

WORSHIP IN THE WILDERNESS

Psalm 63

When I was serving as a vocational missionary in South America for a season, I had the privilege of flying to the northern part of Chile to a couple of towns in the Atacama Desert. The Atacama is about a 600-mile-long strip of desert that has earned the title “the driest desert in the world.” On average, the Atacama only receives 1-3mm of moisture per year, and some places have recorded zero rainfall since record keeping began. Most of the ground is said to be sterile, a kind of “death zone for vegetation, depriving the land of water and nutrients.” The soils samples from this area are very similar to soil samples from Mars and because of this, the desert is actually used by NASA for testing instruments that head to the red planet itself, just like the Perseverance Rover that landed on Mars this week. But movies and documentaries about Mars have even been filmed in the Atacama Desert it’s so similar. Having 300+ sunny days a year and being so remote, it is arguably the number one place in the world for space observatories.

One of my friends who was in this desert during the hottest days said he couldn’t sleep at night because I think he said it was like the moisture was being sucked out of him and he had to get up in the middle of the night to go and find water. When I personally landed in this place, it was like landing on a beach. The airport roads didn’t have snowplows but sand-plows, with sand-drifts on the side of the road. Virtually nothing grew there, they said, unless watered by man.

But I share this with you because we are going to spend time today in Psalm 63 where David is out in the dry and thirsty wilderness of Judea, and the dry and thirsty wilderness is his great depiction of this world and our souls without God. A desolate and barren wilderness is exactly what this world is like for us at times, and it should be. If we seek to find our satisfaction, our nutrients and what our souls really longs for, from the desert of this world, we will end up dry, thirsty, parched, and famished. We are going to starve spiritually because the ultimate satisfaction our hearts need is not in this world. When you try to find what you need in the world, you end up hopeless, which is where many are at in our culture. We are living right now in a desert generation of most’s. As far as I can tell we are not living in *gen most* (comprised of boomers, millennials, gen x, gen z): *most depressed, most anxious, most isolated, most lonely, most indulgent on drugs and alcohol, most amused, most unpleased, most purposeless, most confused, most hopeless*. Our culture is lost in the wilderness of atheistic, secular humanism that has no real nutrients and satisfaction for our souls because it has excluded God and we’re spiritually starving to death in it. There is a famine and it’s not a famine of food shortage but a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord.

Amos 8:11

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “When I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, But rather for hearing the words of the LORD.

This was already the case before the whole covid thing but since covid “*the most’s*” have been accelerated. Things are not better since the shutdown. Things are worse. And the real epidemic we are facing is the mental and spiritual health of people as they deal with grief, distress, and all of the changes that have taken place – not even from the virus but the changes made on top of it that is adding to the already stresses of life. Many small businesses might not survive because after the “two weeks to slow the spread” they couldn’t convince customers to come back. More young people in California have died in the last year from

taking their own life than from coronavirus. Doctors are treating more and more psyche and spiritually-related problems over the last six months than usual.

People are breaking and broken and seeking. And as the Church, we're called to help people through stuff like this. I want to help you through it for you to help those around you. To help them understand what is wrong with this world and what they need to do to survive in it, to make it through the wilderness. And if you'll apply the principles we learn from this psalm to your life, you will not only get by in the wilderness of this world, but you will show this world as Christians should – how to worship and flourish even in the wilderness. In a day when we're tempted to complain about everything going on, David's going to teach us to worship. In a day when many are despairing of life, we are going to learn from David that there is something better than life that our souls long for.

Every now and then I just get the sense that it's time to take a break from the normal journey through whatever book we're studying and find rest, refreshment and rebalance through the psalms. That's what they're there for. That's why God gave them to us – to balance our hearts and minds and emotions through biblical lamenting and praise. They bring us back to the basics – an open and honest heart before God and a real, vital relationship with Him – our lifeline in the desert. You could literally call this book **“the book of praises”** and notice that this is praise in the desert. The title of this psalm is, *“A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.”* Judging by the description of the psalm, this is probably during his son Absalom's rebellion and he has been forced from the throne as king and away from Jerusalem and he's out in that desert area that extends out towards Jericho. Things are tough for David but he is worshipping and satisfied as He reflects on who God is. Let's read it now.

