

Prayer that Overcomes Distance

Psalm 61

Adoniram Judson is one of my favorite early missionaries. He and his wife, Ann, were among the first Protestant missionaries from American soil. Adoniram had an amazing missionary career. He pioneered Baptist work in Burma that has resulted in more than 5,000 Burmese Baptist Churches, with over 1 million members. He published tracts that were distributed widely, translated the Bible into Burmese, and produced a Burmese grammar and dictionary.

His service to the Lord was costly for him and his family. Judson served in Burma for 38 years. In that time, He buried two wives and 6 of his 13 children, widowed a third wife dying at age 61, and was buried at sea without so much as a prayer.

Adoniram said, *If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings.*ⁱ

I wonder if Adoniram ever struggled with faith and the reality of God's infinite love and mercy? Perhaps he did, especially when Ann died. Her health was broken by the burden of trying to keep Adoniram alive while he was locked in a Burmese Death Prison for 17 months. Soon after Adoniram's release, Ann died. Soon after that, their infant daughter, Maria, died.

Devastated by the losses, darkness settled over Adoniram's soul. He withdrew and began to live an ascetic life. He practiced various forms of self-mortification, denying himself anything that might conceivably support pride or pleasure. He stopped translating the OT. He formally renounced his honorary Doctor of Divinity awarded by Brown University. He gave all his worldly possessions away and reduced his missionary pay.

On the second anniversary of Ann's death, he left the mission compound and built a hut in the jungle. He dug a grave beside the hut and sat beside it contemplating the stages of the body's decay.ⁱⁱ

He finally began to climb out of the darkness and the next year what he called *the spirit of inquiry* began to spread across the land.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was a long and painful journey for Adoniram Judson to get to the place that he could say, *If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by*

infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings.

And it will be a race of endurance for each one of us as well. We may start with the mistaken idea that being a Christian will be easy, a charmed life. The reality is some of you may be fighting to believe. Doubts come for intellectual reasons—miracles like the resurrection; psychological reasons—I don't feel saved; and physical reasons—suffering of the body takes its toll.

Psalm 61 will help us. It is an individual lament. We are not told the specific details that brought the psalmist to pen this prayer, which makes it very applicable to those struggling with a sense of distance from God.^{iv} Brothers and Sisters, there is hope on the other side of the darkness and distance that can dominate our lives.

Psalm 61 has 2 stanzas that swing on the hinge of verse 5: verse 1-5 are a plea with statements of confidence; and verses 6-8 are a prayer for the eternal enthronement of God's king. Verse 5 works like this: it holds the psalm together, serving as a bookend for the first stanza with the repeated word *listen/heard* (1,5) and for the final stanza with the repeated word *vows* (5,8).^v

I want us to walk briefly through the Psalm and then draw out some lessons on prayer.

Verses 1-5, A Prayer for Protection

The first stanza is bookended by the word *listen* (1) and *heard* (5). The verb is the same word in both cases, only in verse 1, it is a request, and in verse 5, it is an expression of thanksgiving for answered prayer.^{vi}

A. His distress

The psalmist was in distress, and he expressed his distress in **two ways** in verse 2. **First**, *from the end of the earth* he called to God.^{vii}

The distance from God he experienced could be a reference to his geographical distance from the tent that was God's dwelling place in Jerusalem at the time, or it could be an expression of how he felt, or both. He was away from home in a distant, dangerous, unfamiliar place, and he felt distant from God.

The **second** way he expressed his distress was by voicing his faintness of heart: *my heart is faint*. Some versions translate *faint* with the word *overwhelmed*. He was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted.

This is the Psalmist's situation when he calls on God. What did the psalmist do at lowest point of his life? He voiced his requests based on his prior experience with God.

B. His requests

He made **3 requests** that get more personal and relational as they go: *lead me to the rock that is higher than I (2b)*; *let me dwell in your tent forever (4a)*; *let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings (4b)*!

In the **first request**, David needs God to guide^{viii} him to the place he personally does not have the resources and ability to attain.

The **second and third requests** are parallel lines where the second line intensifies the first: *let me dwell in your tent forever!* (4a), and *let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!* (4b).

