A Sermon on Psalm 63:

Are You Thirsty For God?

Brian M. Sandifer

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Introduction

Greetings to you this morning in the name of our great God, the God who satisfies our deepest longings and our thirst for his divine presence. Our text today is Psalm 63 in its entirety—a beautiful song of which someone has said, “there may be other psalms that equal this outpouring of devotion; few if any that surpass it.”\(^1\) Let us give careful attention to the reading of God’s word as we read the sixty-third psalm. [Read Psalm 63:1-11]

[Pre-Sermon Prayer] Shall we pray…O God, you are our God, and we gather today as your people—a people who you have created by the work of your Spirit to seek your face. O God of steadfast love, teach us now how we ought to long for you, and grant us by your free grace the earnest desire of the psalmist—to behold your power and glory. We pray for blessing and understanding through Christ the Savior’s name, Amen.

Perhaps the most intense period of spiritual trial I’ve had to date was during a 47-day trek across America the summer after college graduation and before starting my first real job. I traveled from Virginia to California and back again with two friends. It was supposed to be sort of an extreme outdoors vacation, and I planned to record my thoughts and prayers in a travelogue. Little did I know that physical, emotional, and spiritual trials would soon follow. Knowing that my carefree college years were over, and with a job start date looming on the horizon, this transitional time became an occasion for me to search for God, to find his power and glory revealed in creation, and a glimpse of his love in the wilderness. In a word, I was longing for an adventure with God. But like others who go searching for the divine, I didn’t find him in the way I expected.

\(^1\) Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (TOTC; Downers Grove: Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 224.
Have you ever longed for God? I don’t just mean a desire for God, but have you ever deeply hungered and thirsted for God like David recorded in this psalm? There are many possible ways people could answer such a question. The Bible teaches that the way to be blessed is to long, to yearn, and to crave for God with all that is within us. Psalm 63 is a great text that can teach us this lesson: what it means to long for God today, what longing for God looks like, and how we can know this longing ourselves.²

**Background and Context**

First, let’s put this psalm in its historical context because knowing such things frequently aids in understanding. This psalm has the inscription: “A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.”³ This is important because it means that David is the author, and that he was in the wilderness of Judah—far removed from the creature comforts of Jerusalem. Keep in mind the wilderness of Judah is not some ruggedly beautiful yet uninhabited forest, but a barren desert wasteland of hills and valleys. If ever there was a place on earth that seemed cursed by God, it was the Judean wilderness.

Second, David probably penned this psalm when he fled from the wrath of King Saul. Saul was trying to kill David out of his jealousy and hatred of David’s popularity and success, so young David and his loyal band of followers became refugees wandering in the wilderness of Judah.⁴ If you’re inclined to further study, the Bible’s historical narrative that serves as the context of Psalm 63 is found in 1 Samuel chapters 21-31.⁵

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³ All subsequent Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁴ See 1 Sam 22:5; 23:14, 24-25; 24:1 for more place names of where David wandered in the wilderness of Judah.

⁵ See John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ed. and trans. James Anderson; vol. 2; 1846; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981) 433, fn. 1. I am following Calvin, with whom many modern commentators
Now that we know a little about the background and context of Psalm 63, we are in a position to take a closer look at its language and meaning.

**Exposition of Psalm**

I’ve chosen to outline this psalm into three stanzas (or sections). **Verses 1-4** poetically describe David’s thirst for God amidst trial. Notice the imagery David employs in verse 1 to capture his desire for God—in both body and soul he longs for God as a thirsty man desires water in the desert. One of the excursions my friends and I embarked on during that cross country summer vacation was a day of mountain biking in Moab, Utah in the hills overlooking the Colorado River. Although we each had two liters of water, it wasn’t enough to replenish bodies exercising under the summer desert sun. When the water ran out, we pressed on knowing we needed to get back to our car before dehydration set in. But we didn’t make it without taking one last snack break. All I had left for my parched throat was a small orange, and I don’t really like oranges! But I was so thirsty that I can still remember the satisfaction of eating it. In fact I can still taste it in my mind. It might as well have fallen straight off the Tree of Life. That’s the thirstiest I’ve ever been and hope to ever be again, unless I get that desert thirst for God like David had.

The righteous who thirst for God is a common biblical image. David wrote in Ps 143:6, “I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.” Ps 42 begins, “As a
deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?”

In verse 2 of our psalm David longs to behold the power and glory of God in his sanctuary. In the wilderness David is far away from the place where God dwells. But that does not stop him from yearning for God. John Calvin comments in his inimitable manner, “Even when so situated, in a wild and hideous solitude, where the very horrors of the place were enough to have distracted his meditations, he exercised himself in beholding the power and glory of God, just as if he had been in the sanctuary.”