*“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 have I seen You in the sanctuary,
To see Your power and glory.
Because Your lovingkindness is better than life,
My lips will praise You.
So I will bless You as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands in Your name.
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 takes hold of me.*

*But those who seek my life to destroy it,
Will go into the depths of the earth.
They will be turned 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.”*

Alright, so first I want us to see from this that if we’re going to not only survive, but even get to the place where we thrive and flourish in the wilderness of this world, we need to realize what David realizes and it’s that our satisfaction is only going to be found in God alone – not in this world.

I. GOD ALONE IS THE SUPREME DESIRE OF MAN’S HEART. (VV. 1-2)

Every man and woman in this world, old and young, are constantly longing and yearning for something more. They know something is messed up and missing in their lives – they’re continually searching for meaning and purpose and life and security and significance. And what you turn to, to find that, is going to determine whether you end up with hope or hopelessness. If you look to the things of this world to find that missing piece, you’re in trouble because it is only going to be found in God. It can’t be found in anyone else or anything else. It’s like one man wrote, we have a God-shaped hole in our hearts and only God can fill it. Everything else is a square peg we’re trying to fit in a round hole. The hole is there because we all have a sin problem and that sin problem has left a hole in us, because where we should have this communion with God, there is now a yearning for it. And only when we turn to Christ as the one who satisfied our sin debt to God, are we forgiven and the Holy Spirit comes and fills the hole and we are complete again in Christ. When man and woman sinned, they lost the spirit and life of God from that, but when we trust Christ, the Spirit of God brings back that part of the redemption process.

This is one of the reasons God allows wilderness experiences in our lives in the first place – to drive us back to Himself. We go our own way, try to be filled with the things of the world and realize it’s empty and turn back to God. Even as believers we can like Israel and get a little too comfortable, a little too routine-like, a little too taking God for granted and letting our relationship with Him slide, we experience the consequences of that and are driven back to God. This is what David is doing. He’s allowing the wilderness to drive him back to God because he knows only God can help him get through this and find refreshment and satisfaction despite it all.

“My soul thirsts for You, my soul longs for You.”

Even though he is probably incredibly thirsty, **he knows his deepest thirst isn’t physical, but spiritual.**¹ The greater need is spiritual drink and spiritual sustenance. And it’s the same with us. Jesus called Himself the Bread of Life and the Water of Life that if a man eats and drink he’ll never hunger or thirst again. Speaking of his crucifixion, Jesus said, *“Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day... [I am] the bread which came down out of heaven.... [and] he who eats this bread will live forever.”* What was He saying? Well, right after that in the same context He says, *“The Spirit gives life; the flesh profits nothing. the words that I have spoken are spirit and life.”* He’s saying that **those who believe in Him will find true nourishment and satisfaction their soul longs for in their heart.** I think God’s trying to tell us something when heart disease is the leading cause of death. Our hearts were made for God and are restless until they find rest in Him.

❖ **Only Jesus can satisfy your spiritual hunger and thirst.**

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied (Mt. 5:6). How are they satisfied? In Him, who is our righteousness by faith (Rom. 5). Jesus satisfies your spiritual hunger and quenches your spiritual thirst because He forgives your sin in Christ.

We don't want to miss either how David starts out the psalm with "*O God, you are my God.*" I think that's a small but major detail we don't want to miss because to David, God is not just any god, He is *his* God, "*my God.*" **God is personal to him.** He has a personal knowledge of and awareness of God. He knows who God is, what He is like, what He desires. And the reality is that a lot of people don't. They might think He's unknowable. But what this world needs to see is more Christians who have a personal relationship with their God. Christians who are serious about reading and studying God's Word and prove its worth by the way they live their lives according to it. "My God" people can tell people what He is like and what He's doing today and what He is doing in their life and teaching them.

