

## **“Counting on God”**

### **Psalm 62**

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The psalm we are about to read is a wonderful specimen of what scholars call a “confidence” psalm, a confession of the psalmist’s faith in God. Last week we spoke of the Christian struggle with doubt; so today I thought it would make sense to consider a psalm that is all about our confidence in God. Like many psalms this poem was born in difficult circumstances, indeed, as v. 3 may suggest, the pressure was still intense as the psalm was being written; but no matter, David’s confidence in the Lord got stronger not weaker.

### **Text Comment**

Jeduthun is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 16:41 as one of David’s chief musicians. Here the name refers to some aspect of the musical setting or performance of the psalm. Jeduthun may have become the name of a tune or the name of a particular choir or musical style. [Tate, 120]

- v.1     The thought is that David had come to terms with the fact that only God could help him and that, therefore, the issue must be left with him. He would wait for the Lord, neither complaining nor agitating. It is the state of mind expressed in Psalm 123:2:

“As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us.”

Hebrew often uses repetition as a way of increasing emphasis. It is not clear in the English translations but in the original Hebrew the exclamation **אֱמֵן** which means “truly” or “only” begins five of the first seven verses of the psalm and again v.9. “Confidence!”

- v.4     Blessing with the mouth but cursing in the heart is a common human hypocrisy, but it is especially common in politics and David, after all, was a king, a king with enemies who only pretended to be his friends.
- v.5     We have here another instance of soliloquy, an important technique of godly living in the Bible. Soliloquy is the practice of speaking to oneself or instructing oneself or, even, arguing with oneself. You know famous soliloquies from plays like Shakespeare’s “Hamlet.” Hamlet steps to the front side of the stage and has that famous conversation with himself, “To be or not to be, that is the question!” He is arguing with himself. There is a part of him that wants to commit suicide. There is a part of him that is too afraid to take that final step and by that soliloquy the audience is brought into the mental processes of the character. The practice of speaking to oneself is something we find frequently in the Bible. Three times we read in Psalms 42 and 43, the psalmist arguing with himself: “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” Then he makes an argument, “You shouldn’t be and here’s why!” In Psalm 103 we read, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name.” There David is stirring up his soul to praise God and to rejoice in his great goodness. Martyn Lloyd Jones, the famous London preacher, summing up a

lot of Puritan wisdom on living a godly life, said, “The whole art of Christian living is to know how to talk to yourself.” You know the truth, but you are not feeling its force; it is not wielding its influence. What do you do? How do you make the truth a power again in your heart? You speak it to yourself; you argue the point to yourself; you batter it home into your own heart. That is the art of soliloquy in the Christian life.

- v.7 The thought that David’s *glory* rests on God is unusual. What he means by glory is his honor or reputation. We don’t think much of honor in our day; they thought much more about it in previous days. But we still care for our reputation. We wish to be thought in the right; we wish our actions to be judged to have been noble and worthy. *That* is our glory and we ought to care about such things. And here David admits that his hope of such glory rests with God and with God’s work in him and for him. Left to himself not much glory will result.
- v.8 This is an insight to share and the rest of the psalm addresses other people.
- v.10 It doesn’t matter whether one’s riches are fairly gotten, as in v. 9, or obtained by crime, as in v. 10. Riches are no solid basis for a man’s life or hope however they are got, as temporary as they are and as incapable of providing what matters most to the soul.
- v.12 What men *can* count on is God’s power, his steadfast love, and his just judgment.

Some of you may remember that I had friends in British Columbia, in our church in Vancouver years ago, John and Rosemary Dunstan, expatriate English folk, by then Canadians. Rosemary had cancer some years before but for nine years after her treatment she had enjoyed good health. But suddenly, in 1997, she took ill and was found to have a number of inoperable brain tumors. No treatment was possible, none was even attempted. She was going to die; the only remaining question was when. John and Rosemary were the sturdy sort of Christians and on the day they received the news of Rosemary’s impending death, John began to read a psalm to her, one each day, to mark the passage of her remaining life. The day before she died in the summer of 1997 they had reached Psalm 62.

