

A Study of Psalm 61
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When undertaking a study of the Psalms one can expect to be inundated with imagery, allusions, parallelism – basically letters of poetry written on a masterful level. We are given glimpses of a time long gone and sometimes forgotten; people of another age, and at times, people which may even appear to be of another world altogether. The Psalms themselves are instrumental in the composition of the Old Testament. They are books of poetry, history, and prophecy combined. Yet, aside from all the treasures the Psalms hold, none compare to the timeless truths they contain. Messages passed from one generation to the next. Lessons of days gone by calling out through the centuries to warn us of lessons once learned. Hopefully, we will discover at least a few of these treasures in our study of the 61st Psalm of the Old Testament.

We have all encountered times in our lives when we've cried out to God in pain or distress – when the world surrounds us and fear is camped outside our door. David, King of Israel was undergoing such trials when he wrote Psalm 61. It appears as though David wrote this while *he was separated from his usual spiritual privileges*.¹ You can almost hear David's cry for things to be as they used to be. With this in consideration I would classify this to be a Psalm of Lament. Even though there are allusions to the Messiah (v. 7) it appears as though the entire structure of the Psalm is that of a cry for help – as seen in the very first verse.

¹ Jamieson, Fausset, Brown: Commentary Critical and Explanatory of the Whole Bible; www.crosswalk.com

In order to emphasize the desperation of his cry and his need for God's attention David opens this Psalm with a synonymous parallel verse. He asks God to hear his cry and then he repeats his request by imploring God to listen to his prayer.

In the second verse David continues to call "from the ends of the earth" as his "heart grows faint". This is a prime example of poetic license as I am sure that David is not at the ends of the earth – wherever that may be! I do believe that this is just another indicator that David is not where he should be, and in comparison to where God is David feels as though he is at "the ends of the earth". He finally lets us in on what he wants, what he desires of God; that is, to be led to the rock that is "higher than I". He is feeling a lot of pain and isolation and he longs to be brought back to the Lord (Psalm 18:2) that is the foundation of God (Psalm 40:2), the rock that he has grown so fond of.

In verse three we are presented with synthetic parallel lines. David tells the Lord that He has been his refuge, but then he gets more specific and depicts the Lord as a strong tower. Through this parallelism he also expresses a metaphor of God; He is a refuge and a strong tower.

Following this train of thought into the next verse David is longing for the tent of the Lord. He is simply stating that he wants to live with God in an intimate way forever. By doing this he hopes to take refuge in the "shelter of your wings" - a beautiful use of anthropomorphism! Even though men do not have wings the Psalmist is ascribing to God (immaterial) the characteristics of man (material). This technique really helps the reader to gain a better understanding of a God that is not seen with human eyes.

In verse five we see David, in a sense, reminding God of his vows (prayers) and the heritage that he has been given (spiritual blessings of Israel). David does not think that the Lord needs to be reminded of this, he just knows that God is bound to His Word and His promises. This is a practice that all children of God can benefit from. Call out to the Lord with confidence that He has heard your prayers and that He has given us an inheritance, one that was promised to “those who fear your name”.

Beginning in verse six David refers to himself in the third person and asks that the days and years of his life be increased for many generations. He is not only referring to himself but also to his royal line all the way up to the Christ.

Still in the third person in verse seven he asks to “sit as a king in God’s presence”² under His protection. It appears as though David is using a foreshadowing allusion. He is referencing the reign of the Christ as He will sit in a throne before God for all time. He also personifies love and faithfulness when he asks that God appoint them to protect him (David, his descendants and the Christ). He is treating concepts (abstract nouns at best – love, faithfulness) as though they were individual beings subject to God. He brings about this picture of soldiers being appointed to guard them at all times.

Then, interestingly enough, in the final verse David appears to close this Psalm with a conditional statement. He simply states that if all the preceding mandates are fulfilled; in regards to his line and kingdom, then he will sing praises to God’s name and fulfill his vows day after day. It appears as though he is saying, “if you keep your

promises then I'll keep mine and I will also sing praises to your name". What David must have thought that he might bargain with God?

Well, at the conclusion of Psalm 61 the question that is probably on everybody's mind is, "what was happening to David at the time that he wrote this lament unto God?" Unfortunately, we may never know for sure. It appears as though he was in the midst of some kind of exile. Some attribute this to Saul and others to Absalom.³ The latter would probably be the best option considering he refers to himself as king in verse six and he was not king when he was running from Saul. Yet others would argue that verse six is a reference to the Messiah and has nothing to do with David at all. So, obviously the only thing we can really know about the history of this Psalm is that it was written during a time of distress in David's life.

There is much more to be found in the words of the 61st Psalm irrelevant of why, when, and even where it was written. The greater truth that is exposed through David's words is the revelatory truth of the qualities of God. Just as we often feel exiled from our rightful positions, so has the King of a mighty nation and we can follow his example of what to do in these circumstances. Ask that you may take refuge in the strong tower that stands upon the rock of ages. Seek to dwell in the tent of the Lord as you may live with Him in an intimate way. Hold strong to the promises of the Lord as you try to make sense of the state you are in. Know that He has appointed love and faithfulness to protect you in your darkest hour.

² Jamieson, Fausset, Brown: Commentary Critical and Explanatory of the Whole Bible; www.crosswalk.com

³ Matthew Henry: Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible; www.crosswalk.com

Yet; above all, the most important truth that we can glean from these words of David is ‘cry out to God!’ No matter what the situation or how lost you may seem, never cease to cry out to the Lord your God. He is faithful to Kings, He is faithful to His Son – so shall he be faithful to us!

“Hear my cry, O God;

listen to my prayer.”

·Psalm 61:1