In verse 3, David promises to praise God in the midst of harsh circumstances because God’s covenant love is better than life. This verse can be understood as the foundational theme of the whole psalm. David’s lips will praise God because his steadfast (or covenant) love is better than life. The love of God is better than life because it cannot be lost. David knew from experience that life is precarious, and though it is the most precious thing in this life, it cannot compare to the hesed (the Hebrew word which means the steadfast covenant love of God).

Then in verse 4 David determines therefore to bless God as long as he lives by lifting up his hands to worship in God’s name. Elsewhere David wrote in Ps 28:2, “Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary.” No, David was not a freaky worshipper or a crypto-charismatic. But that is not to say that we should not raise our hands in thankfulness and praise to the God who loved us and saved us in Christ. This psalm clearly instructs us to worship God with our souls and our bodies.

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6 Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 434.
7 James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms* (vol. 2; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 520, writes, “The word he uses is hesed, which is often translated ‘lovingkindness’ or ‘covenant-love.’ It stresses the faithful continuance of God’s love. God’s love is steady and unchangeable, which is why it is better than even the best thing in life, which is life itself. Life itself can be lost, even though we value it and try to protect it at all costs. However, the covenant-love of God can never be lost.”
Notice verse 1: “My flesh faints for you.” Verse 2 teaches us to worship God with our eyes: “So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.” Verse 3: “My lips will praise you.” Verse 4: “In your name I will lift up my hands.” Verse 5: my mouth and lips and stomach are in view. Surely God wants us to praise him in all circumstances, with all our heart, all our soul, with all our [physical or bodily] strength, and with all our mind.  

So learn from David that it is OK, even for a manly warrior like him, to praise God with gusto and excitement, even by lifting your hands to worship in his name.

The next stanza or section is verses 5-8, which describes in beautiful figurative language how **God will deliver David and satisfy his soul**. Here we read that when David thinks about God through the night his soul will be satisfied as a bountiful meal satiates the appetite. Thus he will praise God with joyful lips. The fullness and satisfaction (not the sleepiness!) that we feel every year after the Thanksgiving meal is similar to the feeling God will fill David with in his soul. And God will even be with us in the middle of the night when we ponder his goodness and remember the steadfast love of the Lord when we lie awake. In verses 7 and 8 David pictures himself as clinging to and resting in the help of God as a young bird finds shelter under its protective mother’s wings. These are familiar ways that David thought of God. David wrote in Ps 17:8, “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings,” and also in Ps 36:7-8, “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.” These are deep and meaningful images from nature and common human experience that teach us how to praise God, how to pray to God, how to rest in God, and how to hope in God.

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8 WSC 42; Luke 10:27.
Furthermore, this hope in God that David confessed and prayed became a firm confidence in the deliverance that only God gives to those who are weary yet earnestly seek him. In the final stanza or section, verses 9-11 speak of David’s confidence of his enemies’ destruction, and his own deliverance. Specifically, verses 9-10 tells us that David is confident his enemies will perish by the sword and their bodies ashamedly eaten by jackals (which are the coyote-like scavengers of the land). This kind of language is frequent in the Psalms, and it should not bother us as unduly harsh or vindictive because this has always been and always will be how God brings salvation into the world. Salvation comes through the judgment of the wicked and thereby the righteous are delivered. For example, David wrote in Ps 55:15 of his enemies, “Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol [the grave] alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.” Also remember that sometimes the enemies of the righteous are from one’s own house or countrymen. This is the case for the prophet Jeremiah when he prays in Jer 18:21, “Therefore deliver up their children to famine; give them over to the power of the sword; let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be struck down by the sword in battle.”

Concluding the psalm in verse 11, David confesses confidence that he will be king, and that he and his loyal followers will rejoice in God when lying mouths are stopped. Even the prince of Israel, David’s best friend Jonathan, knew that David would someday be king. First Samuel 23:17 records Jonathan’s words, “‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said. ‘My father Saul will not lay a hand

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9 Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 441-42, fn. 3. In this footnote, the editor provides some useful information on the nature and habits of jackals, animals that “never go alone, but always associate in packs of from fifty to two hundred. They are known to prey on dead bodies; and so greedy are they of human carcases [sic], that they dig them out of their graves, and devour them, however putrescent. They have been seen waiting near the grave at the time of a funeral, eagerly watching their opportunity of digging up the body almost as soon as it was buried.” What David probably means by his saying his enemies “shall be a portion for jackals” is that “they would be denied the rites of sepulture, which was deemed a great calamity, —that they should be left unburied, for jackals and other wild beasts to prey up on and devour.”
on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this.” Yet David’s confidence was not in the assurance of Prince Jonathan’s words, but in the assurance of God’s word.10

