

Up All Night
Sermon Text: Psalm 63
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A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN HE WAS IN THE WILDERNESS OF JUDAH.

- 1 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.**
- 2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.**
- 3 Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.**
- 4 So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.**

- 5 My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
6 when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
7 for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.**
- 8 My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.**

- 9 But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;
10 they shall be given over to the power of the sword;
they shall be a portion for jackals.**
- 11 But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.**

What keeps you up at night? What is it that causes you to toss and turn, to make your mind turn over and over? What is it that causes us to pull out your phone and scroll through social media just a little bit longer? To stay up a little later, or maybe it's some unnamed, fuzzy vague worry about the general cares of this life. Maybe it's wondering when life will be back to normal, when you or someone you love will get sick, when and where your next paycheck is coming from.

Or perhaps it's sin. Guilt for past sins and their consequences, or struggles with a current temptation or besetting sin. No matter what the cause, there are many things that keep us from sleep, that cause anxiety and worry and grief.

Here in psalm 63, we find David in a similar place to ourselves. In verse 6 of our Psalm, David finds himself awake in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, anxious and troubled.

In our modern western way of communicating, we often start at the beginning, with our main point or thesis. But here in our psalm, as with many of the psalms, the key verse is actually the very middle of the psalm, with the Psalm rising up to its central idea, then falling and resolving.

And the central verse is actually verse 6, where David says, **“I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;” (Ps 63:6, ESV).**

So, David can't sleep. And while many of us would use this as an excuse for a late-night snack, David uses this time to meditate, and to compose a psalm. What was it that was keeping him up? We are told the reason for David's sleeplessness in the title of the Psalm: David finds himself in the Desert of Judah, a place David knew all too well.

There are two likely events that inspired this psalm. David had fled into the He was also forced to flee later on after becoming king of Israel. His son Absalom had staged a coup against his father, forcing David and his most loyal followers to flee from Jerusalem and take refuge from Absalom in the Judean desert, Most likely, this psalm relates to the later flight to the desert, as David, the King, runs for his life from Absalom. Particularly, given David's reference to “the king” in the last verse of this psalm.

And so, as David meditates on this event in the night, as he is on the run from his son Absalom, we see David do two things: first, he looks back at God's past faithfulness, and then he looks forward to God's future deliverance.

Looking back:

David begins, as do many of the Psalms by crying out to God. “Oh God you are my God.” He tells God that he has been seeking him earnestly in the desert, longing for God. He uses the parallel language of soul and flesh to make it clear that his whole person is longing for God. “my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you.” The land itself reflects David's state. Just like David is thirsty and fainting, so the land is arid and has no strength left. David's external circumstances become the very image of his internal, spiritual condition. He longs for God.

This language of longing has both a positive and a negative aspect to it. It's positive in the sense that David is declaring to God that he desires him above all things. More than food or drink or earthly comforts, he is longing after his God. As Augustine says in his confessions: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”

But there is a negative component of this statement as well. David is crying out to God. God had given David a spiritual hunger and thirst for him, but David is starting to feel spiritual hunger pains. God seems distant or absent. David is earnestly, we could say even desperately, seeking after God.

And just like with physical hunger and thirst, David's spiritual hunger and thirst for God are only heightened and made more evident, and painful, the longer he goes without.

We are reminded in David's admission of longing that we too, like David, have had our hearts and minds renewed, and that God has called us to himself. God has renewed our hearts and minds by his spirit. We desire God above all things, but we often long for God. We can feel at times that God is distant from us, or that we are seeking him in vain.

So, what is it about David's current situation that keeps him from being satisfied? What is it that makes him thirsty and thirsty and weary? We see the answer to this as David compares his current state of affairs to his life as king in Jerusalem. He says "***So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.***" (Ps 63:2, ESV)

Before, when David longed for God, he would go to the sanctuary. David could walk from his royal palace to the sanctuary. He could see the sacrifices being offered, he could smell the smoke of the altar, and the incense, he would hear the instruments and the voices of the people of God worshiping and praying to their God. It was a visible demonstration of both God's presence with the people, but also, as David says, of God's power and his glory.

But now David looks around and sees nothing but desert. No food, no water, no sounds of praise. No visible signs or proof of God's power or glory. David has been banished from the presence of God in Jerusalem.

As David was fleeing Jerusalem, Zadok the priest and all the Levites were bringing out the Ark to bring it with David into the wilderness. David refused to bring it. He said "***Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place. But if he says, 'I have no pleasure in you,' behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him.***" (2 Sa 15:24-26, ESV)

David knew the ark belonged in Jerusalem. Jerusalem and the temple were the place where God had promised to dwell in the midst of his people. Instead of trying to hold on to power and take the ark with him, David leaves his fate in the hands of God, and we see him leaving Jerusalem weeping and in mourning.

