

Series: “Learning from the Psalms: How to Put God at the Center of Life”

Main Idea: According to Psalm 63, three convictions came into clear focus for David while in the desert. So, too, for us. When God takes us into the desert, we soon discover three insights about ourselves.

- I. In the desert we learn what we really *want* (1).
 - A. David had a relationship with God.
 - B. David craved God.
 1. He sought for God.
 2. He thirsted for God.
 3. He longed for God.
 - II. In the desert we learn what we really *value* (2-8).
 - A. David experienced God in the past (2).
 1. It happened in the sanctuary.
 2. It created a longing for more.
 - B. David resolved to honor God in the future (3-5).
 1. The purpose of life is honoring God.
 2. The by-product of a God-honoring life is a satisfied soul.
 - C. David treasured God in the present (6-8).
 1. God is our helper.
 2. God is our protector.
 3. God upholds us.
 - III. In the desert we learn what we really *believe* (9-11).
 - A. David affirms what will happen to his enemies (9-10).
 - B. David affirms what will happen to him (11a).
 - C. David affirms what will happen to God’s people (11b).
- Take Inventory: Three questions to consider...
1. What do I want most in life?
 2. Am I investing my life in what matters most?
 3. What change needs to happen most today?

Jesus Christ said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matt 28:18).” This is Jesus’ universe. He is Lord. Life is from Him, through Him, and to Him. The truth of His Lordship should affect every aspect of our lives. We’re continuing to learn how to make God central in our lives by looking at the Psalms. Today, from Psalm 63, we learn how to make Him central when in the desert.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 63

When Louis was a little boy, he enjoyed playing with his father’s tools. One day, sadly, he accidentally punctured one of his eyes with a sharp tool his father used in leatherworking. Not only did Louis lose the sight in that eye, but infection that resulted from the puncture wound spread to his other eye and at the age of four little Louis was blind in both eyes.

In the early 1800’s in France, most blind people ended up begging for money on the streets. In God’s good providence, however, Louis at the age of ten earned a scholarship to attend *The Royal Institution for Blind Youth* in Paris. At the time the popular system for printing books for the blind, using huge raised letters, was both inefficient (one book could weigh over one hundred pounds) and expensive. At the age of eleven Louis began to devise a raised dot system by which the blind could read with their fingers. He finished his system when he was fifteen years old, in which the letters of the alphabet

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier treatment of this psalm, see the Psalms of David series and the message preached in 2007.

corresponded to the arrangement of six raised dots on a piece of paper. Today we call the system the *Braille system*, named after the boy that created it, Louis Braille. Amazingly enough, the very tool that ruined Louis' eyes is the tool that God allowed him to use to make his new alphabet.²

When God places something in our lives He intends to use that very thing, painful though it may be, for His honor, for the good of others, and for our own good. Ponder that statement carefully.

When God places something in our lives—nothing just ‘happens’ in God’s world.

His intent is to use that very thing—God works all things together for our good, if we know His Son (Rom. 8:28).

Painful though it may be—and surely life in a sin-cursed world is full of pain, even for God’s people.

For His honor, for the good of others, and for our own good—that sums up God’s agenda in our lives and every detail He allows to enter our lives is related to the fulfillment of that agenda.

Did you realize that *deserts* comprise one-third of earth’s land surface? That means that for every two acres of good soil there’s one acre of dry, barren soil on the planet. That’s a lot of desert.

I don’t know if the ratio is two-to-one, but I do know that in the pilgrimage of life God’s people will spend time in the desert. In the desert, life is hard and even harsh. In the desert seasons of life, you feel dry, barren, even forsaken.

Can anything good come out of the desert? Psalm 63 says *yes*. According to the psalm’s heading, Psalm 63 is *A psalm of David*. But note the experience in David’s life that triggered this psalm—*When he was in the Desert of Judah*.

When did David spend time in the desert of Judah? We know he spent a lot of time there as a young man running from King Saul, but verse 11 suggests that David was already king when he wrote Psalm 63. So when in King David’s life did he go to the barren desert of Judah? 2 Samuel 15:23 gives us the setting. “The whole countryside wept aloud as all the people passed by. The king also crossed the Kidron Valley, and all the people moved on *toward the desert*.”

Why was David leaving Jerusalem and heading for the desert? Because his son, Absalom, had usurped his throne and was seeking to kill him. To have your father-in-law hate you and try to kill you, as Saul did, is one thing. But to have *your own son* trying to snuff out your life? Unthinkable, yet that was David’s situation.

