

Experiencing God

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0:00] Our scripture reading this morning is from Psalm 63, and I'm going to invite Douglas Carter to come and to read that passage for us.

! A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah. O God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My flesh faints for you. As in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live. In your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food.

[0:56] And my mouth will praise you with joyful lips. When I remember you upon my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night. For you have been my help.

And in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you. Your right hand upholds me. But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth.

They shall be given over to the power of the sword. They shall be a portion for jackals. But the king shall rejoice in God. All who swear by him shall exult.

For the mouths of liars will be stopped. Amen. All right, we're working our way in the summertime through some of the psalms in the mornings.

And we've said most weeks that psalms are prayers. Sometimes they're prayers. Sometimes the psalms are meditations. Meditations where the author is actually talking to themselves about the experience of the Christian life.

[2:02] And when you look at all the psalms together, all 150, what you have is a guidebook really or a blueprint for what it is supposed to be like to experience seeking after God.

So what the experience of seeking God's face in this normal life should be like. And you can look at all 50 together to get a sense of what that's like. Like, Psalm 63 is probably one of the two or three purest examples of what it is to seek God.

What it looks like played out from the internal thought life of David here. It is a prayer entirely about the experience of communion with God. So you would have noticed that as Douglas read it, just the language like, I thirst for God.

Or my soul clings to you. Or your love is better than life. So this is language of deep communion with God.

And so this is one of the purest examples of really what the whole of the book of the psalms is doing. So last week we were on holiday the past couple of weeks. And I watched a short little film that somebody sent to me on YouTube made by some of the churches in England.

[3:15] And it was about the awakening of spiritual hunger in the UK. A story that many of us will have read and thought about and seen in the media. And it talked about how in the early 2000s, really all the way up to COVID, so many folks were still in a space of militant atheism, of anger at religion.

But since COVID, there's been a shift towards spiritual hunger. And so one of the questions that's been coming up is, what does it even mean to have an experience of God? What's it look like to have a real experience of the real God?

And so lots of people are asking that. And then some of the people that they did testimonials with, they were being interviewed and they said that their experience of God was things like, you know, I heard God tell me in my normal work day, stop what you're doing and go plant a church next to this cafe.

And so different people were giving their different takes on what an experience of God might be like. And there's confusion. I think anybody in this room would probably admit, it's hard to really know the answer of what should an experience of God be like?

What should deep communion with God feel like? What should it look like? What should be happening to me? Should these things be happening to me? If I'm having real experiences of God in my life?

[4 : 32] And we here at St. C's are, this is a Presbyterian church, free church. And that means we are oriented towards being a cerebral bunch.

So we like to write what we believe on paper. We like to read it. And that means that we will always tend towards a more intellectualist side of the pole of what it means to experience God.

We will think of experiencing God as knowing God through knowing propositions, through knowing ideas, through learning more about God means knowing God deeper and deeper communion. Of course, there's the opposite end of the pole, which is the mysticism tradition of the Christian faith. And in the most far-reaching mystical ideas that have been around in Christianity, the idea is that you seek an unmediated experience of God, which means you want to vacate your mind of concepts and language and words.

And only then could you get closest to the God who you can't really know. And so Christians throughout the centuries have vacillated between shifting between those two things.

[5 : 37] Personality has a lot to do with it and the tradition you may have been brought up in. And so we feel oftentimes confused and saying, what should an experience of real communion with God actually look like and be like?

Where do you go? Well, the book of Psalms all collectively actually tells us what it looks like to experience God according to God's own word, according to God's own hand.

And Jonathan Edwards, he's one of the great theologians, pastors of the American Christian tradition. And he's well known for thinking about the experience of God and communion with God more than most others in the past couple of centuries.

And this is what he talks about. He says, experiencing God can never be divorced from knowing things about God. That's a must. But in knowing the truth about God, there's something else.

And this is what he calls it. He says, a profound inner sense of the heart. Where you taste God's infinite beauty and holiness that transforms what you care about and what you love.

[6 : 42] So Edwards says, the biblical model of the experience of communion with God absolutely includes theology. It includes knowing things about God that are true. But then there is something else.

