

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Psalms</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>18</b>		Mason Depew
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### THE LIFE OF THE KING

**Introduction:** As you read the psalms, you can hardly avoid noticing that so many of them describe and reflect on the experiences of David's life. Clearly, however, most Israelites had not been through these same trials, such as being personally hunted all over the land by King Saul, so what were they supposed to get out of singing these psalms? What are we supposed to get out of singing about David's pain and tribulation? To borrow some popular modern terminology, are we just supposed to be impressed by the authenticity of David's lived experience?

Psalm 61 provides us with key clues to answer this question, particularly in verses 6 and 7. The reason David's life mattered so much to the ancient Israelites is that he was God's anointed (in Hebrew, "messiah") king. The reason David's life interests us is not primarily that he is relatable (although in some ways he certainly is), but because of his *office*. As Israel's king, he was their chief mediator standing between them and the Lord.<sup>1</sup> When he ruled well, he brought God's blessings of peace and prosperity on the nation. When he violated the Law of God, he brought down God's severe curses upon them all. At his best he gives us a taste of the way Jesus his son will rule the New Creation in all blessedness, and at his worst David shows us the curses which Jesus took upon himself at the Cross.

1. Verses 1-3: David cries out to the Lord in his distress.
  - a. One of the important purposes that verses like these accomplish coming from David is they remind the people that their king is a mere man.
    - i. There was an extremely dangerous tendency among ancient kings to claim divine or semi-divine status. The Egyptians treated the pharaohs like living gods on earth. The Romans deified their emperors after death. This, of course, would do little to keep the king's already powerful ego in check and give him excuses to run roughshod over the people.
    - ii. Israel's king, on the other hand, was supposed to write a copy of the Law of Moses for himself and read from it every day of his life to remind him that he was under the Law of God just like every other Israelite.<sup>2</sup> Verses like Psalm 61:1-4 show that

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a trend among some conservative Christian circles to view Israel as the blueprint for good government in every nation. Most Americans intuitively prefer a republic, and therefore American theologians have often argued that Israel was never supposed to be a monarchy, citing texts like 1 Samuel 8:5, where the people demand a king from Samuel, and he rebukes them. The problem is that this reading fails to take Deuteronomy 17 into account, where the foreseen problem is *not* monarchy itself, but the manner in which the king will rule. In other words, the problem is not that the people are demanding a king, but that they are demanding a *worldly* king ("like all the nations"), and they will get exactly that. Israel was always going to have a king because Israel's purpose in God's plan of salvation was always to foreshadow and prepare for Jesus to bring the fully realized Kingdom of God, which is anything *but* "like all the nations." Rather than being a kingdom of compromises that gradually becomes indistinguishable from the world, Jesus's Kingdom will fully transform and integrate the world into its ideal when he returns to earth.

<sup>2</sup> "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping

David did generally see himself this way. He is not here putting on a facade of invincibility, but rather admitting that his very life depends on the Lord's power alone. Therefore, the people ought to look to God alone, as the "higher rock," to give them stability and solve their problems. David is just his servant, like everyone else in this sense.

- iii. This point is also supported by the previous psalm, 60, which presents the power of God as the *only* strength by which Israel wins any of her battles. There is no room for David to boast in either of these psalms.
- b. The first two verses speak of David crying out or calling to the Lord in prayer. The Old Testament treats this as the pre-eminent evidence of true faith: a believer turns to the Lord in need. We see this even in the earliest chapters of Genesis, shortly after the Fall,<sup>3</sup> and it continues up through the Prophets.<sup>4</sup> This is one of the simplest fruits of faith, and yet it appears to also be one that God cherishes most tenderly, just as earthly parents delight to meet their children's needs.
- c. Verses 2-3 depict God in very concrete terms.
  - i. The rock higher than David suggests to us a huge and solid rock; something that would be very difficult to physically move. This is actually one of the most common metaphors for God's relationship to Israel in the whole Old Testament, and it seems to have been one of David's favorites in particular.<sup>5</sup> The Psalms use this word for rock as a metaphor for God much more than to speak about literal rocks!<sup>6</sup>
  - ii. Describing the Lord as his "refuge" implies shelter and rest from the natural travails of life. The Lord gives David such spiritual comfort that he is able to give over into God's hands all the future problems that may come upon him as king of his nation.<sup>7</sup>
  - iii. The "strong tower" here suggests protection, but more specifically protection from violent attackers. From Goliath to his own son, Absalom, the Lord did indeed shield David from many who wished to kill him, and David rightly saw that he could not take credit for these victories. And through David as their mediator, he shielded Israel as a whole from these threats.