❖ **Christians should be known as the "My God" people.**

"My God" people don't want to live a single moment without God because they've come to know Him and they want others to come to know Him as their God. The world needs to see a people who aren't just religious and do religious things and live like a hypocrite throughout the week but those who have a real, connected relationship with Him. And I didn't get this for the longest time. I grew up religious, I thought God was out there somewhere, maybe loved us but didn't know that He would be so personal and really show you who He is.

"Whoever has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. The one who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I too will love them and show disclose Myself to them."

John 14:20-21

I hope that's you today. You can say that you know God personally and He is working in your life because like David you've yearned for Him. That church isn't just something you do on Sunday morning because your parents tell you too because when you know God, it will change your life. When you know God like this, it changes your outlook on your wilderness circumstances. Wiersbe said, "To be able to say "my God" by faith transformed David's wilderness experience into a worship experience."ⁱⁱ From **wilderness to worship**, as we see next.

II. **GOD IS THE SUPREME DELIGHT OF MAN'S SOUL (VV. 3-8)**

At a time where David should have been discouraged, overwhelmed with anxiety, complaining and angry, he is refreshed and worshipping!

"Thus I have seen You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and glory."

First, His thoughts go back to the sanctuary of the **tabernacle**, which would have been the tent-like structure where God dwelt in a special way in Israel's midst before the temple. God had revealed His power and glory and likeness there. David understood that the tabernacle with its altar and incense and showbread and mercy seat covered by the cherubim were all just **shadows of the real God and explained what He was like and how to approach Him in our heart.** He strengthened Himself in the thought of what the tabernacle taught Him about God, looking beyond the physical realities of it and to the God-truths it taught him: that God was obviously holy and righteous and that he didn't deserve to be near God as a sinner, but it also taught him that God was merciful and forgiving and with the right sacrifice (Christ ultimately!) He could enter into this loving God's presence. It was the love of God for him that really struck him. David knew he was a sinner but was a man after God's own heart and God had a loyal, covenant love with David.

"Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise You."

Even though he's going through this terrible wilderness experience and deserved to be there, David knew God has forgiven him and acknowledged God's **lovingkindness** towards him. In Hebrew it's the word **hesed** and it expresses a **saving and loyal love in action**. He acts on our behalf.

❖ **hesed = saving, loyal love in action.**

At Men's Breakfast yesterday we learned that true masculinity is this, right men? We are not to be nice and soft and selfish men who act out of self-preservation, but men of virtue who act out of self-sacrificial love for the true good of others like Christ, the prime example. Because David knew God's hesed, his loyal, covenant love with him, he could rejoice in this desert. **It's better than life!** Even if he didn't have any comforts at this point in his life, he had God's lovingkindness, and that is where his heart was satisfied. The greatest example or manifestation of God's lovingkindness that we are continually satisfied by is the cross.

❖ **The cross is greatest expression of God's lovingkindness.**

The cross is the actual substance of the shadow that the tabernacle was. Jesus is the ultimate once-for-all sacrifice and the great High Priest. He is the bread of life. His blood that was sprinkled on that mercy seat that allows us to enter into the holy of holies and sit under the protection of His wings.

And as we go through wilderness experiences of this life and we start to question God's goodness and lovingkindness – because trials make us think weird and can I say, stupid things – the cross tells us once-for-all and forever that God loves us and loves us so much that He died for us. And **because He doesn't change, neither will His love for us in Christ**. The thought of God's lovingkindness caused David's heart to overflow in worship. Verse 4:

“So I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name.”