Absalom was a brash, self-absorbed young man. He actually stirred up his dad's friends against him so he himself could take over as king. He rallied the troops to kill his father, and even flaunted himself immorally to disgrace his dad.

David left the palace in Jerusalem brokenhearted and fled for his life. Where did he go? Into the desert. What did he do there? Psalm 63 tells us.

When we read Psalm 63, we discover that three things came into clear focus for David while in the desert.³ So, too, for us. When God takes us into the desert, He’s giving us the opportunity to gain three insights regarding ourselves, namely, what we really *want*, what we really *value*, and what we really *believe*.

² I’m indebted to Kay Washer’s book, *One Candle to Burn*, for the story. Kay started schools for the blind in Niger and Togo; p. 112. Other info about Louis Braille from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Braille.

³ Other psalms that echo similar themes are Psalms 42, 61, and 62.

I. In the desert we learn what we really *want* (1).

“O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” We learn here two important things about David. First and foremost...

A. David had a relationship with God. “You are *my* God,” says David. The *my* doesn’t indicate ownership (God isn’t some Genie in a bottle to David), but rather *personal loyalty*. God isn’t a far-off deity to David. He’s a Person with whom he has a personal relationship marked by devotion and loyalty.

If I say to Sherry, “You are *my* wife,” I am not claiming ownership of her but am communicating that out of all the three billion or so women in the world she alone is the wife with whom I am in a covenant relationship and she alone is the object of my personal love and loyalty.

In his classic commentary on the Psalms, *The Treasury of David*, Charles Spurgeon gives us some tremendous insights, including this one concerning this phrase. “How can I seek another man's God? But it is with ardent desire that I seek after Him whom I know to be my own.”

Can you say that about God? Sure, He *is* God, but is He *your* God? Have you entered into a covenant relationship with Him, as David had, through saving faith?

But David didn’t merely have a relationship with God. Verse 1 reveals that...

B. David craved God. Note the verbs. Each express what David most *wanted*.

1. *He sought for God.* “Earnestly I seek you.” The Hebrew verb for *seek* in the noun form is the word *dawn*, and the verb can be translated either “to seek earnestly” (as in the NIV and ESV) or “to seek early” (as in the KJV). David did both. In Psalm 5:3 David says, “In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” David sought God early and earnestly.

Do you? All of us fall short, but all of us, like David, need to make it a priority to seek God in His Word and through prayer on a daily basis. Says Spurgeon, “He who truly longs for God longs for him now.”⁴

2. *He thirsted for God.* “My soul thirsts for you.” Remember, David is in the desert. Perhaps his lips and skin are parched.

Picture a man stranded in the middle of the Sahara desert. See him lying there, dehydrated and nearly dead. Given the choice, what would that man choose, a hundred dollar bill or a canteen of water? A bag of gold or a canteen of water? A desert has a way of helping us sort through our priorities. That man may have dreamed about bags of gold in the past, but now he *must* have water or he will die.

One of the benefits of a desert experience is that it forces us to get our priorities in order. So what’s David thirsty for? Water? No, at least that’s not what he thirsts for *most*. “My soul thirsts *for you*.”

3. *He longed for God.* “My body longs for you (ESV, “My flesh faints for you”), in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Keil & Delitzsch describe the scene, “In a region where he is surrounded by sun-burnt aridity and a nature that bears only one uniform ash-coloured tint, which casts its unrefreshing image into his inward part, which

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, p. 66.

is itself in much the same parched condition, his soul thirsts, his flesh languishes, wearied and in want of water, for God, the living One and the Fountain of life.”⁵

The world is full of people with empty longings because they don’t even know that God is what their souls truly desire.⁶ That’s what they were wired for from the beginning of creation. *To want God.* “God thirsts to be thirsted for,” said Gregory.⁷ Augustine put it this way, “Our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee.”⁸

I’ve underlined in my Bible the second person plural pronouns that appear in Psalm 63. Over and over David uses the pronouns “you” and “your,” I count eighteen times in this psalm (in the NIV). David yearns for God!

You say, “I want a relationship with God like David had.” Really? John Newton, the former slave trader and author of ‘Amazing Grace,’ once told God he did, too. He wrote a song about what happened, which I quoted in a message not long ago, but it’s so insightful it’s worth hearing again.

*I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek, more earnestly, His face.*

*’Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer!
But it has been in such a way,
As almost drove me to despair.*

*I hoped that in some favored hour,
At once He’d answer my request;
And by His love’s constraining pow’r,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.*

*Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow’rs of hell
Assault my soul in every part.*

*Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.*

*Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
’Tis in this way, the Lord replied,
I answer prayer for grace and faith.*

⁵ Keil & Delitzsch, p. 215.

