

Prayer In Isolation

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 August 2021

Preacher: Rev. D. A. Macdonald

[0 : 00] So text on the first verse of the Psalm, Psalm 61 verses 1 and 2.

Here my cry, O God, listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint.

I suppose you could say that this was a prayer offered at a time of isolation. We're not told the occasion in David's life to which this Psalm refers.

It is possible that David wrote the Psalm during one of his military campaigns when he was far from Jerusalem.

For example, the second book of Samuel in chapter 9 tells us that David also defeated Hada Dezer, the son of Rahab, king of Zola, as he went to restore his power at the river Euphrates.

[1 : 23] That is one view with regard to the background of the Psalm. However, many think that the setting of the Psalm is David's period of exile from Jerusalem when his beloved son, Absalom, rose up in rebellion against his father, the king.

Can you imagine the pain and the distress in the father's heart as he is forced to flee from Jerusalem?

Visualize for a moment, or try to visualize for a moment, the sin, the dark clouds of that, the threatening revolt have been steadily gathering.

And now the star and birth song David's head, the leader Absalom, was his father's favorite son.

I suppose you could say that Absalom was David's Joseph. You remember how Jacob in the Old Testament was the father of Joseph, and to show and express his love for Joseph?

[2 : 50] He made him a robe of many colors, which led to the rest of the family being greatly envious of the position that Joseph enjoyed in the affections of his father.

And perhaps it was a wrong move from a part of Jacob to show such affection for one member of the family over others, and there's a lesson there for every parent.

Absalom however wasn't given a robe of many colors, but he occupied a prominent place in the affection of his father David.

And that was despite his murderous past. You remember he killed his, or he had his older half-brother, and non-killed because of the rape of Tamer.

Absalom's sister. And that led to Absalom being exiled for a period, but when he was restored to favor, this handsome prince pursued a campaign to woo the heart of the nation.

[4 : 18] And his campaign was so successful that David, along with a few followers and his personal guard, fled across the Jordan, leaving Jerusalem and the main part of the kingdom to Absalom.

This son, who was so deeply loved, was the source of deep anguish and pain.

And whatever it is that we allow to have the chief place in our affections has the most power to cause us grief.

How painful for any parent to have a thankless, rebellious son or daughter. Absalom, an example of one who was not only thankless, but who drove his father into exile unsolved to have him killed, and yet, yet, despite the behavior of this wayward son, David continued to love this thankless son during the time of his greatest act of deceit and wickedness.

And you know, I think many parents could follow that from their own experience. However much they have been hurt by a son or a daughter, it doesn't in any way take away the love that is in their heart for a son or a daughter.

[6 : 10] And I think too that David is symbolic of the greater son of David.

In the way that David dealt with Absalom, or the way in which he continued to love Absalom, is symbolic of the way in which David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ, continues to love wayward sinners like you and me, despite the fact that we often display our thanklessness under the rebellion against him, until ultimately we are brought to the place where we come to trust in him, and to reciprocate the love with which he loved us.

Well, David continued to love this son, and when he, David was compelled to send out the army against his rebel son, you remember how he gave instructions to his army commanders, Joe Ababishai and Dittai, and you remember what he said to the instruction he gave, deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.

And that in itself is, I believe, an indication of the place Absalom occupied in the affections of David. However, Absalom met with death, and when news of his death was brought to David, who can forget the poignant moving scene that is depicted for us in the Bible, of the weeping, brokenhearted, distraught father, as he cried out in deep anguish, Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom, would I have died instead of you, Oh Absalom, my son, my son.

And perhaps some can follow the words on the experience of David, but even if he had died in place of Absalom, he couldn't absolve Absalom for what he had done, nor could he save Absalom from himself. But you see, David's greatest son laid down his life for people like you and me, and he has the power to save us from ourselves, to deliver us from all that we have committed against God, and to bring us into subjection to himself. Well, whatever the occasion of the writing of this song, I think perhaps the very lack of a clear background helps us perhaps to see ourselves in the song. So three thoughts. First, a place of solitude. Secondly, a petition or a plea for security. And thirdly, places of safekeeping. First of all, a place of solitude. You notice the psalmist speaks of being at the end of the earth. Solitude, it can be a desirable or a coveted place, a place for time for reflection and solitary meditation, alone with your thoughts.

[10 : 32] And you may have just such a place for quiet reflection and meditation, where you are able to withdraw momentarily from our busy world without fear of interruption. I don't know if you covet such a place, but I think for most people that is a special place. Isaac is an example in the Bible.