The thought of God's lovingkindness allows us to worship in the wilderness and I wonder if there's hardly anything sweeter to God than someone worshipping God even though they are in a wilderness experience. It's goes against the crowds and the feelings of self-pity and the desires to complain and it glorifies Him. It blesses Him! And apparently, it's okay to raise your hands when you do that! He was raising his hands in worship, a sign of purity (1 Timothy 2:8).

Verse 5 shows us David's hunger and thirst is curbed in the thought of his spiritual satisfaction.

“My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips.”

Just as we have physical appetites that can be satisfied, so we have spiritual appetites that can be satisfied. **Marrow and fatness** takes us back again to the sacrifices at the tabernacle, maybe the sacrificial meals the priests would eat. Even though he isn't a Levite and is in the wilderness separated from God's House, **God has a satisfying spiritual meal for David made up of the choicest food**. The marrow and finest typify the finest parts, not just scraps, but delicacies.

But in verse 6 David reveals the secret to surviving and flourishing in the wilderness and even an advantage of being in the wilderness – we have time to meditate on God.

“When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches”

David says when he lies in his bed, rather than fearing and fretting and thinking about all his problems and trouble, he would instead think about God – do you see that? This may be the most important part of this psalm. He sets his mind on God. He remembers God and meditates on Him and His Word and ways and works.

❖ **The secret to spiritual survival and flourishing in the wilderness: Meditate on God and His Word. That’s where the joyous worship is coming from!**

When you see that word **meditate** in the Bible, you don’t want to think of the eastern religions of the world with someone sitting cross-legged in the lotus position, eyes closed and hands extended, murmuring “Om” sounds while they try to empty their minds. Biblical meditation is quite the opposite. It is not emptying your mind but **filling your mind** with thoughts about who God is and what He is like – His promises, His ways, His works, His deeds. It is an active meditation on the inside, **a Christian discipline that involves studying, reflecting and ruminating** – rolling over and over in your mind some aspect of God from His Word. For every sermon I ruminate on a passage, like on this psalm and through reflection over the course of days is how I’m able to probe the truths of what it’s saying for significance in our lives so that we might be transformed by it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Biblical meditation implies the thought of a cow chewing cud. The cow chews the cud, swallows it, then bring it back up and chews on it a little more, then swallows it. And over and over. When we’re meditating on God we’re taking something from His Word that He has told us and chewing on it. That’s why ideally, I like to do my devotional in the mornings so I can chew on it throughout the day and pray it into my heart and mind and probe for ways to apply it.

You can see why this may be the most important element of this psalm. It’s because David is refocusing back on God in his quiet wilderness time that he is able to not only survive, but to worship. That’s how we strengthen ourselves in the Lord. Chuck Swindoll just hit the nail right on the head when he said in a devotional last month: *“I cannot be the man I should be without times of quietness.”* Let’s reframe that for us: *“We cannot be who we should be without times of quietness.”* The most important, but most easily neglected part of your life is your quiet time with the Lord where you’re reading His Word, praying, and I recommend journaling the things He’s teaching you. I know it can be awkward at first, but that’s where you’re going to learn to strengthen yourself in the Lord. Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark, taught us this by His example. He would do whatever He had to do to make sure He had quiet time with the Father.

Spurgeon emphasized the importance of quiet time in God’s Word this way: *“A Bible that’s falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn’t.”* If your Bible is falling apart, there a good chance you won’t be because you’re getting the nourishment your soul needs. One of the benefits of a Bible falling apart is that you’ve probably developed a working knowledge of the Word of God and you know where to turn for those reminders. You can get yourself a tool like **“Talk Thru the Bible”** Guide by Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa to help you understand the Bible and the purpose of each book. Spurgeon was also a man acquainted with periods of deep depression: *“I have often, in times of frightful depression of spirit, reached down my Bible, and within a few minutes been able to leap for joy of soul.”* There are days where sometime you won’t feel like reading your Bible or praying, but then you do and you realize it just saved your day from being a meaningless waste to being a meaningful reward that eternity will recognize. God told Joshua this:

Joshua 1:8

“This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall **meditate on it day and night**, so that you may be careful to do all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

David probably had memorized that exact text and was applying that in his wilderness worship. Some translations actually translate verse 1, “*Early I seek You*”. Then, “*I meditate on You in the night watches*.” It’s an all-day every-day thing for those who know God. And it’s at night that he needed it most, which leads us to the last heading.

