

Better than Life  
Psalm 63

So, are you getting a little stir crazy? Maybe folks up north are accustomed to being housebound during the winter – I remember some of our Michigan friends showing pictures of snowdrifts that reached to their roofline! Another friend, who went to Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, told me that the buildings on campus are all connected by tunnels so the students can move around regardless of how much snow there is outside. I suppose they might be used to be inside for weeks at a time.

But here in Southwest Mississippi, whatever snow or ice we get disappears quickly, and the days between cold fronts in January and February are some of our most pleasant – luring us outside. This year our tour of Wintergreen Cemetery on the first weekend of March was just beautiful – clear, cool evenings, azaleas and camellias giving a touch of color, and a full moon overhead.

Oh, we might be chased indoors by the buffalo gnats in the Spring or the oppressive August heat and humidity, but even on the hottest days you can get out until around 10 in the morning, and the miracle of air conditioning has allowed us to continue our extensive social schedules year-round. And let's face it – in this corner of the Hospitality State, we don't need much of an excuse to plan a party, no matter what time of the year it might be.

But this virus has done what the most severe weather couldn't do – it's managed to keep Mississippians apart, even during baseball and basketball season. And that's not an easy thing. After all, this state is home to some of the greatest athletes, and greatest sports fans, in the country. But because of this virus, even though the Ole Miss baseball team and the Mississippi State women's basketball team are both ranked in the top ten, neither will get a chance to play for a championship. The ballparks and gyms are empty of players and fans alike as the NCAA has canceled all spring sports and the colleges have sent all their students home. Governor Reeves has sent all the K-12 kids home until April 17. And government officials from the President of the United States to the mayor of Port Gibson have urged us not to gather in groups larger than 10, so today, we're worshipping online using Facebook livestream.

So, what do we do with an empty social calendar? What do we do with all this extra time on our hands? And how do we handle the anxiety that can come from wondering just how bad this situation is going to become, wondering if we or our loved ones are going to get sick?

Well, although David didn't know anything about viruses, corona or otherwise, he knew what it was like to hide out from his enemies. He knew all too well how boredom and dread could combine to make his problems seem worse than they really were. After all, when he wrote this Psalm, he was in the wilderness, the desert, on the run from King Saul, his own father-in-law. Not only his social calendar but his whole life was on hold, and he had no idea if or when he would ever be able to get back to his home, and to his wife.

Yes, as verse 2 says, David was in a dry and weary land where there is no water. As verse 9 says, he had enemies who were seeking to destroy his soul. He was tired and scared. And yet as verse 1 says, his deepest longing, his greatest thirst was for God. As verse 5 says, when he lifted his voice in prayer and his hands in praise, he felt just as satisfied, just as full as if he had eaten the most sumptuous of meals. In short, David was more interested in Sunday worship than he was in Sunday lunch.

How could that be? How could David be so focused on God when it would have been so easy for him to give in to bitterness or self-pity? Well, while David was stuck in his desert hide-out, enduring the months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror that seem to characterize all wars past and present, he seems to have spent a lot of time in prayer. After all, verse 1 says that David sought God even in the earliest hours of the morning. In fact, the very existence of this Psalm proves that David not only poured out his heart in prayer to God, but also took the time to write some of those prayers down in ways that others could sing along.

And how might our days be different if we started our days off with prayer and Scripture, instead of with the lies and spin on our TV screens or the clamor and confusion of our social media feeds? What if, like David, we sought God early? What if during these long, boring days of social isolation we put God at the top of our priority list?

That seems to be what Jesus did in our New Testament reading, didn't He? Like many of us, He was absolutely covered up with responsibilities. After it became known that He had healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, the whole city of Capernaum came knocking on the door – it was almost as if He had bottled water or toilet paper to sell! But the crowd didn't start to gather until after sundown, so all those healings probably stretched late into the night.

And yet, what was the first thing Jesus did the next morning? He couldn't have had very much sleep, but well before daylight, before any disruptions or disturbances could break in upon Him, He went off to a solitary place, a place just like the one in which so many of us have found ourselves this week. And there, instead of worrying or fretting, Jesus prayed, seeking God early, just as His ancestor David had done – and just as we need to do today and every day.