There is a inner sensation, an inner taste of God's divine beauty that displaces things you used to love and changes what you care about.

And very famously, Edwards says, there's a world of difference in knowing that honey is sweet, learning that honey is sweet, and tasting honey, and delighting in honey.

And he says, you need both. You need to both know the sweetness of God, but you also need to have an experience of the taste of the beauty of God. You need to not only be told honey is sweet, you need to be able to taste that honey as well.

And that's what you see happening in Psalm 63 and throughout so many of the Psalms. David here is undeniably experiencing an immediate felt experience of God's presence.

[7 : 42] And he's not here necessarily saying God is telling me things and giving me new information. Instead, how does he express it? He says, the experience of God is, my soul thirsts for you.

And so that means that when I think when you look at the Psalms as a whole, one of the things you realize, if you were to ask the question, is a real experience of God something God gives you to hear primarily?

Is it an experience of vacating your mind and try to experience the transcendence of God in a way that you've never met before? I think when you look at the Bible, the main thing that we're given is, you know you're experiencing God in your life when you have an appetite for God.

So the main thing that we're given here in Psalm 63 is that, that when you can say in some measure, any measure at all, I do thirst for God, then that means that you are and have had an experience of the real God in your life.

So let me dig into that a little more, according to David here, thinking about the details of the experience of God he gives us, and then secondly, the experience of God in the wilderness. [8:50] And then lastly, just a very brief reflection on the basis of that experience. So what is this experience? A little bit more detail on that idea. So look at verse one. This is the main idea of what he means by an experience of God here.

He says, oh God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you. Now the order, that's the main idea of the whole Psalm, the order of that, those two clauses matter so much.

Oh God, you are my God, therefore I seek you with earnest. And it can't be flipped around. It has to be in that order. The order matters so much.

This is when he says, my God, that's covenant language. It's the same way that God told Abraham to speak only after God came to Abraham and said, I will save you, I will deliver you, and I will make you, I will be your God, you will be my people.

And only then was Abraham able to say, this is my God. And so notice the order. David says, my God, therefore earnestly I seek you. One writer points out the importance of saying my God.

[9:57] You can think about it this way, as I read this week. Like, how many people in your life do you say my about? So if somebody comes to you, if somebody comes to me at the end of the service during tea and coffee and says, I'm new here, I haven't gotten to meet Heather, I might say, do you mean my Heather?

Because there's multiple Heathers that go to this church, but I do have a my Heather here. Or if somebody asks, where's Isabel? I might say, do you mean my Isabel? I have a wee daughter named Isabel.

But if they come to me and they say, you know, I was hoping to get to be introduced to David, I probably wouldn't say, do you mean my David? Or Don told me this, and there's lots of Don's around here, but I wouldn't say, are you talking about my Don or another Don?

Now, I love all the Dons, and I love all the Davids, but there's a difference, because friendship doesn't even really allow you to say my.

And so when David says, my God, he's talking about deep covenant family relationship with God. So much so, that if you look down to verse 7 and 8, he uses two more words that really help us see this.

[11:20] He says, for you have been my help. And this is one of the rare places that the word help shows up. This word help in the Old Testament, and it's the same word that shows up in Genesis chapter 2 for the way Adam talks about Eve, or the way Eve is described to Adam.

She is my help. That's not language of servitude in Genesis 2. It's language that throughout the rest of the Old Testament is only ever used of God to say, he is my help. He is so intimately close to me. It's marriage language. And then down in verse 8, right after that, my soul clings to you. That's the same word that shows up rarely in the Old Testament, but in Genesis 2.24, when it says, a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave, hold fast, cling to his wife.

And so these marriage metaphors are being used with covenant language to show the intimacy of this relationship that God has, that David has with his God here. Now the order, therefore, the main idea, is that the order he puts this in is the gospel itself.

He says, you are my God, therefore earnestly I seek you. And here's why. Because in the Bible, we learn that every single human being is spiritually hungry for the real God, for this God, the God of the Bible.

[12:35] Every person is. And even in the most ardent campaign against Christianity and the other religions from militant atheism in the early 2000s, the Bible actually still teaches that even Dawkins and Hitchens, at their greatest powers, still were hungry for the real God.

