

WHEN GOD SEEMS FAR AWAY

Psalm 61

A certain little boy greatly missed his father, who was separated from the family for a long time by military duty. But the boy was comforted by a picture of his dad that sat in a frame on his nightstand. When he was frightened at night, he would stare at the picture and imagine his daddy was watching over him. It did not work one night. His mother, hearing his weeping, came into his room and asked what was wrong. Through tears, he answered, "I want daddy to come out of the frame."

Has this ever been your experience? You know the heavenly Father is real. You know he is good. You know he loves you. Yet there are times when God seems to be in a frame. It feels that God does not hear your call, see your need, or feel your pain. God seems far away. This brief but beautiful psalm is tailored to teach us what to do when God seems far away.

Psalm 61 is ascribed to David. But we do not know when he wrote it. Verse 2 says: "from the end of the earth I call to you." Verse 4 says: "Let me dwell in your tent forever!" These statements suggest that David is exiled from Jerusalem and the tabernacle. Commentators assume David wrote this psalm when he fled from Absalom his son. It has also been considered a song David wrote as he returned home from exile. We do not know. It is not meant for us to know. The point of the psalm is not found in the historical circumstances David faced. It is found in the spiritual condition David experienced.

Whatever his geography, David was at a place where God seemed far away. He wanted more than a return to Jerusalem or another opportunity to worship in the tabernacle. He longed for a greater sense of God's loving presence, protective care, and strengthening grace. So he prayed that distance would be transformed into intimacy. In so doing, David shows us what to do when God seems far away. In a word, pray. YOU CAN NEVER BE SO FAR AWAY THAT GOD CANNOT HEAR YOU WHEN YOU CALL. "Wherever we are," wrote MATTHEW HENRY, "we have liberty to draw near to God, and may find a way open to the throne of grace." How should you pray when God seems far away? **Psalm 61** gives two answers.

I. PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE IN WHAT THE LORD HAS DONE.

The book of Psalms was the hymnal of the Jews. But as you read the psalms, it is obvious that this hymnbook was also a prayer book. It not only taught them how to worship. It also taught them how to pray. More specifically, by singing these psalms, the Jews gave expression to the prayers of the heart for which they could not find words. **Psalm 61** is a great example of how private needs can be communicated to God through corporate worship. Verses 1-4 teach us to pray with confidence that God will hear and help.

A. ASK GOD TO HEAR YOU.

The psalm begins with words of lamentation. Verse 1 says, “Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer.” These opening words teach an important lesson about the nature of true prayer. David cried to God. The word “cry” refers to a loud, piercing scream. The word was most often used to describe a cry of joy. But here it expresses agony, not ecstasy. It is an urgent, desperate cry – an SOS distress signal. Why did David cry to God in prayer? Verse 1 answers with two words: “hear” and “listen.” David is not going through an empty ritual of “saying his prayers.” Venting does not satisfy. Getting it off his chest does not help. He needs God to hear his cry. He needs God to listen to his prayer. He needed God to pay attention and take heed to what he heard. This is what prayer is about. It is not about saying the right words. It is about getting to the right ear.

GOD CAN HEAR YOU FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH. David says, “From the ends of the earth I call to you.” What is “the ends of the earth”? Some think it is a poetic statement of the fact that David was exiled from Jerusalem. Others think it refers to Sheol, the grave, or the place of the dead. It would thus be a way of saying that David was near death. But I would argue that the reference is spiritual, not physical. David felt distanced from God. And he describes this spiritual reality in geographic terms. He says it is as if he has found himself at the most remote part of planet earth. Yet from the ends of the earth, David called on the Lord.