⁶ Observation by James Boice, p. 518.

⁷ In Eric Lane, p. 282.

⁸ Quote taken from James Boice, p. 519.

*These inward trials I employ,
From self, and pride, to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st find thy all in Me.⁹*

Ponder those final two lines in which God is speaking: “And break thy schemes of earthly joy, that thou may'st find they all in Me.” You see, in a nutshell that's our problem. We pursue joy in the wrong places. Not necessarily in sinful places but deficient places. We settle for created things rather than the Creator. We were made to find our joy in God, but we foolishly pursue earthly attractions, convincing ourselves they will satisfy. But they never do.

So in His gracious love for us, God brings into our lives the one thing that will most open our eyes to the folly of this idolatrous pursuit... *The desert experience*. “So that thou may'st find thy all in Me,” as Newton puts it.

In the desert we learn what we really *want*. Secondly...

II. In the desert we learn what we really *value* (2-8).

In reality, our *wants* are driven by our *values*. David *wanted* God because David *valued* God. So too, we will want God if we truly value Him.

You say, “I'm not sure I value the Lord as I ought. Can you help me?”

David can. In the second section of Psalm 63 David tells the Lord why he valued Him so much, from three perspectives: past, future, and present.

A. David experienced God in the past (2). “I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.” David says he saw God and His majesty. Where?

1. *It happened in the sanctuary.* ESV, “I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.” What sanctuary? The tabernacle, the place God graciously gave Israel for the offering of sacrifices. No sinner can approach a holy God without his sins being covered. “That's where I saw God,” says David, “in the place where the lambs are slaughtered to cover my sins.”

Apparently, as happened years later to Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 6:1), David had had a “God-moment” in the house of worship. He saw God. And that past God-moment sustained him in his present desert experience. In fact...

2. *It created a longing for more.* Isn't it interesting that out in the desert it became crystal clear what David missed the most? He misses “being able to meet with God in his house.”¹⁰ We'll come back to that thought in a moment, but first notice how David's verbs move from the past tense in verse 2 (“I *have seen* you”) to the future in verses 3-5: “Because your love [ESV ‘steadfast love’] is better than life, my lips *will glorify* you. I *will praise* you as long as I live, and in your name I *will lift* up my hands. My soul *will be satisfied* as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth *will praise* you.” Notice how...

⁹ John Newton, “I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow”

¹⁰ Eric Lane, p. 281.

B. David resolved to honor God in the future (3-5). *I will glorify you. I will praise you. I will lift up my hands. I will be satisfied with you. I will sing praise to you. I will, I will, I will,* says David.

And why? David says it all boils down to this. *Your love is better than life.*

It's why Eric Liddell chose not to run (although favored) in the 100 meter dash in the 1924 Olympics, simply because the race was held on a Sunday, for to Liddell *His love is better than life.*

It's why somewhere in the world today a Christian dies every three minutes as a martyr (22 per hour, 548 every day, 200,000 every year), because *His love is better than life.*

It's why a man turns down a potential job promotion that would increase his wealth but eat up his precious time for the Lord, his family, and his church, because *His love is better than life.*

What makes God's love better than life? It's better because this life will end but God's love endures forever.¹¹

Charles Spurgeon summed it up, "Life is dear, but God's love is dearer. To dwell with God is better than life at its best; life at ease, in a palace, in health, in honour, in wealth, in pleasure; yea, a thousand lives are not equal to the eternal life which abides in Jehovah's smile."¹²

David grasped two vital lessons which deserve our daily attention.

1. *The purpose of life is honoring God.* "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man (Eccles 12:13)." "Whether you eat, drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God (1 Cor.10:31)."

2. *The by-product of a God-honoring life is a satisfied soul.* David got it right. "My lips will glorify you" in verse 3 comes before "My soul will be satisfied" in verse 5. Live for yourself and you'll never be satisfied, not fully, but live for the honor of God and a satisfied soul will be yours, *guaranteed.*

Years ago I read a line from, *The Valley of Vision*, a collection of Puritan prayers, adapted it, and turned it into little song to remind myself of this. It goes like this: "Teach me that if I do not live a life that satisfies *Thee*, then I will not live a life that satisfies *me.*"

David shares a third perspective. Having expressed what God meant to him in the past and will mean to him in the future...