They still actually want the real God. That's part of what's deep down in the human soul. We were made by God. We were made for God. And he is our only and truest and deepest satisfaction. But at the same time, the Bible says that nobody wants God.

So because you were made by God, actually you do want God. But at the same time, because you are a sheep that has run away, rebellious, you don't want God. So Romans 3 says, no one seeks for God.

No, not one. We have all gone astray. We have all run away from God. And so we've got this great tension that generic religion, the world religions, what are the world religions? The world religions are simply expressions of people's hunger for the real God.

But because they don't actually want the real God, because we're all idolaters, all rebellious, they've just attached themselves to things that aren't actually the real God. Hinduism, Buddhism, this is just expression of desire, hunger for the real God, except they misplace worship to the wrong thing. [13:48] And in the same way, every single one of us wants the real God. And at the same time, we don't want the real God. What does that mean for this psalm? What it means for this psalm is this. If you today can say, God, I seek communion with you in any way, it is because God has already sought you.

You can only say earnestly, do I seek the God of the Bible, if the God of the Bible has already made you his child. You see, the order, the order is the gospel.

He says, oh God, my God, therefore, only because you first sought me, can I now say, I seek you. And I hope this is a word of assurance to every person in here, because I would imagine for some of you, if you're like me, you read Psalm 63, and you say, I would love to have communion like this with God.

But I can honestly say, I'm not sure the last time, I can't remember being able to pray, say things, and feel the way that David feels about his God in this psalm.

But look, if you have the slightest inkling, even if you say today, I wish I had more of this communion than I do, then that tiny feeble desire is only because you have had an experience of God in your life.

[15:07] Because the Bible says, no one seeks God, no one wants God, no one chases after God, only unless God is already chasing after you. And that means you are experiencing God in your life. If there's any sense that you can say, I want God in the slightest degree, maybe like this, you might say, the things that I thought were going to fulfill me in this life that I have been pursuing have become less and less and less attractive over time to me.

Maybe you got some of them, and you realized they weren't exactly what you had hoped for. And only in that space, you feel slightly more inclined to want God more. That is God working in your life. That is the experience of God that is taking place in your life. And so you can come today with assurance that if you desire God at all, the real God, it is because God has already desired you, has already chased after you.

That means God's grace is already at work in your life according to the experience of God that David receives here. Now secondly, we learn here that that means one of the most important ways the Bible teaches us about the experience of God is through the evidence of appetite.

So do you have an appetite, a hunger, a thirst at all, like David puts it here, for God? And that's the evidence of God's work in your life. But where does this tend to grow?

[16:24] Where does this tend to happen best? Where does this experience tend to really come out? And we learn that also in the psalm. Look at the title, what we call a superscript.

So superscripts, the little smaller printed text in the Bible is also part of the Bible. It's also part of the text. And we have an introduction here, a psalm of David, King David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.

And so almost all the commentators agree that the wilderness of Judah is a reference to the time that David fled Jerusalem because his son Absalom was trying to overthrow him and take the throne.

And so this is a story from 2 Samuel 15 to 20. And in that section, David's own son Absalom had been plotting for years to overthrow David and ultimately have him assassinated.

And that means that when David writes this psalm, what has taken place is what has taken place in 2 Samuel 15. He has run for his life from Jerusalem. He's crossed the Kidron Valley.

[17:28] He's gone up the Mount of Olives and he's entered into the wilderness of Judah. And there he's starving. He's thirsty. The text tells us that he was barefoot, weeping, that he had no armor, hardly any clothing.

And he's crying out. And can you imagine, you know, being kicked off your throne, being displaced from your home. But, of course, we read later in the story that the greatest pain he experiences is because this is his son.

It's Absalom that has done this to him. And it's here where we get Psalm 63. That's the context. Now, what's so striking about that is because what you read about here is not Absalom or getting kicked off the throne or the loss of a son.

What you read about here is him just going directly into the sweet communion of God's presence and saying, I need you, I thirst for you, I hunger for you. He is literally in a physically dry, parched, weary, thirsty land.

And, of course, his soul is absolutely dry and parched and weary and thirsty because of what his son has done to him. But it's seeking the honey, the sweetness of God's presence that he goes to. What does that mean?

