

Pastoral Care

Psalm 61:1-8

By [Bill Hughes](#)

As we continue to work our way through the Psalms we come to the 61st Psalm. The subject of this evening is "Pastoral Care: In Facing Life and In Facing Death." Perhaps you noted the very hymns that we sang tonight were hymns that bring to our minds the issues: In the first hymn the issues of life and its struggles, and in the second hymn the issues of death. And that comprises the subject of the Psalm that we will have before us. It's no accident that the Psalms have had a magnetic affect upon the people of God—that is, the people of God who live within their pages. The Psalms are unrivaled in their range of power and expression: from praise to lament, from petition to complaint, from celebrating God's grace to begging Him for more help, from assurance to anxiety, from the bowing of thanksgiving to the voicing of disappointment. All the emotions and responses of the human spirit are expressed. Surely there is a Psalm for all seasons in life and in death. Before we read the 61st Psalm let us look to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father and our God, as we come to Thy word this evening we, we pray that Thy Holy Spirit would open our hearts and open our minds that we might understand the very word which Thou hast given unto us. We would ask, O Lord, that in the quiet of these moments, Thou would not only teach us but that Thou will apply Thy word to us and to our lives and to our circumstances. Feed us from the word this evening, O God, we pray. We would ask that we would see nor hear no men, but that we would see none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray in His precious name. Amen.

Let us hear the word of God.

1 *For the choir director; on a stringed instrument. A Psalm of David.* Hear my cry, O God; give heed to my prayer. 2 From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. 3 For You have been a refuge for me, a tower of strength against the enemy. 4 Let me dwell in Your tent forever; let me take refuge in the shelter of Your wings. 5 For You have heard my vows, O God; You have given me the inheritance of those who fear Your name. 6 You will prolong the king's life; his years will be as many generations 7 He will abide before God forever; appoint lovingkindness and truth that they may preserve him 8 So I will sing praise to Your name forever, that I may pay my vows day

by day.

Tonight as we come to consider the 61st Psalm. This is a text that has often been used in pastoral situations, both in those situations having to do with life and in those situations having to do with death. And so this is a meaningful text to me personally and I trust a meaningful text to you as well. Sickness, disease, accident, death—these things are ever reminders to us that we continue to live upon a sin cursed earth and that remaining sin is still a part of our lives. The storms and struggles of life are always with us until death comes and then suddenly there is nothing more to say. The words of friends and family and perhaps even the minister seem to be inadequate to fill the void and the silence. And our aching hearts often cry out, “Doesn’t God have anything to say in this time of silence and sorrow?”

To us who are alive and involved with pain and difficulties and the struggles of life, God, I believe, speaks to us in this Psalm, Psalm 61. The Psalm is generally thought to be written by David who was experiencing some great trouble and heartache while he was king of Israel. There seems to be some good indication that David wrote this Psalm when he was driven into exile on account of his rebellious son Absalom—Absalom, who at this time was greatly endangering his life.

Can you imagine a king, a father, being hunted like an animal by his son, driven temporarily from the throne, from his family, into a foreign land? Can you imagine the pain, the distress in the father's heart? Visualize for a moment the scene: the dark clouds of a threatened revolt have been steadily gathering and now the storm bursts on King David's head. By this time David was some perhaps 60 years of age, health and strength being impaired. His favorite son, Absalom, now risen in rebellion against him. Not only his throne but his very life was in danger, together with the lives of his wives and children. Solomon was perhaps scarcely ten years of age.

What then does the king do? No determination to stand his rightful ground, David says, “Let us flee” and he runs for his life, and he runs as a scared rabbit. And Absalom had laid his plans carefully and executed them to take an advantage of his father's special love for his favorite son, and had stolen the hearts of the subjects of the kingdom. He aspired to the kingdom and now he determined to seize, by whatever means, the kingdom from his father, and he assembled his forces in Jerusalem. He had determined that his father's life must now be sacrificed for his ambition, and he goes forth to accomplish this deed. See this aging parent driven from his home, humiliated before his subjects, stricken to the very depth of his heart by this murderous hatred of a son that he loved. Is this not a faint shadow of the amazing love of Christ which moved Him to set His love upon His own?