C. David treasured God in the present (6-8). "On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me."

When I don't sleep well at night, I tend to view that as a *bad* thing. How about you? Apparently, David had a sleepless night in the desert (probably more than one), but he says that rather than bemoaning his lack of sleep, he used his awake-time to *remember God, to think of God, even to sing to God.*

Spurgeon offers this perspective, "If day's cares tempt us to forget God, it is well that night's quiet should lead us to remember him."¹³

¹¹ Forty-one times in the Bible we find the phrase, "His love endures forever." In fact, in Psalm 136 it's repeated in all twenty-six verses.

¹² C. H. Spurgeon, p. 66.

¹³ C. H. Spurgeon, p. 67.

What was it that captured David's attention in the night? He mentions three truths about God that were dear to him. I'll personalize them.

1. *God is our helper.* "Because you are my help, I sing..." says David in verse 7. Singing is the last thing you'll be doing in the desert *unless* God is your help.

2. *God is our protector.* "I sing in the shadow of your wings (7)." Apparently, David is remembering what he saw in his God-moment back in the sanctuary, for there the wings of the cherubim cover the ark of the covenant, representing God's protective care of His people (see Exod. 25:17-22).

3. *God upholds us.* Notice the two sides to perseverance in verse 8. "My soul clings to you [there's human responsibility; David perseveres after God]; your right hand upholds me [there's God's sovereignty; God perseveres to keep His own secure]."

Why is it that we often fail to appreciate what we have until we lose it? We do this often with our health, our families, our jobs. Yet as important as these gifts from God are, they're not what David mentions. What comes to his mind out in the desert is a **person** and a **place**. The person is God, and the place is where he learned about God, mentioned in verse 2, the sanctuary.

Let this sink in. In the desert David learned the value of God and His sanctuary.

Where is God's sanctuary today? If you say God's sanctuary is Jesus Christ, you are right. In the person of Jesus Christ, God made His dwelling (i.e. tabernacled) on earth (John 1:14). God came to earth in order to rescue sinners and reconcile them to Himself, by dying for their sins on the cross and then breaking the grip of death that bound them by means of His resurrection. Why would you *not* treasure the sanctuary? There is no other place where you can abide under the protective wings of God than in the sanctuary, which is Jesus Christ.

But there is another sanctuary, rather I should say there is another expression of the same sanctuary. Although Jesus Christ has returned to heaven, He has established something on earth that His Word calls *the Body of Christ*, also known as *the church*. What's more, this living organism is also called God's temple, and the Bible makes it clear that *we*, as an individual local church, are God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16), God's spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5), God's dwelling place (Eph. 2:22), God's *sanctuary*.

Some would say, "I have Jesus. I don't need a local church." To which I would say, if for no other reason (and there are many), you'll wish you had cherished the church when the desert times come, and here's why. When you participate in the life of the church, you are storing up God-moments that will sustain your soul when the desert times come. On the other hand, by missing church, you are missing potential God-moments that would rejuvenate your soul in the desert.

Here's one specific way that we can show that we do value God's sanctuary. It's by valuing the significance of the Lord's Day.

In *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, Ligon Duncan and Terry Johnson offer this thought provoking statement, "Sunday is not just the Lord's morning, but the Lord's Day." Is there scriptural support? In Revelation 1:10 the apostle John says, "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit." When was the Lord's Day for the first century church? In Acts 20:7 Luke says, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread."

Duncan and Johnson offer this historical perspective:

We are the first generation of American Protestants to have forgotten the benefits of the Sabbath command. Prior to the middle of this century, all American Protestant denominations, whether Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, or Episcopalian, were sabbatarian. This was true for over 350 years, dating from the establishment of the Jamestown colony in 1607 until the mid-1960's. For generations it was understood that the Sabbath was made for humans, for human benefit (Mark 2:27-28). But once again we have become too clever for our own good. We have crammed our schedules full of activity seven days a week. We have lost our Sabbath rest in the process...

Essentially it comes down to this. If you are not convinced that the whole of Sunday is the Lord's and not yours, you will not be consistent. You will inevitably allow other matters to interfere. Things will come up. But, if you are convinced that Sunday is the market day of the soul [as the Puritans used to refer to the Lord's Day], then it changes everything. The question of the Sunday services is settled—you will be there morning and evening. That the issue is dead, so to speak, has a wonderfully therapeutic effect. It is like the divorce laws in the pre-no-fault day. Because it was tough to get out of marriage, one tended to work it out and in the process find marital happiness. Eliminating options helps. Because Sunday worship is an inflexible given, everything else has to accommodate it. The fourth commandment tends thereby to cast its influence over the rest of the week. Life has to be organized around one's Sunday obligations. Shopping, travel, business, yard work, housework, recreation—all must be finished by Saturday evening. Sunday must be cleared of all secular obligations. The blessed consequence is not only that one is free to worship twice on the Lord's Day, but one also enjoys guilt-free, refreshing rest from the concerns and labors of life."¹⁴

