

PSALM 63 part 3 verses 6-8 9-13-15

A God-Centered Mental Focus

(Psalm 63) For sports fans this is a happy time of year. Baseball season is getting ever more exciting while the football season gets into full gear starting today. So, some of us will spend time this weekend watching the world's greatest athletes compete. And you know, all of these guys have incredible physical abilities. They really do. Often times what separates the champions from the also-rans is what happens upstairs in the course of competition. I mean, imagine that you are an NFL quarterback – something I spent a good part of my childhood doing. Imagine that you are in a big game and you throw a bad pass that gets intercepted. It was a terrible mistake on your part. What's more, the pass was returned for a touchdown. It was a devastating error. Then the next time you have the ball you just get creamed by a rushing linebacker and you fumble. Your team is behind. The fans are booing, the coach is talking with your backup. Got that picture? What is going through your head? How will you handle the stress of it all? Huh? Every quarterback goes through these situations. The thing that makes or breaks him is what?

That is what I want to talk about today as we continue in our series on the 63rd Psalm. You will recall that this Psalm is written in a terrible time for King David. His son Absalom had recruited an army to overthrow his father's government. He had marched on Jerusalem with enough force that David had to flee for his life. He escapes into the desert east of Jerusalem where he is spending the night in tents, wondering what the future would hold. He was in danger. He was feeling guilty because he knew he had made some terribly sinful choices. He had plenty of reason to fear. On an even bigger stage, David was like our quarterback who has had his confidence, his joy, his peace pounded out of him by his own folly and the attacks of the enemy. Where will David turn? What will he do? How will he respond to this bleak situation facing him? Psalm 63 tells us. Our focus today will be in verses 6-8 but we can read the entire psalm. Psalm 63:**1-11** *A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah. 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. 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. 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. But those who seek my life to destroy it, Will go into the depths of the earth. ¹⁰ They will be delivered over to the power of the sword; They will be a prey for foxes. ¹¹ But the king will rejoice in God; Everyone who swears by Him will glory, For the mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.

David's example in this Psalm points us to something that is part of the secret of contentment for the believer. It is in verse 6. Do you see it? 6a *When I remember you on my bed.*

Remembering may be the most underrated discipline of the spiritual life. But notice what he remembers. It is God. Out there in the desert, sleeping in tents or under trees, there were all kinds of thing vying for David's attention. He could have been eaten up with fears, or stewing with anger. He might have been plotting strategy for how to get his kingdom back. But his testimony is that in that moment he turned his heart and mind toward God. He remembered God and meditated on Him. Do you think that David's mental focus had anything to do with his positive internal condition? What is happening around us, in our circumstances, clearly has an affect on the internal world of the mind and the heart, but just as much impact is found in this matter of our inner focus. What do you think about? What do you dwell on? If we are going to let eternal realities, rather than temporal circumstances, control the climate of our internal world, it is imperative that those eternal realities own our thoughts and meditations. AW Tozer wrote this: *What we think about when we are free to think about what we will - that is what we will soon become. Our voluntary thoughts not only reveal what we are, they predict what we will become.* What the externals of your world will be – well that is very hard to predict. But what your internal realities will be tomorrow is largely known by where your mind goes today.

Possibly the most popular motivational speaker in my lifetime has been the late Zig Ziglar. Zig was a Christian man who had a lot to teach us about how to nurture a positive mental outlook even when the externals of our lives, the circumstances of our lives are difficult and discouraging as they were for David when he wrote our psalm. Here are a couple of Zig's lines: *It's not what happens to you that determines how far you will go in life ;it is how you handle what happens to you.* Then, check out this one -- *We all need a daily check up from the neck up to avoid "stinkin thinkin" which ultimately leads to hardening of the attitudes.* Stinkin thinkin. I like that because, well, you know, it rhymes. What's more it accurately depicts where most of us tend to go when we face adversity. The temptation is to allow the stresses of our external world to obliterate our mental or emotional health. We succumb to fear, to discouragement. We lose our trust in God

and start looking to other things to meet our needs. Many will tell you that the solution to this problem is positive thinking. Positive thinking – it certainly beats the alternative, but the Bible doesn't issue a call to positive thinking so much as it does a God-centered mental focus. What we are given in Psalm 63 is a recipe for such a God-centered mental focus. From verses 6-8 we can derive three lessons for how to thrive in dangers and deserts by means of a God-centered mental focus.