[18:33] It means this. Communion with God does tend to grow in the wilderness experience. Communion with God does tend to arise more palpably when you walk into the wilderness.

And Charles Spurgeon points out in his sermon on Psalm 63 a few different wilderness experiences that we might be going through. One is the wilderness experience of terrible circumstance like he's walking through.

Something you don't want, something that you didn't choose. But the others are the wilderness experience that sometimes God puts us in, which happens in other Psalms of David where we're put in a wilderness experience because of patterns of sin in our life.

And as one writer puts it, sin is the great suppressant of appetite. So the more we are in patterns of sin in our lives and the more God puts us in a wilderness to wake us up and shake us back up, the more we will struggle with any desire for God.

And so if you come today and say, I'm struggling with desire for God, I don't thirst for God, I don't seek God as sweeter than honey in my life. One of the first questions Spurgeon and I think the text is drawing us to ask is, is there a pattern of sin in my life that we haven't confessed yet?

[19:47] Because sin is the great appetite suppressant. It is eating sweets all day and not wanting your dinner. The very thing that is so good for you is dinner, the vegetables at dinner, but you eat sweets all day and sometimes God puts you into the wilderness experience to awaken to that and then that draws you back into sweeter communion, deeper communion with God.

Another wilderness experience that is pointed out by some of the authors is just the wilderness of the heart. So you may say, look, I don't have any obvious patterns of sin in my life that I could point to in some extreme way and I'm not going through bad circumstances, but I am just walking through the wilderness of the drought.

I just don't care. I have apathy. I just don't feel like seeking after God at all and there's all sorts of things we can do, but let me give you two things you can do according to David here. Of course, we need to self-examine.

Of course, we need to ask, are there patterns of sin in my life that I'm not even aware of? All of those things, but let me give you the two main things David gives you from the psalm very briefly and here's the first.

Notice, in this prayer, he does not ask for his circumstances to change. Not yet, at least, and instead, what David does here is he gives you a very particular type of prayer and so you can see it.

[21:05] It's almost chiasmatic. It moves in and out. In verse 3, he says that my lips will praise you. In verse 4, he says, I will bless you as long as I live.

In your name, I'll lift up my hands. That's a reference to worship. In verse 5, my mouth will praise you with joyful lips. Back to lips. He's talking about worship and praise through the lens of a specific type of prayer and that's the prayer of adoration.

So, if you read the Psalms, you'll see all types of prayers, adoration and confession, thanksgiving, petition, and if you look at our order of service here at St. C's, you will see that we try to do every type of prayer.

We begin with a prayer of adoration, we move to a prayer of confession, then a prayer of thanksgiving, and then a prayer of petition. And you'll see all this throughout the Bible, but the most important type of prayer is what?

Adoration. It's the beginning of every other type of prayer. And what David here is in the midst of this, he just starts praying about God's beauty in the midst of pretty terrible circumstances.

[22:09] He doesn't say, Lord, give me. He says, Lord, I adore you. Now, he's going to come later to, Lord, give me. I need. But he begins with, Lord, I adore you. And we're being, you're being invited here to see something that's very simple, but just that prayers of adoration to God, contemplating through prayer on God's sweetness, His beauty, His attributes, is really the key in the Psalms to sweeter and deeper communion, to every other type of prayer.

That if you reflect on God's power in all of Him and His beauty and His infinite majesty, that leads you towards prayers of confession. And that's exactly what David shows us here. He gives this whole person into adoration and praise as the primary response to His circumstance. The second thing is that prayer of adoration here leads to what we call Christian meditation. Okay. The Psalms are prayers, but often, if you read them carefully, the Psalms are not prayers. They are meditations. And that's slightly different. So what are meditations? You can see one at the bottom of this Psalm, verse 9 to 11, when he turns away from prayer and he says, but those who seek to destroy my life will go down into the depths. [23 : 23] He's not talking to God there. He's turned to just talking to himself. That's a meditation. Of course, he's talking there about the circumstances and so his great friend Ahithophel, who ate dinner with him almost every single night, has been the main partner with his son Absalom in plotting his assassination and coup.