I. Facing Life

Two considerations we want to reflect upon in this Psalm, facing life and facing death. First of all then, facing life. I'm sure you noted that the Psalm is a prayer, a prayer not just with the mumbling of some words but a crying out unto God from a heart that's in great distress. He was earnest as he lifted up his voice. He was pleading with God to listen to his prayer. The language of the Psalmist is such that he would be in deep distress, and a sad and burdened heart gives vent to its feelings and a loud cry for mercy.

And when it comes to crying with us and whatever anguish we might be experiencing, I wonder if there is an understanding in our minds and in our hearts that God hears our cries. Do we have assurance that the heavenly Father is not hardened against the cries of His own children? What a consoling thought to know that the Lord hears our cries in the times of our troubles. And it was just that: In this midst of his distress we find David praying, not just at a matter when it might be convenient, not at all. He says, "From the ends of the earth I call to You, O God." Wherever it happened to be, whatever the circumstances might be in God's providential dealings, God was there and David was not too weary to pray.

When a man is in the midst of overcoming difficulties there's a saying that perhaps is true, "There is an end to a man when he makes an end to praying." But notice David; he says, "I call...I call as my heart grows faint," or I still like the King James, "I call when heart is overwhelmed." When the waves of trouble, when the difficulties of life are over me, when I'm nigh unto being covered up, overwhelmed, at my wit's end, at the end of my rope. It's difficult to pray when our hearts are drowning, is it not? And without the grace of God it is near impossible. But with God all things are possible, for tribulation brings us to God and brings God to us. Faith's greatest triumphs are achieved often in our heaviest trials. David is saying, 'Affliction is all about me and covering me and would seek to even swallow me, and yet God is near, near enough to hear my voice. I will call to Him.'

Do we notice that David the Psalmist calls out to God as one with whom he was assured a very present help? What does David say? This is the heart of the matter, for he says, "Lord, lead me to the rock that is higher than I." David could see the Lord. He could see Him as his refuge, but he admits his confusion and his weakness and his inability to fully understand, but nonetheless he says, 'Thou art steadfast, O Lord. Guide me. Thou art high. Thou art lifted up to a rock, to someplace that's a refuge, to someplace where I'm maybe safe.' David is thus admitting that he has no strength in himself. If he depends on himself, therefore, he could not be safe, but to a place of safety he prays that God would lead him, and we need One much higher than we are. We need a Savior, a Redeemer, One that is higher than we are. How infinitely higher than we are is the salvation of God!

David, dear people, draws a picture here for us. It is the picture of a man suffering shipwreck. The boat in which he has been sailing has sunk and he has been plunged into the ocean waves, struggling for life, panting for breath, just about to give up and suddenly he discovers a rock near by. Oh, if he could but climb to the top of that rock and get his footing where the billows would not be able to reach him, there he would be safe. The prayer in Psalm 61 is the cry of such an individual. He is exhausted and tired, unable to reach the rock himself, and he cries for a friendly hand of One much stronger and One that is able to lead him safely to the rock. "Lead me to the rock," otherwise I perish.

"But what rock?" we ask. Oh, he knows that unless the rock be a high one, he will not be in safety. 'The rock,' he says, 'must be higher than I or the waves will reach me and wipe me away.' David sets forth so clearly for us the dangers of sin and the consequences of sin, but then he shows us the security of refuge: "the rock that is higher than I" must be higher than any one of us. David was the mighty king but David seeks the refuge, for his need is not in the arm of flesh or the suggestions of men but in the rock of ages, the Lord Jesus Christ. To Him that is mighty to save David cries, "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I." It is nothing but the sinner's cry to the sinner's Savior. "The rock that is higher than I," the rock of our salvation is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. It is only by our grasp and our trust of Him that there is any help or hope for us against the storm and the struggles and the distresses of life.