The Bible tells us that Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening. It was a time of, in the experience of Isaac of conversing with God. And Matthew Henry, the Bible commentator, makes the observation, if we have the art of improving solitude, we shall find we are never less alone than when alone. If we have the art of improving solitude, we shall find we are never less alone than when alone. But not everybody covers solitude. For some people, solitude is something to be avoided. They require constant social interaction. And I suppose, in some ways, it depends on your makeup. Those of us who may be more introverted by nature, perhaps covet solitude. Those who may be more extrovert by nature, perhaps dread solitude of any kind, because of the craving for social interaction. Well, in our text, the psalmist describes the time of solitude as being at the end of the earth. It suggests a place of isolation. And of course, isolation is a word that has been frequently used in the vocabulary in the past 18 months.

For the psalmist here, it seems to imply a place of separation. Perhaps implied to in the words that he uses is a time of enforced solitude. We do not have to go across the globe or to travel far to feel that we are at the end of the earth. Although it could refer to geographical distance, I think it is more a metaphor for being in a lonely place, a place of isolation. It is more, I think, about a state of mind and heart rather than a geographical distance. You can be at the end of the earth tonight in this building and you're surrounded by a number of people. And yet you can be at the end of the earth. It may even be what brought you to this building this evening, that you feel that you are in a place of isolation, that you feel that you are at the end of the earth in a lonely place. And you note the added place, piece of information in this place of isolation, he is fed to use we helpless. As if the psalmist were saying, in this place of solitude, it is all too much for him. He's not coping. He is overwhelmed. I suppose you might say drowning under the burden of cares and anxiety in an isolated place. And it seems to me that all of that is implied in the terminology that the psalmist uses here to convey to us how he feels at the end of the earth. And very often, when you are overwhelmed by the burdens of cares and anxieties, you too feel that you cannot cope. When you are faced with situations where you feel it's all too much and you cannot cope. I read some time ago now during the first period of lockdown, and I saw a story about a doctor going to a care home. I listened to that it wasn't on this island to visit her mother. She was unable to enter the home because of COVID restrictions. And the elderly frail mother was suffering from Alzheimer's. Her face lit up with sheared joy and delight on seeing her doctor outside the window of her home. And she made signs to her to come in, only to be told that the doctor was not permitted to enter because of restrictions.

And the poor mother, understandably, just dissolved in tears, unable to understand why the doctor was not permitted to enter. The mother was a picture of abject misery, and that is but one incident out of many that were repeated frequently since COVID came into the life of the nation. People in care homes not just dying in loneliness and isolation, but I believe dying from the loneliness and isolation. They may have felt that they were at the ends of the earth and faint, because COVID-19 has brought its own peculiar challenge into the lives of many who have felt cut off and disconnected from society at large. And perhaps you have known of people in that situation, and perhaps you have experienced it firsthand. And you know, not even electronic friendships can make up for the lack of human contact. In fact, some would contend, now I don't know if this is true or not, but some would contend that the more time people spend on the internet, the more likely they are to exhibit symptoms of social isolation, such as depression and loneliness. The number of people feeling isolated and alone, according to some statistics, if they can be believed, at the end of last October when the clocks were turned back, apparently statistics show that there were around 4.2 million who felt isolated and alone. Well, I've digressed a bit from the sun. You may have known some enforced solitude on account of illness, where you can face to face with your own limitations and your helplessness in the face of the power of illness, difficulty in coping.

Perhaps you know what it is to have a problem or a difficulty or a trial, which you are trying or we're trying to cope with on your own. And perhaps you feel that you could not even describe it to those in your own family or even share it with them, even though your friends would be ready to help you, how they know, yet in your situation, despite their willingness to help, they would not have the ability to help you. The biggest words could not have expressed it and the bitterest tears could not have spelled out your situation at that particular time. You were far away from friends in reality, although they were all around you. And this is part of what I believe that David meant by the end of the earth, far away from friends. Again, I believe he meant far away from human health. And that can be true of every one of us, where we feel we are confronted by a mountain of burdens. But there are trials which are peculiar to believers. Your spiritual concerns are like huge weights too heavy for human strength to lift. You could assemble all the best weight lifters in the world and let them strain their back until their shoulders give way.