“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence; for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.”

Imagine yourself in that situation. Most of us will be in such a situation at the end of our lives. Imagine lying on your deathbed, as Rosemary was, and hearing your husband or your wife read those words to you as you struggled with the pain of your illness or the prospect of your death. In her case, their children were still relatively young, and the great tragedy of death for her was separation for her loved ones.

What would David’s words mean to you and how powerfully would they address that solemn moment? All your life behind you now; the end has finally come, it is right there knocking at the door. And you hear *those* words, those magnificent, beautiful, life-giving, hope-stirring words. What would they mean to you? Would they, *will they* express the deepest convictions of your heart at that very moment, when push has finally come to shove? Every Christian knows very

well the truth of what David here so beautifully expressed: the absolute confidence that the children of God may have in the justice, the power, the wisdom, and above all the love, mercy, and salvation of their heavenly Father. But it is one thing to *know* that; another to *feel* it, still another thing to take the same comfort from it, to draw the same strength from it, to experience the same calm from it that David did, and all the more to experience it, as David did, when beset by enemies or great dangers.

For example, in Psalms 42 and 43 (originally a single psalm), quite similar in some respects to Psalm 62 – both employ soliloquy and both express absolute confidence in God’s faithfulness – the author of the psalm reminds himself three times of God’s faithfulness but, so far as we can tell, he is still having to remind himself of it at the end of the psalm. He has not found the rest, the calm, the settled confidence that David has already at the beginning of Psalm 62. There are a number of lament psalms in the Psalter that express in the most poignant ways the trials and tribulations of life and the desolation of the disappointed soul without ever expressing the settled confidence and calm assurance that we have here in Psalm 62.

So, in other words, we do not have the profile of Christian experience in any one psalm, but we have it in the Psalter as a whole. Sometimes believers are in the world of Psalms 42 and 43 and sometimes in the world of Psalm 62. David certainly lived at different times in the different psalms. And so will we!

It is a fact of biblical revelation, as it is a fact of life for Christian folk that it is not always the case that the soul is so happily at rest in the conviction and assurance of the faithfulness, the love, and the power of God to help and to save. How is it so with you, brothers and sisters? Sometimes, I dare say, you may have felt as David did when he wrote this great psalm. Perhaps you *have* said or *could have* said such things in such ways many times and they have been the best times of all.

O blessèd life! The heart at rest  
When all without tumultuous seems,  
That trusts a higher will, and deems  
That higher will, not mine, the best.

O blessèd life! The mind that sees,  
Whatever change the years may bring,  
A mercy still in everything  
And shining through all mysteries.

Those beautiful verses, by the way – a beautiful commentary on Psalm 62 I think – were written by William Tidd Matson. We have two of his hymns in our *Trinity Hymnal*, one of them the very fine “Teach Me, O Lord, Thy Holy Way.” Matson’s father was a great man in 19<sup>th</sup> century British politics and his very able son, William, would certainly have been too. But when converted at the age of 20 he gave up all of those glittering prospects to preach the gospel. He sounds like a man who understood Ps. 62:9-10, and indeed he was. He would later say, “No sacrifice, all gain.” That’s what a man says who *knows* that God is his rock and that power belongs to God and so does steadfast love!

There is a way, in other words, of thinking about the Christian life almost exclusively in terms of the sturdy faith and calm confidence expressed by David in this psalm. Sometimes we have it at a flood and what a great time that is for a Christian. But sometimes we do not have this same full and rich *feeling or sense* of that knowledge that every Christian has regarding God, his power and his grace. Is it not the case with you that you can divide up your life into those times when you feel as David felt when he wrote this psalm and those times when these wonderful convictions have waned in your mind and heart and have less influence over your soul?

Some of this is, of course, due to the differences that exist between Christians in psychological makeup, in life experience, in family upbringing, in the experiences of life, in spiritual training, and so on. Some people have a tougher go of it than others. Don't ask me why because I don't know. For some the Christian life is a harder slog than it is for others. For some such confidence and assurance as David expresses here is much easier to come by than it is for others. We all know that if we have lived and loved very long in this world.

