

Psalm 61: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 61, to the choir master with stringed instruments, of David. Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer. 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, for you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. Let me dwell in your tent forever. Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings. For you, O God, have heard my vows. You have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. 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. So will I ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day after day.

Psalm 61 is a psalm of trust and a prayer for deliverance. The psalmist begins by calling for God to pay attention to his cry. He calls from the end of the earth, whether from a great distance from the house of the Lord, in a situation of exile or on a foreign campaign, or perhaps from an internal sense of feeling far removed from the light of God's presence. He is weak and faint, and in such a condition it is to God and the power and refuge that he offers to which the psalmist turns.

From the end of verse 2 to the end of verse 4, he presents a series of petitions to God, the source of his strength and security. From his position of isolation from the end of the earth, he calls to God to bring him to a place of safety and refuge. This place is found with God and in his presence. The psalmist characterises it as like a high rock, a steadfast shelter against the greatest flood or the strongest storm. God is like a stronghold or a fortress in whom he can be protected against the most determined of his adversaries. Such metaphors, the high rock and the strong tower, illustrate the character of God's dwelling relative to the hostile forces without. In the dwelling of God, the enemies of the psalmist can batter and bombard with all of their fury, yet the psalmist himself can know peace and protection from all of their devices. The other metaphors, the tent and the shelter of God's wings, emphasise more the internal reality of the dwelling of God. In the tent of God and under the shelter of his wings, the psalmist can enjoy not just God's protection, but also his comforting presence. The house of God is a place of fellowship and intimacy with God.

From his position at the end of the earth, the psalmist seems to experience a sudden dawning of confidence and assurance. He reflects upon the goodness of God that he has already experienced.

[2 : 4 3] These past and continuing blessings put all of his current difficulties and struggles into a proper perspective. They assure him that God has heard the vows that he has made to worship him upon his deliverance. The inheritance or the heritage that God has given might refer to the blessing of the land given to his people, or more broadly, to the blessing of being in covenant relationship with the Most High God. The Christians singing this psalm might consider the way that, no matter what our trials may be, we too can enjoy that fundamental heritage of those who fear God's name. God has marked us out as his own, numbered us among his people, and assured us of the inheritance of his eternal glory.

Any momentary misfortune that might befall us is placed into proper perspective by this more foundational and enduring blessedness. Verses 6-7 are perhaps a surprising couple of verses to find in a psalm attributed to David. Some scholars have suggested that these verses might be a later addition.

This is not the only time in psalms attributed to David that we see a shift to a third person statement about or petition for the king in the middle of a psalm that is predominantly in the first person. We see something similar in Psalm 28 verse 8.

The Lord is the strength of his people. He is the saving refuge of his anointed. In Psalm 63 verse 11. But the king shall rejoice in God. All who swear by him shall exult.

For the mouths of liars will be stopped. And in Psalm 84 verse 9. Behold our shield, O God. Look on the face of your anointed. There are other possible ways to take such statements.

[4 : 21] James Mays writes, Psalm 84 is a corporate hymn. In it, the congregation prays for the Messiah king because he is their shield and their well-being is identified with his.

Perhaps here and in the other cases, the king is mentioned for the same reason. Or it is possible that these psalms were composed for royal recitation, with the king referring to himself in the third person. In either case, all these instances witnessed to the importance of the Davidic king as one in and through whom God bestowed protection and blessing on the community and individuals in it.

Many Jewish and Christian readers of the psalm have also seen in these words a possible reference to the Messiah, whose throne will endure for all generations. It is in him that the hopes of David will find their full and final realisation. One of the things that these verses highlight is that the king is not merely an individual, even a paradigmatic one. He is a person in whom the destiny and the interests of the people of God is concentrated. The UK national anthem opens with the words, God save our gracious queen, long live our noble queen, God save the queen.

While these words are petitioning God's blessing upon a specific person, in that petition, the well-being of the entire nation is being sought. As the cause of the queen prospers, so her people should prosper. In the psalms, the same thing needs to be borne in mind.

The psalms of David in distress are psalms that connote a corporate, collective distress of the entire people of David. We should consequently be wary of overly individualising them.

[5 : 56] The eye of the psalms is in many instances primarily the eye of the representative of the whole people, and the eye of the whole people. According to the Davidic covenant, the whole people could be blessed or judged on account of the Davidic king. They participate in his life.

In 2 Samuel chapter 7 verses 12 to 16, we see words that the petition in this psalm is almost certainly purposefully echoing in part. When your days are fulfilled, and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. But my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

On account of the union between the people and the king, the psalms of the king could simultaneously carry both an individual and a corporate sense. The king composed psalms about his distress, and invited the entire nation to join him in singing them, not as an expression of his self-absorption, but as an expression of the people's participation in, and there being the extension of, his life. Peter Lighthouse notes an especially striking instance of this in 2 Chronicles chapter 7 verse 6.

The priests stood at their posts, the Levites also, with the instruments for music to the Lord that King David had made for giving thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever. Whenever David offered praises by their ministry, opposite them the priests sounded trumpets, and all Israel stood. King David is praising the Lord through the Levitical musicians, but David has by that point been dead for about two decades. The king is the chief worshipper, who is the leading member of the assembly, who worships God at and as their head. The people as they worship are worshipping in the name of the king, and as the people of the king. This relationship between the king and his people is even more profoundly true of Christ and his people. Lighthouse writes, Jesus has not ceased to offer praise to his father. As Hebrews says, Jesus is the speaker in Psalm 22 verse 22. I will proclaim thy name to my brethren. In the midst of the congregation I will sing thy praise. Hebrews chapter 2 verse 12. Gathered for worship, united in song, the body of Christ along with the head is Christ offering praise to his father. The greater David gives praise by our hand. As Christians, we can locate our sufferings in the suffering of our Messiah and find his triumph in the midst of our distress.

The psalmist vowed to praise God when delivered from his distress, and calls upon God to permit him to do this, that through God's gracious deliverance he might sing God's praises day by day, leading the assembly in glorifying God.