You see how the requests are getting more relational. At first, *lead me to the rock*. Now, *invite me into your house*. Let me be a guest^{ix} in the holy place. Then, He went even further: *let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!*^x

While it could be nothing more than the common occurrence of a hen gathering her brood (cf. Mt. 23:37), the context of God's tent points to the wings of the cherubim above the seat of mercy overshadowing the ark of God in the most holy place.

The word *forever* at the end of the first line applies to both lines (4). The psalmist longed for the nearness of God and prayed that it might never end. In fact, prayer bridged the distance and put him before the throne of God (cf Heb 4:16).

C. His motivation

From a sense of distance and despair that had settled over his life, what was the **encouragement that moved** him to make his requests? Verses 3 and 5 tell us. They are tied together by the repetition of, *for you have*, which gives the basis for his petitions.^{xi}

First, in verse 3, God had been his *refuge* and *strong tower* in the past. The reasoning of faith is, *I've been here before and God was faithful, so hold on*. He is simply praying what he knows to be true of God.^{xii}

Second, in verse 5, the psalmist reflected on his past experience of God hearing his *vows*^{xiii} and on the blessings of his heritage of faith among God's covenant people.

In short, the psalmist's past experience with God moved him to pray about present difficulties.

Verses 6-8, A Prayer for the Kingdom

In verse 5, David mentioned God had heard his *vows*, but he didn't give us any details about the content of his vows. In verse 8, he returned to the topic and revealed the details. God fulfilling his promise to David would result in unending praise. So, we see how verse 5 holds the two stanzas of this psalm together like a hinge.

In verse 6, the focus of the prayer shifts from a personal petition (1-5) to a prayer for God to establish his forever Kingdom on earth (6-7).^{xiv} David was not simply praying for himself but also for the kings who would come after him.

If the prayer of the 1st stanza gest more relational moving from rock to tent to wings, the prayer in the 2nd stanza moves from time to eternity—days to generations to forever.

Prolong the life of the king is literally *add days upon days* (yom 'al yom) to him.

The next line moves from days to *generations*: literally *his years endure to generation upon generation*.

In verse 7 he moves from generations to *forever*: *may he sit before God forever*. God had made big promises to David, and he knew it. David knew that the kingdom was bigger than him and his personal reign. God promised David that his Son would reign forever:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom (12) ... I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son (14a). ... my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul. Whom I put away before you (15a). ... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever (16). (2Sam 7:12,14a,15a,16)

David was praying for much, much, more than his personal kingdom; he was praying for the eternal establishment of the kingdom of his greater Son who would reign forever.

It is uncanny how many times in Scripture you will see *steadfast love and/or faithfulness* used in association with the Davidic king.^{xv} What sustained the Davidic dynasty was the covenant God made with him (7b).^{xvi}

Though Davidic kingdom collapsed, God's promise did not fail. Paul picked this up when he showed God keeping his promise in sending his *Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord* (Rom 1:3b-4). This is what David was praying for, and this is what God delivered.

I see some lessons on prayer in this psalm that I want us to take home. A paragraph in our church covenant reads: *We will seek to fellowship with our brothers and sisters, and we will not neglect to pray for one another and ourselves.*

I want to offer to you that we should pray for ourselves and for the larger concern of God's Kingdom

1. We should pray for ourselves (1-5)

One of the encouraging things about the psalms is the psalmist does not neglect to pray for himself. He understood he needed it.

Do you realize you need to pray primarily for yourself? I fear many Christian neglect to pray for themselves. The enemy tells us its selfish, and we buy in. You will never be able to pray for others rightly until you work through your own junk before God. We can pray for change in others while never considering that I myself may need to change. This is common in marriages.

There are things that need done in you that God is not going to do without you opening your heart to him.

A. Prayer closes the distance between God and me.

There is probably not a person among who has not felt that God is distant at times. Perhaps, you have thought, *I wish I could close the gap and know that he has heard me.* The psalmist said, *hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer* (1).

