

In The Shelter Of God's Wings

Psalm 61:4



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The Psalm we've just read is one that I've used a lot in pastoral ministry. More than not, it is one that I read in the Heart Institute. Where people I've come to know and love are struggling with weak hearts, faint hearts. Where their own energy reserves and health and hope are at a low ebb, and they're reaching out for help –
somewhere
from someone.
beyond even that which the magnificent health care team can offer.

Hear my cry, O God.

Yes, some of us here today have prayed that together. And in that prayer we've join hearts - weak hearts - with David, the author of Psalm 61. We're not exactly sure when he wrote it. Most scholars think that it probably was written during the time described in 2 Samuel 17 & 18, when Absalom staged a coup and threatened the life of his father, David.
David's life is in danger.
He is caught out in the cold.
Those he thought were trustworthy, aren't.
Those that were family are now distant from him.

So -

"Hear my cry, O God: listen to my prayer."

"From the ends of the earth" says v.2 - meaning "far away." Far from home. Far from security. Far from peace. In strange surroundings. Which is where David was after the coup.

And there he felt faint.

If you want to know what that means, check out Psalm 102, where the same word for "*faint*" is used, and the condition described more completely.

"my time of distress....

my days disappear like smoke...

my heart is sick, withered like grass...

I have lost my appetite...

I am reduced to skin and bones...

I lie awake, lonely as a solitary bird on the roof...

My tears run down into my drink..."

Quite plainly put -

It is emptiness.

It is depression.

Life slips away, melts like water into the sand.
Disappearing... and not a THING you can do about it.
Helpless.

So - where, then, to turn?
When everyone, it seems, is against you - where to turn?

And David reaches out to God.
His rock.
His refuge.
His strong tower.

God - the only one who could give him safety.



A few weeks ago, Sharon and I travelled to the city of Haarlem in North Holland - where my family comes from. We saw this remnant of the wall that used to surround the city. It's called the "Amsterdam Gate." Four hundred years ago, residents of the city fled to the safety behind that gate when Spanish troops came, bent on murder and repression. It was a strong tower for them - a place to stay alive.

God, says David, is my strong tower.
I'll stay alive if I stay in him.

Understand this, please.

As much as David seeks it and prays for it, God longs **even more** to grant it to him.

To grant him not only protection and care.

But protection and care in the context of an intimate relationship.

God is not merely some contractor, a design builder of the grandest scale, who conceives the plan and erects the structure called earth - and then leaves, with no further interest in what goes on.

Nor is the Lord a distant owner, an absentee landlord who is concerned about the rent and the value of his buildings, but cares little or nothing of the day to day well-being of his tenants.

God is real.

And God is really present.

He is really present for the sake of his own.



Nothing - and no one - can get in the way of that. No force on earth. No power below or above the earth. No other being can get in the way of God's desire to be very present for the sake of his own.

Close to them.

Right with them.

Snuggled up.

Like, say, a mother bird gathering her chicks.

*Let me abide in your tent forever,
find refuge under the shelter of your wings.*

To be under the shelter of the wings of God.

That's language you find here in Psalm 61. Also in Psalm 57. And Psalm 91. Repeated - because it is so powerful.

Under the shelter of the wings of God -
it speaks of protection and compassion.
Yes. And yet also much more!

It speaks of home.
It is belonging.
There is no deeper, no more right or true place to be.

It is the wonder of closeness,
good and right,
with God.

Under the wings you feel the warmth.
Under the wings you can hide.
Under the wings you can drift off to sleep.
Knowing that even if you can't do anything about it,
even if you don't have the resources
there's One with wings above you
who can!

and WILL!

That's the kind of deep fellowship with our Creator that Psalm 61 invites us to experience.

The deal-breaker of that kind of experience, the road block, the oil that pollutes and obscures the water of such an experience, is *self-sufficiency*.

It's where the little chick believes itself not to need a parent with strong, protective, comforting wings.

I can do it MYSELF.

Kuyper writes:

Self-sufficiency is the futile dream of a small, insignificant world, of which our little self is the great person, whose mind understands everything, whose will disposes everything, whose money governs everything and whose power carries everything before it.

Thus your own self becomes a miniature god in a diminutive temple, and then in your sinful isolation, of course, you are deathly cold - frozen - away from the living God; and all passing of the night under the shadow of God's wings is impossible.

[Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, p.103]

There's not too many of us who would readily admit to being self-sufficient. And yet, dig a bit.

Please.

We're all here today because we are religious people. But what governs the boundaries of our religion, our religious practises and beliefs, the codes of conduct we follow... or not?

For how many of us isn't it something like - "*Well, what I believe is... What's important to ME is... What seems true to ME is....*"

Ever found yourself saying this?

Who's setting the rules here?

Me.

Or do an inventory of your prayer life.

When do you pray?

What do you pray about?

How often?

What might all of that tell you about who really matters in your life, and who you consider to be most influential?

Is "**ME**" a little too uncomfortably close to the centre?

Ditto for reading of God's Word, his timeless and eternally true & trustworthy love letter of life to us.