## 2. Verses 4-5: David's confidence before the Lord.

- a. As we come to the middle of the Psalm, David appears to grow in confidence as he makes his requests of the Lord.

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all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel." - Deuteronomy 17:18-20

<sup>3</sup> "To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD." - Genesis 4:26

<sup>4</sup> For example, "And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'" - Zechariah 13:9

<sup>5</sup> Not just in the Psalms, either. David uses this imagery repeatedly as he approaches his death in 2 Samuel 22.

<sup>6</sup> Notice that Jesus's parable of the two men who built their houses on sand versus a rock comes right before the crowds remark about how he teaches them with authority, unlike the scribes, in Matthew 7:24-29. This makes even more sense when you realize Jesus is alluding to this Old Testament image of God's power and authority as a rock for his people. Jesus isn't standing on the rock, like David did. Jesus *is* the rock!

<sup>7</sup> When we read the word "refuge" we should think of Jesus's teaching in Matthew 6:25-34, wherein he promises to us that we can relax, mentally speaking, and let go of our worries because God cares for us as our heavenly Father.

- i. By “tent” in verse 4 he means the Tabernacle, because of course the Temple was not yet built. David loves nothing more than to be in the presence of his Lord at all times. It is a great tragedy that so many American Christians do not appear to love being with God’s people in his house like this. Some of that is no doubt due to our individualistic culture, but also to the poor quality of church services that do not really feed the people with the Word of God. Would that more of us saw God’s house as a refuge, where we may truly rest for a time from our worldly cares under the wings of our merciful Father!
  - ii. Sheltering under the “wings” of God is another important Old Testament metaphor for God’s relationship to Israel. It is interesting that while God does not explicitly call himself the father of individual Israelites nearly as clearly as he does in the New Testament, there are Old Testament images like this which suggest that idea. David, as Israel’s king and mediator, would only dare to ask for this kind of treatment if God had already established this kind of relationship.<sup>8</sup>
- b. In verse 5 David gives the reasons for his confidence that the Lord will treat him favorably.
- i. First, David has made vows to the Lord. In English this statement sounds very odd, because anyone can make vows and there is no reason that should impress the Lord here. We need to understand that the Hebrew word for vows here can mean both a literal oath sworn to the Lord, as well as animal sacrifices made to pay a vow.<sup>9</sup> In other words, because of the way these vows worked, to say “I made a vow” can mean either you made a promise but have not yet kept it, or you promised to offer a sacrifice and you did make that sacrifice, keeping the vow. Therefore, in Psalm 61:5 David likely means that he has made the offerings he vowed to make, since the king breaking his vows would bring swift punishment down on Israel.<sup>10</sup>
  - ii. Second, David has already received the heritage of those who fear God. Here he is almost certainly referring to the fact that David personally led the final conquests of Canaan, completing God’s promises to their forefathers at last. This was the inheritance of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who showed they feared the Lord by following him throughout their nomadic lives. Esau, for a counterexample, showed by his actions that he did not fear the Lord or value his promises, so his descendants, the Edomites, were forever excluded from the inheritance of the promised land.<sup>11</sup>
3. Verses 6-8: David calls on the Lord to keep the promises of his covenant.
- a. These verses are undeniably alluding to God’s promises in his covenant with David.<sup>12</sup> The similarities in wording and content are too obvious to ignore. Meditating on the way God promised to treat David’s sons as his own sons also goes a long way to explain why David has been portraying God in such a tender, fatherly way throughout this psalm.
  - b. We ought to note that David switches here from the first to the third person.

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<sup>8</sup> See especially Deuteronomy 32:11-13, which presents God in very overtly maternal tones, “Like an eagle that stirs up its **nest**, that flutters over its **young**, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD alone guided him, no foreign god was with him. He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he **suckled** him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock.” [emphasis added]

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Leviticus 22:18-23, for instructions about this kind of offering.

<sup>10</sup> “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.” - Deuteronomy 23:21

<sup>11</sup> When Judah went into Exile many centuries later, Ezekiel 36:5 treats the Edomites’ settling of a part of Judah’s inheritance as a great scandal that the Lord will avenge, because they have no right to it.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Samuel 7:9-16.

