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From Isolation to Hope

Psalm 61

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Sometimes people ask me what I like about fishing. It is all about hope. Fishing is the pursuit of what is elusive but obtainable. It is a perpetual series of occasions for hope. Hope is not a luxury in life. Hope is an essential to life.

During the Korean War they found that soldiers died in three basic circumstances. Soldiers died fighting. Soldiers died running. But there was also a group of soldiers who died seemingly without injury. They just died in the foxholes. The autopsies revealed that those that died running and those that died fighting all had the same basic changes physiologically. They were consistent with a discharge from the sympathetic nervous system that would be consistent with a rush of adrenaline. But when they did autopsies on those that died in the foxholes, apparently without injury, the changes physiologically were very different. It was basically a discharge from what is called the parasympathetic nervous system. Their conclusion was that they simply died from hopelessness.

Years later, there was a group of scientists that wondered if they could reproduce what happened in those foxholes. Without condoning the methodology, the findings were quite interesting. They selected an animal called the Norwegian wharf rat to test because the rat was a good swimmer but also was just a tenacious, vicious animal. They took one set of rats and they filled a tank with water. One by one they would put these rats in the tank with no possibility of escape to see how long they would survive. The average rat swam for 16 minutes and then drowned. When they did the autopsy on these rats, they found that the symptoms were almost identical with those who died in the foxholes. They concluded that they simply died of hopelessness.

Then they took a second set of rats and they put them in the same tank with the same conditions. Only right before those rats drowned, they rescued them one by one. They dried them off, fed them and put them in a dry cage for a couple of days. They let them rest and then put them back in the same tank. This time the average rat survived for 36 hours.

Their conclusion was that because these rats had experienced salvation once, it caused them to hope and believe that it was possible a second time, which caused them to survive 150 times longer. The reality is *hope* is an essential part of life.

Sadly, we live in a culture of hopelessness. We live in a culture of despair. There are probably a variety of reasons for that, but one of the reasons is that we as a culture have bought into what people have termed the post-modern mind. Within the post-modern mind is what is referred to as the autonomous self. That is the belief that I myself am the center of the universe. It is up to me to define reality for myself. It is up to me to define right and wrong and good and evil. It is even up to me to construct my own definition of God.

Robert Bellah, a sociologist, wrote a book called *Habits of the Heart*, in which he interviewed a nurse by the name of Sheila Larson. Sheila Larson well describes this autonomous self as it relates to God and has coined a phrase today referred to as "Sheilaism." It is basically this idea that she is her own God. She is the center of her own universe. She defines her spirituality her own way. In the interview she said, "I believe in God. I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It is Sheilaism. Just my own little voice. It is just to try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself."

- *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, 1985.

Many people today would not necessarily use those terms, although I am convinced that is where a lot of people are. They have convinced themselves that they are the center of their own universe, and when push comes to shove, they depend upon themselves for life. They may be very spiritual. They may be very religious. But they follow a God of their own making. They follow a God of their own defining, a God who does not crimp their style. They follow a God who makes few demands...a God that is whatever that person wants their God to be.

At first glance that may seem rather attractive, but the problem is deep down in their hearts they know, *If the one I am ultimately dependent upon is me, then there is every reason for despair, because in the end I am simply not sufficient.* That produces a sense of hopelessness that pervades our culture.

So what is the solution? Where do we find hope? Turn with me to Psalm 61, a psalm of David. We don't really know what the background was. It does seem apparent that David was king when he penned these words. It could have been when David was fleeing from his son, Absalom. It could have been any one of a number of military campaigns that David conducted.

Hear my cry, O God; give heed to my prayer. (v. 1, *NASB)

This is where hope starts. Hope starts with the realization that I am not sufficient. I am inadequate; therefore, I need to be dependent on One who is greater than me. David understands his inadequacy, his inability to bring hope in the midst of his very circumstances—which causes this response to cry out to God in prayer.

It is easy to believe that we are dependent upon God. Probably none of us would say, “No, I believe I am self-sufficient.” But I would suggest to you that we are much more dependent on ourselves and much less dependent on God than we tend to think.

