



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## Developing Spiritual Depth

Psalms 61 – 63

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### *Introduction*

A friend once remarked about one of our teachers who became our mentor that he loved to hear the man pray publicly because to do so was to “listen in on an ongoing conversation with God.”

I immediately knew what he meant. I also knew why we both felt that way. Our teacher was a man of God in the best sense of that phrase. He had a relationship with God—not a mere “church relationship” (though he loved and supported the church as much as anyone I’ve known)—but a personal relationship that had depth.

Whether it’s someone we’ve met, or someone like the great Bible heroes we hope to one day meet, I suspect that, if we are remotely serious about following God, we long for that kind of relationship and look at it with what I’ll call a holy envy. There’s both good and bad news in our observation and longing. First, the good news: we do have someone we can admire to see what a relationship of spiritual depth looks like. The bad news? We may think it is reserved only for spiritual giants like them.

Knowing two things will help us counteract the bad news. First, all our spiritual heroes were as human as we are, flesh and blood with feet of clay. The depth of their relationship with God was not a matter of having a special gift or being especially favored; it was a matter of *growth*. Second, we have access to the same resources that were available to them as they grew. Yes, we must use them and appropriate their benefits for ourselves. But if we are of a mind to use them, we too can deepen our relationship with God.

Psalms 61 – 63 point us in the right direction. The first is a lament (61); the second is a psalm of trust (62); and the third is a psalm that has been classified as both one of lament and trust (63) (Metzger & Murphy 1991, 724-725 OT). Their commonality of theme and expression suggest that we are wise to study them together.

To summarize their main ideas, Psalm 61 is a prayer for protection, including: (a) a cry for help (vv. 1–2); (b) an expression of trust (vv. 3–5); (c) a prayer for the king (6–7); and (d) a closing vow (v. 8) (Metzger & Murphy 1991, 724 OT).

Psalm 62 expresses confidence in God's protection, presenting: (a) God as the psalmist's only help (vv. 1–2, 5–7); (b) the psalmist's situation—cursed by enemies (vv. 3–4); and (c) instructions to the psalmist's compatriots to also trust in God (vv. 8–12) (Metzger & Murphy 1991, 725 OT).

Psalm 63 is a prayer for deliverance from personal enemies, expressing: (a) the psalmist's love for God and his temple (vv. 1–2); (b) complete immersion in God (vv. 3–8); (c) the end of those who threaten the psalmist under God's protection (vv. 9–10); and (d) an affirmation of trust in the king (v. 11) (my summary).

As we seek a deeper relationship with God, Psalms 61 – 63 teach us the importance of our priority, our focus, and the strategy we should utilize.

### *Priority: Desire to Know God*

Emphasis on the desire to know God is most directly stated in 63.1, 3, 5, 8; verse 1 sets the theme for the psalm: "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."

Verse 3 gives a reason for wanting to know God so much: God's "steadfast love is better than life." But that affirmation suggests a question, articulated by James Mays: "How can prayer separate God's faithfulness from the life that depends on it and hold it up for praise as more valuable than that life?" (Mays 1994, 218). Mays also notes that this question goes to the heart of one of our biggest challenges to knowing God: thinking that the value of our lives is the primary reason to trust God. The words of the psalmist challenge us to see something deeper:

It seems that the vision of God and the praise of God carry the psalmist to a point at which prayer transcends the soul and its need to contemplate God alone. Trust becomes for the moment pure adoration that leaves the self behind as any participant in the reason for adoration.... This verse leads us in prayer to the point of devotion to God alone that must be the goal of all true faith" (Mays 1994, 218).

The ideas of satisfaction and complete dependence on God expressed in verses 5 and 8 reinforce this idea. "My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,... My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me" (vv. 5, 8).