Do I believe it's a sin to shop or play ball on Sunday? No.¹⁵ But I do believe that the Lord's Day gives us a wonderful opportunity to say in a tangible way (that ought also to be seen in our lives the other six days), "You, O Lord, mean more to me than shopping, or sports, or family, or anything else. I value You above all else! And to show You that I do, I am taking practical steps to organize my life with You at the center. I am not doing this to earn Your favor but out of appreciation for Your grace given to me in Christ."

When we're in the desert three things come into focus for us: what we really *want*, what we really *value*, and...

III. In the desert we learn what we really *believe* (9-11).

David finishes the psalm by affirming three, personal beliefs. In the first...

A. David affirms what will happen to his enemies (9-10). "They who seek my life will be destroyed; they will go down to the depths of the earth. They will be given over to the sword and become food for jackals."

That's quite an affirmation for a man who's running for his life in the desert. How can he be so sure of the fate of his enemies? It's because he believes and he knows that their fate lies not in his hands, but in God's hands. And God will vindicate His name.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Give Praise to God*, edited by Philip Ryken, Derek Thomas, and Ligon Duncan, pp. 332-3. The author adds, "I find myself regularly falling asleep about three o'clock in the afternoon with chills of gratitude and pleasure for the rest of the Christian Sabbath. Amazingly, even for preachers for whom Sunday is the busiest day of the week, it is also the most restful."

¹⁵ See Romans 14:5.

¹⁶ That, in essence, is what David told Goliath years before in 1 Samuel 17:45-47.

B. David affirms what will happen to him (11a). “But the king will rejoice in God.” *The king*—that’s David, Israel’s true king as opposed to Absalom, the self-proclaimed king. The king *will rejoice*—he may be weeping in the desert now but the day will come when he will *rejoice* (a word that means “be glad, delight in, be elated”). Rejoice in what? That he’s out of the desert? That he’s back in the palace? That he can sleep soundly again? That life is pleasant again? No, that’s not what David says. Rather, he says the king will rejoice *in God*.

And why would the king do that? Why would he rejoice *in God*? Because of something he has believed since the day God saved his soul, something the desert merely confirmed. There’s no other place to find joy than in the Living God.

C. David affirms what will happen to God’s people (11b). “All who swear by God’s name will praise him, while the mouths of liars will be silenced.”

Eric Lane observes, “This was not a conflict between rivals for the throne, but between those loyal to God (those *who swear by his name*) and the *liars* who claim to be his covenant people but are not true to their word.”¹⁷ And what’s going to happen to those who truly are God’s people? David says, “They’re going to be doing what I’m doing and plan to do. They’re going to praise God, too!”

Yes, David learned something in the desert. He learned what he *believed*, namely, that when God places something in our lives His intent is to use that very thing, painful though it may be, for His honor, for the good of others, and for our own good.

Take Inventory: Three questions to consider...

1. *What do I want most in life?* What do you dream about, think about, make plans about, and talk to others about? Be honest with yourself. The true answer to this question isn’t what we say in church on Sunday morning, but what we would say at the breakfast table on Thursday morning. What do I really want most out of life?

2. *Am I investing my life in what matters most?* David told the Lord, “Your love is better than life.” Can we say that? Is there evidence in our lives to prove it, to confirm that we indeed are investing our lives in what matters most?

All of us fall short, and at this point all of us need to look again at the cross of Jesus, for it’s there that we find forgiveness as well as the grace that enables us to change.

3. *What change needs to happen most today?* That is, of the *many* areas where we fall short, which one is the lynchpin that right now the Spirit of God is putting His finger on? Perhaps you don’t value God as you ought because you don’t know Him, and the reason you don’t know Him is you need to be born again. Ask Him to give you a new heart.

Perhaps you know Him but you haven’t been treasuring Him as He deserves. What one change would most say to Him today, “Your love *is* better to me than life!”? Here are some suggestions:

- getting up earlier in order to spend time in His Word and prayer
- get a good hymnal, learn some new songs about the cross, and sing them to God
- breaking off a relationship or habit that’s not pleasing to Him
- making the Lord’s Day a top priority in your life
- going to a brother or sister with whom you are at odds because it’s grieving our God
- having an attitude change so that you stop resenting the desert and start learning

¹⁷ Eric Lane, p. 282.