David continues by saying, "I long to dwell in Your tent forever." And what he is saying is that, 'Even though I am in exile and heavy distress, and facing many troubles and facing the heartache of a son that is out to kill me and take my throne...' And so the problems and the stresses and the difficulties of life ought all the more to drive us to worship, for David would say that in the dwelling place of God is the place of refuge. It is the place of shelter. It is the place of trusting in the covering of the wings of God. The chickens beneath the hen—how safe, how comfortable, how happy! This, dear people, is the Psalmist's words to us who must struggle with the issues of life.

II. Facing Death

But what about those who must face the issues of death? The Psalmist tells us in Psalm 116, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." Among the early Christians, when one passed from the world they often rejoiced and offered thanksgiving to God as they buried the body with songs and thanksgiving, as if they were setting out from one place to another near by. But we must be aware that all deaths are not precious. Some people mess up their lives: They rebel against God. And those lives are not precious in God's sight; for when the soul is not leaning upon the Lord Jesus Christ, how can there be anything precious? As you and I live, dear people, the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 61

regarding God as our refuge and strength, the very present help in trouble and a resting place for our souls, may we find these words in Psalm 61 becoming our very life experience.

But what about those of us when we come to die? Only one thing really matters. Not how much money we have, not how many flowers decorate the church, not how many people attend our funeral—only one thing really matters: What is in your soul and how much of Jesus Christ is there? For it's precious in the sight of the Lord, the death of His saints. Sometime ago a minister in California announced that he would be speaking the next Sunday over the radio on the subject of heaven, and during the week the minister received a letter from an old man who was very sick. I want to share a portion of that man's letter with you tonight. It goes something like this:

Next Sunday you are to talk about heaven. I am interested in that land because I have held a clear title to a bit of property there for over 55 years. I did not buy it. It was given to me without any money and without price, but the owner purchased it for me at a tremendous sacrifice. I am not holding it for speculation since the title is not transferable. It is not a vacant lot. For more than half a century I have been sending material out of which the greatest architect and builder of the universe has been building a home for me, which will never need to be repaired because it will suit me perfectly, individually, and it will never grow old. Termites can never undermine its foundation for it rests upon the rock of ages. And fire cannot destroy it. Floods can never wash it away. No locks or bolts need ever be placed on its doors, for now almost completed and almost ready for me to enter it and abide in peace eternally without fear of ever being rejected. There is a valley of deep shadows between the place where I live in California and to which I shall journey in a very short time. I cannot reach my home in that city of God without passing through that dark valley of shadows, but I am not afraid because the best friend that I have ever had will be with me. He has stuck by me through thick and thin since we first became acquainted 55 years ago, and I hold His promise in printed form never to leave me or to forsake me. He will be with me as I walk through the valley of shadows and I shall not lose my way when He is with me. I hope to hear your sermon on heaven next Sunday from my home in Los Angeles, California, but I have no assurance that I shall be able to do so. My ticket to heaven has no date marked for the journey and no return coupon, no permit for baggage. Yes, I am all ready to go and I may not be here while you are talking next Sunday evening. But I shall meet you there someday.

My dear friend here tonight, what a way to face death. Faith makes death easier. Perhaps you remember John Bunyan's great classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*. You remember near the end when Christian and Hopeful arrive at the river, the river being the symbol of death. They wanted to go over or around it but they were told this was the only way to the heavenly city, straight through the waters. For the Christian, death is the door whereby we reach that heavenly city. And they asked if the river was the same depth all the way across, and the angel there answered

by saying, "It is deeper or shallower depending on your faith in the King." Death, we all know, is never easy to accept but a strong faith in God makes the sting easier. Through faith we know that death is but a moment's darkness and then we will enjoy the light of God's presence for all eternity. And though fearful, Christian and Hopeful reconcile themselves to the fact of death and they go down to the water. And as they do Christian becomes fearful but he receives a strong hand of comfort from his friend Hopeful and he's able to bear the troubled waters; for, you see, Hopeful reassures Christian that salvation depends not on your own righteousness but on the righteousness of Christ. And finally you remember that climactic scene where Christian sees Jesus standing on the other side of the river and Christian's faith is renewed? The rest of the way through the river is shallow. Faith does make death easier.