Does **MY** life give central space to hearing Him?

Or just toss a few crumbs now and then, when it's convenient?

Who is at the centre?

The psalmist prays, "*lead ME to the rock that is higher than I... let ME abide in your tent... find refuge under the shelter of your wings.*"

ME.

He knows his need.

Not abstractly.

But personally.

Me.

Let ME find refuge under the shelter of your wings.

I cannot do without you.

I do not WANT to do without you.

Let ME find refuge under the shelter of your wings.

That's what David prays.

He prays it here when he's in deep, deep trouble.

But please, don't ever get the idea that this was the first time for him to pray like this.

And please

please

please...

Please don't wait till you land in the Heart Institute before you pray like this.
Please don't!

How do you come to know what it is to be in the shelter of God's wing?

How do you come to know that it is safe space?

How do you what the experience is like?

Well, certainly not this way - certainly not by waiting until you end up knee deep in proverbial swamp muck, with alligators crawling around, and then crying out for God's protecting wings to swoop down, and find you, and cover you, and rescue you.

Remember, David was the one who, early in his youth, sitting in the quiet and calm and peace of the field penned these words. Please recite them with me:

The LORD is my shepherd; I have everything I need.

He lets me rest in green meadows;

he leads me beside peaceful streams.

He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths,
bringing honour to his name.
Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid,
for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.
You prepare a feast for me
in the presence of my enemies.
You welcome me as a guest,
anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.
Surely your goodness and unfailing love
will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the LORD forever.
[NLT Psalm 23]

Don't wait until the crisis moments to pray.
Don't wait until all else fails before seeking the glory of God in worship.
Don't wait until your senior years to read God's Word.

As Kuyper says, the sense of being close to God is something that needs to be practised.

In happier days.

And then, when the dark days come, we know where to find the rest and safety we so desperately need. [*To Be Near Unto God*, p.106]

And where to begin?

Well, in the place where we get rid of any sense of self-sufficiency.
And that, too, is before the wings of God.

Some of you veterans of bible study may have already picked it up, but there is a clear allusion in Psalm 61:4 to the tabernacle.

That's the tent which was church to David.

It's where he went to worship God; to get away from all the distractions and challenges and demands that faced him every day.

It's where he was able to focus on God's presence and care.

Catch a hint!

AND -

in the context of that tent come the words about wings...



Anybody remember where, in the tabernacle, wings were found? On top of the ark of the covenant, the box in the holiest place of the tabernacle church.

There, every year, the blood of the sacrifice lamb was poured out under the wings stretched over the ark -

blood atoning for the sins of the people, making them right with God.

They couldn't come in their own sufficiency.

They couldn't come because of all they'd managed to do and perform for God.

They came because another had shed it's blood for them, and God in mercy had received that as payment full and complete.

The blood of the sacrifice lamb.

Who is that?

Allusions are made elsewhere in this Psalm. Check verse 2:

"Lead me to the rock that is higher than I..."

That is the solid rock

the stone that was once rejected by humanity,
but now become the cornerstone

Jesus.

the King of creation who, having been raised to life after his sacrificial death on the cross, has years that will endure to all generations; that is enthroned forever before God - which is verse 6 & 7 of this Psalm.

He is the only way, the living way through which we come to experience the cover, the warmth, and the nearness of the wings of God.

He promises:

"I will never leave you nor forsake you."

"I will be with you always."

"Come unto me, all of you who are weary and heavy-laden; I will give you rest."

As you surrender to Jesus you can rest under the outstretched wings of God.

Read verse 5:

For you, O God, have heard my vows...

Stop there.

Have you done that?

Taken the step of making public your vow of faith in and devotion to Jesus, the Living Son of God?

Done that in the presence of God and His people?

If not - what's stopping you?

I challenge you to do it.

I challenge you to give me a call and chat about making a public profession of your faith. I'll even buy the coffee and donuts for that chat!

AND

Do you make that vow anew each morning when you rise?

If not, why not - as a reminder to yourself, and a daily renewal before the Lord.

Day by day.

Step by step with Him who is higher than you -
your "Higher Power."

Step by step, and day by day with Jesus.

Carry on with verse 5:

You have given me the heritage of those who fear your name...

Friends, that is the heritage of Jesus.

We share the inheritance of Jesus in the eternal family of God.

That's the promise to us in Romans 8:16&17 -

we are children of God

we are co-heirs with Christ!

In the course of my work I am privileged to talk with a LOT of people.

What saddens me more than just about anything is when I meet someone in a difficult situation, facing it without faith in Jesus.

All they can do is hope in a better day.

That one day things will improve.

That there's sunshine behind the cloud.

Keep talking and you can hold out like this for a while.

But eventually.....

Friends, Psalm 61 points us to the One who is sunshine.
to the One who brings the better day.
who will bring what we ourselves cannot engineer
who will guide us to where we ourselves cannot go
who will protect us when we ourselves have nothing to offer.

I invite you into His presence.
I invite you to reach your hands and your heart up, into his care.
To Him,
who will NEVER disappoint.

Never.