I remember when the quarantine was first starting, having a conversation with a friend. You started to see churches starting to go online and promoting online church services.

And I was thinking out loud and asking "I wonder how many people will just stop going to church after this." Will many see the need for corporate worship unnecessary or even burdensome? My friend wisely and insightfully challenged this thought. And he said, "I think Christians will really see through this just how important church is."

While certainly there may be some who abandon the church in this season, or who have or will become disheartened, my friend turned out to be right. I do believe, and we've seen, that God's people have felt just how important and central Sunday worship is for God's people. Spurgeon insightfully comments on this psalm, especially in light of our current circumstances. He says "***This Psalm is peculiarly suitable for ... any constrained absence from public worship.***"

Perhaps we feel similar to David in this season. While we too have access to God daily through prayer and through the word, there is a very real sense in which we meet with God and behold his power and glory as we gather corporately as God's people. God calls us to worship him every Lord's day.

In our own time, with all of the restrictions that are in place, and for many the physical separation, we long like David to go to God's sanctuary. To meet with God and his people like we did before. We long to give full expression of our worship, we desire for the whole body to be joined together again.

David, despite being physically away from God's temple and from the worship of the Saints, unable to see the physical manifestation of God's power and Glory, David's thoughts move from the public worship of God to God's steadfast love. David declares, "**your steadfast love is better than life.**"

David is not merely affirming God's attitude of love towards David. He's not simply saying, "God love me." While it is true that God loves David, this word steadfast love, or lovingkindness as some of your translations say, is one of the most important words in the Old Testament to understand God's relationship to his people.

The word that David uses, steadfast love, can be translated loyalty, solidarity, closeness, faithfulness. At its core, this word summarizes the unbreakable commitment God has towards his covenant people. We can think of it as God's Covenantal love.

When God made his covenant with David, and promises him an everlasting kingship, he makes a promise to David's offspring: "**but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.**" (2 Sa 7:15-16, ESV).

David affirms the unbreakable bond that God has made to him and to his people. This is the same covenantal love that God uses to describe himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, "**The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,**" (Ex 34:6-7, ESV).

What does it mean exactly that God's steadfast love is "better than life"? Well, to say it another way, he is saying that there is no life apart from God's steadfast love. Just like physical hunger and thirst in the end will certainly lead to physical death, so life apart from God and without his mercy leads to Spiritual death.

When Jesus asks the Disciples in John's gospel whether they, like the crowds, wanted to leave, it says "**Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,"**" (Jn 6:68, ESV). David realizes he would rather be in the desert in fellowship with God than back in Jerusalem apart from him.

More than an acknowledgment of the life in God, or our relationship with God, David is also affirming the unbreakable nature of God's commitment to us. To say that God's love is better than life is to say that even death cannot separate him from God's steadfast love, a love which can go even beyond the grave.

And so, David too, in reflecting on his times of want and his times of plenty, acknowledges God's provision, and more importantly God's strength to carry him and provide even through dry and weary lands.

In light of David's meditation on God's glory and power and steadfast love, his only response is to praise God with his lips and to raise his hands in prayer.

This first half of the psalm closes with David's hunger and thirst for God satisfied. "**My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,**" (Ps 63:5, ESV).

Perhaps the hunger and thirst are taking their toll on David. Maybe, as often happens when people begin to succumb to the desert heat, David is seeing things, imagining things. But in fact, David is fed by God in the wilderness. As David crosses the Jordan as the people are becoming weary and worried about food and water, we see God's provision. It says in 2 Samuel 17,

When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi the son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Machir the son of Ammiel from Lo-debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim, brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, flour, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds and sheep and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat, for they said, "The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness," (2 Sam 17:27-29).

Even in the desert, God reminds us that he not far from David and his people. Through the hands of pagan rulers, God brings food and drink and beds to David and those who have fled with him. We see here a practical example of Christ's own promise to his people, to provide for his people in just the right time and in just the right way.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:

"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Mt 6:31-34, ESV).

But not only is David physically fed and given rest in this Psalm, but as he has been spiritually refreshed by God, by meditating on his steadfast love and compelled to praise him. As the first half of this psalm closes, David has gone from hungry and thirsty and tired to refreshed and satisfied as he meditates on God's steadfast love and faithful provision, rejoicing and praising God.