GOD CAN HEAR YOU WHEN YOUR HEART IS FAINT. Verse 2 says, “I call to you when my heart is faint.” The KJV translates this phrase, “when my heart is overwhelmed.” Indeed, there are times when the heart becomes overwhelmed by the circumstances of life. But this is about more than an emotional response to difficult circumstances. It is total exhaustion. It is when one’s whole being runs out of energy. It is to be without hope, courage, or strength. When the heart is faint, you become tired physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is bad enough to be at the ends of the earth. But it is not so bad when your heart is filled with hope, strength, and courage that tell you, “Hold on, we’re coming out of this.” But when the heart is faint, it makes being at the ends of the earth even worse. Yet David says, “from the ends of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint.”

B. ASK GOD TO HELP YOU.

YOU NEED THE PROTECTION OF GOD TO HELP YOU. In verse 2b-3, David uses three wonderful pictures to describe how God protects his own.

GOD IS A ROCK. Verse 2b says, “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” This prayer request both confesses human inadequacy and affirms divine sufficiency. David needed a rock because he was weak. He is as a shipwrecked sailor in a tumultuous sea. He cannot swim to safety. There is no help in sight. His only hope is to get to a rock to which he can hold on. David also needs the rock to be high because he is small. A water level rock provides no safety. The crashing waves will overwhelm him and wash him back out to sea. He needs a rock that is higher than he is. David further needs to be led to this high rock because he is blind. He cannot see

through the storm. He needs an invisible hand to turn the storm, order the waves, and lead him to a high rock.

Where is this rock? Who is the rock? David gives us a hint by using the definite article. He prays to the rock, not a rock. It is God himself. Twenty-two times in the Psalms, God is called a rock. He is called a rock three times in **Psalm 62** alone. In **Psalm 62**, verses 2 and 6 read: “He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.” And verse 7 says, “On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.” God is our rock. He has proven this by sending us his Son to hold on to for eternal life.

**MY HOPE IS BUILT ON NOTHING LESS
THAN JESUS' BLOOD AND RIGHTEOUSNESS
I DARE NOT TRUST THE SWEETEST FRAME
BUT WHOLLY LEAN ON JESUS' NAME**

**ON CHRIST THE SOLID ROCK I STAND
ALL OTHER GROUND IS SINKING SAND**

GOD IS A REFUGE. In verse 3, David gives two reasons why he asks God to lead him to a high rock. The first reason is because God had already proven himself to be his refuge. A refuge is a place of safety from danger. It was an ancient “panic room,” a safe house where one fled to escape advancing enemies. This is our God. **Psalm 46:1** says: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” **Psalm 46:1** is a testimony of corporate deliverance. But this is a testimony of personal deliverance. David says, “For you have been my refuge.” When there was nowhere else to turn, David found a hiding place in God. And when he fled to God, he discovered that no one but God can keep you when you cannot keep yourself. God is a refuge.

GOD IS A STRONG TOWER. This is the second reason David gives for why he asked God to lead him to a high rock. God had been “a strong tower against the enemy.” A strong tower serves the same purpose as refuge. But there is a difference. A refuge is where you turn for safety when the enemy chases you away from the city. But a strong tower is where you turn for safety when the enemy attacks the city. A strong tower was a place of defense built onto the wall of the city. The watchman would stand guard in the strong tower. And when the enemy attacked, the strong tower was a strategic battle station, where you could reach the enemy without the enemy reaching you. A refuge was a safe place to hide. A strong tower was a safe place to fight. This is our God. **Proverbs 18:10** says, “The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous man runs into it and is safe.”

YOU NEED THE PRESENCE OF GOD TO HELP YOU. Verse 4 highlights two ways the presence of God helps us.

GOD'S PRESENCE SATISFIES. Verse 4a says, “Let me dwell in your tent forever.” The “tent” David mentions was more than a tent. It was the tabernacle. The tabernacle was where the Lord met with his people. Before the temple was erected,

the tabernacle was the house of God. David asks to dwell in the tent of God. This may indicate that David was in exile and longed to return to the sanctuary for worship, but not necessarily. David's consuming and ongoing desire was to dwell in God's presence. In **Psalm 27:4**, David says, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple." This seems to be David's focus here, as he prays to dwell in the Lord's tent forever. This ought to be our ultimate desire. JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE wisely counsels: "Never fear to be intimate with God. God desires to be intimate with you and is only hurt when you remain at a distance or draw back from his presence."