[20 : 56] And their legs wobble and collapse beneath the enormous weight. Yet the spiritual needs of the Christian could not be carried by them. Your spiritual needs are a burden intolerable for humans or shoulders. No, not God can sustain you. In fact, the Bible encourages us to cast a burden on the Lord and there is a promise attached to that and he will sustain you. There are times when believers are sighing and groaning on account of the withdrawal of God's face. When your sins perhaps are hunting you like packs of wild wolves. When afflictions are rolling over you like huge sea billows. When faith is small and fear is great. When hope is dim and doubt becomes terrible and dark. Then we are far away from human health. But even then we can cry unto God.

When anxious cares are like a leaden weight in your heart. When threatening falls on your knees. Do we attempt to carry our burden or face our enemies in our own strength or do we pour out our deep complaint like the psalmist to God. By the end of the earth I think there is also the suggestion that David felt himself to be at a distance from the means of grace. He was absent from Jerusalem. The place associated with worship. Perhaps on account of illness. Either personal or illness and the life of a family member or relative we are unable to attend the house of God.

For others it may be the nature of their work. Whatever that work takes them whether it is in social care or the health service or in other industries where you are required to work and be away from home and unable to attend the means of grace. And for God's people that is I believe a great deprivation. Spurgeon makes the observation and it's very stringent. You will find that a true Christian had rather missed a meal than lose his daily portion of scripture or his frequent resort to the house of prayer. I wonder how many of us would fit into Spurgeon's idea there.

A true Christian would rather miss a meal. How many of us love our food would hate to miss our food. This was Spurgeon's view and then he goes on to say that man is no child of God who does not value the means of grace. I tremble says for that man's piety who professes himself able to maintain the vital spark of grace within him when the means of grace are at hand and he lives and neglects of them. It's worth reflecting on that isn't it. How much do we value the means of grace.

What part do they play in our lives. What place do we give them in our lives. It's a very high standard that Spurgeon says and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews encourages the gathering together for worship not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another. Well thanks be to God we may still cry out to him during the the periods of lockdown many were prevented from the practice of gathering for worship and less virtually another new terror that we became familiar with. The voice of communal praise on virtual worship was unheard and we were in a sense far away from the gatherings of God's house but we are not so far away from God but we cannot call to him.

[26 : 01] Well in the life of this man a place of solitude led to prayer. I wonder how many of us can follow the experience of the psalmist here. A place of solitude led to prayer.

Wasn't that he was feeling sorry for himself. Wasn't that he was wallowing in self-pity. But it led to prayer. Here my cry oh God listen to my prayer and the cry is expressive of faith.

Hear his faith and exercise. Faith and a prayer in a prayer here in God. And that truly implies his trust in God in his mercy in God's grace and God's power.

He doesn't confide in his fellow man as many do today nor does he think that his fellow man holds the answer to personal global difficulties and trials.

Some months back I read an article by John Humphries, one-time broadcaster. I think it was towards the end of last year.

[27 : 26] And Humphry appeared to argue that the likes of David Attenborough has the answer to the woes of planet earth. But for David the psalmist, despite the aggravated sense of loneliness and solitude and his awareness of his own vulnerable humanity, he has the unshakable conviction that God holds the answers to all his trials.

What a fellow man, not so much of the standing of David Attenborough. Hear my cry oh God, listen to my prayer. Do we share the conviction of David the psalmist?

Remember how the hymn writer expressed it, what a friend we have in Jesus, all those sins and griefs to bear, what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer. O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrow-share? Jesus knows how every weakness, take it to the Lord in prayer. Are we weakened, heavy laden, combered with a load of care?

[29 : 00] Precious Savior, still a refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer. Do thy friends despise, forsake thee, take it to the Lord in prayer.

In his arms he'll take unshielded, thou wilt find a solace there. Well, that's not a trite response. It is the experience of faith in the life of the hymn writer in the composition that he made there. David too knew that he was crying to a prayer stimulating, a prayer hearing and a prayer answering God. He had experience of such blessing in the past. Remember how he wrote in an early of Psalm, the righteous cry the Lord responds.

And, and, freeze them when distressed. The Lord draws near the broken heart and rescues the dis, the depressed. A time of solitude. It may even be a place of work creating its own peculiar trials for you. But do you cry to God? And that brings me to my second heading where we are given the content of his cry. So a place of solitude, secondly, a petition or a plea for security.

Lead me to the rock, says the psalmist that is higher than I. And I think what comes across from this petition is that the psalmist is not only in a place of solitude, but in a place of danger. And so we have this petition or plea for security. He longs for a place of refuge.

Frequently in the Psalms, you find reference to the word rock. The idea of God being a rock appears at least 20 times in the Psalms. Psalm 18, the Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, and who might take refuge. Psalm 28, to you, O Lord, I call my rock.