Looking forward:

So, David's thoughts turn from looking back on God's past faithfulness and he begins to look forward. You can imagine David, who's been on the run through the hot Judean wilderness, with little or nothing to eat and drink, finally having his first meal in a while, and finally having a soft bed to rest on. He lays down, and just as he's about to fall asleep, he is reminded again of his current circumstances. David remembers that his enemies are still on their way.

And as David faces his fate and the fate of the kingdom with uncertainty, he turns to God again, declaring, "you have been my help." The language here reminds us of Samuel's words in 1 Samuel 7, after God delivered them from the Philistines. Samuel erects a large stone monument and names it "Ebenezer" which means "Stone of Help," saying **"Till now the LORD has helped us." (1 Sa 7:12, ESV).**

David adds to this rich idea of help to describe himself under the shadow of God's wings. This phrase, "the shadow" or "shelter of your wings" is a phrase unique to David in the Psalms. David uses it 5 different times to describe complete security or safety from any harm. Even in the desert, he is reminded that he was under the protective wings of God.

In verse 8 he says **"My soul clings to you."** David affirms that he will not let go of God. He clings to God. This word is the same word used of Adam and Eve, of their cleaving together, speaking of an unbreakable closeness and unity. Lastly David speaks of God's Right Hand, which signifies the full strength and power of God which upholds David.

In these two short verses, David makes four powerful statements regarding God's sure protection of David. God is his help, God shelters him under his wings, he is cleaved or glued to God, and God upholds him with his strong right arm. It's as if David is grasping for every possible metaphor he could think of to describe how secure and safe he is in the face of his enemies. And in this confidence, David makes a decisive declaration against God's enemies.

Note the contrast here in the psalm between David and his enemies. David, who starts out weary and hungry, in pursuit and away from God's presence is fed, and now he assured that he is safe and secure in God.

The enemies of David on the other hand, are cast off of their positions of power, and thrown down do the depths of the earth, cast out of God's presence. The sword which now pursues David will be turned upon them, and they will be slain. And while David's hunger was satisfied by God, God will make David's enemies food to satisfy the hunger of wild animals.

David ends the psalm with a final declaration of the victory of God's people over their enemies. David says that **"the king shall rejoice in God."** By invoking the title of King, he is anticipating a return to his rightful throne, where he will praise God with his people. And we know from 2 Samuel that David did make it back to Jerusalem.

The victory of King David and his re-ascension to the throne was bittersweet. We see David, understandably, as he returns to Jerusalem, weeping and grieving for his only son. It was not the rejoicing that David describes in his psalm. Not only that, but this would not be the end of David's earthly troubles. David, and his sons after him, would not see the victory that David looks forward to in this Psalm.

David is not speaking in this Psalm only of his deliverance from Absalom, but even more so of the final victory of God for God's people, when all the King's enemies would be subdued. David knew that the true king, the one who would sit on his throne forever, would come, just like God promised to him. He knows that one day, all of God's enemies will be conquered.

David's statement "The king shall rejoice in God" was not contingent on whether or not he made it back to Jerusalem. Even if David's enemies overtook him there in the desert, even if David never made it back to see God's temple again, the words in this psalm are no less true.

God does not always bring victory in the way we want or the time we want or through the means that we want. And God has truly conquered our enemies through his death and resurrection. In light of our sure salvation in Christ, Paul considers what this means for us as we face all the hardships and worries of this life. He asks, **"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor**

things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Ro 8:31-39, ESV)

Indeed, as David says, God’s steadfast love is better than life. I have to wonder if the Apostle Paul had this psalm on his mind when he wrote the last section of Romans 8, that mountain top expression of God’s love and grace for us in Christ.

Just as David says that God’s steadfast love is better than life, so the Apostle Paul says that nothing, not hunger, not banishment, not threat of violence, not disease, not even life and death, can separate us, or David, or any of God’s people, from the steadfast love of God that is revealed to us in Christ.

All the things that haunt us in the middle of the night: condemnation for our past sins, the lies of the enemy, the political and economic turmoil we seem to face on a daily basis, sickness, danger, in fact all things, are under the sovereign control of our God who loves us.

Brothers and sisters, we aren’t promised to be free from the hardships of this life. David did in fact hunger and thirst. David was faced with death. But we rest with David, knowing that, we are more than conquerors in Christ our king.

So, this morning, may we cast our cares upon him who cares for us. May we be assured that God has and will continue to love us with his steadfast covenantal love.

When anxiety or fear or hopelessness begin to set in,
May we say with David,

“for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.”