

Desiring God

*York Chapel, Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina
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PSALM 63

What does it mean to desire God, to thirst for God with our whole being, to bless God as a daily necessity? If we do not yet know, the psalmist will teach us by shaping our prayers until we begin speaking in "the grammar of heaven." In this cycle of receiving God's blessing and blessing God in return, the daily life we thought was mere drudgery becomes imbued with epiphanies great and small. The daily practice of praising God with our lips is a participation in the pattern of eternal life, and therefore reveals the language of blessing as a weapon too powerful even for death.

O God, you are my God;
urgently I seek you.
My throat, my whole being thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
in a dry and weary land—with no water. (Ps. 63:2)

Do you desire God that much? Then pray the Psalms, and you will find companionship; they are all of them songs of desire. Do you wish you desired God that much? Then pray the Psalms; they will shape your desire, and rivet it on God. For desire is the note that throbs all the way through the Psalms: desire for the immediate presence of God, for that saving, comforting, exhilarating nearness. Many of the Psalms express desire that is satisfied, at least to some degree; those are the psalms of thanksgiving, the hymns of praise. But what many others, like Psalm 63, express is longing, longing so intense it hurts, like

the ache you might feel, one time or another, for a lover or a child you long to hold, for a beloved parent, lost when you still needed her, or him, terribly. This is longing that drives every other need into the corner.

"My throat, *nafshi*, my whole being thirsts for you"—the Hebrew word *nefesh* is used here in its literal sense of "throat": "My throat is dry with desire for God." But in the Bible, *nefesh* most often means one's whole being, body and soul. This is thirst that consumes entirely—desert thirst, the craving for life itself, and even for more than what we ordinarily call life. "For your constant love is *better than life*" (v. 4)—so our psalmist prays.

This is someone who has learned to live thirsty—and remarkably, to turn thirst into blessing: "Yes, I will bless you [God] with my life" (v. 5). That line points to our psalmist's secret, the secret alchemy of blessing, turning painful emptiness and longing into blessing God. That is the secret of survival. In a waterless land, blessing God is what keeps the psalmist alive and more than alive.

As with rich food, my throat, *nafshi*, my whole being is sated,
my mouth praises you with jubilant lips. (v. 6)

Lips that bless God smack with satisfaction, although only a moment before they were cracked with thirst. Now those lips burst open in praise. The psalmist stays with the bodily metaphors of throat and lips, thirst, the palpable pleasures of food and drink; we're not talking about a headtrip. No, blessing God meets basic need; it yields satisfaction of the most elemental kind.

Strange, then, that we modern Christians speak so little of blessing God. Bruce Wilkinson's bestseller *The Prayer of Jabez* finds in an isolated verse from Chronicles a guaranteed prayer mechanism for getting blessed by God. I'll leave his exegetical method alone, but it is worth noting that in biblical prayer, the emphasis is overwhelmingly the opposite of Wilkinson's: not nearly so much on God blessing us, as it is on us blessing God. Again and again the psalmist lays hold of that lifeline:

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless his holy name. (Ps. 103:1)

May the name of the LORD be blessed,
from now until forever. (Ps. 113:2)

... I will bless your name, forever and ever.
Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name, forever and ever. (Ps. 145:1-2)

The psalmists claim that blessing God is a daily necessity, and if they are right, then our forgetfulness is costly. What could it mean to view blessing God as a daily necessity? We can learn something about this from rabbinic tradition, for from ancient times to the present, blessing God has been the primary and ubiquitous form of Jewish prayer. God is blessed over and over, multiple times each day, by every observant Jew—and why? Because, as the ancient rabbis taught, to use or enjoy any created thing without blessing the Creator is to steal something from God's glory. Taking for granted is just that: it's taking, not receiving. The gifts of God's love pour forth constantly toward you, abundantly and superabundantly, but the gift becomes yours only as you recognize that this good thing comes from God, and return blessing for it. So there are rabbinic blessings to recite for every event and moment of the day, most just nine or ten words long. At morning prayer, for instance, one blesses God for the strength to get out of bed today and go to the bathroom; there is a blessing for the egg at breakfast and a different one for the orange juice; there is a blessing for the privilege of study, another one for your Old Testament professor, and yet a third for the ethics department; there is a blessing for good news and even one for bad news, blessings for the sunset and for a falling star.

"For your constant love is *better* than life," the psalmist says. The work of recognizing all these many particulars of God's love toward all creation, and responding with a blessing—that steady work of discernment and prayer is what makes life more than life, more than life that is, as we too often experience it, "just one damn thing after another." The truth is that this cycle of receiving God's blessing and blessing God in turn—this is the pattern of eternal life, the life of those who are wholly absorbed into God's life. "My whole being clings to you" (v. 9), as our psalmist puts it. "My whole being clings to you"—if that is eternal life, then it certainly does not begin when we die. No, we enter into eternal life as we allow ourselves to be drawn out of preoccupation with self, out of desire for anything that does not come from God or lead to God, as we let ourselves be drawn into the steady, intimate, joyous communication with God that we call, for short, "heaven."

Blessing, then, is the grammar of heaven, the accustomed way of speaking for those who dwell wholly in the light. Practicing and gradually mastering that grammar give us a foretaste of heaven's joy while we are yet in this world. We have an intimation of this at the very end of Luke's Gospel, when Jesus ascends to heaven after his resurrection appearances. What we see in our risen Lord's last moments on earth is blessing flowing at high tide, first from Jesus to the disciples. Listen:

Then he took them out as far as the outskirts of Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. Now as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven. (Luke 24:50-51)

In the very act of blessing, Jesus himself is drawn into the perfect communion, the perpetual flow of love and mutual blessing that is the Godhead. And as that happens, the disciples, too, are caught up in the flow. As Luke tells us:

They worshiped him and then went back to Jerusalem full of joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:52-53)

The disciples watch Jesus withdraw from them, yet they do not grieve, because blessing God gives them already in this world a full share in the joy of heaven. Those short, repeated prayers of blessing God are like arrows shot through the opaque curtain that shuts us off from heaven's light, the curtain of sin and self-absorption. Each blessing tears a small hole in the curtain, and as we increase the barrage of blessings, the curtain gradually becomes tattered, and we are at last bathed in light.

On Christmas Eve I spoke with my friend Barbara, whose husband is very ill with pancreatic cancer. She told me of the lovely day they had had, with Bob home from the hospital and his pain relieved. She told me that she had said to Bob at breakfast: "You know, even in such a difficult time, I still find myself at moments overcome with joy, usually over some small thing, like a bite of warm gingerbread." And Bob answered her, "Yes, this is a time of fulfillment."

Do you recognize it? They are speaking the language of blessing, the grammar of heaven, the one language strong enough to hold us joyfully in life as we face death. "I will bless you *with my life*" (v. 5), the psalmist promises God. That promise is made in the face of deadly enemies; Psalm 63 might be David speaking, with Saul in hot pursuit. So now we can fully understand the secret of the psalmist. Blessing God as Creator and Giver of every good thing, gingerbread included, is a weapon wielded against death itself. That is why the psalmist can say,

Your constant love is *better* than life;
my lips will praise you. (v. 4)

Words of blessing slash through the heavy curtain that veils God's light. We are now in Epiphany, the season when the church especially desires light, ever more light, that our lives and our world may be illumined more and more

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with the light of that deathless love manifested to us in Christ Jesus. As you might have guessed, the rabbis have a blessing that is apt for us to pray in this season—a night prayer that is said just before going to sleep, but it is apt for any hour, including this one: Blessed are you, O Lord, whose majesty gives light to the whole world.

Amen.