But we must quickly ask the question, what will heaven be like? What will it be like to dwell in a place where there's no selfishness, no seeking after recognition, no envy, no pride, no evil desires, no place where there is no sin to cast a shadow? In heaven there will be perfect praise. One of the visions given to John, as recorded in the book of Revelation, is of heaven at worship. The angels and elders, the multiplied millions of the redeemed proclaim with a loud voice of the worthiness of Him who sits on the throne of the universe and honor the Lamb that was slain. If we are capable of heartfelt praise and adoration here and now, how our spirits will lead with ecstasy there! Glorious praise belongs to the tabernacle of heaven.

In heaven there will be reunion with those loved ones who have long since died. Our eyes glisten at the sight of loved ones or friends for years missed and then found. These human ties are stronger than steel. They'll endure through the world to come. Perhaps this is some of the meaning that we find even in the Transfiguration scene. Moses and Elijah came to talk with Jesus about His impending crucifixion. Death and translation had not nullified their personal identity; neither will death do this to any Christian. Heaven will certainly mean reunion with Christian loved ones who have gone on before. Another delight of heaven will be the making of new friendships. How fascinating it will be to sit down with Adam and Noah and Abraham and Joseph and Moses and David and Isaiah and Daniel and other Old Testament worthies. And others come to mind, such as Joseph and Mary and Peter and John and Matthew and Thomas and the Apostle Peter, Barnabas, and Augustine and Luther and Calvin and Knox and Spurgeon—and, oh, what a company! What glorious conversations are ahead.

But the greatest glory of heaven is Christ Himself. The Savior's promise to the penitent thief was that he should be in paradise that very day with His newfound Lord. It is perhaps the biggest thought that can ever enter the mind, that the Son of God became man. It's the greatest experience that can ever come to one, that he should enter into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. To know Him is eternal life. To know Him in the unhampered fellowship of heaven, in the undimmed seating of the holy heart with the loving response heaven will inspire,

that indeed will be glorious.

The story is told of Dr. J. Gresham Machen, longtime professor at Westminster Seminary for many years. Some would refer to him perhaps as the finest of New Testament scholars. This man of mighty intellect was a Christian of pious and deeply reverent heart, and on a mission trip to a group of churches in North Dakota in the dead of winter, he became ill. First, he developed pneumonia. There he was in the hospital, far from friends, but he was ministered to by a man of God who later became pastor of a church in Selma, Alabama, the Reverend Samuel Allen. Mr. Allen told how in the throes of pneumonia Machen one time said, "Sam, I have just been praying and it seemed to me as though I were actually in heaven. Sam, it was glorious. Sam, I mean it was glorious." How often have we heard stories of those who are on the very doorsteps of heaven who seem to be granted some understanding and some taste of a heavenly vision? What a magnificent prospect is held forth for us. The whole man was involved in sin's ruin. The whole man's spirit and body blessed by redemption recovered from ruin. "When my heart is faint—" "When my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I."

The Psalm before us, Psalm 61, is not an antique to be dusted and polished, but a living expression of trust and worship. This Psalm before us is not just an artifact to be studied. But this Psalm as all the Psalms are, hymns and prayers to be sung in the high and the low moments of life. This Psalm is not just a masterpiece of art to be admired. But here we find a ringing testimony to faith, a vital witness to hope. This Psalm is life changing, like the taking of medicine that invigorates the body and refreshes it. This Psalm is life correcting, like the discovery of a map in a time of aimless wandering. It is in the power of this Psalm, one verse or one stanza can change life's direction, heal life's hurts, or chart life's course. I trust that this power has touched your thinking, eased your pain, and stirred your devotion. The Lord of this Psalm is yet at work because He has not changed, His Psalms are always in season. Amen.

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