We can feel that we are at the *end of the earth* (2a), and God is out there, somewhere, and could not be more disinterested. Perhaps you are overwhelmed,

exhausted and at the end of yourself and your resources. Distance is the best descriptor.

Have you ever simply wanted to escape? People try to in so many unhealthy ways.

The problem is you cannot escape you! You cannot escape your past, pain, or failure; You can, however, face those demons in Christ so they lose power in your life. The good news is you can run to our loving heavenly Father who is a *rock, refuge, and strong tower* (2b-3). Running to God is the only escape that will help.

When we run to God as our rock, refuge, and strong tower, He invites us into deeper relationship—as a guest in his tent and to take shelter under his wings (4), where he mercifully and gently deals with all our issues.

We may be avoiding praying for ourselves and closing the distance because we want to nurse our anger, hold our grudge, punish someone, lay with our lovers, keep our pride, and indulge in our sin.

When you're drawn deeper and deeper into relationship with him, he deals with all the damage you are protecting. He takes our misguided fear and gives us the *heritage of those who fear his name* (5b).

The only way you can escape you is by fleeing to him.

If you were in the prayer Sunday School class last fall, I cited Ole Hallesby who wrote a classic on prayer that he creatively titled, *Prayer*. He captured the most moving biblical definition or description of prayer quoting Revelation 3:20; *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.*

Hallesby said, *To pray is to let Jesus come into our hearts. This teaches us, in the first place, that it is not our prayer which moves the Lord Jesus. It is Jesus who moves us to pray.*^{xiii}

Has it occurred to you that God won't let you work your way out of your trouble so that he might teach you your need of him?

B. Prayer confesses some things about us and about God

Prayer confesses that we are helpless. Again, Hallesby said, *only those who are helpless can truly pray.*^{xiv}

Overwhelmed and feeling distant, David reflected on God's past faithfulness (3,5). That moved him to pray for God to intervene and save him from his enemies. God had been his refuge and strong tower, so he prayed for God to do what David could never do—*lead me to the rock that is higher than I* (2b-3).

God had heard his prayers and given him a rich heritage of faith, so David prayed that God would invite him to take *refuge in his tent* and *shelter under his wings* (4-5).

That is such a bold prayer. A man could not enter the most holy place and live. But that is exactly where David wanted God to hide him, a place where the enemies of David's soul would not be able to gain access.

You see how David was confessing his helplessness (2b). He could not save himself. As brilliant, valiant, and talented as he was, he was no match for his foes, but his foes were no match for God.

When we have a sense of our own helplessness, we will pray and find sweet communion with Jesus.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, have you come to terms with the reality that you are not your own solution? You can't make it on your terms. I want to say to Christians simply obey the Bible.

As believers, you have what you need to have a good marriage, to parent your children, and to live the Christian life. Simply obey the Bible. We are not wiser than God. God speaks through his word.

The psalmist's prayer was informed by what he knew to be true of God.

2. We have larger prayer concerns than ourselves (6-8)

It is by no means wrong to pray for ourselves. I need prayer more than anyone I know. Praying for larger concerns and neglecting to pray for myself is not superior praying.

It was not until David prayed through his own sense of distance from God and the despair that had settled over his soul that he gained the perspective to see where God was moving history and his place in it.

Only when his personal concerns were worked out, was he ready to pray rightly about the larger concerns of life, namely the coming reign of God's Son in history. Until we lay our burdens before the Lord and receive his mercy and acceptance, we are going to have a hard time praying rightly about the larger issues of life.

In verses 6-7, David prayed that the covenant God made with him, promising him a Son who would reign forever, would be fulfilled because of God's steadfast love and faithfulness, that is God's faithfulness to his covenant.

This is the OT way of praying how Jesus taught is: *When you pray say, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt. 6:9-10).*

David understood that if one promise of God failed, it was game over. Prayer would not matter; life would be of no consequence; and hope would be foolish. Everything—the future, my life, your life—rides on God's appointed and reigning King.

Often, we so idolize with lesser things—our lives, careers, education, desires, and wants—that we have little to no thought of the Kingdom of God. It's a struggle, but our present life often seems more enduring than the eternal Reign of God. This is why we need to be drawn near to God to be able to see the larger concerns rightly.