There are a couple of ways we can measure that. One way is exactly where David is, and that is our prayer life. I do believe our prayer life is an adequate measure of our dependence on God. If I really believe that I am inadequate and insufficient, then I must be dependent on God. He is my source of life and my source of hope. That just naturally produces a heart that longs to pray. It is not something I have to force. It is not something I have to try and manufacture. I am just desperate. I am desperate every day. I know that I am needy, and that causes me to be a person of prayer. Ask yourself: Day in and day out, how is your prayer life? Does it reflect an attitude of dependence upon God?

I think a second thing we can look at to practically assess this would be our intake of the Scriptures. Prayer is speaking to God. In the Scriptures God is speaking to me. If I really believe I am inadequate, if I really believe I am not sufficient, if I really believe I am needy and dependent upon God, then I am going to find myself daily in the Bible. I *want* to know what God says. I *need* to know what God says. It is not something I am forced to manufacture; it flows out of my neediness. It flows out of my realization that I am desperate for God. Therefore, day in and day out, I have to know what He says. I am dependent on Him.

Day in and day out, if you don't find yourself in an attitude of prayer, if you don't find yourself digging into God's Word, I would suggest to you that you are much more dependent upon yourself than you may care to admit. But that is where hope starts. Hope starts with the realization that I am not adequate and I need help, which causes me to seek for God.

From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint... (v. 2a)

Throughout the Scriptures this phrase “from the end of the earth” is in reference to a place that is remote. It is a place that is often out of the land of promise. It is a place that is away from home. Wherever David was, he was out of Jerusalem. He was away from home. He was in a place that was uncomfortable. He was in a place that was unsafe. He was in a place where he did not fit, and in his heart he longed to be home. Home is the place where I belong. Home is the place where I fit. Home is the place where I am safe.

I think in David’s case it probably was literal. It was geographical. But in our case, it is more often metaphorical. It is the idea that I am not where I want to be. I am in the middle of circumstances that I never thought I would be in. I am in a situation where I don’t feel comfortable. This is not where I want to be. I wish it were different. There is a sense that I wish I could go home, the place where everything seems together and orderly. It is a place where I feel like I belong, but I am not there.

David says, “From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint.” That Hebrew word translated “faint” is a word that means to despair or be hopeless. David is in the midst of circumstances far from home, and it causes a sense of hopelessness in his soul and he cries out to God.

From here, it goes through a series of metaphors, of images, that recapture his focus. He says:

Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. (v. 2b)

A rock was a place of safety. It was a place of security. In the midst of the battle, whoever had the higher ground had the advantage. The rock was a place of advantage. It was a place where one could rest and recalibrate. David understands that as his own rock he is inadequate. He needs a rock that is higher than he is. He needs something beyond himself.

When we buy into this postmodern, autonomous self-mindset, thinking we are adequate and we can depend upon ourselves, then when we are in the midst of difficult circumstances we feel this despair and hopelessness. The best we can do is to just hope that the circumstances change. We hope someday that things will be different, and it creates this despairing feeling within us.

But David understands he can do better than that. He wants to find this rock that is higher than he is. I do find it interesting that he is even somewhat concerned that he cannot find it on his own. He asks God to lead him to the rock “that is higher than I.”

Sometimes in the midst of our despair, it is hard to tell where we even should turn. How do we even find this rock? Understand that if your heart is sincerely crying after God, you need to just pray David’s prayer: “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” I can assure you God will answer that prayer.

For You have been a refuge for me... (v. 3a)

David is tapping into past experiences, and his past gives him confidence for the present. God has been his safe place, his refuge. I think oftentimes it is hard for us to understand the danger of the ancient culture. We are so used to what we take for granted every day. But in the ancient culture it was just very dangerous to live. It was extremely dangerous to travel. Outside of your city and the city walls, there was not a State Patrol that covered the grounds. There weren’t laws and rules; by and large it was the law of the jungle. If somebody killed you out on that road, it was very unlikely that anybody was going to do anything about it. So life was extremely dangerous.