Now, we don't know the content of Jesus' prayers – Mark didn't write them down for us. But we know what David prayed. And we know that just as David's prayers indicated that God was on the top of his priority list, we also know that his prayers were based on great confidence in God's blessings. In verse 7, David said that God had been His help in the past. And because of that, he was able to rejoice in the shadow of God's wings, in spite of his boredom and fear in the present.

And the same thing should be true for us. Sure, we're going through some tough, scary times now. But can't we all look back at the many, many ways God has blessed us, showing us His grace by answering so many of our prayers in the past? David could. Even while he was hiding out in the desert, he could remember how God had protected him when he fought against the giant Goliath. He could give thanks for his many victories in battle over the Philistines, and for his wife who loved him and helped him to escape from Saul. And in spite of his uncomfortable living conditions, in spite of his boredom and fear, he could even thank God for continuing to protect him, for each day that Saul failed to find him.

And in how many ways has God helped all of us? How many jobs has He helped us find? How many marriages has He strengthened? How many children has He helped us raise? How many students has he helped us teach? How many trials has He already helped us endure, from storms and fires and floods to sicknesses in ourselves or our loved ones?

And if David could rejoice in the protecting shadow of God's wings even while he was hiding out in the desert, how much more reason do we have for rejoicing? For we know that what Jesus told His

disciples in our New Testament reading was true. We know He didn't just come to heal us of our physical sicknesses. No, He came to preach the good news to us, to tell us that the time is fulfilled and that the Kingdom of Heaven has come. He came to urge us to repent of our sins and believe the good news that we can be saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

So even in this time of stress and crisis, surely our prayers should include a large measure of thanksgiving, as we remember all the ways God has already blessed us. And that leads us to the next thing we can learn from David's prayer. For if the fact of his prayer indicates that God was his highest priority and if his remembrance of God's help in the past bolstered his faith in the present, he was equally confident that God would vindicate him in the future. In verses 9 and 10 he confidently predicted that all his enemies would be destroyed, that those who were trying to kill him would themselves be killed.

And how could David have such confidence? He was remembering the promises of God. Back when he was just a boy taking care of his father's sheep, the prophet Samuel had come to visit the family and had chosen David to be the next king of Israel, anointing him with oil. That's why in verse 11 David could say that the king shall rejoice in God – he was looking forward to the day when Samuel's prophecy would come true. He wasn't afraid of his dangerous circumstances in the present because he was confident of God's blessings in the future.

And can't we have the same sort of confidence? After all, we not only know that Jesus came to tell us the good news that the kingdom of God has come. We have not only heard His gracious words of salvation offered to all who would trust in Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord. We know He has ascended into Heaven, and that He holds all authority in Heaven and Earth in His hands. And He has told us that He will one day return to this earth to rule and reign and make all things right and new. He has told us that one day there won't be any more death, any more sorrow or crying or pain, because He will be with us forever.

Ah, but how can we be so sure that Christ will keep His promises? Even if we've made God our first priority, and even if God has blessed us in the past, how can we be sure that God will get us through our present trials? How can we be so sure that, as David says in verse 8, God will in fact uphold us with His right hand, even if we cling to Him?

Well, why does David say that He will continue to bless the Lord in verse 4? Why does he say he will continue to lift up his hands in praise to God? Why does he say in verse 3 that he will continue to praise God with every word he speaks? Because he says that God's lovingkindness is better than life. That means if David were to be faced with a choice between holding onto God's steadfast, faithful, covenant love on the one hand and going on living in this world on the other, he would choose God's love.

And didn't great David's greater son make the same choice? For how was Jesus able to offer salvation full and free to all who trust in Him? How was Jesus able to promise that He will come again and destroy the power of death and make all things new? Because He laid down His life in order to accomplish the Father's will, in order to express God's faithful, covenant love to us. To Jesus, making God's lovingkindness available to us was better than life.

So, how can we doubt that He will keep the rest of His promises to us? Since Jesus was willing to die for us, how can we doubt that He will give us everything else that we need? Since Jesus loves us better than life itself, can't we trust Him? Shouldn't we rejoice in Him?

So, especially when we are hiding from our enemies, especially when we're bored and lonely and scared, let's seek Christ early, putting Him first in our lives. Let's remember the blessings He has already given us and trust in His promises for the future. For surely His steadfast, faithful, covenant love for us is better than life.