[31 : 11] Psalm 59, God is my high rock. Psalm 62, he alone is my rock. How frequently do you hear a person say about another person? He or she is my rock. And we understand from that that they mean that person is their support, the person upon whom they lean and depend. Well, let us ask ourselves this evening, upon whom do we depend, upon whom do we lean? To put it bluntly, who is your rock tonight?

The person closest to you in life? Is that the response? But you know even the person closest to you in life cannot always cope.

The person you may regard as the most reliable person in your world cannot always cope. And perhaps even the person you regarded as your rock is taken from you through death.

So can you say, as David said, the Lord is my rock, my God, my rock. As island dwellers, we know the danger that rocks pose in coastal waters. Many ships have foundered on rocks with the resultant destruction of ships and boats and frequent loss of life. But in this context, the psalmist looks on the rock, not as a place of destruction, but as a place of security. He was familiar with rocks in the Judean desert. He used them as places of refuge and protection during the years where he was compelled to flee from King Saul. So the rock is the symbol of a place of refuge, a place of security. And I think I ought to point out that each of the psalms has its own way of writing about God as the rock. And that is true in this psalm. And there are two unique features mentioned with regard to David's usage of the rock image here. First of all, he writes of the rock that is higher than I. And secondly, he requests that he be led to it.

Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. The rock that is higher than I. What does he mean? Is it a place where he is out of reach of his enemies? We know from the Bible that he hid and cares. Cave of Adalam and Angadie. It is difficult to be sure, except that he regards this rock as a place of security. And when you consider you are secure, you're relaxed, don't you? Where you feel safe, you feel relaxed. And although that is true in the literal sense, for many the rock that is higher is equated with Jesus Christ. The Bible refers to Jesus as the rock on which the church is built. Paul writes in the letter to the Corinthians of the rock from which God provided water to the children of Israel in the desert. And he states, for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ. In the Old Testament, when Moses was desirous of seeing the glory of God, you remember he was placed in the cleft of the rock. And that again is symbolic of being placed in Christ. Not only does it speak of the security afforded, but it is in Christ that we receive spiritual sight to enable us to behold the glory of God. No one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side. He has made him known, says John in his Gospel. So when we think of Jesus being higher than us, his superiority to us, we might consider his perfect life of obedience to the Father, which is so much higher than our sinful failures. We could reflect on his deity as a person of the Trinity, as God the Son. We could reflect on his work.

[36 : 05] In the world, his death on the cross to atone for sins, his resurrection from the grave, his ascension into glory, in all of these ways. Christians look up to Jesus and worship the one who is infinitely high above us. Is that the view that we have of Christ this evening?

Do we long to be found in Christ, to enjoy the security that is in Christ, and that could only be found in Christ, and is not to be found anywhere else out of Christ? Because there is no security in any place else. Doesn't matter how we try to safeguard our lives. Doesn't matter what measures we take to protect our lives. There is no safety or security out of Christ.

So the second request that he be led to the rock. Now the word lead me surely is very significant.

There is an admission implied that by himself he cannot ascend into this place of security. He requires to be led. Who does he wish to guide him? Who does he wish to lead him?

Remember he is calling to God, oh God I call to you. Then lead me. In other words he is admitting I don't know the way, but I know that you know therefore lead me.

[37 : 48] You know have you ever been in a place where you were unfamiliar with the area, and you asked someone to be your guide? It reminds me of an incident when we were staying in Edinburgh as a family, and we were going across the city to the other side of the city, a place we weren't familiar with, and I said to my wife as we were driving along, I'm just going to follow this car. I have no idea who was in the vehicle of anything, but in the over the whole in providence of the Most High the car took me near to the address that I was looking for. Our driver will never know how useful he or she was, but when you've been in a place and you've asked someone to be your guide, you don't know your way, you place your confidence in that person, don't you? And here is this man in isolation, and he's crying to God, lead me, oh Lord.

And this is I believe symbolic of coming to Christ. You know many people fall into the way of thinking, I can come to Christ when I want, when it suits me, when I think it's appropriate, but you know the Bible doesn't support that way of thinking. The Bible says no one can come to me, says Christ, unless the Father who sent me draws him. In other words, unless your resistance and mine is overcome by a superior force, by nature we resist God. We are opposed to God, and unless we are overcome by a power that is mightier and stronger, then we cannot come, and will not come to Christ. And that proves to us if we need proof that the quickening of a spiritually dead man to life is the sole action of the free grace of God. But even after being brought to Christ we need to be led to an understanding of gospel truths so that we come to rest highly in Christ.