First, we ponder the Lord's presence. Ponder His presence. If you are like me you may find yourself engaged in all kinds of mental stress, wondering what to do, how to deal with your problems – and then, all of a sudden, you remember God is with you, and when you do the whole situation is altered. Our loving Lord is always there, always mighty, always wise, always caring. That we learn from our theology, but to find satisfaction in God we must turn our theology into psychology; we must bring what is out there in here, into our hearts and minds and souls. This is precisely what meditation is designed to do. David says, *I meditate on You in the night watches*. And that meditation is key to making the internal good when the external is anything but. The wisdom of Scripture urges us toward this kind of meditation. Wake up! And heed the wisdom of God's word. Put aside stinkin thinkin and cultivate the blessed habit of mentally chewing on heavenly truth day and night. You may know Psalm 1 which describes the blessed man, the man who prospers as God defines prosperity and it says he is one who doesn't listen to the lies of the world but instead – Psalm 1:2 *his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night*. The story of God's people reinforces this. As he was taking leadership of the children of Israel, Joshua had a conversation with God in which he heard this. Joshua 1:8 *This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success*.

Why do you think that it is? Why does meditation on eternal truths lead to success in the Christian life? It is because meditation is what lets the truth filter down from our heads to our hearts and begin to transform our values, our affections, our entire disposition. Meditation can turn the presence of God from a doctrinal affirmation into a reality of deep, personal comfort. Someone said the greatest distance in the world is sometimes that between my head and my heart and it is only the bridge of meditation that traverses that critical gulf.

There are a variety of ways that believers meditate. We meditate through what we read, through what we watch, through what we sing and say. Eight days ago I had a conversation with an elderly gentleman whom I respect greatly who spoke to me again about how he wished he could convince more believers to engage in the practice of memorizing Scripture. This man is well into his 80s and yet he quotes Scripture constantly and he attributes his spiritual vitality to the discipline of memorizing the word. It has been a valuable practice for me as well. So – I offer it to you as maybe the best way to meditate. I urge you to have and execute a plan for memorizing God’s word. To commit a portion of God’s truth to memory you have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. To keep it in your remembrance you must review it and the process of doing that is truly transformative. That is one way to ponder the presence of the Lord. He is out there – by meditation we bring him in here. Ponder His presence.

Then you want to praise Him for His protection. David says in verse 7 *For You have been my help, And in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy.* This was not David’s first trial in life – not by a long shot. In verse 7 he reflects on the Lord’s help in times past, how the power of God had come to him with rescue for his weakness. David has learned in times of danger to look to heaven. One of the grand themes of the psalms is that of *God our Refuge*. Why, in the psalm just before this one, David wrote 62:2 *He only is my Rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken.* In the Psalms God is called a Rock, a Defender, a Warrior, a Fortress, all of which are meant to remind us to run to Him in time of need and trust in His benevolent power. In verse 7 the psalmist uses a metaphor I would not normally think of, but is used several times in Scripture. Here the psalmist sees himself not as a sheep finding solace in the Shepherd, but as a little bird, running to its mother for protection from a predator. *In the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy.* You may be familiar with Psalm 91 which speaks in a similar way: 91:4 (NLT) *He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you with his wings. His faithful promises are your armor and protection.* And what does David say he can do in that safe place of the Almighty’s wings? He can sing for joy. He can sing for joy! While his rebel son is running the capitol, while his life is in danger, while he is in the desert, he can sing for joy because the comforts of God’s presence and God’s protection are near and on his mind and on his heart. Beautiful stuff!

And I would have you note that the source of David’s comfort and the basis for his joy are things that are entirely outside of himself. He doesn’t put his confidence in himself or his skill or

his cunning. In the image of this verse he is in himself as helpless as a baby bird before a predator. So he says, *You have been my help. You have been my help.* Not – *ain't nobody messin with big bad me!* David doesn't claim to have joy because of his own personal greatness, but due to the greatness of His God in whom He finds refuge. Tim Keller says this about the followers of Jesus. *Our identity is found in what we receive, not what we achieve.* That is a really important concept. Listen again. *Our identity is found in what we receive, not what we achieve.* Essentially, what are you as a Christian? You are a sinner saved by grace. You are a lost boy, a wayward hopeless girl, now adopted into the family of the King. *Our identity is found in what we receive, not what we achieve.* Keller goes on to say: *As a result, we don't look down on others. If your identity is in what you achieve (your smarts, your openness, your morality, your wealth) you look down on others. But there is no basis for pride when your standing is not earned but graciously given.* So then, we do not boast in our own abilities, but we say with David, *You have been my help. My joy is found in your protection, so I do not boast, I praise. I do not boast, I praise.*