And so very probably when he says, those who seek to destroy my life shall go down to the depths of the earth, he's thinking of the treachery of his friend Ahithophel here. He's talking very specifically about the circumstance, but that's a meditation.

Look at verse 6. He says it outright. He says, when I remember you upon my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night. So there it is, meditation.

The Old Testament in the time of Jesus, we looked at this in the series we did in June on Luke 24, is divided into three sections. The books of Moses, what's called the prophets, but the prophets actually begin with Joshua, the history books, and then the Psalms are the writings, which starts with the Psalms.

So you've got the first five books of the Bible and then section two of the Old Testament, Joshua, section three of the Old Testament, Psalms. Chris preached on Psalm 1 recently, and you'll remember that language, meditate on the law of the Lord day and night in Psalm 1.

[24 : 44] He meditates. Joshua 1, in the second paragraph of the opening of that second section of the Bible, what does it say? It says, Joshua was given the command, meditate on God's law day and night.

So at every section of the Old Testament, it opens by saying, practice meditation. What is this meditation? We're told about it right here, and it's this.

It's contra mysticism, contra Eastern religion where you're invited to empty your mind of all concepts and instead just experience whatever you happen to experience.

Instead, Christian meditation in the Psalms is when you actually fill your mind with the beauty, presence, and truth of God that you learn about in the Bible until God becomes sweet to you.

So that's the practice of Christian meditation. Listen to Jonathan Edwards talk about it. He says, it's when you take a single spiritual truth and you deeply digest it until it moves from a cold fact in your brain to a sweeter taste in your heart.

[25 : 45] There was a woman named Ann Bradstreet. She was a Puritan author in New England, and we have just a host of her meditations on God that have been preserved, and she's got, they're really worth looking at.

They're absolutely beautiful. But this is what she, she talks about her practice of meditation or contemplation on God, and oftentimes she would look at nature as a mirror like Psalm 19 does and reflect on the sun and the moon and the trees, and she says, I don't just see what's in front of me, but I see the sun and the moon and the trees as symbols or mirrors pointing to God's divine beauty and His power and His order and His love.

And then she says, she writes this in one of her meditations. Lord, why should I doubt any more when you have given me such assured pledges of your love? First, I see you are my creator.

I see I am your creature. You my master, I your servant, but my comfort arises when I say this, you are my father and I am your child. So there she's practicing meditation, leading into prayer, and that's exactly what we have all throughout the book of Psalms.

It's pursuing conversation with God through thinking about God all the time in the most ordinary moments of your day. There's another writer, Brother Lawrence, who Protestants have sometimes pulled from for some of the helpful bits.

[27 : 07] You can't take everything from Brother Lawrence. You leave some stuff behind, but Brother Lawrence in his book, Practicing the Presence of God, he was a cook at a monastery, this guy, and he says, there is no manner of life in the world more sweet or more delicious than continual conversation with God, and Brother Lawrence in his book talks about how he most

communes with God, most thinks about God, most talks to God when he is doing the dishes, that that was his favorite moment, that he says, the time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer.

And so this is the practice of what Paul means in the New Testament when he says, pray without ceasing. It's learning to meditate on the infinite beauty of God and let that draw you into prayer until your heart feels sweet with the reality of who God is.

Sometimes that takes 30 seconds, and sometimes that takes three years. Sometimes you don't arrive at the sweetness of the infinite beauty of God's very being, meditating and praying. It doesn't really get into your soul until three years later. And you might be walking through a 30-second season or a three-year season on this very day, but the promise is that God will give you that sweetness.

That's the promise of Psalm 63. Listen, I'll move on to the final and very brief thing, but let me give you what Edwards says about this experience. He says, I want, he says, excuse me, he says, in reading Scripture I seemed often to see so much light that I could not get along in my reading. [28:47] Almost every sentence at times in my life have seemed to me to be so full of wonders. I found from time to time an inward sweetness that used, as it were, to carry me away into contemplation about my God.

I felt alone, sweetly conversing with Christ, wrapped up and swallowed up in Him. The sense I had of divine things would often, of a sudden, as it were, kindle up a sweet burning in my heart and ardor of my soul that I know not how to express now to you into words.