We might describe each of these sections of the psalm theologically around the biblical theme of exile in the wilderness, because in a sense David fled to the wilderness in exile from Saul, the Lord’s anointed king.11 This is the essence of what it means to be exiled in the Bible: being banished from the blessed presence of God and his kingdom, driven away into the cursed wilderness. We could say that in verses 1-4 where David thirsts for God amidst trial, that the theological point is Worship and Longing in the Suffering of Exile. Verses 5-8, which picture God who will deliver David and satisfy his soul, can be described as Protection and Rest in the Suffering of Exile. And verses 9-11, which describe David’s confidence in his enemies’ destruction and his own deliverance, can be arranged as Hope in the Glory of Judgment and Salvation. This theological perspective, focused on the motif of exile, can help us see the relevance of David’s words today for the follower of Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ

10 For my sermon outline I am drawing from suggestions in Dennis E. Johnson, Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ From All the Scriptures (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2007), 313-20, where he advises preachers and Bible teachers to structure their expositions of particular psalms around their themes instead of merely expositing the text verse by verse. In the case of Psalm 63, the major themes follow the structural flow of the psalm, but stressing the themes of (1) Thirst for God amidst trial, (2) God’s provision of protection and rest, and (3) Confidence in deliverance and judgment on enemies, help to highlight this psalm’s penetrating relevance for people today while still locating, as Johnson writes on page 320, “the psalm as specifically as possible in the concrete circumstances” of the author.

11 According to Johnson’s redemptive-historical apostolic hermeneutic and method for preaching, linking an occasional text like Ps 63 to broad biblical themes is appropriate. He writes in Johnson, Him We Proclaim, 313-14, “Israel’s psalmists sing with a wide array of voices, both individual and corporate. They respond to a broad spectrum of experience, from worship to exile, from rejection to deliverance; and they convey a range of emotions, from confused desperation to exultant praise and thanksgiving. Some Psalms selectively rehearse the historical ebbs and flows of God’s covenant with Israel, highlighting his faithfulness or Israel’s failure or both together (e.g., Pss. 78, 105, 106). Some memorably transmit God-given wisdom from generation to generation (e.g., Pss. 1, 119). Some look forward with longing to the consummation of the covenant in the just destruction of the godless and the gracious vindication of the oppressed, who cling in hope to God’s promises (Ps. 72).” Psalm 63 utilizes many of these biblical macro-themes: I have structured the theology of this sermon around the theme of exile and the experiential progression of believers from suffering to glory.
experienced everything David described in Ps 63, and he perfectly fulfilled it for his people the Church.  

Christ the Psalm Singer

But before we as Christians can draw application from this psalm (or any biblical passage for that matter), it is necessary to view it through the lens of Christ—how he sees it, how he lives it, and how he fulfills it in his suffering and glory. One way to do this is to ask this question whenever you read the psalms: What gospel light is shed on this song when placed on the lips of Jesus? Such an exercise will push you to think in a rigorously Christian way about the Psalms, it will force you out of the common Bible-reading rut into greater understanding, and it will draw you closer to Jesus. So if Jesus were to sing this psalm (and he is the great Psalm singer of the Bible), how would our understanding of it deepen?

First, we can see that like David, Jesus earnestly sought his Heavenly Father. Here are just a sampling of verses that demonstrate this. “And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). “And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount

12 Frame, Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, 15-18, outlines his triad of God’s lordship attributes that manifest themselves in all his interactions with creation. The Control, Authority, and Presence attributes of the Lord can be seen in my theological summary statements of Psalm 63. “Worship and Longing in the Suffering of Exile” expresses the Presence of God as his people seek to worship him in his company and long for that intimate fellowship when God seems more transcendent than immanent. “Protection and Rest in the Suffering of Exile” speaks to the Control of God as his children gather restfully under the shadow of his wings, safely upheld by the same right hand that upholds all things. “Hope in the Glory of Judgment and Salvation” communicates the Authority of God as the rightful judge and savior of his creatures. Of course, each of my theological themes for Psalm 63 could be categorized under a different lordship attribute because, as Frame constantly points out, Control, Authority, and Presence are “perspectivally related.”

13 Johnson, Him We Proclaim, 314-15, justifies reading OT psalms Christologically when he writes, “Biblical scholars have typically identified certain psalms as ‘messianic’ because of their focus on the king’s office and future orientation, and because such psalms are explicitly (and in some case[sic] repeatedly) cited in the New Testament as having found their fulfillment in the suffering and exaltation of Jesus the Christ (e.g., Pss. 2, 22, 45, 110). [Edmund P.] Clowney has contended provocatively, however, that all 150 psalms should be viewed as messianic and read in the light of Jesus’ fulfillment of the psalmists’ varied experiences of suffering and vindication, inasmuch as David and his fellow Israelite poets composed their prayers and praises under the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ and in relation to their typological theocratic offices.”
called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him” (Luke 21:37-38). “Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work’” (John 4:34). Jesus also taught us to seek God using much the same language that David used in Ps 63. “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt 6:33). “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt 5:6).

