

**A. Introduction:**

- a. King David understood clearly that all who are born will die, and he understood that the life we live is subject to God’s will and purpose. In Psalm 63 King David reflects on the life he enjoyed as king in the presence of God in the capital city of Jerusalem, and the life he is currently living as an outcast in the desert wilderness with enemies seeking to kill him.
- b. As David ponders his position, he concludes that God Himself is the treasure he longs for and cannot live without. David’s prayer recorded in Psalm 63 is an example of personal refocus and identity restoration in dire circumstances, as well as hope for the future in the Presence of God. The purpose of this article is to ponder the historical context, structure, images, feelings conveyed, theological meaning expressed, and future theological application of Psalm 63.

**B. Historical Context:**

- a. READ – 2 Samuel Chapters 15-17 which provides the historical background and setting for the kingly prayer recorded in Psalm 63. In this portion of the narrative story, David decided to flee from Jerusalem following a successful coup-de-tat led by his son, Absalom; aided by David’s subversive enemies including Ahithopel, David’s former advisor and his wife Bathsheba’s grandfather.
- b. The narrative when contrasted with the poem offers many insights into David’s thinking and his feelings. David felt betrayal – by his own son and from people he relied upon and trusted. At this point, he is not certain who can be trusted – other than God.
- c. The narrative shows David suffered doubt and self-recrimination evidenced by the curses he accepted from Shimei. Presuming that Shimei might have been sent from God as referenced in 2 Samuel 16:10-12, the king accepts this verbal abuse which otherwise would have been deserving of capital offense.
- d. The narrative of the Samuel passage presumes the reader would have a working understanding of the geographical terrain. Jerusalem is built upon a coastal mountain, providing a vista to the coastal and inland valleys below. As David and his company exit the city, they would take a narrow switch-back trail down the mountain to the Jordan river valley below. Shimei would have been just above him kicking dirt and loose rocks down upon the party below. As they continue down the mountain their mood sinks along with the terrain. It hits the low spot just

before they cross the Jordan where they pause to look back before crossing into exile. The author of the story in 2 Samuel Chapters 15-17 made use of the geography as a reflection of the emotional mood of the party. These stylistic literary devices add to the beauty as well as the meaning of the text.

- e. As king, David recognized his duty was first to God, and then to the nation. Because the people were his concern, he decided to leave the city immediately to prevent unnecessary bloodshed [2 Samuel 15:14]. Scripture shows the priests loyal to David had decided to go with him and brought The Ark of the Covenant along on the journey, presumably to secure good fortune for David and his followers. However, David sent the Ark and priests back – having recognized that the symbol of God’s presence belonged in the city with His people. David also deduced that the priests would serve him better by remaining in the city where they could send him helpful information.
- f. As a result of the turmoil in this story, the poem that is psalm 63 is filled with powerful emotions. A sense of loss dominates the scene as David and his loyal followers march from the city of Jerusalem into exile in the desert wilderness. David submitted himself to exile, recognizing that God was in control. If it was God’s will and purpose that Absalom should replace him now, leaving the city was the wise thing to do to save his family and loyal friends. David also knew that God may yet bring him back if He was pleased with David [2 Samuel 15:25-26].
- g. The mood of the procession was somber and sorrowful, consistent with that of a funeral service with mourners progressing along barefoot, with covered heads, and weeping [2 Samuel 15:30] – [weeping, covered heads, and walking barefoot are consistent with funeral processions of the period<sup>1</sup>]. The feelings conveyed are easily understood. As the king is forced to leave his city, and leaving behind all his wealth, comfort and authority; only to flee to an unknown destination. The feeling that especially dominates the poem is that of David’s estrangement from God. This feeling permeates the poem as David writes in verse 1, “earnestly I seek You,” “my soul thirsts for You,” “my body longs for You,” then in verse 6, “On my bed I remember You,” and in verse 8,

---

<sup>1</sup> Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary

“My soul clings to You.” It is clear from these references that David’s sense of loss is derived primarily from his separation from God, specifically from being in God’s presence before the Ark.

- h. David realized that God had bestowed his kingship. David observed first hand how Saul lost his kingship to David, and he realized the same could happen to him. Saul’s attempt to hold onto the throne were futile, and he understands his similar attempts would be futile as well. As David waited for God to intervene with the time and the place of Saul’s removal for office, David waits on God to determine if Absalom has been chosen to replace him, or if David would regain the kingdom. The poem, however, makes it clear that the real loss in David’s mind was the relational intimacy and physical proximity he enjoyed with God.

**C. Literary Structure:**

- a. The typical structure of Hebrew poem has been provided in the “Introduction to the Psalms” article at the beginning of this section. The structure is outlined in terms of “strophes,” or “turnings” within the poem. These turnings are comprised of verse components that have “internal as well as external cohesion” – each of which formulates one distinguishable thought within the poem. This poem is comprised of six strophes; the first includes verses 1 and 2, the second verses 3 & 4, the third verses 5 & 6, the fourth verses 7 & 8, the fifth verses 9 & 10, and the sixth verse 11.