Then thirdly we see that we can not only ponder the Lord's presence and praise Him for His protection, we can also persevere by His promise. In verse 8 we read: *My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me.* Interesting the language of this verse. David describes his relationship with God in terms of his activity toward the Lord, which he calls *clinging*, followed by the Lord's activity toward him, which he calls *upholding*. The Old Testament speaks several times about the promise of God to uphold His servant and since the right hand is generally understood to be the stronger hand, we read not only here, but also in Isaiah 41:**10** *Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.* In verse 7 of our Psalm God is portrayed as a mother bird who protects her young, but here we are in verse 8 back to the more typical anthropomorphism, the speaking of God in human terms to which we can easily relate. Our God is mighty, strong, capable and we are in His hand. Here is a picture that a friend of mine drew when I was in college. It hangs on my office wall and it represents the imagery of Isaiah 40 and 41, showing the man held up in a powerful right hand which depicts the hand of God. He has promised to protect us, to keep us, to hold us in His hand. Jesus spoke the same way in John 10 and spoke of us being in the Father's hand and what is able to hurt us in that place? Nothing! He said, John 10:29 *no one can snatch you out of the Father's hand.*

So, we are reminded of the protection that is ours. But here is what I love even more in verse 8 which has become my favorite line in this Psalm and, as a result, our memory verse for the month. The upholding work of God does not dismiss the responsibility or activity of the believer. God may uphold me, but my responsibility is to do what? To cling to Him. In the picture I just showed you, the individual being held in God's might hand is doing what? Running. He isn't passive or indolent. I like this picture because it presents both sides of a biblical truth. So often, in order to make our point we focus on partial realities. Someone may say *you have to take the bull by the horns, you have to get up and create your own luck, you have to make your own way cause ain't nobody goin to do it for ya*. Or, someone may say, *Let go and let God. Just quit fighting and struggling and trust that the Lord will take care of you*. The reality is that there is truth to both perspectives. Verse 8 gives us both ends of it. While God is keeping me, upholding me, securing me in His might hand, my soul is to grab on to the Lord for dear life, and let nothing break my grip. So, maybe a picture or two depicting that part of the verse.

Our church is from a theological tradition that is known for a doctrine called *the perseverance of the saints*. What this doctrine claims is that anyone who is truly a believer in Jesus today, anyone who has been born again by the Spirit of God and brought into the family of God will remain in that family, will abide in faith, will be, as Peter puts it (I Peter 1:5) *kept, guarded, preserved by the power of God*. I have often said that we believe in the perseverance of saints because we believe in the preservation by God. Perseverance through preservation. Those words go together. Ultimately, I like that wording – that reminds us that our perseverance is a result of God's preservation. That seems to me to be the leaning of Scriptural truth. But – I would affirm as well, that our preservation is through our perseverance. Saints persevere because they are upheld by God, but that is not without some tenacity on the part of the saints as well. Nothing can steal me from the Father's hand – but what then do I do according to our text? I cling to my Lord. I hang on. I adhere to His grace. Moses exhorted the ancient Hebrews in this way in Deuteronomy 10:**20** *You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him*. On chapter later Moses says the same thing. Deuteronomy 11:**22** (NLT) *Show love to the Lord your God by walking in his ways and holding tightly to him*. Again two chapters later we read this: Deuteronomy 13:**4** *You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him*. Why does Moses keep saying this? Obviously, he recognizes there are a lot of things that could pull the hearts of the people

away from the Lord. And there are aren't there? There are so many things that threaten to break my grip on the Lord. So many things in this world promise me security. So many things promise me pleasure. You know what I am talking about don't you? This is why so often my parting words to Christian friends is now, *Cling to Jesus. Cling to Jesus.* This is what I say to new widows like we have in our church. This is what I say to men who have lost their jobs. This is what I say to those who have a cancer diagnosis. This is what I say to students going off to college. It applies to us when we are hurting and prone to look about for something to numb our pain. It applies to us when we are prospering and are lured toward the illicit excitements of the world. This reminder is good for us any time, any day, any moment. The temptations to stray will come from the right and from the left, they will come from our victories and our defeats. You won't hear this pastor say *Let go and let God* but you will hear me say, *God is holding on to you, so you don't let go of Him. Cling to Jesus.* That is what I desire for each of us because I know that as long as we have Him, we have all we need.

Have you come to know Jesus as heaven's greatest treasure? Have you grasped how rich you are with Him, and how broke you are without Him? Have you seen how Jesus supplies precisely what you need for the challenges of life and of death? Then, my friend, let that stiffen your resolve to lose anything and everything, but never let go of Christ. Never let go of Christ. Pursue Him with a tenacious faith. Maybe that should be our word for the day, *tenacious* – “tending to adhere or cling.” The noun form is *tenacity*. Someone said *Tenacity is the ability to hang on when letting go appears most attractive.* And there will be times when letting go does so appear. I would say it this way though. *Tenacity is the choice to hang on when letting go appears most attractive.* The choice, which we reinforce constantly through meditation. Pondering God's presence. Praising Him for His protection. And so, persevering by His promise to uphold us. Ultimately, I know this is my heart's deepest desire – that my tenacious and joyful grip on Jesus would convey to others just how wonderful, how satisfying He is. In His strong hands I am secure, and, as a result, with my puny hands I cling.