A plea for security, a place of solitude, and finally places of safe keeping.

You know we always want the answer to prayer yesterday, don't we? And there are times when the Lord answers immediately before they call, I will answer, says God.

But the answers may not always be immediate. And David obviously remembers the ways that God helped him before. Reminds me of the story that was told of Robbie Duncan, famous free church professor and minister. He apparently used to tell the story of a person who came to his door in need, seeking either food or money or even both. And Duncan was on the point of closing the door.

[41 : 34] When he heard the person say, oh but you helped me before. And when he heard that he said, I felt I could do nothing else than offer help again. Because it reminded me of my own pleading in the poverty of my emptiness before Almighty God. You helped me before. Lord, help me again.

And David here remembers past occasions of safe keeping. And he uses four different images, just briefly, to show how the Lord helped him in the past and provided places of safe keeping. The first one is you have been my refuge. He knew what it was to be in a place of great danger on the brink of capture and facing even death. And in such situations he could testify to the delivering power of Almighty God in providing a place of safety. And the impression created by using this image of a refuge is of an impregnable mountain fortress which cannot be bridged by any enemy, a place of security. When the believer is aware of their own frailty, their inability to protect themselves, they commit their security to God. And you know, that's not a one-off experience, but a constant recurring characteristic in the life of the believer. Let me ask you, how many times have you repeated the words, God is our refuge and strength, a very present or an ever present help in trouble? You didn't just repeat them because you were asked to sing them in a service, but because they are deeply significant to you as a believer. You value the protecting power of the Almighty in a world of constant upheaval and change, whether it's the threat of destruction and we are weak and vulnerable. How comforting to know that the unchangeable Almighty God is your ever present refuge. And the second one is this, a strong tower against the enemy.

It may appear to be similar to the first image. A tower was, it was usually part of a city's fortifications. It provided a vantage point from which to engage and effectively fight and defy the enemy. In the book of power, the name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous man runs into it and is safe. In other words, you shelter in God. And thirdly, there's the image of a tent.

Let me dwell in your tent forever. Now some think that this is, refers to a domestic scene where a host might welcome strangers in the Old Testament times. But it seems to me that this doesn't so much speak of a domestic scene, but that it speaks of worship. The image changes from that of protection to that of communion and fellowship in the place of refuge. Remember, the tabernacle in the wilderness was built to divine specifications. That's where the ark of the covenant was kept. The tabernacle was also referred to as a tent. To dwell in God's tent is to be a member of his family, to enjoy his generosity and protection, to live in intimate communion with him, to live for God dwells. The tabernacle ritual sets before us in various pictures, the saving work of Christ, especially the sacrifices for sin and the sprinkling of atoning blood on the mercy seat and so on. And so the psalmist could say, for in his dwelling he will keep me safe in troubled days. Within his tent he'll shelter me and on a rock he'll raise. As you dwell in

God's house, you plead the grace that is offered at the cross where Jesus died for sinners, you want to be closer to him. And I think I could sum it up like this. All for a closer walk with God.

[46 : 15] A calm and heavenly frame, a light to shine upon the road that leads me to the Lamb. So shall my walk be close with God, calm and serene my frame, so pure a light shall mark the road that leads me to the Lamb. And the final image of safekeeping is of a mother bird covering her vulnerable chicks with her wings. Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings.

It's an image that speaks not only of protection but also of comfort. The young birds feel safe behind the protective layer of feathers of the mother bird.

As a hen covers her chicks so does the Lord, protects the souls of those who trust in him. So these are the images that he uses of safekeeping and note how that succession of images grow more intimate. It could be applied to the life of the person who comes to the cross seeking refuge from divine wrath. And as they progress in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, they gain assurance and based on our assurance they begin to nurture their relationship with God by meditating more on this word, deepening their prayer lives, learning to trust the all-sufficient grace of Christ. So you may this evening be in a solitary place feeling weak and vulnerable but have you prayed to the God who hears and answers prayer? Have you found the place of eternal security? Have you experienced of God's safekeeping? A place of solitude, a plea for security, a places of safekeeping? Or are you tonight far from God? As far as salvation is concerned are you at the end of the earth? Perhaps God has taken you there to learn the wonders of who Jesus is. What he has done for sinners will you not ask him to lift you up to the rock that is high above, that you may be delivered from your sins and begin living a life of fellowship with God at his prayer.