

**Psalm 63 (1984 NIV)**  
***Praying in Our Desert Experience***

**Introduction**

An American rabbi, Harold Kushner, once wrote a book titled “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”, that became a best-seller. In that book, he related the tragedy of having lost his teenage son Aaron.

He had been concerned about Aaron’s health from the time he stopped gaining weight at the age of 8 months, and from the time his hair started to fall out just after he turned one year old. Prominent doctors had been consulted and they all told the father that his son would grow to be very short, but would be normal in all other ways.

Then one day, a pediatrician diagnosed Aaron’s condition as “progeria” (meaning “rapid aging”). He went on to say that the boy would never grow much beyond 3 feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while he was still a child, and would die in his early teens.

On hearing this, Harold Kushner felt a deep, painful sense of unfairness. He had been a good man; he tried to do what was right in the sight of God; he had been living a more religiously committed life than most people he knew. Kushner had grown up believing that God is all good and all powerful.

So when Aaron finally died two days after his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, Harold Kushner found all that he had gone through was totally contradictory to what he had been taught and believed about God. And out of this painful experience, he wrote the best-seller, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”, to offer an acceptable explanation of why he had to undergo what he did.

He wrote to also help those who wanted to go on believing in God, but whose anger at God made it hard for them to hold on to their faith in God. He wrote and ended with this conclusion—God is all good, BUT He is not all powerful. His painful experience had changed his original perception of God.

Indeed, tough and painful times can affect our own original perception of God. In the Psalms, we see different people going through a myriad of “desert experiences”. Now, let me first define what I mean by a “desert experience”—it is a time when one is struggling with worries, anxieties, cares, trials, temptations, and other earthly entanglements; when one is seeking refuge from these struggles, yet feeling so lonely in oneself and forsaken by others. I find it very spiritually enriching to read and pray through the Psalms, and feel how the

various psalmists were responding to God in their respective desert experiences.

As we allow the words of each Psalm to soak into our mind and understanding, we will begin to see not so much a formula for prayer, but a picture of how the psalmist concerned would perceive God in his desert experience. Similarly, the way we pray at a difficult time reveals, or even betrays, the way we perceive God at that point in time.

In Psa. 63, we find the psalmist in the desert (or wilderness) of Judah. It was a very dry and desolate area. There were two different times in David's life when he was forced to flee Jerusalem from persecution, and into the desert.

- The first was early in his life, before he was king. He was in the service of King Saul, and Saul later became jealous of him and decided he was going to kill him. That story is in 1 Samuel 11-21.
- The second was late in his life. He had been king for around thirty years, and his son Absalom became jealous of him, staged a coup, declared himself king, and formed an army to try to kill him. You can read about that in 2 Samuel 15.

Scholars are divided over which of these two times Psa. 63 is talking about. Personally, I think it's talking about the time when David was running away from his rebellious son Absalom. This is because David had referred to himself as "king" in v. 11, and he would never have done that if Saul was still alive and ruling as king. So, I believe Psa. 63 was about that occasion when David had to flee into the desert for a second time.

Now, if this was you, and you were on the run from either the most powerful man in the country or your own son, what would be on your mind? This was David's second refuge in the desert, and he's now an old man back in the seemingly God-forsaken desert many years later. What would you expect to come out of his mouth? Think about your answers to that question as we look at Psa. 63 today.

Some of us may feel like David in the desert today—all lonely and forsaken in our hurt and pain. It is only human to feel this way at such a time. But more importantly, it is also very crucial and needful that we maintain a right perception of who God is at such a time. Indeed, how we perceive God in times when we feel all lonely and forsaken—i.e. in our desert experience—will determine how we pray in such times.

As David struggled with his predicament in Psa. 63, we see how he perceived God even in such a difficult time. He did this by focusing firstly on the truth that ...

## I. God is dependable (vv. 1-2).

1 O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you,  
my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

In v. 1, David called God as “my God”. He expressed not only his personal relationship with God, but also his personal trust in God as a dependable God. And his personal trust in God led him to seek, to thirst, and to long for God.

When you are at your lowest, you don’t run to someone who will further put you down. Instead, you run to someone whom you can trust to be dependable. David knew whom he should go to at this difficult time. That’s why he had expressed such a longing and desiring for God.

As far as David was concerned, his experience in the desert did not mean that God had lost control; that God was not dependable. That’s why he still could call God as “my God” and deeply yearned for Him. He diligently searched for godly wisdom to understand and to deal with his situation. His desert experience was a time when he was stripped of every comfort and became vulnerable on all sides. It was a time when he must learn to love God not for what he was enjoying as a king, but for what he believed God to be—i.e. God is ever dependable even in his plight as a refugee in the desert. It’s as if the king of Israel must now learn to say without reservation, “Lord, I have been chased out of my palace into this dry and desolate desert. This situation is beyond my control. I now can do nothing but to depend on you.”

Indeed, to trust God as dependable in our most difficult time is to recognise that man’s control over many things in life is only limited.

