the last four verses of the psalm. Having given us the foundation of his expectations, and the firmness of that foundation, David now demonstrates the futility of all other foundations.

III. We Must Refuse to Look for Other Sources of Fulfillment (62:9-12)

Men of low degree are only vanity, and men of rank are a lie;
 In the balances they go up;
 They are together lighter than breath.
 Do not trust in oppression,
 And do not vainly hope in robbery;
 If riches increase, do not set your heart upon them.
 Once God has spoken;
 Twice I have heard this:
 That power belongs to God;
 And lovingkindness is Thine, O Lord,
 For Thou dost recompense a man according to his work. (62:9-12)

Here David attacks what we often seek first and trust the most, people and money—the two assets we fly to when our tottering fences make us weakest and most vulnerable.

First, we look to people. The terms, "men of low degree" and "men of rank," are a poetic ways of saying "all men." All men, rich and poor, distinguished and undistinguished, are merely a puff of wind, a vapor, lighter than breath. (The word "breath" is the same word that is translated as "vanity" in the book of Ecclesiastes.)

This is easily recognized, of course, in people who do not possess wealth, fame or authority. No one whose honor is at stake puts his trust in a man of low degree. But David says that the same is true of those who seem to have everything going for them. Their appearance is deceiving. It is a facade, a lie. Fame is fleeting. We may do something that turns heads, but soon we're forgotten. Emerson said, "Every hero becomes a bore at last." There is nothing quite so heart-

rending as a has-been trying to make a comeback. Who would want to pin his hopes on a breath of air?

The second asset that we trust in is money, or material possessions. In fact, David notes that we place so much stock in money that we will resort to violence to get it. I do not need to elaborate on how we pin our hopes on money. That is why we have lotteries. If you do not think people believe money will meet their needs, observe the checkstands where lottery tickets are sold.

Money talks—but mostly it lies. Money deceives us into believing that good fortune will bring satisfaction and security. But having enough never satisfies. Having more is the goad that drives us. We pity the disillusioned, lonely old tycoon with his money fixation, but we don't learn the obvious lesson. The writer of Ecclesiastes said, "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income" (5:3).

In verses 11-12, David summarizes what he has learned about God through his crisis. First, he says, "power belongs to God." Power, the ability to help us no matter what our need, no matter what condition the fence is in, and no matter how vulnerable we are, belongs only to God, not to people or material possessions.

Human limitation is a fact of life. It doesn't take much to bring us down. A tiny virus can devastate us physically; a slight miscalculation can ruin us financially, a small miscue can undo us socially. Life cannot be controlled and contained. There are just too many contingencies, and we don't have what it takes to control all of them. One truth that God has been whispering in my ear these past few years is this: I have least control over the things I care about most.

Howard Butt, in an article entitled "The Art of Being the Big Shot," put that thought in these words:

It is my pride that makes me think I call my own shots. That feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone. I can't rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak, limited. So living independent of God is a self delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It is my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am self dependent, I am lying to myself about who I am. I am pretending to be God and not man. My independence is the idolatrous worship of myself, the national religion of hell.

Our discomfort is God's doing. He hounds us. He hems us in. He thwarts our dreams. He foils our best laid plans. He frustrates our hopes. He waits until we know that nothing will ease our pain, that nothing but his presence will make life worth living. Then, when we finally turn to him, he is there to greet us. He has been there all along. The psalmist said, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him" (Ps 145:18).

Maybe you are saying, "Why would God want me? He knows my sin, my wanderings, my long standing habit of not yielding to him. I'm not good enough. I'm not sorry enough. I'm unable not to sin." No, this is wrong thinking. Our waywardness does not have to be explained to God. He is never surprised by anything we do. He sees everything at a glance—what is, what could have been, what would have been apart from our sinful choices. He sees into all the dark crannies of our hearts. He knows everything there is to know about us. But what he sees only draws out his love, because it is his nature to love.

The psalms are filled with affirmations of that love. Everywhere we find phrases like, “I trust in Your unfailing love” (13:5); “I...rejoice in Your love” (31:7); “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to You” (86:5); “The Lord is good, and His love endures forever” (100:5); “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, and His love endures forever” (106, two times); “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, and His love endures forever” (118, five times); “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, and His love endures forever” (136, 25 times). David’s term for God’s tender affection means love that flows out of deep devotion. It’s translated thirteen different ways in the Old Testament, but perhaps “lovingkindness” is the best translation.

This is how God thinks of himself: “The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6-7). David took that revelation to heart, twice quoting God’s exact words: “ But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness” (Ps 86:15; 103:8). Knowing that God is like this, and knowing this God, is rest indeed.

There is no more profound lesson in life than learning what David learned: Only as it looks toward God is my soul at rest.

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