Even within the walls of a city, life was much more dangerous than we would imagine today. They all longed for a place where they could feel safe, a place of security, a place of refuge. It was the one place in life where they could just take a deep breath and know they were safe and that everything was going to be okay. You see this imagery come up a lot in the Psalms. That is what David is talking about here. He longs for a place where he can finally feel safe and feel like everything is going to be okay.

A tower of strength against the enemy. (v. 3b)

Specifically David mentions the enemy here in reference to an enemy attack. Within a city there was often a tower, and at the top of the tower was really the safest of the safe places. If an enemy seized the city and penetrated the walls, the tower was the last place of safety. Everyone would run to the tower, and that was the safest of the safe.

David is seeing God as that place for him. It is the ultimate place of safety and security.

Let me dwell in Your tent forever. (v. 4a)

Surely David is referring to the tabernacle. We talked about this last week. The tabernacle was this magnificent tent that preceded the temple. Within the tabernacle was the Holy of Holies. Within the Holy of Holies was the place where God dwelt.

It is hard for us in our New Covenant theology to understand there was a time when God was located in a specific geographical area. People understood, *God lives there; God dwells there*. You had to go there to enter into the presence of God.

David is longing for that. David is far away from Jerusalem. He is in a circumstance that causes his heart to faint; there is despair and hopelessness. He longs for that moment when he could dwell in the presence of God and be where God is. This is a place where he knows he would be safe and secure. What he really wants in his heart is to dwell in that place, not for a minute or not for an hour, but: “God, is it possible that I could dwell in Your presence forever, that there would be a day when I would never have to leave Your presence? I would never have to long for You. I could just be with You and never have to leave.” He goes on to say:

Let me take refuge in the shelter of Your wings. (v. 4b)

We talked about this last week from Psalm 57. David surely, after referencing the tent or the tabernacle, is referring to the Ark of the Covenant. Under the wings of the cherubim is that mercy seat, and that is the place where once a year the blood of the lamb was poured into the grate, into the mercy seat. This was symbolic of God’s promise to Abraham that God Himself would shed His blood to make it possible for sinful people to have a relationship with a holy God. It was believed that at that specific place a holy God met sinful man. That is what David is asking for. That is what David is longing for.

If we believe that our refuge, our tower, our hope, is dependent upon our religious performance, then we have every reason for despair—because frankly day in and day out we don’t perform very well. But what David is saying is that he understands this is not based on religious performance. It is based on God’s promise of what was symbolized under the shadow of the wings of those cherubim. On the basis of God’s shed blood, he could find hope. He could find God as his refuge and tower and rock.

Now, as we read through this prayer of David, it is very important to recognize that we today live in the fulfillment of everything that David longed for. David found hope in a faith, believing that one day... We find hope in believing that *that* day has been fulfilled and we live in the reality of this. Of course, the fulfillment of what was symbolized there at the mercy seat was the cross—the place where God Himself in the flesh shed His blood to atone for sin. And those who believe that, those who embrace what Jesus did on that cross, experience the forgiveness of sin and enter into an intimate relationship with God. We enter into a relationship with God that is so intimate that God's Spirit literally dwells within us, never to leave us.

Jesus promised, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Jesus promised, as He gave the disciples their marching orders, "I will be with you always." Jesus said, "Come unto me, all of you who are weary and heavy-laden; I will give you rest." Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of what David longed for.

Do you realize, as of the moment you trusted Jesus as Savior, there will never be a time from that point to all eternity where you will ever be out of the presence of God? You will never experience what David experienced as he longed to be in the presence of God and he prayed, "God, isn't it possible in some way that I could be in your tent forever?" Yet, on the basis of what Jesus has done, that is exactly what we have today. I will never be outside of the presence of God. I dwell in His presence now and forever. In a way, far beyond what David could have imagined, I experience God as my rock, as my refuge, as my tower, that I am able to dwell in His presence and I don't ever have to leave.

Notice each of those metaphors gets a little bit more intimate. You go from the rock to the refuge to the tower to the tent to the very presence of God. The reality is that we have far more reason for hope than David could have even imagined, because we live in the fulfillment of what David prayed for.