GOD'S PRESENCE SUSTAINS. Verse 4b says, "Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings." In verse 3, David testifies, "You have been my refuge." Now he prays, "Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings." A mother bird would permit her babies to eat and play in an open space. But when she saw a predator or a storm coming, she would call her babies to herself. As they fled to the mother bird, she would open her wings, and they would hide under the shelter of her wings. This is how God watches over us. **Psalm 17:8** says, "Keep me as the apple of your eye, hide me in the shadow of your wings." And **Psalm 57:1** says, "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by." And **Psalm 61:4** says, "Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!"

This is a prayer God always answers. A mother bird will not refuse to open her wings to her children in the time of trouble. And God will not turn those away when we seek him for refuge. To the contrary, we are exposed to unnecessary storms, because we don't take refuge under the shelter of God's wings. In **Matthew 23:37**, Jesus laments, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." This is also the Lord's lament for every sinner who refuses to trust in him. While Jesus is calling, run to the cross and take refuge under the shelter of his wings. Do not let it be that Jesus says to you, "I wanted to gather you under my wings, but you would not let me!"

II. PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE IN WHAT THE LORD WILL DO.

In verses 1-4, David draws near to God by remembering past blessings. In verses 5-8, David draws near to God by anticipating future blessings. This latter half of the psalm teaches us how to pray with confidence in what the Lord will do.

A. ACKNOWLEDGE THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD.

Verse 5 says, "For you, O God, have heard my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name." This verse does more than look back again at what the Lord has already done. It is a declaration of God's unwavering faithfulness

in every season of life. David mentions two ways the faithfulness of God has been demonstrated in his life.

Verse 5a says: “For you, O God have heard my vows.” This is the second time David mentions “hearing” in this psalm. In verse 1, David asks God to hear him. In verse 5, David acknowledges that God has heard him. But note the distinction. In verse 1, he asks God to hear his cry. Here he says God has heard his vow. A vow was a promise that would often accompany a prayer for deliverance. Some would use vows as a crafty negotiation tactic. But the sincere worshiper made vows as a statement of faith. With confidence that God would answer their prayers, they would vow to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving when the prayer was answered. In verse 8b, David determines to perform his vow. But here he states his confidence that God will do his part. The very fact that God had heard his vow was all the proof David needed to trust in the faithfulness of God.

Verse 5b says: “you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.” The name of God reflects his nature, character, and authority. So great is the name of God that it is to be feared. To truly know God’s name is to live in a holy fear of saying or doing anything that dishonor his name. This became a means of identifying the people of God: “those who fear his name.” The fear of God brings blessings. Those who fear the name of God receive a “heritage,” which refers to the benefits of being in covenant with God. It is the spiritual inheritance of God’s people, which included the Promised Land of Canaan. This is the faithfulness of God. Those who fear his name receive a heritage from the Lord. **Psalm 37:11** says, “But the meek will inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.” We who have put our trust in the bloody cross and empty tomb of the Lord Jesus Christ are beneficiaries of a heritage. In **Colossians 1:12** Paul says we should be “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.”

B. TRUST THE PROMISES OF GOD.

Verses 6-7 says, “Prolong the life of the king; may his years endure to all generations! May he be enthroned forever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!” This prayer for the king is disruptive. It seems to come out of nowhere. Its connection to the rest of the psalm is not obvious. And the complexity of this prayer is increased by the fact that David shifts from the first person to the third person. You must dig beyond a surface reading of the text to see that the king is David. As a result, when we turn to **Psalm 61** for help, comfort, and strength, we are tempted to read through verse 5, skip over verses 6-7, and land at verse 8. But to do so is to rob yourself of an integral blessing of the psalm. Get past the abrupt transition David makes here, and listen to what he says. These complex verses show us what it means to trust the promises of God. We see this in how David prays for himself and beyond himself.