Not long after a great earthquake shattered the city of Kobe in Japan on 17 Jan. 1995, the newspapers flashed this almost unbelievable headline—“Technology Fails Japan”. How could technology which had made Japan such a foremost economic powerhouse in the world then fail the country?

Indeed, while we are thankful for all the benefits and convenience that technology brings to us today, we must not worship technology as the supreme expression of man’s ability to do anything and everything. Yes, man invented technology and technology in turn enables man to do many things, BUT man is still not in control of all things.

King David expressed his longing for God, and this longing is heightened by his vision of God’s presence, power, and glory in v. 2.

2 I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.

This vision of God was especially important to David at this time in his desert experience. Being hurt, fearful, lonely and forsaken, he realised that he was not

in control. This vision of God reassured him of God's presence and control in his situation; of God's dependability; of the fact that all was not lost for him.

One lesson that God can teach us in our own desert experience is that our control over many things in life is limited. This may break our pride and humble us. But a broken pride is a good thing—it is the beginning of depending more on God and less on self.

- We may fail, but God never.
- We may lose control, but God never.
- We may be overwhelmed, but God is never overpowered.

There is a teaching these days that tries to make us believe that man is a very capable being—man can do it all, and hence, he should feel good, positive, and capable every time he looks at himself. The ultimate goal of this teaching is to make us believe that we have a “divine spark” in us. In other words, to make us believe that you and I are a “god” in our own self, and capable of all things.

- Humanity is advocated as an extension of the divine being.
- There is unlimited human potential in each person to attempt and succeed in all things.
- We are to believe that we are always in control.
- We can be so successful and have things so good because we are in control.
- It is taboo to say that we cannot because this means that we are admitting our loss of control.

Thus, it is no wonder that many people feel uncomfortable when they cannot manage or answer some the complex issues in life, either in the secular or sacred realm.

But when David refreshed himself with that vision of God's presence, power, and glory, he could humbly admit his own limitations without feeling diminished in his humanity and personhood.

- Such a brokenness of self-reliance helped David to realise and accept that he was only a finite being who's not always in control.
- Such a brokenness enabled him to perceive God as who He always is—i.e. He is dependable and is always present and in control.
- Such a brokenness enabled him to call God as “my God” and to yearn deeply for Him.

Similarly as we go through our own desert experience, we need to check if we are depending on “my God” or on “myself”. If we perceive ourselves as even more dependable than God, then we need to ask for a brokenness of the over-confident and self-reliant spirit in order to perceive God as dependable as we acknowledge our seemingly hopeless and helpless situation.

Yes, David kept a right perception of who God is when he was finding refuge in his desert experience in Psa. 63. He did this by focusing on the truth that God is dependable.

Secondly, he also focused on the truth that ...

## **II. God is sufficient (vv. 3-8)**

King David praised and worshipped God with thanksgiving in vv. 3-5 because as far as he was concerned, God's love was better than life. And God alone could be trusted to truly satisfy his deepest needs.

3 Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. 4 I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. 5 My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

When we read of life here in v. 3, I believe it has to do more with the quality of life rather than the breath of life itself. As far as David was concerned, God's love (or loving kindness) was even better than the best that life could offer. In other words, to experience God's love does not necessarily mean to enjoy the best that life here on earth can offer. David's desert experience was definitely not among the best times in his life. Yet he was very much aware of God's love; that God had enough to see him through although he had lost all that he once enjoyed in his palace.

Now, when we ourselves are not enjoying the better things in life, we may feel a little less than others; that God does not seem to have enough for us, or has somehow short-changed us. When we are missing out on some of the good things in life, we need to remind ourselves that God's love is still with us. His love may not be in the form of enjoying greater comfort, but may be in the form of experiencing His sustaining grace. Indeed, to be able to praise and worship God; to be reassured that God is not less loving and less kind towards us even as we go through a time of lack in our desert experience, God often have to take us out of our comfort zone of self-sufficiency.

In vv. 4-5, we read of David praising and worshipping God with thanksgiving in spite of his apparent lack in the desert. All these were expressions of his response of faith in God's sufficiency.

Also, notice how David filled his lack in the desert by resting still in God in vv. 6-8.

6 On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. 7 Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. 8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

David recalled his thoughts of God. He reflected on how God had acted in loving kindness towards Israel and King Saul. This reflection reassured him of God's help and protection at this time when he felt so vulnerable.

Yes, while God promises to be close, He also expects us to draw close to Him at the same time. However, in our desperate attempts to get out of our desert experience, we often forget that our sufficiency does not ultimately depend on how much/hard we work, but on how abundantly the all sufficient God will take care of us.

By taking time to recall and reflect on the grace and goodness of God, we renew our confidence not in our own sufficiency, but in the all sufficient God Himself.

I recall bringing my older daughter Vera to the swimming pool for the very first time when she was still very young.

I made her sit by the side of the pool and splashed water gently on her body. When she got used to the feel of water on her body, I carried her into the pool. It was shallow and she could actually walk in the water with her head above it. But I noticed that she was struggling to walk steadily though she was holding on to me.

