

Devotion and Anticipation

Psalm 63

GK Chesterton was once asked, “If you were stranded on a island and could only take one book with you, what would it be?” His answer, of course, was “Thomas’ Practical Guide to Shipbuilding.” You thought it was going to be “the Bible” didn’t you? Before you can answer a question like that, you need to be clear about your highest objectives. He answered the way he did since his highest objective would be to get off the island.

Here’s a question for you: “If you wanted to learn how to pray and you could have only one book, what would it be?” Again, you’d need to be clear about your objective before you could answer that question. You could find a book of prayers to memorize if you want to say a prayer before meals or before bedtime. But what if you wanted to learn how to pray when you’re so anxious about the future that you’re paralyzed? Or when you’re so overcome with guilt that you can’t imagine that God loves you anymore? Or when you simply want to express to God how much you love Him? Or when you are lukewarm and don’t feel like praying? Or when your enemies are making your life miserable? Is there anywhere you can turn that will help you learn how to pray in any and every situation? The answer is, “Yes, turn to the book of Psalms.”

For the past 2500 to 3000 years, the people of God have turned to the psalms to learn how to pray. When Jesus faced the darkest hour of His earthly life, He turned to the psalms to express Himself to the Father. He was quoting from Psalm 22 when He prayed, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” The psalms have been the go-to book for learning to pray for millennia.

Most of the Bible is God talking to people; in the psalms we find people talking to God. These are people who were in covenant relationship with God, people who took seriously that God had promised to take care of them no matter what. Much of the time they are appealing to God to be faithful to the covenant He had made with them: “God, where are You? I’m dying down here, and You are silent! I don’t have any hope unless You come through for me!” The psalms are always honest and often raw.

This morning we begin a seven-week sermon series on prayer from the book of Psalms. We’d like for you to view this sermon series as a workshop on prayer. We’d really like you to take away one or two specific ideas from each sermon that you intend to practice (either that week or whenever appropriate). Instead of passively listening to these messages, actively listen for ways that you might approach God in prayer. Instead of thinking, “I’m not very good at prayer and I’ll probably never be very good at prayer,” consider the possibility that God might open up new ways that you might approach Him in prayer. My assumption is that every single one of you can have a thriving prayer life given ***your*** temperament, ***your*** circumstances, ***your*** schedule, and ***your*** past.

Today we consider Psalm 63. In this psalm David gives us an example of how we can pray prayers of anticipation and devotion. It might never occur to us to express our devotion to God or to anticipate times of seeking Him. But David illustrates that such praying can be very fruitful.

Psalm 63 – A Case Study in Anticipation and Devotion.

The heading of this psalm is: “A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.” In the Scriptures, “the wilderness” was a difficult place to be, but it was also a place where people commonly experienced God. David was either hiding from King Saul who had been rejected by God (1 Samuel 23) or from his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15). He begins with an expression of his devotion to God and his commitment to seek God.

1 O 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.

I love how David addressed God: “O God, You are my God.” There’s nothing arrogant or possessive in addressing God in this way; he was simply taking God at His word when He promised Abraham’s descendants, “I will be your God” (see Genesis 17:7). David was only affirming that God had committed to playing this role in his life. He lived as a person who belonged to God.

He also declared, “I shall seek You earnestly/fervently.” When was the last time you expressed to God that you intend to seek Him fervently? Honestly, it rarely occurs to me to pray something that tangible and direct. I’m much more likely to pray, “God, please help me seek You better,” or “God, I feel like a slug; I’m sorry I don’t seek You as I should.” Those prayers are fine, but David demonstrates that it’s also good to engage our wills and declare to God our intentions to seek Him. There’s a risk, of course, in doing this. It’s much safer to pray, “God, if I feel like it, I might seek you tomorrow morning.” But why not go for it?! David prayed, “I will seek you earnestly.”

David prayed a similar thing in Psalm 5:3.

3 In the morning, O Lord,
You will hear my voice;
In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.

Do you see how intentional David was about praying and seeking God? It was one of the core commitments of his life. Consider the possibility of praying this type of prayer tonight before you go to bed: “O God, You are my God. Tomorrow morning, You will hear my voice. I fully intend to seek You tomorrow morning.” This is the type of praying that we can learn from David in the psalms: ***Declare to God your intention to seek Him.***

If you’re the type of person who has been saying or thinking for months (or years), “I know I should seek God more. . .” perhaps you simply need to decide that you will make seeking God a priority in your life and declare as much to Him (like David did). But what if you honestly don’t intend on seeking God tomorrow? Maybe the starting point is declaring ***that*** to God. I’m serious about this. Tonight before you go to bed, be honest

with God and tell Him, “God, tomorrow morning I fully intend on taking my relationship with You for granted. I really don’t see any need to seek You; my life is humming along just fine without it. And so don’t get up early for me. You’ll hear from me if I’m desperate, probably not before. . .” If that is genuinely the condition of your heart, expressing as much is the place to start. That type of honesty puts you in a position for God to show you whatever you need to see.

David declared his intention to seek God because he understood the condition of his soul. The condition of your soul will always suggest issues to bring before God in prayer.

1 O 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.

You can probably think of a time when you’ve been thirsty – maybe even a bit dehydrated. When you’re that thirsty, nothing else matters much and nothing else will satisfy you except a drink of water. David recognized that his soul was that parched for God. And so seeking Him was an obvious thing to do because he wanted his thirst quenched.