David prays, “Prolong the life of the king.” This is the fundamental request the people prayed for the king. The stability of the nation was based on the life of the king. So it was natural for them to pray that the life of the king would be prolonged.

Here David humbly prays this for himself. At the end of verse 7, David prays, “appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him.” A king needs strong and faithful guards to protect him. But David prays that God would appoint two special guardians: “steadfast love and faithfulness.” These are twin attributes of God that bring assurance that God will never leave us nor forsake us. **Psalm 23:6** says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Verse 6 says, “Prolong the life of the king; may his years endure to all generations.” It is natural for David to pray that his life as king be prolonged. But how can he ask that his “years endure to all generations”? No human king lives forever. Verse 7a says, “May he be enthroned forever before God.” Human kings do not remain on the throne forever. David is praying beyond himself. In **2 Samuel 7:13**, God makes a covenant with David that he would “establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” This promise was ultimately fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. In **Luke 1:31-33**, the angel Gabriel tells Mary, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” David trusted that God would keep his promise. All the more, so should we. Jesus is the ultimate proof that God will keep his word.

C. PRAISE THE NAME OF GOD.

Psalm 61 begins with a lamentation. But it ends with a celebration. Verse 8 says, “So will I ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day after day.” The key to this closing verse is its opening word, “So.” This little word binds prayer and praise together. Grateful praise is the appropriate response to answered prayer. **AUGUSTINE** wrote: “They that are godly are oppressed and vexed in the church or congregation for this purpose: that when they are pressed, they should cry; and when they cry, that they should be heard; and when they are heard, that they should laud and praise God.”

With a sense of determination, David concludes, “So will I ever sing praises to your name.” The answer to David’s prayer had not yet come. Still he predetermines his response. In fact, he determines his response before the prayer ends. When God answers, he will sing praise to his name. This is the second time the name of God is mentioned in this psalm. Verse 5 speaks of the fear God’s name deserves. Verse 8 speaks of the joy God’s name elicits. When God brings you out, you ought to joyfully serenade his great name. David was a skilled musician and a sweet singer. But he did not choose to sing to God on the basis of his musical gifts and talents. Answered prayer should result in songs of praise, whether you can sing or not. **Psalm 92:1** says, “It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night.”

David says, “So I will ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day after day.” A vow to God was to be paid by offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

The performance of a vow was an act of worship. The presentation of an animal sacrifice communicated to the people of God that worship ought to cost you something. David was willing to pay the cost. He will perform his vows. It is what he owed God. But David refuses to offer muted worship to God. He could not silently lay his offering on the altar. The Lord had been too good to him. As he performed his vows, he couldn't help but sing praises to God's name. I'd bet the Lord has been too good for you to offer muted worship. You ought to sing praises to his name.

Notice the two time references in verse 8. David says, "So will I ever sing praise to your name." David's joyful singing was not merely a Sunday morning thing. He determined that he would not stop singing praises to the Lord. **Hebrews 13:15** says, "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name." The word "continually" means "through it all." Sometimes we feel like singing. Sometimes we don't. But our praise should not be based on how we feel at any given moment. It should be based on two life-changing acts of God. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins. And Jesus rose from the dead to give you new life, eternal life, abundant life. Such amazing grace should cause you to praise God through it all. David says, "So will I ever sing praise to your name, as I perform my vows day after day." The worshiper was only required to perform his vow once. When the sacrifice of thanksgiving was offered, the vow was performed. But a one-time payment was not enough for David. He would perform his vows day after day. The goodness of God is a debt that can never be repaid!

**I CAN HEAR THE SAVIOR SAY,
"THY STRENGTH INDEED IS SMALL!"
CHILD OF WEAKNESS, WATCH AND PRAY,
FIND IN ME THINE ALL IN ALL."**

**JESUS PAID IT ALL,
ALL TO HIM I OWE;
SIN HAD LEFT A CRIMSON STAIN
HE WASHED IT WHITE AS SNOW.**