As I reflect on the psalmist's words, I am reminded of a story, told by Robert Webber, of a younger person who was put off

by what she felt was the "egocentricity" of God. Why does God want everything created to praise Him? Of what value is it really? Another person more mature in the faith and wise in his understanding of worship responded to her question. "God," he said, "only wants us to speak the truth about him.... The truth is that he is the Creator, that he is ultimate, that he is the highest, the holiest, the one most perfect in his being" (Webber 1978, 85).

The point is that the best love for God loves him for his own sake, not for the benefits we receive from loving him.

### *Focus: Know Why We Should Know God*

While most of us readily agree that we should know and deepen our relationship with God, we can become busy and distracted by life's demands and relax our determination to develop our relationship. It is important, therefore, for us to pause and remind ourselves why growing our relationship matters.

In these psalms, the beginning point for seeing the point is found in noticing the repetition of the adverb *alone/only* (אֶלֶּכָּ; *ak*) in Psalm 62.1–2, 4–6, 9 [Hebrew verses 2–3, 5–7, 10]. The uses of the word point to a disjunct between priorities. In verses 4 and 9, the chosen priority is something other than God: verse 4 speaks of those who seek to “thrust him down from his high position”; verse 9 highlights the temporary status of those of low and high estate, both of whom are “lighter than a breath.” In contrast, in verses 1–2 and 5–6, God alone is the focus. He alone is the psalmist’s rock and salvation, the one his soul awaits in silence (vv. 1–2), and therefore the sole object of his trust (vv. 5–6).

That single-minded devotion is the beginning and key to having a deepening relationship with God and is the underlying premise in all three psalms (e.g., Pss 61.1–2; 63.3). The point is also reinforced in the various descriptors used to refer to God in these psalms: rock (61.2; 62.2, 6–7); refuge (61.3; 62.7–8); tower (61.3); shelter (61.4); fortress (62.2, 6); and the one with steadfast love (61.7; 62.12; 63.3).

Notice how useful this understanding is when we face trouble (61.1–2; 62.3–4). But understand also that the psalmist does not intend to suggest that it is only when we face trouble that we need God. Indeed, the best way to know we can count on God when we face trouble is to be sure he is our only priority when things are going well.

### *Strategy: Use the Right Tools for Knowing God*

In all three of these psalms, attention is given to more people than just the author. The community of faith is featured (Pss 61.4–5; 62.8–12), as is emphasis on communal worship (61.4–5, 8; 63.2). And as is often the case in Psalms, the king is mentioned (61.6–7; 63.11). The different references to the king reflect his place as God’s agent; in Israelite thought, the Davidic king is important “as one in and through whom God bestowed protection and blessing on the community and individuals in it” (Mays 1994, 215).

The inclusion of others calls attention to two truths. First, there is no part of life where God does not want to be a part (61.6–7; 62.1–2; 63.6–7). Second, God has given us different aids to help us know him.

We should pay particular attention to the place of worship and the community. While true that our relationship with God should not be limited to communal worship (62.1–2, 8; 63.7), we should not minimize its place for deepening our relationship (61.4–5, 8; 63.2). Nor should we minimize the importance of other believers, not just in our meetings, but also as we share a precious faith (61.4–5; 62.8–12).

This should tell us what we should want from one another and our worship. Our worship should focus us primarily on God; again, it’s not about us. We are regularly tempted to gauge our worship services by how we are pleased; when we do that, it’s easier to not praise God in our worship (and not realize we’ve not praised him). But that does not mean we should give no attention to the communal aspect of our services; we gain strength from each other. As a worshiper, you should want and encourage deeper focus on God in all his character and deeds; you should value the teaching aspect of worship.

### *Conclusion*

I began by telling you about a man whose ongoing relationship with God was evident. Being reminded of the uniqueness of God will help us stay focused on developing that kind of

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relationship in our lives. So will using the strategies he has provided for us. But, more than that, we must *want* to know him because “knowing God” is how Jesus defined eternal life (John 17.3). How badly do you want that life?

### Works Cited

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