This is the experience that David is having in Psalm 63. Now, one application, and it's this. This is so important for us in a cerebral congregation as we will tend to be in our Presbyterian theologically oriented tradition because it is my default.

I imagine it is some of your default to say, when you are feeling spiritually low, to say, I want a spiritual pick-me-up, so I am going to put my favorite preacher on my favorite Spotify app, on the Spotify app, into my ears while I walk through the city and dig in to what he has to say to me. And that's a very good thing. I believe in preaching. We're doing it today, in fact. And so, don't not do that, but we all know that sometimes going to our favorite preacher because we like the way they put things can leave us in front of our favorite preacher because we like the way they say things and never taking that next step, which is to actually meet with God.

[30:19] So, do you, even today, even as we sing, even as we pray in just a moment, do you take the step from saying, I like the way somebody may or may not have put X, Y, Z in a sermon to actually saying, I'm turning now to speak and converse with the living God about what I've just seen and heard and read.

That's the step that we, as theological Protestants, often can miss. And so, we're being invited in Psalm 63 to deeper communion and meditation. On what basis, finally, as we conclude very shortly?

Luke 24 tells us that Jesus read the Psalms and he taught how they concerned himself. And that means here that when you read Psalm 63, like the rest, especially the Psalms of David, you have to say that they are ultimately about Jesus Christ.

You have to read them in the light of him, in the light of the gospel. I don't think it's coincidence at all that when you read, if you were to go read 2 Samuel 15 to 20, the story of David being run out of the city because of this circumstance of Absalom that David goes barefoot and weeping out from the center of Jerusalem down through the Kidron Valley up the Mount of Olives.

And there, on the Mount of Olives, he meditates on the one who ate dinner with him yet betrayed him, Ahithophel. And it's there that he starts to pen the Psalms like these.

[31:48] It's no coincidence. That a great king in the middle of history would go up the Mount of Olives and pray a prayer like this on the basis that the one he had been eating dinner with had betrayed him.

And of course, this Psalm is far more about the true and better David that we read about in Matthew chapter 1 who went up the Mount of Olives and who stood in Gethsemane and who was betrayed by the one who had eaten dinner with him just that very night.

And he was the true and better king that was being exiled where into the deep wilderness. But there's a difference and the difference is this. David here in this Psalm says, I thirst for you, God.

And God comes to him sweeter than honey. But the true and better David said, I thirst. And in that moment he wasn't just talking about his lips, his physical lips.

He was saying, I thirst for communion with my father and he was nothing but parched. He was starved. He was forsaken. He was cast out. And see, David did not deserve communion with God and neither do we.

[32:55] We are rebel sheep. We are rebel sheep. David does not deserve this communion but God gives David this communion on the basis that one day the true and better David will say, I thirst and he will be ultimately exiled so that David can know the grace of the sweetness of God's infinite presence with him in this very moment.

And that is the same exact thing that is true for you. If you come today and you say, I'm struggling to pray, I don't experience this sweet communion in my life right now, let me add one little facet to the discipline of meditation and it's this.

Meditate, as he says, on the steadfast love of the Lord which is better than life. But how do you meditate on that? You say this, the steadfast love of the Lord expressed in Jesus Christ hanging on the cross for me, that love is better than life.

So you orient your meditation to the Christ of the cross and you say, that's where I know that his love for me is better than life itself. Your heart, over time, your heart over time will start to see that the greatest benefit of prayers of communion with God is not, it's not Lord give me, it's not in getting whatever you're asking for, but it is in the very fact that you get God himself.

that will grow in your life. Let us pray. Father, we want an experience of God even today, even now, and some of us are there, we're tasting the honey that is the infinite beauty that is condescended in your presence with us as you promise it.

[34:28] And for many of us, probably, more of us, we are feeling distant and cold and struggling and saying, yet I want this, and so Lord, first we ask that you would assure us that you are working in our lives if there's any hint of desire in us for knowing you more.

And then secondly, we ask that you would grant it to us even now. So help us to turn away from the meager words of some sermon from some guy and instead, Lord, all of us help us now to turn in prayer and communion with you, the living God.

So we ask for that as we sing these words of Be Thou My Vision. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen. Amen.