One of the most beautiful love stories in the history of the Christian church is that of a man and a woman who never married, couldn't marry, and so had to manage their deep affection for one another in a highly artificial way, with particular attention to the conventions of etiquette regarding the behavior of unmarried men and women that were accepted in their day. Olympias was a remarkable woman. She was highly intelligent, strong-willed, and outspoken. The daughter of one of the Emperor Constantine's officials, upon her father's death she became fabulously wealthy. In 385 the emperor Theodosius arranged a marriage for her with the intention of keeping all of her money "in the family" as it were. Her husband, however, died less than two years later. Theodosius pressed her to marry again but she categorically refused. By this time, she was committed to the ascetic life, and bluntly told the Emperor off: if her king, the Lord Christ, had wanted her to be married, he wouldn't have taken her husband away! The emperor was furious. In his view that much money should not remain in the keeping of a widow and it would be a waste if she lavished it all on Christian charities, which she was likely to do, instead of allowing that money to be spent for the benefit of the government. He ordered that her fortune be impounded until she was thirty, but four years later he relented, in large part because of her sterling and public reputation as a Christian woman.

With her own funds she built a convent next to the bishop's residence in Constantinople and soon had created there an impressive center of ministry to the sick, the poor, and the stranger. The early church office of deaconess had its origin in the order of widows the Apostle Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 5, and although Paul there says that no widow was to be put on the list who was younger than 60 years of age, and although that age limit had recently been confirmed by the Emperor Theodosius, the aged bishop of Constantinople, one Nektarios, had found Olympias so helpful and such an advantage to the church that he had ordained her deaconess when she was still in her early thirties. After Nektarios' death, when John Chrysostom arrived in Constantinople to take up his duties as the bishop, there were some 250 women living and working in the convent, all having devoted themselves to the service of the Lord and all having renounced marriage.

The two must have met almost immediately and from the beginning there formed between them a deep affection and mutual admiration that was to last until John's death. Her convent was separated from his bishop's palace by a single wall. Olympias began to take care of John's clothes and prepare his meals, which she sent across to the palace every day. Modern readers of their relationship and the correspondence between them over many years are bound to discern some kind of sexual element in the relationship and, of course, there must have been. But there is no reason to suspect any unchastity. They were both absolutely committed to their callings, both entirely aware of the temptations of sexual desire, and both remained throughout very careful to keep a proper distance, physically and emotionally, by means of an elaborate formal courtesy. As Chrysostom's greatest biographer, J.N.D. Kelly puts it, "What their heroic efforts cost them we can only surmise..." He goes on to say, "if [the effects of these heroic efforts] on John were relatively slight, on Olympias they were to be deeply damaging." [Kelly, 114] I'm not sure if the evidence is sufficient to prove that conclusion, but it is certainly possible. Someone should make a movie of their story. For their later years I suggest Robert Duval or Anthony Hopkins for Chrysostom, perhaps Meryl Streep for Olympias. Sorry young people, but these are roles far beyond the capacity of Chris Pratt or Jennifer Lawrence!

Anyway, when John was exiled from Constantinople, a disgraceful affair orchestrated by his ecclesiastical enemies – John had enemies close to him as David had long before – Olympias and John continued to write to one another. They last saw one another in the baptistry of Hagia Sophia in June of A.D. 404 and were never to see one another again, though, of course, they did not know that at the time. In the three years that followed they exchanged letters as they were able (they had to send their letters only when a trustworthy courier happened to be going the right way). We don't have her letters to John, but we have seventeen of John's to her and can easily enough imagine much of what she must have written to him. Olympias was, perhaps by temperament but now by circumstance, inclined to discouragement. Her heart ran to the psalms of lament and all the more after she lost John. And now, whether related to her emotional state or not, she was ill much of the time. It was clear that her life had been shattered; her Christian morale dealt a severe blow by her separation from the man she loved and counted on.