For you have heard my vows, O God; You have given me the inheritance of those who fear Your name. (v. 5)

When David is talking about his vows, he is talking about how God knows the commitment of his heart. In essence he is saying, "You know that I am sincere, that I have promised myself to you." He knows that God hears that, and because of that, God has promised him the inheritance that goes to all those who fear His name.

In the Old Testament when it talks about inheritance, it is referring to the land and all the benefits that come from dwelling in the land as the people of God. But of course, that was merely symbolic of greater fulfillment that we would experience in the New Covenant. We don't inherit the land. We inherit a spiritual kingdom. The reality is that we have riches beyond what David could have even imagined. You have an inheritance, because as of that moment you trusted Jesus as Savior, you were adopted into the family of God and you have become a legal heir of the family inheritance—of the inheritance of God and the riches of heaven.

Do you realize if you have trusted Christ as Savior you are wealthy beyond your wildest imagination? You are wealthy with the riches of heaven. They are yours in Christ and they can never be lost. They can never be rusted or corrupted. They cannot be stolen. They are yours and they are yours forever. They are not the wealth of this world that is here today and gone tomorrow. It is the wealth of eternity, and it is yours in Christ. That is what God has promised for those who trust Jesus as Savior.

You will prolong the king's life; his years will be as many generations. He will abide before God forever. (vs. 6-7a)

David slips into the third person, but he is still talking about himself as the king. He is relating to God's promise that David would have a long rule as king. Whatever the circumstances are here, David is still claiming God's promise, "Long live the king" and that David would sit on that throne a long time. He believes that and that his reign would last forever.

Now of course, as soon as you move into "forever" you know that it is talking about something more than David. It is talking about the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant that was fulfilled in Jesus, a descendant of David, who would sit on the throne forever. As we go through this psalm, we have talked about some magnificent promises that are reasons for hope. But the reality is that if there was ever a day when God ceased to be King, when Jesus no longer sat on that throne, then those promises would become null and void. It is very important to recognize that Jesus is King in the line of David and will be the Sovereign King forever. That is the basis by which we claim His promises forever.

Years ago when I was going to college in Chicago, I worked for a music studio. The president of the music studio was named Chuck. He had a loft a couple of blocks away from the studio, and most of my work was there. I was kind of a fix-it man—a handyman. It was quite an impressive place. It had a couple of bedrooms and a kitchen. He actually lived there, but he also had a very large movie theatre room. It had a hot tub and sauna and all kinds of wild neon art all over the place. It had a stoplight in the middle of the living room. There were buttons on the sink that you could push to get different beverages right out of the sink faucet. It was really quite a place.

One evening Chuck said, "You know, Bryan, I'll tell you what. Some evening we are just going to vacate this place and I am going to let you have it. You can invite all of your friends from school and you can have yourselves a big party." I thought this sounded like a great idea. When you are living in the dorm every day, that is quite an inviting offer. We set a date and we began to invite people; we were going to have a great time.

The party was scheduled for shortly after spring break. I went home for spring break, and when I got back to school I went down to the studio. I was informed that while I was home on spring break Chuck had died in his sleep of a heart attack. He promised. He promised we could have this party. But at that moment, as sincere as he was, that promise was null and void. I was informed quickly that the offer was off. As a matter of fact, my job was off.

The reality is that Jesus has promised us some magnificent promises. The only way we can know that those promises will be kept is if Jesus remains on the throne forever. That is exactly what David is saying.

Appoint lovingkindness and truth that they may preserve him [*the king*]. (v. 7b)

These are the same two attributes that David talked about in Psalm 57. He believed that this would come to pass because he believed God is love and he believed that God tells the truth. Our hope is in the fact that we believe God loves us and we believe that God tells the truth. In the midst of the most difficult circumstances, we believe that and that is our source of hope.

So I will sing praise to Your name forever, that I may pay my vows day by day. (v. 8)

Most people believe that David's reference to vows here was his vow or promise that he would praise God. If he really did believe this, then there was reason every day to praise God. And so he would do that as his testimony, his witness, his fulfillment of his vows.