An outline of the structure and main themes is as follows:

**Strophe 1 – Verse 1 & 2 – The Problem of separation**

Ps 63:1 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.

Ps 63:2 I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.

**Strophe 2 – Verse 3 & 4 – The Promise of faithful commitment**

Ps 63:3 Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

Ps 63:4 I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.

**Strophe 3 – Verse 5 & 6 – The Confidence in present circumstances**

Ps 63:5 My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods;  
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

Ps 63:6 On my bed I remember you;

I think of you through the watches of the night.

**Strophe 4 – Verse 7 & 8 – The Confidence for present deliverance**

Ps 63:7 Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.

Ps 63:8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

**Strophe 5 – Verse 9 & 10 – The Specific problem and confidence for deliverance**

Ps 63:9 They who seek my life will be destroyed;  
they will go down to the depths of the earth.

Ps 63:10 They will be given over to the sword  
and become food for jackals.

**Strophe 6 – Verse 11 – The Deliverance assured, rejoice in confidence**

Ps 63:11 But the king will rejoice in God;  
all who swear by God’s name will praise him,  
while the mouths of liars will be silenced.

**D. Exegesis – the following is a more detailed explanation and interpretation of the text:**

**a. In the first strophe, David clearly states his problem as separation from the presence of God.**

Verse 1 begins with a parallelism or “rhymed thought” where David calls out to God and then reaffirms the personal nature of that cry – “You are *my* God.” David is confident that God hears him in this intensely personal prayer. The extensive use of personal pronouns such as “You” and “Your” for God, and “me”, “my”, and “I” for David affirms his personal relationship with God.

- i. The first strophe alone employs ‘You’ [5 times], ‘Your’ [2 times], ‘my’ [2 times], and ‘I’ [2 times]. Thus, in the first two verses the impression of a close personal connection is clearly emphasized. [These personal pronouns are continued throughout the eleven verse poem, with ‘You’ used eleven times, ‘Your’ being used six times, ‘my’ used eleven times, ‘I’ used eight times, and ‘me’ and ‘Him’ each used once.
- ii. The reference to David’s adversaries as ‘those’ is used twice, and ‘they’ is also used twice in the last three verses.] As David ponders God, he reaffirms that he will continue to “seek You [God] earnestly,” that dedicated search is with his entire being. David’s commitment is so intense that he describes his soul “thirsts” for God, and his body “longs” for God. Thus, David expresses the depth of his emotions in the most graphic way

possible.

- iii. The problem of estrangement is reinforced by the image of David’s surroundings in the desert as “a dry and weary land where there is no water.” David thus identifies his own internal condition with the present external condition of his surroundings. The problem being made more personal with the affirmation that David *has* seen God in His sanctuary – David remembered having personally witnessed God in His sanctuary where His power and glory flowed.
  - iv. This image is in stark contrast to David’s present barren wilderness sanctuary. David and his family and friends have left the beautiful mountaintop setting of Jerusalem and the comfort of his palace for a stark and barren safe-haven in the desert. The physical surroundings are now dry and dead, and in this atmosphere David is relationally and spiritually alive in God. Professor Morgan calls this “A Banquet in the Wilderness” because of this dichotomy. This imagery foreshadows the visions of Isaiah [6:5], Ezekiel [1:28] and John [Rev 1:17] where they observed God in Heaven, which at first humbled and awed them, and then strengthened and encouraged them for their ministry. It also calls to mind Jesus statement of seeing the Father and His glory [John 6:46,17:25].
- b. In the second strophe, David states the reason for his commitment to God – because God’s “Hessed” or “loyal-love” is better than life. God is loving and faithful, and deserves to be trusted implicitly and completely. Thus, David will bless and praise God for as long as he lives, and more specifically in this situation for as long as God allows him to live. The situation does not dampen David’s relational connection to God, instead it strengthens it.
- i. David retreated to the wilderness because he knew that his life was forfeit if he remained in the city, and many others would lose their lives as well. Here in the wilderness, he avows in the face of that danger the blessedness of relational intimacy with God. God is the loyal, covenant-keeping God of the scriptures who has repeatedly proven Himself worthy of David’s trust and confidence.
  - ii. Though David has made preparation to enable himself and his companions to survive the current threat in his desert sanctuary, David reaffirms that God is the real basis of his

confidence. David’s faith and trust will endure through this adversity as he anticipates God’s deliverance, however that may work out.