So I told her to let go, and instead, I held on to her. She then felt the security of my hold on her. Only then could she steady herself and walk confidently in the water.

Perhaps, some people are like that—i.e. they struggle because they pin their security on how desperately they try to hold up on their own, instead of letting loose and allowing the all sufficient God to hold them up. Are we (you and I) one of them?

David reminded himself (and us today) that the kind of calm and composure he had in his desert experience did not come about by frantically fighting his situation on his own, but by taking time to recall, reflect, and rest (i.e. be still) in the presence of God.

David kept a right perception of who God is during this difficult period in his life. He did this by focusing on the truths that God is dependable and God is sufficient.

Lastly, David focused on the truth that ...

### **III. God is just (vv. 9-11).**

9 They who seek my life will be destroyed; they will go down to the depths of the earth. 10 They will be given over to the sword and become food for jackals. 11 But the king will rejoice in God; all who swear by God's name will praise him, while the mouths of liars will be silenced.

In these verses, David was able to see the defeat of his enemies and his eventual rejoicing in God. Notice how often he used the future tense—six times in the NIV.

- “will be destroyed”
- “will go down”
- “will be given over”
- “will rejoice”
- “will praise”
- “will be silenced”

David saw the defeat of the enemies and his rejoicing in God. With eyes of faith, he was able to see everything out there in the future. But at the same time, he was able to pull everything out there in the future to the present, as if everything is happening NOW. Thus, he saw not his present predicament in the desert, but the eventual defeat of his enemies and his rejoicing in God.

Indeed, David could say these faith-filled words in vv.9-11 because he experienced victory even before his trial in the desert was over. His faith in God as the Just Judge made him trust not in what he could do to correct the wrong, but what the Just God would do to correct it.

There are times when we feel we have been unjustly treated.

- Some people question our motive, our integrity, or our sincerity.
- Others get more rewards though they put in less work than us because they know how to please the boss with nice but untrue words.
- Something goes wrong and we are made the scapegoat because someone must be made responsible.
- We confide something in someone and that person uses it against us.

Yes, we can feel so unjustly treated that we may be tempted to take matters into our own hands in the wrong way. And that can be dangerous. David who was running from some unjust persecution was able to end Psalms 63 on a victorious note because of his trust in God as the Just Judge.

The story is told of a famed personality who was very angry with the photographer after receiving the proof of his portrait. He stormed back to the photographer and protested, “This picture has been touched up too much. It does not do me justice!”

The photographer replied, “Sir, with a face like yours, you don’t need justice. You need mercy!”

In times when we are tempted to mete out justice in our own way because we feel unjustly treated, we do well to remind ourselves that perhaps mercy is the better option, both for others and even for ourselves. In other words, we don’t

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mete out justice in our own way, but instead, we let God the Just Judge be our final vindicator.

Notice also that in v. 11, the rejoicing was in GOD. It was not rejoicing in the defeat of one's enemies, or in one's victory over others, but in GOD. To rejoice in others' defeat, or in one's victory is to feel "one-up" over others. But to rejoice in GOD only is to put aside self-glory, and worship God for who He is (i.e. He is the Just Judge). Yes, we can still rejoice even if we are not having the upper hand when we perceive with our faith-filled eyes that God is indeed our Just Judge.

Are we feeling so unjustly treated in our desert experience that we are thinking of taking matters into our own hands; that we are beginning to doubt whether the righteous hand of God is long enough to stop the wrong against us? If so, we need to be reminded of the words of Abraham Lincoln who once said, "My great concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God's side." Yes, may we not be tempted to take matters into our own hands the wrong way by trying to play God ourselves. Instead, let's learn to trust God as the Just Judge who will settle all wrongs in His time and way, even on our behalf. In other words, let us not play God, but let God be God.

## Conclusion

Psalm 63 is not David's first desert experience. He had run into hiding in the desert before when he was persecuted by the jealous King Saul (1 Sam. 23:14-29). At that time, he had experience a gamut of emotions, including fear and anger. But here in Psa. 63, we see David running again from persecution into the desert, yet maturing into a man of faith as he perceived God to be dependable, sufficient, and just. That's why Psa. 63 is not a lament psalm, by really a thanksgiving psalm. So, let's learn to perceive God like David did in Psa. 63 as we pray in our own desert experience.

As I close, here are some questions for you to reflect and respond personally:

- Is there a pride/stubbornness that is causing you to depend more on yourself than on God? Be honest with God and ask Him to break that pride/stubbornness in you, and know that only God Himself is all dependable.
- Is your security rested in what you have or in who God is? Take time to rest still before God and renew your trust in His sufficiency. Know that only God Himself is all sufficient.
- Are you tempted to take matters into your own hands and in your own way because you feel unjustly treated? Ask God to help you change the way you see your own situation so that you can wait on the justice of God to vindicate you. Know that only God Himself is the all Just Judge who is on your side.

I pray the Lord's enabling upon you as you so reflect and respond. Amen!

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