Second, it is clear that **Jesus experienced David’s desert exile during his 40 day test in the wilderness.** Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is not patterned after David’s experience. Rather, Jesus’ and David’s experiences are both patterned after Israel’s 40 year wilderness journey. “And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry” (Luke 4:1-2).

Third, several passages give account of how **Jesus longed to be in the sanctuary of God.** His passion for God’s presence, and his consuming zeal for the Father’s house are evident.

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.” And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:46-49)

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” (John 2:13-17)

Fourth, as God upheld David with his strong right hand, **Jesus in his resurrection was upheld by the right hand of God over his enemies.** “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is
interceding for us” (Rom 8:34). “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet” (Heb 10:12-13).

Fifth, **Jesus’ enemies will be judged and given over to death on the last day** in a manner akin to David’s prayer for his enemies to be judged. “For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape” (1 Thess 5:2-3).

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. (Rev 19:11-16)

Sixth and finally, like David who would be king, **Jesus, the King of Kings, and all his people shall rejoice and exult in God when he comes in his glory**. “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet 4:13).

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”-- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. (Rev 19:6-8)

**Application**

So to revisit our opening question: have you ever really longed for, even yearned, for the presence of God? Do you want nothing else but to be in his presence? Do you thirst for God like I thirsted for that lousy orange in the Utah desert? Maybe you’re thinking: “Sure, why not? I love God. Doesn’t everybody? Especially church-going Christians—we all must long for God,
right? Otherwise why in the world would we be here listening to this sermon?” Or perhaps instead you’re thinking: “No, not really—but it’s not a big deal because I’m doing all right, I’m happy in my relationship with God, and I’m pretty confident that I’m going to heaven someday.” Still others of you may be thinking: “No I don’t, but I wish I did long for God like the Bible describes we should. But I just cannot muster up that kind of longing. I’m not really an emotional person, and I don’t really long for anything. But sometimes I wish I did—especially for God, since I do love him and at least I desire to sincerely long for him.”

Let’s face it, no one has sought our Heavenly Father perfectly, except one man. He has set us the perfect example to emulate. He blazed the path as the pioneer and perfector of our faith. He faithfully and perfectly sought God (in our place) as our representative. As we look to Christ as our example and head, we find ourselves falling in love with him and thirsting for him. For the power and glory in his sanctuary is something to behold! His steadfast love is better than life itself. As we gaze upon the beauty of Christ, the one who longed for worship and the protection and provision of God, we find ourselves doing the very thing we cannot do in our own strength. When you look to Christ and meditate on his love for God, you may notice that you begin to seek God in a powerful and fresh way, for God is meant to be sought and found only in him—in his son Jesus Christ.

What did Jesus say about our thirst for God? The Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well met Jesus and he answered this same question. In John 4 Jesus testified of a different kind of water that quenches the thirst of those who long and yearn for the presence of God. This “living water” comes from the Savior himself.

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this
water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:10-14)

The yearning, the longing, the thirsting for God that you experience in your moments of sensing exile and suffering—all of these have been faithfully and successfully borne by Jesus Christ. And by his Holy Spirit—given to all those who believe in him, worship him, long for the protection and rest he provides, and hope for his salvation and deliverance from exile—we may have our spiritual thirst finally satisfied with flowing rivers of living water springing up from our hearts (John 7:37-39). 14

As pants the hart for cooling streams when heated in the chase,
So longs my soul, O God, for thee, and thy refreshing grace.
For thee, my God, the living God, my thirsty soul doth pine;
O when shall I behold thy face, thou Majesty divine!
Why restless, why cast down, my soul? Trust God, and he'll employ
his aid for thee, and change these sighs to thankful hymns of joy.
Why restless, why cast down, my soul? Hope still; and thou shalt sing
the praise of him who is thy God, thy health's eternal spring. 15

14 Although I did not work through every step of Johnson’s suggested procedure for moving from text to sermon, his methodology influenced my thought process at many points, some of which were prayer for sermon preparation/illumination throughout, identifying the Fallen Condition Focus (FCF), organizing the text structurally and thematically, cross-referencing similar passages, examining other OT and NT passages with similar themes, consulting commentators, considering the redemptive-historical progression of the themes and viewing them Christologically, organizing a sermon outline, and then writing the sermon manuscript. The complete, detailed methodological outline may be found in Johnson, Him We Proclaim, 397-407.

Bibliography