His letters to her are wonderful specimens of the art of encouragement. He told her everything that was going on in his life, the ups and downs, his own health issues, the cruel winter, his struggle to keep warm, and so on. He let her into his life, in other words. He confided in her his own struggles and the state of his heart. He told her how much it meant to him to hear from her. And he worked hard to console her for what he knew was her deepest sadness, her separation from what he called "the nothingness that is all that I am." [Kelly, 266] But what makes his letters interesting to us with respect to Psalm 62 is that they were virtually an elaborate effort to help her to the same state of mind that David had found when he wrote this wonderful psalm.

His desire, he said, was to help her shake off what he called the tyranny of depression which she had not seemed to be able to escape. And what he did in making that effort was to remind her of what he knew she believed as ardently as he did. If in the present circumstances they were like a ship battered by storms, God was the pilot and would set their ships on their proper course in his own good time. If her friends had been treated unjustly, if erstwhile friends had betrayed her, all of these disasters were only apparent and temporary. God is all powerful and all merciful and he would put matters right in just that way that would bring the greatest good not only to the two of

them but to everyone else. Christ himself was maltreated, vilified, and betrayed but all of that redounded to the greatest conceivable good for the whole world. “Olympias should abandon her gloom, turning her eyes away from the distresses of the moment to contemplate the deliverance and the ultimate recompense which will surely be hers.” [Kelly, 266-267] Is that not precisely the thought with which David concluded his psalm in v. 12?

John encouraged her to believe that because of God’s faithfulness our sufferings must make our lives more fruitful, if only we gratefully accept them as from him and honor the Lord through them. We don’t know how successful John was in encouraging her to a better frame of mind and heart, but we do know that his argument was precisely the argument that any Christian ought to deploy with himself or herself, or, as David shows us here in vv. 8ff, the argument we should make to other believers.

It is a confident appeal to the character of God and to his promise to be his people’s rock, fortress and salvation. God is God, his nature does not change, and he does not cease to be our salvation, our hope, and our confidence because we may fail *to feel* that he is. *Psalm 62 is a witness to the triumph of the objective over the subjective, of the truth about God over the mental state of his children.* We may not feel this reality as David did when he wrote Psalm 62, but we can *know* it nevertheless. That is what Chrysostom encouraged Olympias to do: *speak the truth she knew to her own heart!*

Psalm 62 is the demonstration, of which we find a great deal in the Bible, of the unchanging reality of the character of God: his power, his justice, and his mercy, all of which are infinite and absolute. The troubles of life that can, at times, seem to overwhelm us, are, in fact, nothing in comparison to majesty of God. Every Christian knows this. I do not need to prove it to you. But if that is so, as it is, if God is all powerful and all merciful, as he is, if he is our rock and refuge, as he is, if because we trust in him we have nothing to look forward to but our salvation, as we do, then it is ours, as David reminds us, to wait patiently in silence for him. He will come at the proper time and do for us what ought to be done and, at last, make us forget all the troubles we ever faced in this world.

If we cannot completely rise above the trials of life, at least let us make the attempt and continue to make it. In that way we pay honor to the great Majesty who is our God and Father. And no doubt, now and then if not frequently, he will let drop a ray of comfort from his throne. In Madame Guyon’s words:

A little bird I am,  
Shut from the fields of air;  
And in my cage I sit and sing  
To him who placed me there;  
Well pleased a prisoner to be,  
Because, my God, it pleases thee.

O, it is good to soar  
These bolts and bars above,  
To him whose purpose I adore,

Whose providence I love;  
And in thy mighty will to find  
The joy, the freedom, of the mind.

That freedom and that joy are always there to be found because they are found in God who is always there. It was that freedom of the mind that David described in this wonderful Psalm. If you haven't found it or, if you have temporarily misplaced it, look up. Look to God. Talk to yourself about what you know to be true of him and of his character. As you speak to yourself, you will realize anew and afresh how true it all is. That freedom of the mind is there. Seek and you will find! Wait for God until he shows you his mercy. The mercy will be the sweeter for you having waited for it!