When David personally poured out his requests to God, and found refuge in him, his prayer turned toward the larger, permanent, eternal issues of life that ultimately give meaning to loving your spouse, raising your kids, working your job, and fighting for faith and holiness.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the only way we are going to find the enchanted life of unending praise is when God's reign is finally established (8).

Conclusion:

We should pray for ourselves, and we should pray for Kingdom of God to come. If you have not placed your faith in Christ, the first prayer you need to pray is a prayer of repentance and then show that being baptized.

ⁱ John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ*, 87. Quote from Eugene Myers Harrison, *Giants of the Missionary Trail*, 73.

ⁱⁱ John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ*, 99-100.

ⁱⁱⁱ Piper 101.

^{iv} Because of its placement, I like to imagine the psalm is influenced by the same situation that brought forth Psalm 60. Psalm 60 is a community lament in the time of his foreign campaigns—notice all the 1st person plural pronouns (60:1,3,5,10,11,12). Psalm 61 is David's individual lament *from the end of the earth* (61:2), perhaps written during those times he was away from his home and his city. The psalmist lamented both publicly and privately. Both psalms have a military background and call for defense and safety (60:9-12; 61:1-4), refer to those who fear the Lord (60:4; 61:5), speak of enemies, one specifically (60:6-8) and the other generally (61:3). See Allan Harman, *Mentor, Psalms*, vol. 1: Psalm 1-72, 451.

^v For me this argues for the king as the one praying throughout the psalm. The prayer for the king then not an abrupt later addition, but the planned composition of the psalm.

^{vi} The word in both cases is *sama* only in verse 1 it is an imperative, showing a prayer request, and in verse 5 it is in the perfect tense, showing a completed action or an answer to prayer.

^{vii} Wilson, NIVAC, *Psalms*, vol 1, 869n3. The phrase, *ends of the earth*, occurs 11 times in the Psalter, seven of which are in Book 2 (Pss 42-72). The seven occurrences in Book 2 are, 46:9;48:10; 59:13; 61:2; 65:5; 67:7; 72:8). By comparison it is used only 4 times outside Book 2 (2:8; 22:27; 98:3; 135:7). The phrase is part of the thematic message of Book 2. Near Psalm 61. The phrase links thematically back to Psalm 59:13, showing God's universal rule. It looks forward to Psalm 65:5, showing God's salvation is the only hope of the world; and here it shows the Psalmist's distress.

^{viii} *Guide* is one more link to Psalm 60. In 60:9 the psalmist asked, *who will lead me to Edom?* He was confessing his inability to take Edom.

^{ix} *Dwell* (*gur*) the word used for a resident alien, like Abraham *sojourning/dwelling* in Canaan (cf. Gen 20:1).

^x The metaphor of *shelter* or *shadow* of God's wings is not uncommon in the Psalter (17:8; 36:7; 57:1).

^{xi} Tate, WBC, *Psalms 51-100*, 115.

^{xii} Wilcock, BST, *Psalms 1-72*, 218.

^{xiii} Vows are not bargains, but expressions of truthfulness and true devotion. Think of swearing to tell the truth in court for truth-telling, and of a wedding for expressions of devotion. We shouldn't think of vows as bargaining with God—If God will do something I really want, I'll do something he really wants. Such vows are foolish and rash, lacking the elements of truth and devotion. Jesus upended the practice, saying, *let what you say be simply "yes" or "no"* (Mt 5:33-36; cf. 23:16-22).

^{xiv} This kind of praying links this psalm with 63:11, where David prays, *But the king shall rejoice in God*. These are not so much abrupt insertions as purposeful movement in the psalms.

^{xv} At least 9 times: Ps 89:1-2, 14,24,28,33,49; 2 Sam 7:15; Isa 55:3.

^{xvi} You can see this reality played out by the contrast between the Southern and Northern kingdoms. The NK did not produce a single ruling dynasty, but was ruled by 9 different dynasties, comprising 17 kings from 930 to 722 BC (some very briefly). The SK, by contrast, maintained the Davidic line until its demise in 586BC.