- i. The first reason for this is fairly clear: David knows he will not rule forever, as God had promised one of his descendants would. In these verses, therefore, David does not stand apart from the people he rules but with them, as they all eagerly look forward to his son's arrival.
  - ii. There is an important second reason, however: this switch from the first to the third person reminds us that David's office is bigger than himself. The life of the king does not matter to God's people because of his authentic and relatable life experience. The life of the king matters to God's people because the king stands between them and God as a mediator: if God blesses the king with long life, he will bless all the people with him. If God cuts short the life of the king in judgment, that is a sign of God's curses falling on all the people.<sup>13</sup>
- c. David's wording of "steadfast love and faithfulness" also ought to remind us of the covenant with David, wherein the Lord promised his steadfast love would not depart from David's son, as it did from Saul.<sup>14</sup> When the Lord binds his love to you in a covenant of grace, you can be absolutely certain he will not abandon his commitment.
  - d. In the final verse, David brings up his vows again. This time he has worded it differently to make it clear he is *completing* his vows, but they have a different tone now. He is not placing them as the basis for his demands on the Lord, as in verse 5. Instead, now he keeps his vows joyfully, no doubt because he is so thankful for the Lord's wonderful promises to him and to his household. So as *king* David keeps his vows to earn blessings for the people, but as a private individual David relies on God's gracious promises like all the rest of us and keeps his vows in gratitude for the good news of his son's coming.<sup>15</sup>
4. Psalm 61 shows us several ways that David is both like and unlike our Lord, his descendent.
- a. Jesus is the Christ (anointed one), who is even greater than David. He stands between God and us, his people, representing us to God and God to us, but he is an infinitely better mediator than any of his earthly ancestors. Jesus completed his vows without any error whatsoever. He kept the terms of the covenant in the way that the kings of Israel failed to do.<sup>16</sup>
  - b. In Jesus's wilderness temptations, and in his passion, we see the endurance of extreme suffering; even more severe trials than David had to face. Unlike David, however, there was no deliverance for Christ until the wrath of God was fully satisfied on our accounts.
  - c. Unlike David, who went down and slept with his fathers in death when his time was complete, and remains dead to this day, Jesus is alive. He has passed through from death to life everlasting, putting death to death for his people's sake. Because our great king lives and cannot die, our everlasting life is guaranteed! This is what Paul means when he

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<sup>13</sup> R.C. Sproul once astutely observed that you can see this play out in the contrast between the northern and southern kingdoms after Solomon's death. The northern kings reigned on average for far fewer years than the kings of Judah, and the northern kingdom changed dynasties ten times! Then, of course, the northern kingdom was exiled first, so the life of their nation as a whole was shorter than Judah.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Samuel 7:15.

<sup>15</sup> This is a feature of the way the Law of Moses worked that is very confusing to many people. On the national level, Israel's good works earned blessings or curses from God. On the personal level, the Israelites relied entirely on the grace of God for their salvation just like New Testament Christians do. Consider, for example, that Moses failed to enter the promised land because of his disobedience as the mediator of Israel. Nevertheless, Hebrews 11:24-29 clearly presents Moses as one of the Old Testament believers who held on to the promises of the heavenly promised land. Even as he died looking at the earthly promised land of which he was not worthy, Moses was carried into God's presence to await the ultimate promised land of the New Creation.

<sup>16</sup> "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." - John 17:4-5

says Christ's resurrection is the "firstfruits" of our resurrection. Jesus was the first to be "harvested," as it were, from the ground, but the Resurrection will not be complete until we have all been raised just as he was.<sup>17</sup>

- d. Jesus's reign is not yet as fully consummated as it will be when he returns, but it is very real even right here and right now. This is clear right from the Great Commission, which says *all* authority and power have been granted to Christ, and he exercises this authority over every nation to build and preserve the Church.<sup>18</sup> There are many other passages which follow exactly this same logic, such as when Paul says all things have been put under Christ's feet, and rules over them with the Church.<sup>19</sup>
- e. It seems like madness, but Christ has his reasons for ruling the nations in such a way that he allows his Church to be persecuted until he returns. One chief reason is that this path of persecution is the one he walked for our sake, and so it is fitting that we should do likewise for his name's sake. Not to save ourselves, but to bear witness to the watching world that we really believe what we say about our great heavenly king.
- f. We cannot overstate the value of realizing more and more that Christ really does rule all things for the benefit of his people. As Calvin said in his commentary on Psalm 61, "So numerous are the dangers which surround us, that we could not stand a single moment if his eye did not watch over our preservation. But the true security for a happy life lies in being persuaded that we are under divine government."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Notice how Paul connects Jesus's incorruptible life with his rule over all things and the destruction of his enemies. "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." - 1 Corinthians 15:20-25.

<sup>18</sup> Note that Jesus's authority over all things is the basis for the Church's mission. We evangelize all the nations because he already owns them. "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" - Matthew 28:16-20

<sup>19</sup> "And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." - Ephesians 1:22-23. Paul reinforces this in the next chapter when he says that God has already "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." - Ephesians 2:6-7. Paul was actually asking persecuted Christians (Paul himself was in prison as he wrote this!) to believe they were already seated as rulers with Christ of the whole earth!

<sup>20</sup> *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. 5, pg. 416.