Next time you have a moment to sit and wait at the doctors office or airport or bus stop or train crossing, instead of pulling out your phone – mediate on God and His Word. Bring to mind that verse or passage that struck you in your quiet time that morning and probe it for truths and ways to apply it. Night and day, early and late, David was meditating on God. At night, I can imagine, he especially needed the next point:

III. **GOD IS THE SUPREME DEFENSE OF MAN’S LIFE. (VV. 9-11)**

David said this in our final verses, 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 [David himself] will rejoice in God; Everyone who swears by Him will glory, for the mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.”

There was a man named Voltaire that said, “God is on the side of the big battalions.”^{iv} This says Voltaire was wrong. God is on the side of His own.

Psalm 20:7-8

“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.
They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.”

Remember David had enemies after him. There was a smear campaign led against him in Jerusalem with a bunch of lies being told about him, but if David awoke at night, part of what his mind was on was **the Lord’s protection and vindication of him**, which meant that he didn’t have to worry and stew over his enemies. If they were going to get to him, they had to go through God first and no matter what they said, someday God would prove them liars. He didn’t have an army battalion, but he had God, and that was all he needed. To drive David permanently from his throne, they would have to drive God off His throne^v and that is why he looked for victory. David recalls their ultimate destination is the grave. They’ll be delivered over to the power of the swords and like a fox pounces on its prey, so they’ll be caught.

Verse 7 here with how David speaks of himself as being “*in the shadow of [God’s] wings*.” He’s protected under God’s wings, maybe speaking of God anthropomorphically here as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings or as himself sitting on the mercy seat in the holy of holies with the cherub’s wings around him. When you’re a child, maybe you were like my children now, and when dad got home you’d run to the door and greet him and he’d throw the wing of his arm around you. Every time my children hurt themselves or crying I find myself wrapping my arm around them to

comfort them. There's nothing like dad's wing being around you to comfort and protect. When you're in the shadow of God's wings, you are secure.

❖ **God's people are secure under His wings.**

In a world where the wicked rule and do a lot of harm to God's people, persecuting them, God's people do cry out for justice. We're tired of seeing evil prosper and slander the righteous. We pray for our enemies first, yes, but we also pray for justice and vindication and that God will avenge His own (Rev. 6:10; 18:20-24).

❖ **God will avenge & vindicate His own.**

One of the reasons we are in the wilderness we are in, as a nation and world today, is no doubt due to lies and propaganda for a profit. There are wicked agendas taking place behind the scenes. But we rest knowing that God is in control and He will have the ultimate say. He will come and rule in righteousness. He will make all things new. We too, look for victory.

You know, it's very rare, but it does happen – that in the Atacama Desert, when it gets a 1mm or 2 of rain, it blossoms like this. The driest desert in the world comes to life with these gorgeous purple flowers like it did back in 2015. When these flowers bloom, it's a big deal. People come from all over the world to take pictures because it's a rare thing. And God can do the same with us. When we decide that we're going to focus on Him and meditate on Him, we'll bring life and beauty to the desert, worshipping our way through the desert of this world – and that's a rare thing!

Lord, thank You for Your Word to us this morning that is of great encouragement in the desert of this world. Like David, I pray that we would meditate on You and on Your Word in the midst of it all so that our souls and our hearts might find that nourishment it needs to flourish and worship You. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

ⁱ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary, Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 944.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 944.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark D. Futato, *Transformed by Praise* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 95.

^{iv} John Phillips, *Exploring the Psalms, Volume 2* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1986), 190.

^v Ibid, 190.