- iii. This imagery foreshadows the hope expressed by the prophets during the exile that God would renew His covenant relationship with His people, and reunite them in the land of their inheritance. Many of the Jews shared this hope during Jesus ministry, although most of the leaders and people misunderstood the new covenant Jesus had called them into [1 Cor 1:21; Gal 3:7].
  - iv. This same confidence allowed the New Testament community to endure trials, tribulations, and death as they held onto the high calling of eternity with Jesus. In the latter part of the first century AD, Jewish and Roman historians wrote that something like a million Messianic Jews and Gentile converts to Christianity were martyred. The number of Jews who perished in 587 BC when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and deported a remnant of the population to Babylon likely exceeded this number. However, the present situation turns out, David knows that God’s will must prevail, and that He can be trusted.
- c. In the third strophe, David states the basis for his personal confidence in his present circumstances – his soul is completely satisfied with God, and he remains undaunted in his present physical circumstances.
- i. The richness of life symbolized by ‘marrow and fatness’ is what David has discovered in the wilderness with regard to his relational intimacy with God. There is nothing better to experience. Hence, even in the bleak surroundings he found himself in, David’s mouth “offers praises with joyful lips.” In the midst of a barren wasteland, David finds refreshment – not with water or food, but in God.
  - ii. During the night with danger lurking in the shadows, David finds comfort and solace in contemplating God. This image foreshadows that of Paul in the New Testament having learned to be totally satisfied in whatever circumstances he found himself in [Phip 4:12]. Also, when Jesus was troubled, He often retreated to prayer for refreshment and comfort. This form of prayer retreat is an excellent reminder for God’s people throughout the ages.

- iii. Jesus also reminded His apostles that they lacked nothing when He had sent them out without provisions with only the Gospel message for the nation [Luke 22:35]. Our experience of God’s faithfulness in the past forms the basis for our hope for the future.
- d. In the fourth strophe, David states the reason for his confidence in the future – which is God’s supernatural protection.
  - i. David reaffirms in verse 7 that God has been his help thus far in his life. The verbal picture of “God’s protective wings” that cover and shelter David, bringing his response of joyful singing.
  - ii. David’s soul [meaning his complete being] clings to God, and God protects him with His “Right Hand” symbolic of the strong hand. In this image it is the strong side [right side] from which help is expected in military encounters, as it is the right hand that is the offensive side capable of grasping a sword, javelin or other means of offensive protection from attack.
  - iii. The image demonstrates that it is God who goes before him and does the fighting [1 Sam 17:47; 2 Chron 13:12; Isaiah 8:10; Zec 4:6; Jer 17:7]. This is the true definition of “Jihad” – meaning God fighting for His people, it does not mean that we need to fight for God. Paul states this concept in a slightly different fashion, “So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’” [Heb 13:6].
- e. In the fifth strophe, David having stated the reasons for his confidence in God, he identifies his specific problem and the expected result – there are those who are seeking to take his life. However, after all that David has been through he is confident that God will deliver him.
  - i. The depths of the earth [sheol] will swallow his adversaries through the power of the sword that they intended to inflict upon David. They will be further humiliated by being consumed by scavenger animals instead of receiving the proper burial befitting noblemen.
  - ii. David expresses his hope and expectation of a final triumph of God’s divine justice. God will ultimately prevail because His will cannot be thwarted by the machinations of sinful man [Prov 16:4].
  - iii. This same confidence is demonstrated in Revelation, where God’s justice will be

ultimately be enforced and the guilty parties will pay a horrible price for turning against God’s Anointed.

- f. In the sixth strophe, having been assured of God’s deliverance, David restates his confidence in God. David has now been vindicated and he has no choice but to rejoice along with all whose hope is in God.
- i. All of humanity will ultimately submit to death, and all will stand before God and face His justice. God’s character demands that justice will be done, thus all evildoers will give account for their actions and they will suffer the consequences of their sin and decadence. Only those whose hope is in God will be rewarded.
  - ii. David is confident that a fitting end to his present situation and his life in general is assured, because God Character will require it. By extension, every believer can rely on God’s justice to be both fair and honorable... in the end, no one will be able to say that God was unfair with them. [Deuteronomy 23:14; 2 Kings 17:39; Psalm 31:1,15; Na 1:7; John 14:1; 2 Cor 1:9-10; Heb 4:16; Phil 1:6].

**E. Conclusion:**

The richness of meaning found in Psalm 63 is unlocked through the historical and relational context, as well as the geographical context, through which we can enter into and understand David’s situational and emotional turmoil. Through a close reading of the text, we can walk along with king David as he leaves Jerusalem and enters his desert stronghold and experience his emotions. As the locale changes from lush to desolate, we find in this bleak location that David discovers new depths of intimacy and dependency with God. The theology revealed in this poem speaks out to God’s people throughout history. The message is based on the personal relationship of the believer with God, and finding joy and fulfillment in His transcendent power and Glory. Regardless of the temporal circumstances we find ourselves in, the faithful nature of our covenant making and covenant keeping God assures His people that His justice will prevail. God is sovereign, and ultimately He in control of all earthly circumstances. This message was of great comfort to the exiled king David, it was also of comfort to the exiled nation of Israel in Babylon, and it is of comfort to modern day Christians who are reminded that regardless of our circumstances this world is not our home and God Himself is our ultimate inheritance.