If we want to pray well, we need to pay attention to the condition of our souls. We need to slow down long enough to recognize that our souls are starved and parched for the food and drink that only God can give. So many times we ignore our condition and just keep plowing through life with less and less spiritual energy. The other option - the one David illustrates - is saying to God, “I’m hungry and thirsty, so I am coming to You to fill me up!”

Consider ***making the condition of your soul a matter of conversation with God.*** Generally speaking, some aspect of God’s character will address the deficiencies of our souls. For David, his parched soul would be addressed by God’s overflowing abundance. For you, perhaps you’re frightened about something - some circumstances or relationship. When you bring your fear out into the open you’re now ready to experience God as a strong tower, as the defender of your soul, as the Good Shepherd who fights your enemies, etc. God doesn’t merely want your time and prayers; He wants your heart, and He wants all of it. Therefore it makes sense to make the condition of our souls a matter of conversation with God.

In verses 2 through 5 David rehearses how he had experienced God in times of worship. His worship fueled his praying and his desire to seek God.

2 Thus I have seen You in the sanctuary,
To see Your power and Your glory.
3 Because Your lovingkindness is better than life,
My lips will praise You.
4 So I will bless You as long as I live;

I will lift up my hands in Your name.
5 My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness,
And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips.

David had spent a tremendous amount of time dwelling upon the attributes of God that he had experienced in worship (“in the sanctuary”). God’s power, glory, and lovingkindness were more than just abstract theological concepts for him. He had experienced them firsthand and had internalized their significance for his life. That’s the fruit of meditation. Meditation has been described as a lion sitting there growling over its prey; the lion has caught it and is now going to enjoy it bit by bit. That’s what we do when we meditate on God’s attributes - we enjoy them slowly and fully.

Because David had experienced so much satisfaction in God, David expresses a commitment to “bless” God as long as he lives, to lift up his hands in God’s name, and to offer praises with joyful lips. Because he found God so satisfying, David makes a bold commitment to worship throughout his life.

Following David’s example, we might ***identify attributes of God during our times of corporate worship that can fuel our meditation (and therefore our praying)***.

Perhaps some aspect of God’s character that you experience here this morning will capture your imagination (or at least get your attention). That experience of God can and should fuel your praying. For example, in a few minutes, we’re going to sing “Be Thou My Vision” as a response to this message. There’s a line in that song that says, “High King of Heaven, my victory won.” This truth - that God is the High King of Heaven - reminds us that He holds the place of supremacy in all the universe. You might mull over the fact that you are in a love relationship with the High King of heaven. What difference does that make in your circumstances? You might ponder how your “victory” is already won because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Identifying such attributes and actions of God can fuel your meditation and praying.

Verses 6 through 8 introduce us another realm of praying to consider: nighttime prayers. In these verses David explains his habit of remembering and meditating upon God at night. Meditation and prayer naturally go hand in hand; as we think deeply about God, we will naturally address Him in prayer.

6 When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches,
7 For You have been my help,
And in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy.
8 My soul clings to You;
Your right hand upholds me.

In Hebrew culture, the night was divided into three four-hour “watches” or periods of time. When David speaks of meditating on God “in the night watches” he is saying that he ponders God’s attributes when he is awake during the night. We aren’t given details of what David was experiencing, but if 1 Samuel 23 is the context of this psalm, David and his men were in the wilderness because Saul wanted to kill them. David may well

have meditated during the night watches in light of the danger he faced.

Of course nobody was **making** David meditate on God during the night watches; it wasn't a law that he had to be careful to observe. Rather, he was internally motivated to dwell upon God because he had found God so satisfying. He had a reservoir of experiences and convictions from which to draw. That's what David makes clear in verse 7. He meditated in the night watches . . . "For You have been my help." He didn't forget how good God had been to him that day; his meditation flowed from his experience of God throughout the day. He savored the fact that God had been his help and that he dwelt in the "shadow of [His] wings."

Psalm 119:148 expresses a similar thought, making clear that such night meditation wasn't a duty but a delight:

148 My eyes anticipate the night watches,
That I may meditate on Your word.

The psalmist looked forward to the peace and quiet of the night watches so that he might focus his attention more fully upon God and His word. I wake up in the middle of the night quite often. Sometimes it's frustrating; all I can think about is how tired and unproductive I'm going to be the next day. But sometimes I take advantage of the stillness and the solitude; sometimes I get up and enjoy rich times of fellowship with God. Instead of worrying about tomorrow, we can savor what God has already done.

Consider the simple ***bedtime exercise of thinking back over your day and considering how you've experienced God that day***. You could do this ***tonight*** actually. Before bed or in bed, think back over the day and ponder, "In what ways have I experienced God today?" Maybe you'll remember something that you've read in the Word; maybe you'll remember a conversation that you found helpful; maybe God disciplined you in some way. This is largely a matter of paying attention to what God is doing; we don't have to make things up because God is continually at work in our lives. Like David, when we remember God at night, we will naturally turn to Him in prayer.

In the last three verses of this psalm David prays about his enemies. In a few weeks we'll spend an entire sermon on praying about our enemies, so I won't make any comments on these verses today.

Today we've seen at least four habits of prayer from Psalm 63 that are available to us. I'd encourage you to consider practicing one or two of these things week. Here they are. ***Prayer ideas from Psalm 63:***

- Declare to God your intention to seek Him.
- Talk with God about the condition of your soul.
- In corporate worship identify attributes of God that can fuel your meditation and your praying.
- At bedtime remember how you have experienced God that day.