When we are in the midst of difficult circumstances and are dependent on ourselves, the only basis for hope is to just believe someday things will change. Someday things will get better. Someday maybe everything will be okay. Right now I am far from home. I am in the midst of circumstances that I never thought I would be in. There are things beyond my control, and the best I can do is wish that someday maybe things will change. If that is the basis for our hope, that is a reason for despair.

But David knew better than that. David knew that he was dependent on One who was greater than he. One who could do what David could not do for himself. One who could provide hope in the midst of the most trying circumstances. One who could be his rock, his refuge, his tower. But more than that, One with whom he could be intimate. He understood that because of his commitment to God, he was heir to the family fortune. He was heir to the riches of God, and no matter what, that promise would be kept because God would always be on His throne. David moved from despair and hopelessness, in a place of isolation, to praising God—as his heart was filled with hope.

Hope begins when we understand we are not adequate. We are not sufficient. I must be dependent on One who is greater than me. One who can do for me what I cannot do for myself. When people go through the AA process, one of the key points is a higher power. If they believe that it is all up to them, they have no hope and they will never make it. They have to believe that there is a higher power. We would say it is very important that higher power is defined as Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. That brings hope. It is on the basis of His grace that by faith we enter into an intimate relationship with God and He becomes our rock. He becomes our refuge and our tower. We are welcome beyond our wildest imaginations. We never have to leave the presence of God. He is with us now and forever. We have every reason to celebrate. We have every reason for hope.

Kay Arthur tells the following story.

When I was a little girl—just a skinny little beanpole with pigtails—I used to run to my daddy for comfort. I was a tomboy who consistently fell out of trees, got into fights, and crashed my bicycle. It seemed like I was forever bloodying those poor, banged-up knees of mine. That's when I would run—with pigtails flying and dirty tears streaming down my face—to my daddy.

“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!”

And I'm so fortunate, because I had a daddy who held me. Ever since I was a little girl until the day he went to be with the Lord, I was always his little sweetheart. And I would fly into his open arms, and he would gather me up on his lap—dirt, blood, and all—and hold me there. And he would wipe my tears and push back my pigtails and say, “Now, Honey, tell Daddy all about it.”

Many years later I was hurting again, so very deeply.

But I couldn't run to my daddy.

I was a single mom with two little kids, trying to work and go to school. And it was one of those days when everything seemed to catch up with me—all of the hurt and loneliness and regret and pressure and weariness. I remember driving into the driveway of the little brick home where we were living. I got out of the car and began walking down the little gravel walkway toward the front door.

For some reason, time seemed to stand still for a moment.

To this day I can't tell you what triggered the thought, but suddenly—in my mind's eye—I saw something.

I saw a little girl, running.

I saw a little girl with tears streaming down her face and banged-up, bloody knees on those skinny little legs. I saw her in need of her daddy. Running for her daddy.

Then suddenly—strangely—I saw her running down a huge, shiny corridor. A vast corridor with gleaming marble walls and beautiful windows spilling heavenly light. And at the end of that marble hallway were massive doors of brilliant gold. Standing before those doors were bright, powerful guards with great spears.

And I knew that the little girl was me, and that I was running toward the very throne room of God, sovereign ruler of the universe. Yet I was the daughter of the King of Kings, so when the guards saw me coming, they swung open those doors and let me run in. There I was, weeping and running into the very presence of God. I heard the cherubim and the seraphim crying out, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty! Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory!” Many bowed before the throne, and court was in session, but I just ran and ran and didn’t stop....

I could just see myself running up the wide stairs to that glorious throne—two steps at a time—crying, “Abba, Father! Daddy!”

And I could see Him stopping everything, opening His arms wide and just gathering me to His chest, saying, “There, there, My precious child. Let Me wipe away those tears. Tell your Father all about it.”

- Kay Arthur, “Running for Daddy!” from *More Stories for the Heart* compiled by Alice Gray, Multnomah, 1997, pp. 266-267.

I don’t know what your circumstances are. Maybe you find yourself identifying with David. All I can tell you is that whatever you are going through, there is every reason for hope. If you will run to Jesus, I can assure you, you will find Him faithful.

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